

Abstracts

Interrogating Migration in India's Northeast

Samir K. Purkayastha
Sucharita Sengupta

Background of the study:

This paper is an attempt to understand the intricacy and dynamics of mobility and migration in the northeast India amidst a transitional economy. The geopolitical location of the Northeast flanked by 5 countries- Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and China- makes it susceptible to a steady influx and outflow of goods and persons, both legally and illegally.

The 'Look East' – now 'Act East'- policy adopted by the Indian government in 1991 had first opened up the northeast to a foray of developmental policies. Adopting the 'look east' policy following the fall of a superpower then was an important strategy of India's foreign policy to economically and politically integrate with the states of the East and Southeast Asia. In India's vision for the east, the northeastern region has become extremely significant given its geographical proximity to China, and the Southeast through Myanmar and Bangladesh. As a result, the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DONER) was set up in 2001 to foster in development in the region by opening up the region to the immensely flourishing economies of the Southeast Asia and also with the so called mainland India through a network of institutions, communication networks and trade. With the Himalayas in the north and the Bay of Bengal in the south, the entire region acts as India's gateway to the Southeast. A number of bilateral and multilateral projects, for instance, Morey-Tamu-Kalewa road, Trans Asian Highway, India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, Kaladan Multimodal project, Stilwell road, Myanmar-India-Bangladesh gas and oil pipelines have been flagged. So while logistically a new space is being built up through expansion of railway, construction of roads, dams and highways giving rise to a steady demand for labour, it also presupposes stability and peace in the region by monitoring and regulating population flows. Attention has been particularly given to stricter border patrolling measures to curb illegal migration. On the other hand, the attempt to integrate the region with the national economy has also led to a large exodus of people from North-East to the rest of India in search of better economic opportunities. According to a study, migration is at its peak now with 50 lakh people expecting to migrate from North East within the next few years.

In a deprived region torn by ethnic clashes, military insurgency, illegal infiltration, poor infrastructure and massive displacement, peace has remained either elusive or transient. Against this backdrop, the paper will critically explore the dilemmas of a fragile state, the implications of the sudden surge in "development" on population flows across borders- both legal and illegal- displacement if any in wake of the new governance and the identity of a migrant labour vis-à-vis the indigenous communities. In two separate sections, the paper would also attempt to map migration from Myanmar and Bangladesh, two extremely important countries in securing India's ties with the ASEAN countries.

Brief history of migration in the Northeast

Migration per se was not initially viewed negatively in the Northeast. In fact, during the British era, labour migration from neighbouring states was encouraged to keep the tea and timber industries functional. It unfolded as a security concern only when it was related to resource and identity politics. Since its inception in 1979, the United Liberation Front of Asom [ULFA] has been in the forefront of orchestrating protests against Bengali settlers from Bangladesh [erstwhile East Pakistan] in Assam, but later with time and context changed its stand. While immigration in Northeast has continued through centuries, it is only since the last thirty-fourty years that it is being considered as a serious threat. Proving one's identity as an "insider" is also a relentless struggle here, for instance, the Bru/Reangs in Mizoram despite having valid documents were repeatedly targeted by the Mizos as "outsiders". Around 37000 were displaced and compelled to flee to Tripura following violent clashes in the late 90s. The Nellie massacre in Assam in which officially more than 2000 Bengali Muslims were butchered, the Bodo-Santhal conflict which broke out in May 1996 in Kokrajhar and Gossaigaonand Kokrajhar conflict in 2012 are some of the cases when fear of the 'other' has witnessed its worst manifestations.

Illegal immigration too continues to be a matter of grave concern in the entire region. Before the British annexed Assam following the Yandaboo treaty in 1826, immigration to the region was not very high due to lack of economic and administrative need. The administrative reforms of 1874 which transferred the Bengali dominated districts of Goalpara (undivided Goalpara now divided into 4 districts), Cachar and Sylhet to Assam, significantly affected the demography of Assam and opened the flood gates of migration of Bengalis into the state, soon transforming it into a Bengali majority state. In early 20th century British policy also encouraged the immigration of landless Bengali Muslim peasants to Assam to till more fertile land. The population of Goalpara which increased only by 1.4% in 1881-91 and by 2% in 1891-1901 shot up by 30% in 1901-1911 and by 20.47% in 1911-1921. In 1841 British tea planters also started importing migrant labours from central and eastern parts of India. The subsequent sudden surge of migrants led to tension between native and nascent settlers. To control this, the British government in 1920 introduced the line system in certain parts of Assam, demarcating areas for settlement of migrants, mostly Bengali Muslim peasants from then East Bengal. This system, however, only created greater rift between the immigrants and the indigenous people.

