



Research article

Illegal Bangladeshi Migrants in India: A Critical Overview

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Abstract

The history of the world is the history of migration. Migration has taken place since time immemorial and will continue in the future. Generally, people move either legally or illegally in search of better opportunities or out of fear of persecution by political and ethnic groups. India is often described as a land of migrants, and India-Bangladesh relations are very much influenced by the issue of migration, particularly after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975. However, the issue of migration from Bangladesh into India has been a controversial subject for a long time. This is now viewed as a threat to the internal security of India. Migration of Bangladeshis into India, particularly Assam, Tripura, and West Bengal, has led to numerous clashes. The Government of India has adopted many policies and strategies to prevent illegal migration. There is no accurate figure available regarding the number of Bangladeshi migrants settled in or entering India due to a lack of reliable data. The paper will focus on various causes and consequences of illegal Bangladeshi migrants in India, look at the policies of the Indian government towards Bangladeshi migrants, and highlight the number of illegal Bangladeshi migrants in India.

Keywords: Migration, Bangladesh, India, Security, Government Response.



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Introduction

The history of the world is the history of migration. It is a global phenomenon. People from different countries have migrated to distant places in search of food, security, shelter, a better lifestyle, and freedom, etc., and have influenced the socio-economic, cultural, and political fabric of their destinations. India is often known as a land of migrants and refugees (Das, 2016, p. 9; Mayilvaganan, 2019; & Basu Ray Chaudhury & Ghosh, 2021, p. 4). The partition in 1947 and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 did not solve the problem of outmigration among India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. A large influx of people into India happened during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. On humanitarian grounds, India sheltered the refugees. In fact, according to the data published in 1971, West Bengal received almost 76 per cent of the East Pakistani Refugees in total, Tripura 15 per cent, Meghalaya 6 per cent, and Assam 3 per cent (Ghosh, 2016, pp. 20-21). Ten districts of West Bengal share borders with Bangladesh: Cooch Behar (561 km), North Dinajpur and South Dinajpur (combined 538 km), North 24 Parganas (280 km), Nadia (263 km), Malda (173 km), Jalpaiguri (157 km), Murshidabad (125 km), South 24 Parganas (63 km), Darjeeling (27 km) (Samaddar, 2025, p. xxi). Socio-political, cultural, religious, and security aspects worked together behind the issue of Bangladeshi migrants. The 1971 Census of India highlights that two bordering districts (Nadia and North 24 Parganas) of West Bengal received most refugees from Bangladesh: Nadia approximately 15,00,750 and North 24 Parganas approximately 16,50,000 (Migration Table, Census of India, 1971). In fact, the Census of India, 2011 shows similar trends: Nadia approximately 3,49,762 and North 24 Parganas approximately 5,68,366. (Migration Table, Census of India, 2011) There are variations in the population of Hindus and Muslims in the bordering districts of West Bengal between 1971 and 2001. The data of the Directorate of Census Operations, West Bengal in 2001 shows that how the percentages of Hindu and Muslim population in Nadia, North 24 Parganas and Bankura have changed between 1971 and 2001; Nadia- 75.91/23.34 and 73.75/25.41, North 24 Parganas- 77.26/22.43 and 75.23/24.22, Bankura- 80.85/0.85 and 84.3/57.51 (Dasgupta, 2016, pp. 214-215 & Directorate Census Operations, West Bengal, 2001).

Literature Review

A large number of books and articles have come up on the issue of transborder Bangladeshi migration, problems of Bangladeshi migrants, and the politicization of migration in India. Different aspects of migrant life in various social circumstances have received much attention in this field. Some have been consulted for the present study. Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury and Ambar Kumar Ghosh, in an occasional paper, "Trans-Border Migration: Bridging the Gap between State and Human Security" (2021, pp. 3-25), have given a detailed description of the nature of migration, how the issue of migration poses a challenge to the nation, and the relationship between state security and human

