



## **BORDERS, BELONGING, AND BILATERAL TENSIONS: MIGRATION, UNDOCUMENTED MOVEMENT, AND THE EVOLUTION OF INDIA–BANGLADESH RELATIONS FROM PARTITION TO THE PRESENT**

Abhishek Podder

### **RESEARCH ARTICLE**



#### **Author Details:**

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Coochbehar Panchanan Barma University, Coochbehar, West Bengal, India

#### **Corresponding Author:**

Abhishek Podder

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#### **Abstract**

This article looks at how migration — both documented and undocumented — has shaped the relationship between India and Bangladesh from the time of Partition in 1947 to the present day. Using historical records, diplomatic documents, policy material, and a wide reading of the existing scholarship, it traces how repeated waves of population displacement, starting with Partition itself, then the 1971 Liberation War, and continuing through decades of economic migration, have created both lasting diplomatic friction and deep human ties between the two countries. A central concern of the article is how India has constructed the figure of the 'illegal immigrant' in its political life, and how that construction has been used to justify building the border fence, deploying the Border Security Force in aggressive ways, and implementing the National Register of Citizens in Assam. The article also looks honestly at Bangladesh's side — its persistent refusal to acknowledge large-scale outward migration — and considers what this diplomatic posture has cost people on the ground. The overall argument is that treating migration primarily as a security problem has not worked and has caused serious harm. A more honest, cooperative approach, one that starts from the historical and demographic realities of the region rather than from electoral politics, is both possible and necessary.

**Keywords:** *India–Bangladesh relations; undocumented migration; Partition; 1971 Liberation War; border securitization; National Register of Citizens; South Asian migration; illegal immigration; Assam; bilateral diplomacy*

#### **Introduction**

India and Bangladesh share one of the most complicated bilateral relationships in South Asia. The border between them stretches roughly 4,156 kilometres, making it one of the longest land boundaries in the world, and the two countries are joined not just by geography but by language, culture, shared memory, and the continuous movement of people. Population movement has always been part of this relationship — sometimes as a source of solidarity, more often as a source of tension. Since Bangladesh's independence in 1971, the question of undocumented migrants crossing from Bangladesh into India has become one of the most politically charged issues in both countries. In India, it has reshaped electoral politics in border states, driven the construction of a massive fence along most of the shared boundary, and culminated in the National Register of Citizens exercise in Assam, which left nearly two million people without a clear legal status. In Bangladesh, successive governments have either denied the problem outright or insisted that India's figures are politically inflated.

This article argues that migration between India and Bangladesh cannot be understood as simply a law enforcement or border management problem. It is rooted in the violence of Partition, the devastation of 1971, persistent economic inequality between the two countries, and the complex social geographies that a drawn border can never fully sever. The article traces this history from 1947 to the present, examining how migration has shaped — and been shaped by — the broader bilateral relationship. It ends by asking what a more workable, more humane approach to cross-border movement might actually look like.

#### **Partition and Its Displacements (1947–1971)**

Any serious account of migration between India and Bangladesh has to begin with 1947. The Partition of British India, and specifically the division of Bengal into West Bengal and East Bengal, produced one of the largest forced movements of people ever recorded. Estimates suggest that between eight and twelve million people were displaced within months in Bengal alone (Chatterjee, 2007; Chatterji, 2007). Unlike in Punjab, where the violence was concentrated and the displacement rapid, Bengal's

partition played out more slowly, in waves, across years. Hindus moved west, Muslims moved east, but the movements were rarely clean or final.

Between 1947 and 1971, East Pakistan saw repeated episodes of communal violence that drove Hindus across the border into West Bengal and Assam. The riots of 1950, particularly in Barisal and Sylhet, brought hundreds of thousands of refugees into India. By 1951, the Government of India estimated that around 2.5 million displaced persons from East Pakistan had settled in India, though many researchers believe the actual number was higher (Chakrabarti, 1990; Chatterjee, 1992). The Indian state's reception of these refugees was often inadequate and sometimes hostile. Refugee colonies appeared on the fringes of Calcutta, social tensions between newcomers and local communities ran high, and the politics of West Bengal and Assam were permanently altered.