After the British left India, large scale migration across the newly drawn borders had deep-rooted social, economic, political and environmental effects on the region leading to spacial reorganization. Following protests by indigenous communities, the Immigrant Act of 1950, was passed mentioning that only those persons evicted due to civil disturbances in East Pakistan could migrate to India. The Indira-Mujib Agreement of 1972 also led to animosity among the natives, since it declared migrants who have arrived before 1971 from East Pakistan would not be branded as citizens of Bangladesh. The anti-foreigners movement started by All Assam Students Union (AASU) in March 1979, culminated in the signing of the Assam Accord on 14 August 1985, by the students' body, the state government and the Centre. As per the accord, it was agreed that those who had come to Assam on or before 25 March 1971, the day Bangladesh was created, would be treated as Indian citizens and the rest would be deported. It was however easier said than done. Determining pre- and post- 25 March 1971 migrants became another source of conflict.

Migration from Myanmar (erstwhile Burma) to the Northeast has occurred through centuries. It is believed that several centuries ago the Ahoms of Assam had migrated from the Shan state of Burma. Under the British dominated Burma, many Indians had migrated to Burma for employment. After the Second World War however, many of these Indians returned and stayed in the Northeast. They were followed by other migrants, fleeing Burma either for persecution, militarization or ethnic conflict like the kachins and Chins who came through the Morey border and got settled in Manipur.

Over the past ten years the plight of the Rohingyas, a stateless minority from Myanmar, seeking refuge in Bangladesh, India and the Southeast Asian countries has hit global media headlines in recent years. Myanmar is an important state for India since it serves as a corridor, a crucial link between India's northeast and the Southeast Asia. In terms of trade too it is beneficial to India. Therefore it is lucrative for India to boost her socio-economic-political relationship with Myanmar which is also the sole member of ASEAN to share a boundary with the northeast India. It is evident that cross border insurgency between Myanmar and India is a matter of grave concern from the policies that India has adopted time and again. Under a Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2012 between the two countries, New Delhi has granted US\$ 5 million a year for a five year term for basic infrastructural development in the border areas. It will be thus interesting to note how the two phenomenon – illegal migration and boosting socioeconomic relationship are balanced by the two states.

Border Trade-Mobility-Trafficking-Smuggling: Any study on migration in the Northeast would remain incomplete without an account of the interface between trade (both legal and illegal) across the border and the nexus between trafficking and smuggling that operates in border districts. Migration and trafficking of goods and human is again like conjoined twins in the context of South Asia, and needless to say the Northeast is not an aberration, but a case in point. According to a report by the North East Federation of International Trade (NEFIT), Bangladesh is a major trading partner of India in the Northeast with 17 functional land custom stations (LCS). There are also several border hats that have facilitated bi-lateral trade between India and Bangladesh. While for trading through LCSs situated on Bangladesh and Bhutan border, there is a Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA), Border Trade Agreement have been entered into with China and Myanmar. Northeast's export to Bangladesh is in nature different than the rest of India owing to the existence of distinct resources in the region, for instance, coal, limestone, rawhides, bamboo, dry fish etc.

As per the border trade agreement signed between India and Myanmar in 1994, trade takes place through three border posts- Morey in Manipur, Zokhawthar in Mizoram and Nampong in Arunachal Pradesh. The Kaladan River and Sitwe port in Myanmar provides alternative connectivity of the North-East with mainland India. The Asian Highway is meant to connect Morey and Imphal with the Southeast. This is the official trade link, however, unofficially, border trade through Morey and Tamu in Myanmar is rampant. Morey is a border town situated in Chandel district of Manipur which is again situated near the 'Golden Triangle' of Myanmar, Laos and Thailand, infamous for producing 20% of world's narcotics (heroin). There also exists a network of illicit drug traffickers, sex workers and smugglers there. The volume of illegal trade might be far higher than the volume of legal trade. Since the whole idea behind the 'Act East' policy is to expand trade across borders, the question that arises here is whether this expansionist vision will impact population mobility?

Research Inquiries:

Q- Mapping migration [both inflow and outflow] and push and pull factors of migration in the entire region especially following the Look East Policy, with a focus on India, Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Q-Inquiring into how the issue of migration coupled with issues such as trafficking, smuggling or contraband trade in the region governed so that it does not hinder the new mode of social governance that the state has adopted over the years?

Q-Exploring the relationship between two processes- unrestricted flow of goods and controlled mobility of people and labour- whether they go hand in hand or work independently of each other?

Q-Will the trade and economic growth be a precursor to peace and security in the region or harbinger of further conflicts?

Q- What are the possibilities of frictions arising out of differing cultural perceptions?