security, etc. Abhijit Dasgupta, in *Displacement and Exile: The State-Refugee Relations in India* (2016, p. 157), scrutinizes how the Indian state, without being a signatory to the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol, faced the problem of migration effectively. Ranabir Samaddar, in *The Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal* (2025), examines the reality of transborder migration between India and Bangladesh, the lives of Bangladeshi migrants, how migrants negotiate to ensure their existence, and many issues. Paula Banerjee, in "Continuum of Violence: The Case of Indo-Bangladesh Border" (CRG reports, p. 29), shows how efforts for the securitization of the region actually lead to growing violence and insecurity among the local people. K. C. Saha, in "The Genocide of 1971 and the Refugee Influx in the East" (2003, p. 212), shows how, as a result of the atrocities committed by the Pakistani military forces, refugees started coming into the bordering Indian states of West Bengal, Tripura, Assam and Meghalaya towards the end of March 1971. B. S. Chimni, in "Status of Refugees in India: Strategic Ambiguity" (2003, pp. 443-467), focuses on the reasons for India's refusal of the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol, the legal status of refugees in India, and the role of the National Human Rights Commission in this context. Pushpita Das, in *Illegal Migration from Bangladesh: Deportation, Border Fences and Work Permits* (2016, p. 15-16), discusses the concept of securitization of illegal migration from Bangladesh into India, the trends, patterns and reasons of illegal migration from Bangladesh, the socio-economic and political impact of a large number of illegal migrants on the receiving societies, and analyses various approaches adopted by the Indian Government to deal with this issue. Ranabir Samaddar's book focuses on micro-studies of villages, towns, and the lives of individual migrants. In fact, it has focused more on migrants rather than the issue of illegal Bangladeshi Migrants. B. S. Chimni has focused more on the legal aspects of refugees in India. K. C. Saha emphasized the refugees in India and the role of the Indian Government. Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury and Ambar Kumar Ghosh also focused on the challenges of migration to the nation. So, the issue of illegal Bangladeshi migration and the number in India remained untouched. In fact, there is no reliable data on the actual number of illegal or undocumented Bangladeshi migrants in India. In this context, the paper will focus on various causes and consequences of illegal Bangladeshi migrants in India, look at the policies of the Indian government towards Bangladeshi migrants, and highlight the number of illegal Bangladeshi migrants in India.

Understanding the Concept of Illegal Migrants

Migration refers to the movement of people in search of better living conditions from one place to another. It is defined as "a permanent change in place of residence by the crossing of specified administrative or political boundaries. The individuals who fulfil these two criteria are regarded as migrants" (Ghosh, 2016, p. xxii). But this definition does not include wandering people, seasonal migrants, or people having more than one residence

and does not address the length of one's stay in a second abode to qualify as a migrant. International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines migration as 'the movement of a person or a group of persons, either across an international border or within a state' (Ghosh, 2016, p. xxii). There are various types of migration, such as internal migration, external migration, etc. Internal migration refers to a move from one place to another within a country, whereas international migration means crossing the frontiers that separate one country from another (Bhardwaj, 2014). The UN's *Multilingual Demographic Dictionary* distinguished the terms 'move' and 'migration' on the one hand, and 'internal migration' and 'international migration' on the other.

A move is a change of residence within the same political or administrative boundary. Migration is a change of residence and also a crossing of the political or administrative boundary. While internal migration is a change in the place of residence from one administrative boundary to another within the same country, international migration is a move over a national boundary (Ghosh, 2016, p. xxii).

Illegal migration can be defined as the migration of people across national frontiers or residing or staying in a country that violates the national laws (civil or criminal law) of the state (Mayilvaganan, 2019). In 2016, Shri Kiren Rijiju, as the Minister of Home Affairs, said in a written reply that illegal migrants fall into two categories: first, foreign nationals who have entered India on valid travel documents and found to be overstaying, and second, foreign nationals who have entered into the country without any valid travel documents (Official Debates, 2016, Session 241, pp. 143-144).

Refugees are those who migrate across borders leading to the cause of armed conflicts and natural calamities. According to the United Nations (UN) Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees held on 28 July 1951, a refugee is a person who

as a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951 and owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his formal habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (Ghosh, 2016, p. xx).

