HIGH-POWERED DEMOGRAPHY MISSION - POLITY

On India's 79th Independence Day, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a high-powered demography mission to protect the country from the dangers posed by illegal immigrants.

Illegal Immigration in India

Illegal immigration in India refers to unauthorized entry, overstaying of visas, and undocumented migration across porous international borders. It has become a multifaceted issue, particularly in border states like Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, and West Bengal, where cross-border migration alters demographic balance and creates socio-political challenges. The issue is linked with concerns over employment competition, social cohesion, cultural preservation, internal security, and neighbourhood diplomacy.

Causes of Illegal Migration

Porous Borders

India shares long and largely unfenced borders with Bangladesh (4,096 km), Nepal (1,751 km), Myanmar (1,643 km), and Bhutan (699 km). These borders often pass through rivers, forests, agricultural fields, and hilly terrain, making surveillance extremely difficult. Easy access across such terrain facilitates clandestine entry and smuggling activities.

Political Instability, Ethnic and Religious Persecution

Refugee flows are driven by internal conflicts, persecution, or discriminatory state policies in neighbouring countries. Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar, facing ethnic cleansing, have entered India through Mizoram and Manipur. Religious minorities from Bangladesh and Pakistan (Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Christians) migrate to India in search of protection and security.

Economic Disparities

Poor economic conditions and lack of livelihood opportunities in neighbouring countries push migrants to India. India, with higher wages in informal sectors (construction, domestic work, agriculture, small businesses), attracts migrants willing to work at lower pay than local labour.

Lack of Legal Framework

India is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol. There is no national refugee law, which makes it difficult to distinguish between genuine asylum seekers and economic migrants. The absence of clear legal recognition allows many migrants to remain undocumented, creating grey areas in governance.

Impacts of Illegal Migration

Demographic & Social Impact

Alters the ethnic and linguistic composition of border states like Assam, Tripura, and West Bengal. Has led to tensions and mass movements, such as the Assam Movement (1979–1985), which protested against illegal Bangladeshi migration. Creates stress on urban infrastructure in cities like Delhi, Mumbai, and Hyderabad due to increased demand for housing, education, healthcare, and sanitation facilities.

Economic Impact

Migrants often accept lower wages, undercutting local labour markets and reducing employment opportunities for local workers. Expands the informal economy, where jobs remain untaxed and unregulated, lowering government revenue. Creates additional burden on welfare schemes, where subsidies on food, health, and education are diverted to non-citizens.

Security Concerns

Infiltration by extremist outfits (ULFA, HuJI, ISI-backed networks) raises risks of militancy in sensitive regions. Fake identity documents (Aadhaar, ration cards, voter ID, passports) are obtained, enabling unlawful activities like crime, terrorism, and electoral fraud. Porous borders are also exploited for smuggling, human trafficking, and narco-terrorism.

Political Impact

Migrants are sometimes used as a vote-bank, encouraged to settle with forged identity papers. Fuels polarised debates like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC), creating sharp political divisions. Creates friction between state governments and the Centre, especially in the Northeast, regarding responsibility for migrant resettlement.

Diplomatic & Neighbourhood Relations

Illegal migration often strains India's ties with Bangladesh and Myanmar, as these countries deny or downplay responsibility for migrant outflow. India's pushbacks and deportations, such as attempts to send Rohingyas back to Myanmar, have drawn criticism from international human rights bodies.

Environmental Impact

Rising migrant populations exert pressure on land, forests, and water resources in fragile border regions. Leads to encroachment on wetlands, riverbanks, and reserved forests in states like Assam and Tripura. Contributes to urban slums with poor sanitation, unregulated construction, and unsustainable exploitation of resources.

Steps Taken by India

Border Security Measures

Construction of barbed wire fencing, border roads, floodlighting, and use of technical devices like sensors, drones, and surveillance cameras. Deployment of Border Security Force (BSF) along Bangladesh and Pakistan borders, and Assam Rifles along Myanmar border. India is planning to fence the entire Myanmar border with anti-cut, anti-climb technology to prevent infiltration.

Legal & Policy Instruments

Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 (CAA): Provides Indian citizenship to Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan who entered India before December 31, 2014. National Register of Citizens (NRC): Implemented in Assam to identify and exclude undocumented migrants who entered the state after March 24, 1971.

Bilateral Engagements

India regularly engages with Bangladesh and Myanmar to address cross-border migration and security challenges. Joint border management and talks focus on preventing smuggling, human trafficking, and militant infiltration.

Commitment to Crime-Free Borders

India has reiterated its goal of ensuring secure, crime-free borders by cracking down on cross-border criminal activities, movement of criminals, and smuggling networks.

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