The 1964 communal riots, set off by the theft of a relic from the Hazratbal shrine in Kashmir, caused another surge of displacement. Through the late 1960s, Hindu minorities in East Pakistan faced the Enemy (Custodian) Property Act, intermittent violence, and slow marginalisation that made staying increasingly difficult. These cumulative pressures kept the border porous and migration ongoing long before 1971 changed everything (van Schendel, 2005).

What Partition established, beyond the human tragedy of displacement, was a set of structural conditions that would shape cross-border movement for generations. The Radcliffe Award, drawn up hastily in the final days of British rule, cut through villages, families, agricultural fields, and river systems. The border it created was, from the beginning, somewhat artificial — a line imposed on a landscape of social and economic ties that had no interest in respecting it. As scholars like Cons (2016) and Jones (2009) have shown, the distinction between 'migration' and ordinary 'movement' at the local level was often blurry and remains so today.

### **The Liberation War of 1971 and the Demographic Fallout**

The events of 1971 represent the single largest episode of population movement in South Asian history since Partition itself. When the Pakistani army launched Operation Searchlight on the night of 25 March 1971, the violence that followed — targeting Bengali intellectuals, political activists, Hindus, and ordinary civilians — drove millions across the border into India within weeks. By the time the war ended in December, the estimate of refugees who had entered India stood somewhere between eight and ten million. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees called it the largest refugee crisis since World War II (Bose, 2011; Bass, 2013).

India's response was both humanitarian and strategic. Indira Gandhi's government took in the refugees, set up camps in West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, and Tripura, and simultaneously provided weapons, training, and support to the Mukti Bahini, the Bangladeshi liberation forces. The calculation was clear: an independent, friendly Bangladesh would end Pakistan's encirclement of India on the east and create a strategic buffer. India's military intervention in December 1971 was not just about stopping a humanitarian catastrophe — it was also about reshaping the region's political geography in India's favour (Raghavan, 2013; Ganguly, 2002).

After Bangladesh's independence, most refugees returned. But not all of them. Sanjib Baruah (1999) and Udayon Misra (1999) have both documented that significant numbers — particularly Hindu families who had lost property or feared for their safety, or who had found work and rebuilt their lives in India — chose not to go back. Their descendants would later find themselves caught in the machinery of India's citizenship verification exercises. In Assam, the demographic consequences of the 1971 influx were profound and lasting. Anxieties about population change in the Brahmaputra Valley, which had been building for years, eventually erupted into the Assam Movement of 1979–1985.

India's role in Bangladesh's creation has left a lasting imprint on the bilateral relationship, though not always in straightforwardly positive ways. It gave India a founding narrative of solidarity and sacrifice that Dhaka has never been entirely able to ignore. But it also created a kind of asymmetry — an Indian expectation of gratitude and strategic cooperation, and a Bangladeshi sensitivity about sovereignty — that has complicated relations repeatedly over the decades (Riaz & Rahman, 2016; Bhattacharyya, 2015).

### **Building the Border: Governance and the Making of the 'Illegal Immigrant'**

#### **The Early Years After 1971**

Independent Bangladesh and India moved fairly quickly to formalise their relationship. The Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace signed in March 1972 set the diplomatic foundation, and the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974 tried to sort out the messy legacy of the Radcliffe Award, including the bizarre problem of enclaves — small patches of Indian territory inside Bangladesh, and vice versa — that had left tens of thousands of people in a kind of administrative limbo for decades (Ghosh, 2016). In these early years, border governance was fairly permissive. The social and economic connections between the two countries were strong, border infrastructure was limited, and cross-border labour movement — Bangladeshis working in West Bengal, Delhi, or Maharashtra in construction and domestic service — was tolerated as a practical reality. Small traders moved goods across the border in ways that predated the international boundary and continued regardless of it.