The term 'stateless person' was first defined in 1954. Article 1 of the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons defined stateless as 'a person who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law' (Ghosh, 2016, p. xxiii). In short, a stateless person is unable or unwilling to avail the protection of the government of his/ her country of nationality or former nationality. In other words, a stateless person is an individual who does not have a political identity in terms of a nationality of any

country (Ghosh, 2016, p. xxii-xxiii). There are many obligations for a stateless person. Among the general obligations, 'every stateless person has duties to the country in which he finds himself, which require in particular that he conforms to its laws and regulations as well as to measures taken for the maintenance of public order' (Ghosh, 2016, p. xxiii). But what about those cases where states have failed to protect their duty? Are they not stateless in every practical sense? The India-Bangladesh enclave people are an example of it. There are two categories of stateless persons, *de jure* and *de facto* stateless. The *de jure* (legally) stateless persons are those who are not considered nationals by any state under its law. There are many reasons for *de jure* statelessness. Some of the reasons for *de jure* statelessness are conflicts of nationality law proclaimed by the state, discriminatory laws that are proclaimed by the state affecting women and children, administrative practices that exclude some of the sections of the population, etc. The *de facto* stateless persons are those who no longer enjoy the protection and assistance of their national authorities, either because authorities refuse to grant them protection or because they themselves renounce the protection of the countries where they were nationals (Bonofer, 2022, p. 242; & Ghosh, 2016, p. xxiii).

Causes of Migration

A. Political Factors

After the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign and independent state in 1971, the idea of secularism did not change the fate of the Hindus in Bangladesh. In fact, the Bangladeshi political regime was growing more hostile to the minority communities. According to one estimate, between 1965 and 2006, approximately 6 million Hindus were both directly and indirectly affected by the Vested Property Act and lost 2.6 million acres of their land (Das, 2016, p. 29). In the post-1975 period, General Zia and General Ershad started the process of Islamization of the constitution, which increased anxieties among the Hindu population (Das, 2016, p. 30). The concept of an "Islamic State" helped a lot in the rise of religious fundamentalism. Targeting the Hindus became the norm in society, particularly after the elections in 1991, 2001, and 2014. The Census Reports (1991-2001), reports of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Dhaka, revealed that the proportion of Hindus had reduced from 12.13 per cent in 1981 to 9.19 per cent in 2001. So, the political situation is one of the many factors behind the Bangladeshi migrants into India (Dasgupta, 2016, p. 216).

B. Economic Factors

Many economic factors have forced both Hindus and Muslim Bangladeshi Nationals to leave their home and illegally migrate to India. The absence of economic opportunities and land alienation are the factors behind this illegal migration from Bangladesh to India. A growing population creates more demands on resources. The Bangladesh population

has grown over the decades from 70.88 million in 1974 to 159.80 million in 2011 (Das, 2016, p. 32). It is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, with 1,015 persons per sq km. There is an inequality in the process of resource distribution between the rich and poor. The shifting of resources in favour of the rich pushes the poor to greater misery, triggering out-migration (Das, 2016, pp. 31-32). The state has failed to provide jobs to the working-age people in the country, which has forced them to look outside for employment opportunities. Mr Jaswant Singh, the Minister of External Affairs, once said in the Rajya Sabha in March 2002:

The nature of the Indo-Bangladesh border is such that it is very difficult to fence the entire border. Out of 4000 km of the border, there is proper fencing in only a fraction of it. A large part of this border is riverine; a large part of this border keeps changing as the rivers keep changing their course. On account of these various factors, infiltration cannot be stopped simply by putting barbed wire fences on this very difficult terrain, on this very difficult border. There are complex social and economic reasons behind infiltration, including illegal infiltration from Bangladesh. There are economic factors; there are factors of land, and unless all these are taken into account, it will be impractical and unwise to address it in one particular manner (Das, 2016, p. 77).

The study conducted by Pranati Datta in 2004 showed that almost 56 per cent of the total respondents expressed economic insecurity as the cause of their migration. The details are as given below:

Table: 3.1 Push Factors in Bangladesh

Push factors in Bangladesh: Economic Reasons	Percentage of respondents
Lack of industrialization/ economic insecurity	55.9
Crisis in agriculture and cottage industry/ struggle for livelihood	2.9
Economic depression/ poverty	35.4
Forced grabbing of landed property	2.9
Not known	2.9
Total	100.0

Source: Joseph & Narendran (2013, pp. 11-12).

C. Religious Factors

It was a fact that religious hatred became deep-rooted, and the Hindus were not even getting work as daily wage labourers. According to one international migrant,

We were a fishing community. We had observed that those who had reached India were having a better life both socially and economically. Then we decided to move out. In Bangladesh, we were scared as we faced religious opposition. After the independence of India, religious hatred was less than what was perpetuated after the Independence war of Bangladesh in 1971 (Das & Ansary, 2017).

Another family in Jalpaiguri shared their experience-

We had young girls in our households. Their modesty was under threat. So, we were forced to stop their schooling. A tacit threat of conversion to Islam did not allow us to live in peace. Finally, we fixed up one of our daughters' marriages in India, and with the assistance of their family, we all came here (Das & Ansary, 2017).

So, religion is a major cause behind the issue of Bangladeshi migration into India.

Impact of Bangladeshi Migrants:

The influx of a large number of illegal Bangladeshi migrants has proved to be a major challenge for India, with serious implications for its resources and national security. The major consequences are:

A. Socio-Economic Impact

The economy of the north-eastern Indian states is predominantly rooted in products like tea, petroleum, and other forest products. The primary means of livelihood for most of the people is based on agriculture. Over a period of time, illegal migrants attempt to acquire land from locals (Mayilvaganan, 2019). This is one of many reasons behind the alienation of tribes from their ancestral land. The major impact of the influx of Bangladeshi nationals is largely on the demography. Huge areas of forest land were encroached upon by the migrants. It is reported that Assam faced a declining percentage of forest land from 39% in 1951-52 to about 30% in 2015-16. Apart from availing education and health care from government schools and clinics, the illegal migrants who entered India, particularly in West Bengal and Assam, got access to government subsidy programmes such as ration items and other facilities. It is also a fact that the influx of illegal migrants has replaced native workers in some cases, as they are prepared to take up jobs for lower wages than the natives. As per the 2011 census report of Assam, the decadal growth rate in bordering districts of Assam during 1971-2001 was between 20-30% (Assam Population Census Data, 2011 & Mayilvaganan, 2019). In some cases, this has led to competition and conflict between native workers and illegal migrants (Mayilvaganan, 2019).

B. Political Impacts

Large-scale illegal migrants from Bangladesh into India led to the rise of All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) and All Assam Students' Union (AASU) during the 1970s and

1980s in Assam. In some cases, the illegal migrants settled in the bordering districts of Assam and West Bengal have successfully listed their names in the voter list and received voter identity cards (Mayilvaganan, 2019). As a result, they become illegal voters. It is a perception that the political power of the locals is decided by the immigrants. Reportedly, Bangladeshi immigrants settled in the bordering districts are playing an important role in the political outcome. Even, they 'determine' the outcome of polls in about 52 constituencies out of the 292 Assembly Constituencies in West Bengal (Mayilvaganan, 2019). All the major political parties of West Bengal, such as the Indian National Congress, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM), and Trinamool Congress, have all courted the vote of the migrants for electoral advantage (Kumar K C, 2015). The Congress at the time of the 1987 elections in Bongaon alleged that the CPI (M) was using the Bangladeshi infiltrators to defeat their candidate (Dasgupta, 2016, p. 194). One lady, aged 63, who came to Nadia district of West Bengal in India in 1983, told,

Things were not easy in Bangladesh. So, we tried to get our daughters married off in India. My daughter's in-law's family had helped my sons to come here and settle. They are politically influential. Once they had successfully entered, they helped at least 4-5 families to enter India. My sons started working for the same local political party. They also started to become influential (Das & Ansary, 2017).