#### **The Politics of the 'Illegal Bangladeshi'**

The idea that Bangladeshi immigrants posed an existential threat to India — to its demography, its culture, its security — took hold most powerfully in Assam during the late 1970s and 1980s. The Assam Movement, driven by the All Assam Students'

Union and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad between 1979 and 1985, began with the claim that millions of undocumented Bangladeshis had been entered on Assam's electoral rolls. The movement mixed genuine anxieties about demographic change and economic competition with a sharper ethnonationalist politics, and it turned violent in ways that exposed how dangerous the anti-immigrant frame could become. The Nellie Massacre of February 1983 — in which somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000 people, mostly Bengali Muslims, were killed in a single day — remains one of the worst episodes of communal violence in post-independence India (Baruah, 1999; Kimura, 2013).

The Assam Accord of 1985, brokered by Rajiv Gandhi's government, tried to draw a line. Those who had entered Assam before 1 January 1966 would be regularised. Those who came between 1966 and 25 March 1971 would have their names removed from electoral rolls for ten years. Anyone who arrived after the 1971 cut-off would be identified and expelled. On paper, this was a resolution. In practice, implementing it proved nearly impossible, and the Accord's framework was left unresolved for decades, eventually becoming the basis for the NRC (Baruah, 2005).

The Foreigners' Tribunals set up under the Foreigners Act of 1946 became the mechanism for deciding citizenship disputes in Assam. Their record has not been good. Scholars and human rights groups have criticised them for reversing the burden of proof — requiring people to prove they are not foreigners rather than requiring the state to prove that they are — and for producing outcomes that reflect who has documents and access to lawyers, not who is actually Bangladeshi. Poor, rural, Bengali-speaking people, whether Hindu or Muslim, whether Indian or not, have been particularly vulnerable to wrongful exclusion (Human Rights Watch, 2019; Bhattacharyya, 2015).

## **The Political Economy of Undocumented Migration**

### **How Many People, and Why?**

No one really knows how many undocumented Bangladeshis are living in India. Indian government sources and politicians have thrown around figures as high as twelve to twenty million, but these numbers come from security agencies or campaign speeches, not from rigorous demographic analysis (Ramachandran, 2003). Scholars who have actually tried to study the question carefully — Siddiqui (2003), Gardner (2012) — have concluded that reliable estimation is extremely difficult, given that the phenomenon is undocumented by definition and both governments have political reasons to exaggerate or minimise.

What the evidence does support is that migration from Bangladesh to India has been large, sustained, and driven by structural forces rather than individual bad faith. At the broadest level, Bangladesh was for decades one of the poorest countries on earth, while India offered substantially higher wages and more employment options. People crossed the border to work in construction, domestic service, the garment trade, and the urban informal economy — the same calculation that drives internal migration everywhere. Social networks built through earlier waves of displacement made the pathways familiar and lower-risk. At the household level, migration was often a livelihood decision made under genuine economic pressure, and one frequently driven by landlessness — including the kind caused by river erosion (char formation) that has displaced millions of Bangladeshis from low-lying areas over the decades (Rogaly et al., 2002; Gardner, 2012).

Environmental factors are increasingly important. Bangladesh is one of the world's most climate-vulnerable countries. It sits on a delta prone to flooding, cyclones, and sea-level rise, and climate scientists have long warned that tens of millions of Bangladeshis could be displaced as conditions worsen over the coming decades (Rigaud et al., 2018; Black et al., 2011). The IPCC has consistently identified Bangladesh as among the most threatened nations. The link between environmental displacement and cross-border migration is not hypothetical — it is already happening, and the bilateral relationship has not yet found a way to address it honestly.

### **Economic Realities on Both Sides**

The economic picture of Bangladeshi migration in India is more complicated than Indian political discourse usually suggests. In West Bengal, Delhi, Maharashtra, and elsewhere, Bangladeshi workers have filled gaps in the labour market — particularly in low-wage, physically demanding work that many local workers do not want — and their contributions to urban economic expansion are real. Studies of migrant communities in Delhi and Mumbai have shown patterns of integration, remittance sending, and community building that are recognisably similar to internal migration everywhere (Sikder, 2014; Knerr & Matin, 2014).