According to Ranabir Samaddar, migration has changed the nature of local politics. He writes,

Elections, distribution of resources, constitutionalism, politics of kinship, subalternity, nothing can be free of the shadow of the migration issue here. In South Dinajpur, the pervasiveness of the issue is even more striking. Many people, including politicians, administrators, grassroots leaders, traders, peasants, and even some security officials, will tell you, 'South Dinajpur as a district is finished; the only way Balurghat can survive is if the border is opened'. Productivity is low in South Dinajpur; land is still relatively low-priced; migrants prefer North Dinajpur and areas lying farther north. For a national highway, contiguity with Bihar, orchards, irrigation projects, tea gardens, in short, all that is required for attracting migrants is very much present to the west of South Dinajpur (Samarddar, 1999, pp. 185-186; Dasgupta, 2016, p. 181).

C. Law and Order

The influx of Bangladeshi migrants has led to severe social strain and law and order problems in states like Assam. There are many instances of conflicts between tribes and Bangladeshi migrants at local levels. In 1983, native tribes mass murdered over 1700 Bangladeshi Muslim migrants in Nellie village, in the more than two-decade-old

secessionist movements in Assam. It is illegal migrants which has become an issue of violation of the law of the land. According to Lt General S.K. Sinha, then governor of Assam, the massive influx of illegal Bangladeshis is a

“demographic invasion of Assam may result in loss of geo-strategically vital districts of lower Assam. It will be only a matter of time before a demand for their merger with Bangladesh may be made---- International Islamic fundamentalism may provide the driving force” (The Hindu, 2001 & Mayilvaganan, 2019).

Even some districts of West Bengal such as Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, and Siliguri etc. have witnessed local social discord between the locals and Bangladeshi illegal migrants (Mayilvaganan, 2019). It is very difficult to get the exact figures of illegal immigration from Bangladesh to India. According to the reports, from June 2014 to January 2015, of ADG & IG of Correctional Services, Directorate of Correctional Homes, Government of West Bengal, prisons in West Bengal are increasingly being flooded with people from Bangladesh, in particular the prisons of Dumdum in Kolkata and Balurghat in South Dinajpur which have the maximum number of Bangladeshi nationals; The number of Bangladeshi nationals in 2015 in Dumdum Central Correctional Home was 1337 and 421 in Balurghat District Correctional Home (Sengupta, CRG, 22-23 & ADG & IG of Correctional Services, Directorate of Correctional Homes, Govt. of West Bengal).

D. Demographic Implications

The flow of Bangladeshi migrants into India has resulted in demographic changes in the bordering districts of West Bengal such as Murshidabad, South and North Parganas, Nadia, Jalpaiguri, etc. Amarjeet Singh, in 2009, in a study by the Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA), says that about 1.2 million Bangladeshis who entered India with valid documents have not returned home. India managed to push back only 15,000 of them in 2005, 12,000 in 2006 and 11,500 in 2007. According to Shri Kiren Rijiju, the Minister of State in the Ministry of Home Affairs, India deported Bangladeshi nationals only 5,234 in 2013, 989* in 2014 and 474* in 2015 (see table no. 5.5).

Likewise, the census reports of 1981 and 1991 show that during the decade 1981-1991, the number of Hindus in West Bengal decreased by 2.27 percent while Muslims increased by 2.06 percent. At the same time, even in Kolkata, the Muslim population rose by 53.67 percent whereas the population of Hindu increased by 30.79 percent. Thus, the process of illegal migration has disturbed the demographic profile of India (Dutta, 2013).

Number of Illegal Bangladeshi Migrants in India

It is a fact that from the beginning of the 20th century, migration was happening in large numbers from the east to the west in the context of Bengal. Comparing the percentage of population growth and density of population of West Bengal to that of India as a whole,

it is noticeable that, on average, migration into West Bengal is greater than that of India as a whole. However, migration is only one of many factors behind the growth of the population. Still, it is an important one. This is the fact that migration is happening in large numbers (Banerjee, 2014, pp. 30-31). The details are as given below:

Table 5.1 Percentage of Population Growth (1911-2011)

Place	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
India	5.75	-0.31	11.00	14.22	13.31	21.51	24.80	24.66	23.5	21.54	17.64
West Bengal	6.85	-2.91	8.14	22.93	13.22	32.8	26.87	23.17	24.74	17.77	13.93

Source: Banerjee (2014, p. 30).

Even, the density of Bengal's population was higher than that of India. This needs to be understood from the table below.

Table 5.2 Comparative Study of Density of Population (1901-2001)

Place	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001
India	77	82	81	90	103	117	192	177	216	274	338
West Bengal	193	205	199	215	264	299	394	504	615	767	903

Source: Banerjee (2014, p. 31).

Nonetheless, the Government of India periodically has provided statistics on the number of illegal migrants in India. For instance, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) in March 1992 published that more than 7 lakhs Bangladeshis were identified as staying illegally till 1991 in different border states of the country [2,40,446 in West Bengal, 1,35,656 in Assam, 14,268 in Meghalaya, 3,18,731 in Mizoram, and 29,382 in Tripura (1983-1991)]. Mr. Inderjit Gupta, the then Home Minister of India, stated in the Parliament on May 6, 1997, that there were 10 million illegal migrants from Bangladesh staying in India. Based on the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) sources, *India Today* magazine, on August 10, 1998, published the details as follows: 5.4 million in West Bengal, 4 million in Assam, 0.8 million in Tripura, 0.5 million in Bihar, 0.5 million in Maharashtra, 0.5 million in Rajasthan, and 0.3 million in Delhi (Total of 10.83 million) (Das, 2016, p. 26). According to the Indian Census of 2001, the migration data of India shows that the total number of migrants has been

314 million. Out of 314 million, Bangladeshi migrants are considered to be the largest group (approximately 10-12 million). Whereas the *World Migration report* of 2010 states that around 17 million undocumented Bangladeshis are in India (Mayilvaganan, 2019). The former Governor of West Bengal, T. V. Rajeshwar, said that there could be about 7 million undocumented or illegal migrants in West Bengal, 5 million in Assam and 2 million in Bihar. The Government of India submitted the data to the Supreme Court stating that 991,031 Bangladeshis entered India with valid documents but did not return between 1972 and 1997. The details are as given below:

Table 5.3 Figures of Bangladesh Nationals Visiting India with Valid Travel Documents (1972-93)

Year	Arrival in India	Numbers Overstayed	Numbers Returned
1972	7,07,291	49,341	21,388
1973	1,72,334	1,62,480	9,854
1974	85,951	75,669	10,282
1975	1,76,384	1,69,231	7,153
1976	76,831	44,019	32,812
1977	94,262	57,307	36,955
1978	1,31,445	97,206	34,239
1979	1,81,367	1,36,230	45,137
1980	2,19,305	1,66,262	53,043
1981	1,93,135	1,52,482	40,653
1982	1,96,769	1,54,811	41,958
1983	2,03,966	1,64,287	39,679
1984	2,41,673	1,91,897	49,776
1985	2,67,702	2,39,303	28,399
1986	2,00,665	83,088	1,17,577
1987	1,78,615	1,60,542	18,073
1988	1,93,923	1,64,489	29,434
1989	2,11,896	1,79,906	31,990
1990	2,18,123	1,84,327	33,796
1991	2,46,005	1,92,574	53,481
1992	2,55,468	2,12,248	43,220
1993	308,978	2,51,353	57,625
Total	41,25,576	32,89,052	8,36,524

Source: Samaddar (2025, p. 168).