At the same time, Indian political parties, particularly the BJP, have consistently framed undocumented Bangladeshis as a burden on public services, a threat to low-wage Indian workers, a security risk, and — increasingly in the Modi era — as part of a demographic transformation that threatens Hindu cultural dominance. This framing has driven policy in ways that prioritise enforcement and exclusion over any serious effort to understand the actual lives of migrant populations (Bora, 2016; van Schendel, 2005).

### **The Border Fence and Its Human Cost**

#### **Building the Barrier**

The most visible expression of India's approach to the Bangladesh border is the fence. The India–Bangladesh Barrier — two rows of concertina wire on concrete pillars, often with floodlights — has been under construction since the 1990s and by the 2010s covered around 3,141 of the border's 4,156 kilometres. It is one of the largest border fortification projects in Asia, built at a cost of tens of billions of rupees (Jones, 2009).

The fence has not stopped migration. What it has done is redirect movement through more dangerous and remote crossing points, increasing the role of smugglers and traffickers. It has also been accompanied by a use of lethal force that has killed hundreds of Bangladeshi civilians — cattle traders, small merchants, people attempting to cross for economic reasons — at the hands of the Border Security Force. Human Rights Watch and the Bangladeshi rights organisation Odhikar documented these killings extensively over two decades. Victims include children and women. The BSF's rules of engagement have allowed broad discretion to use lethal force, and accountability for killings has been rare (Human Rights Watch, 2010; Odhikar, various years).

BSF killings have been a persistent irritant in diplomatic relations, and successive Bangladeshi governments have raised them consistently. Indian responses have ranged from defensive denial to vague promises of reviewing rules of engagement, but meaningful reform has not materialised. Reece Jones's research (2009) places the fence and its violence within a global pattern of border militarisation that reflects the securitised logic of the post-Cold War and post-9/11 period — a logic in which the physical enforcement of borders has become a performance of sovereignty as much as a practical policy.

### **The National Register of Citizens in Assam**

The National Register of Citizens, updated under Supreme Court supervision and finalised in August 2019, was the Indian state's most ambitious attempt to separate citizens from non-citizens in Assam. Every resident had to prove their citizenship — or that of their ancestors before 25 March 1971 — through documentary evidence. When the final list was published, roughly 1.9 million people had been left out. They were not declared foreigners, but they were no longer confirmed as citizens either, leaving them in a legal limbo with no clear path forward.

The consequences for those excluded were severe and in many cases absurd. Among those left off the register were retired Indian Army soldiers, women whose names differed from official records because of marriage, descendants of Partition-era refugees, and long-term residents whose exclusion reflected poor record-keeping rather than any genuine question of nationality. Detention camps were set up across Assam's districts. Bangladesh refused to accept deportees — correctly pointing out that many excluded individuals had no meaningful connection to Bangladesh and that no bilateral mechanism for their return had been agreed (Bhattacharyya, 2015; Amnesty International, 2020).

The Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 added another dimension. By offering an expedited route to Indian citizenship for Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian migrants from three Muslim-majority neighbours — while explicitly excluding Muslims — the CAA was widely understood as the companion piece to the NRC: a mechanism to protect non-Muslim Bangladeshis from exclusion while targeting Bengali Muslims. The nationwide protests that followed reflected how broadly the CAA-NRC combination was seen as a departure from India's secular constitutional principles. Bangladesh expressed official concern, viewing the religious criterion for citizenship as a troubling precedent with direct regional implications (Amnesty International, 2020).

### **Diplomacy and the Management of Disagreement**

#### **How the Relationship Has Changed**

India–Bangladesh relations since 1971 have gone through several distinct phases, and understanding them matters for making sense of the migration issue. The period from 1971 to 1975, under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was the warmest in the relationship's history. Bangladesh owed its independence partly to India's intervention, and Mujib's government maintained close ties with Indira Gandhi. The Treaty of Friendship of 1972 and the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974 were products of this goodwill (Ganguly, 2002).