Pushpita Das, a researcher at the Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA), New Delhi, in her study shows that between 1951 and 2001, in West Bengal, while the growth rate of Hindus was 198.54 percent, then Muslims growth rate was about 310.93 percent. The growth rate of the Muslim population of West Bengal has been noticed to be comparatively higher in the border areas. For example, between 1991 and 2001, Malda registered a population rise of 24.77 percent, Murshidabad 23.70 percent, and North 24 Parganas 22.64 percent, whereas between 2001 and 2011, Malda registered 21.5 percent, Murshidabad 21.07 percent, and North 24 Parganas 30.96 percent. Illegal or undocumented Bangladeshi migrants are the main reason for such disparities (Das, 2016, pp. 22-27 & Mayilvaganan, 2019). The data from the Directorate of Census Operations, West Bengal, 2001 also gives the detailed variations in West Bengal districts between 1951 and 2001 (Dasgupta, 2016, pp. 214-215 & Directorate Census Operations, West Bengal, 2001).

Illegally crossing the border and entering India is not the only way in which undocumented Bangladeshis settle down in the country. A large number of Bangladeshis are overstaying in India. In 2001, the Task Force on Border Management showed that about 15 million Bangladeshi migrants are residing in India illegally. Shri Sriprakash Jaiswal, the Minister of State for Home Affairs, said in 2004 in the Rajya Sabha that as of December 2001, approximately 12 million illegal Bangladeshi migrants were staying in the country (5 million in Assam and 5.7 million in West Bengal). Later, the statement was withdrawn (Das, 2016, pp. 26-27). The Indian Census Report of 2001 on migration showed that more than 30 lakhs persons in the state of West Bengal were born in other Asian countries, out of which more than 98 percent were from Bangladesh (Census of India, 2001/PC01_D01_19, 2001 & Dutta, 2013). Amarjeet Singh in a study by the Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA), showed that about 1.2 million Bangladeshis who entered India with valid travel documents have not returned home. India managed to push back only 15,000 of them in 2005, 12,000 in 2006 and 11,500 in 2007 (Dutta, 2013 & Das, 2016, pp. 26-27). Shri Kiren Rijiju, the Minister of State in the Ministry of Home Affairs, provided the details of Bangladeshi nationals who have arrived on valid travel documents and departed from India. The details are as given below:

Table 5.4 Details of Arrival and Departure of Bangladeshi nationals in India (2008-2015)

Year	Arrival	Departure
2008	5,41,884	5,21,718
2009	4,68,899	4,42,314
2010	4,31,962	4,00,647
2011	4,63,543	4,36,205
2012	4,87,397	4,76,441

2013	5,24,923	5,15,113
2014	9,42,562	9,16,805
2015	11,33,879	11,10,024
Total (2008-2015)	49,95,049	48,19,267

Source: <https://rsdebate.nic.in> (IQ_238_09032016_U1348_p180_p181).

Many reports show that Bangladeshi nationals have entered India without valid travel documents. Rijju has also given the details of the deportation of Bangladeshi nationals during 2008-2015. State-wise deportation data is not maintained centrally. The details are as follows:

Table 5.5 Details of deportation of Bangladeshi nationals (2008-2015)

Year	No. of Bangladeshi nationals deported during the year
2008	12,625
2009	10,602
2010	6,290
2011	6,761
2012	6,537
2013	5,234
2014	989*
2015	474*
Total (2008-2015)	49,512

Source: <https://rsdebate.nic.in> (IQ_238_09032016_U1348_p180_p181).

Kiren Rijju, as the Minister of State in the Ministry of Home Affairs, also presented the data on overstay and deportation of Bangladeshi nationals from 2011 to 2015.

Table 5.6 Details of overstay and deportation of Bangladeshi nationals during 2011-2015

Year	No. of Bangladeshi nationals found to be overstaying	No. of Bangladeshi nationals deported during the year
2011	24,364	6,761
2012	16,530	6,537
2013	1,541	5,234
2014	450*	989*
2015	116*	474*

*Provisional

Source: (IQ_239_11052016_U1966_p143-144, <https://rsdebate.nic.in>)

In fact, estimates of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in India vary widely; even the Indian Government has conceded the absence of accurate data. The fact is that border states, especially Assam and West Bengal, experience the most significant influx, leading to demographic and social challenges (Swargiary, 2025). Table 6.7 given below summarizes key estimates.

Table 5.7 Estimates of Illegal Bangladeshi Immigrants in India

Source	Year	Estimated Number
Task Force on Border Management	2000	15million
Sriprakash Jaiswal (Parliament)	2004	12 million
Kiren Rijiju (Parliament)	2016	20 million
Samir Guha Roy (Indian Statistical Institute)	n.d.	Exaggerated: 91,000 annually.

Source: Swargiary (2025, p. 5).

However, there is no reliable data on the actual number of illegal or undocumented Bangladeshi migrants in India.

Government's Responses

The Government of India has adopted multiple approaches from time to time to deal with the issue of illegal migration. For example, the 1983 Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act was enacted to provide a provision for examining and screening of the complainant by a local against another person in the same police station. Similarly, the Foreigners Act of 1946, the Passport Act, and the Registration of Foreigners Act, etc., were passed for examining and deporting unauthorized foreigners staying in India. The Indian government also began fencing along the India-Bangladesh border in 1987. Shri Kiren Rijiju, as the Minister of State in the Ministry of Home Affairs, responded to a question in the Rajya Sabha that out of the 3326 km of sanctioned length of fence along the India-Bangladesh border, 2746.44 km has been completed as of February 2018 (Mayilvaganan, 2019). In some cases, providing work permits can be an effective measure for controlling illegal migration in India, and the issue of illegal migrants should be discussed from a humanitarian perspective. In fact, illegal migrants have been uprooted from their homes by either political, social and religious, or economic forces (Bhardwaj, 2014). Atal Behari Vajpayee, then Prime Minister of India in 2001, announced that the BJP government was contemplating providing work permits to all the illegal immigrants in India, admitting the difficulties in deporting them because of legal and constitutional challenges (Pattanaik, 2014, p. 3). In the 1990s, the Indian Government adopted one of the most controversial measures to deal with the problem of illegal migrants: the forcible deportation of illegal

migrants under "Operation Pushback". The main objective of this operation was to deter illegal Bangladeshi migrant settling in India. It had three major steps: (A) Detection, (B) Identification, and (C) Deportation (Das, 2016, pp. 67-69). The Citizenship Amendment Act was passed by the Parliament of India in December 2019. It seeks to amend the Citizenship Act of 1955. It refers to those refugees who belong to the Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, or Christian community, travelled from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan due to persecution, and have entered the Indian territorial jurisdiction on or before 31 December 2014 (Tomar, 2024, pp. 113-114). Thus, the Indian Government has adopted many policies from time to time to deal with this issue.

Conclusion

Illegal migration from East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, into India has continued unabated since 1947. It brought not only socio-economic and political problems in the receiving states but also influenced the relations between the two states. Competition over land, job opportunities, and cultural supremacy between the natives and immigrants became more intense. Despite having many policies to deal with the issue of migration, India should have a clear immigration policy that would clearly state terms and conditions for granting citizenship to the migrants (Das, 2016, pp. 114-118). Due to historical, geographical, socio-economic, and political issues, controlling the influx of Bangladeshi migrants to India is a complicated task. It is challenging but not impossible to resolve the problem. In an election rally at Ramnagar, BJP's Prime Ministerial candidate Narendra Modi said, "As soon as we come to power at the Centre, detention camps housing Hindu migrants from Bangladesh will be done away with --- We have a responsibility towards Hindus who are harassed and suffer in other countries. Where will they go? India is the only place for them. Our government cannot continue to harass them. We will have to accommodate them here" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.2). The fact is that it is very difficult to estimate the actual number of illegal migrants in India in the absence of accurate and reliable data. To deal with the issue, both the states, India and Bangladesh, should cooperate with each other. But the fact is that the Bangladesh government has been denying the existence of the problem (Mayilvaganan, 2019, pp. 39-40). This non-cooperative approach of Bangladesh on illegal migration can make it more difficult for India to address this issue in an effective way.

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