The assassination of Mujib in August 1975, and the military governments that followed under Ziaur Rahman and then Hussain Muhammad Ershad, produced a marked cooling. Both military rulers cultivated ties with China and Pakistan, distanced themselves from India, and took harder positions on bilateral disputes — particularly the Farakka Barrage, which has been a source of Bangladeshi grievance ever since India began diverting Ganges waters in 1975. The contrast with the Mujib years was sharp (Surie, 2016; Kamruzzaman & Hajer, 2012).

The return of democracy in 1991 brought a new variable: the Awami League under Sheikh Hasina and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party under Khaleda Zia developed very different postures toward India. The Awami League generally favoured engagement; the BNP was more wary. India developed an obvious preference for Awami League governance, a preference that has at times been openly expressed and has fed Bangladeshi perceptions of Indian interference in domestic politics (Riaz & Rahman, 2016).

#### **What Has Been Achieved, and What Has Not**

The bilateral relationship has produced some genuine achievements worth acknowledging. The Land Boundary Agreement, signed in 2011 and ratified by India's parliament only in 2015, resolved the enclave problem that had left tens of thousands of people in legal limbo for nearly seven decades — a remarkable outcome that required political will on both sides (Ghosh, 2016). The Ganges Water Sharing Treaty of 1996, reached during the Gujral and Hasina tenures, provided a framework for dividing river flows at Farakka, imperfect but real. The broader Gujral Doctrine — the idea that India should give more than it asks from smaller neighbours — represented a moment of diplomatic maturity that has not always been sustained (Crow & Singh, 2000). On connectivity and development, India has extended substantial lines of credit to Bangladesh, supported infrastructure development, and moved toward greater energy cooperation including electricity supply. The two governments have talked for

years about road, rail, and river links that could transform economic integration between the two countries and the wider Bay of Bengal region (Bhattacharyya, 2015; Ministry of External Affairs, India, 2023).

Migration, however, remains stuck. India insists the problem of undocumented migration is enormous and needs to be addressed. Bangladesh denies that it is sending its people across the border in large numbers. This fundamental disagreement has blocked the bilateral readmission agreement that would be the logical first step in any serious repatriation programme. The Joint Working Group on illegal migration meets, the Home Secretary-level talks continue, but no substantial mechanism has emerged (Siddiqui, 2003; Ramachandran, 2003). The diplomatic deadlock protects political positions on both sides while doing nothing for the people caught between them.

### **The Rohingya Crisis and What It Reveals**

Since 2017, the India–Bangladesh migration relationship has been further complicated by the Rohingya situation. Following the Myanmar military's campaign against the Rohingya — which UN investigators described as bearing the hallmarks of genocide — over a million refugees crossed into Bangladesh, concentrated in Cox's Bazar in the country's southeast. Bangladesh is now hosting the largest refugee settlement in the world, in one of the world's most densely populated countries, with limited international burden-sharing (UNHCR, 2023).

India's response has been awkward at best. It has resisted accepting Rohingya refugees and has in some cases moved to deport those found on Indian territory, despite the principle of non-refoulement under international law. India's concerns are partly strategic — it does not want to damage relations with Myanmar — and partly domestic, given the political pressures around immigration enforcement. But the effect has been to leave Bangladesh shouldering an enormous burden without meaningful Indian solidarity, which has not helped bilateral relations (Bose, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2018).

The Rohingya crisis also exposes a structural weakness in South Asia's approach to population movement more broadly. South Asia is the only major world region without a regional refugee protection framework. Neither India nor Bangladesh has signed the 1951 Refugee Convention. There is no multilateral architecture for burden-sharing or agreed protection standards. This means that every migration crisis falls on bilateral relationships to manage, with all the political constraints and asymmetries that entails (Chimni, 1994; Oberoi, 2006).

Bangladesh's own political landscape shifted dramatically in 2024. Sheikh Hasina's government fell in August of that year following weeks of mass protests, and she fled to India. The interim government led by Muhammad Yunus has signalled a shift in bilateral tone, and Bangladesh appears to be adopting a more assertive posture on a range of issues including BSF killings, water sharing, and the terms of economic cooperation. What this means for the migration relationship is not yet clear, but the political dynamics of the bilateral relationship are in flux in ways they have not been for some time (The Hindu, 2024; Prothom Alo, 2024).

### **What a Better Approach Might Look Like**

The evidence examined in this article does not support the conclusion that India's securitised approach to the Bangladesh border has achieved its stated aims. The fence has not stopped migration; it has made crossing more dangerous and more expensive, enriching smuggling networks. The NRC produced a stateless population without delivering any workable mechanism for identifying or returning genuine undocumented migrants. The diplomatic impasse on readmission has prevented any formal channel from developing. The overall effect has been to impose serious costs on vulnerable people while producing little in the way of policy results.

Several alternative approaches have been proposed in the scholarly literature and deserve more attention than they have received in policy circles. The first is regularisation and formal labour migration channels. Sanjoy Hazarika (2000) and Willem van Schendel (2005) have both argued for bilateral arrangements that would allow seasonal and circular labour migration to happen through formal pathways, providing legal status and labour protections to migrants while giving India the ability to track and regulate movement. Such arrangements already exist in other parts of the world and would be consistent with both countries' economic interests.

The second approach focuses on addressing structural drivers. Bangladesh has made remarkable economic progress over the past two decades — it has left Least Developed Country status and reduced poverty substantially — but the development gap with India remains significant, and climate vulnerability will continue generating displacement pressure regardless of what happens at the border. Investing seriously in Bangladesh's adaptation to climate change and continued economic development is not just good development policy; it is one of the more practical long-term approaches to reducing migration pressure (Black et al., 2011; Rigaud et al., 2018).

Third, a regional institutional framework for managing population movement, however modest, would help. The absence of any South Asian architecture for refugee protection or labour migration governance is a genuine liability. Ranabir Samaddar (2003) and Tapan Bose (2010) have both argued for building incrementally — starting with bilateral agreements and sub-regional arrangements that could gradually establish the norms and institutions for something more comprehensive. ASEAN's imperfect but functional frameworks for labour mobility offer one example of what this might look like.

Finally, any framework that does not incorporate robust protections for individuals will fail on its own terms. The NRC showed clearly what happens when documentation-based citizenship verification meets a society where large numbers of people —

particularly women, the elderly, and the poor — do not have consistent records. People should not lose citizenship because they are poor. Any bilateral or domestic mechanism for managing migration must be built around due process, the prohibition of arbitrary detention, and non-refoulement as non-negotiable starting points.

### Conclusion

Migration has always been part of what India and Bangladesh are to each other. It predates Bangladeshi independence, predates Indian independence, and goes back to the social and economic landscape of an undivided Bengal that colonial partition violently disrupted. The waves of displacement that followed — in 1947, in 1971, and in the years of economic migration that came after — have shaped both countries in ways that cannot be undone and should not be wished away.

What this article has argued is that the political response to this reality, on both sides, has been inadequate. India's securitised approach — the fence, the shoot-to-kill culture at the border, the NRC, the CAA — has criminalised movement that is structurally driven and historically rooted, and has produced statelessness, detention, and death without achieving any of its stated goals. Bangladesh's position of categorical denial has protected a diplomatic posture at the cost of honest engagement with a problem that has real consequences for real people.

A more serious approach would start from the facts on the ground: that cross-border movement between India and Bangladesh reflects colonial legacies, the violence of 1971, economic inequality, environmental vulnerability, and the simple porosity of a border drawn through a densely connected social landscape. Managing that movement well requires bilateral agreements on labour migration and readmission, investment in Bangladesh's development and climate resilience, protection frameworks for people whose citizenship is disputed, and eventually some form of regional architecture that does not leave every crisis to the mercy of bilateral politics.

The coming decades will test both countries. Climate change projections suggest that tens of millions of Bangladeshis could face displacement from flooding, sea-level rise, and extreme weather over the next generation. The question of how India and Bangladesh manage that displacement — whether through cooperation and shared responsibility, or through escalating walls and exclusionary politics — will define the relationship in ways that the decisions taken now will shape. Getting it right matters far beyond the two countries themselves.

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