

Migration and Its Impact on Demography, Governance, and Political Mobilisation in North-East India

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ABSTRACT

Migration in North-East India represents a complex and multi-dimensional socio-political phenomenon shaped by historical processes, ethnic diversity, geographical location, and socio-economic inequalities. This study examines migration patterns in the region with a focus on their historical causes and socio-political consequences. Drawing entirely on secondary data sources—such as Census reports, Election Commission records, government documents, committee reports, scholarly literature, and media analyses—the research explores how migration has transformed demographic structures, social relations, political behaviour, and governance mechanisms. The findings reveal that migration in the North-East is not a uniform or one-directional process but a dynamic interaction of cross-border movements, inter-state migration, internal displacement, and urbanisation. These movements have significantly altered population composition in states such as Assam and Tripura, leading to demographic anxieties, cultural tensions, and identity-based political mobilisation. Migration has influenced electoral politics, the rise of ethnic and regional parties, citizenship debates surrounding the NRC and CAA, and centre–state as well as inter-state political relations. The study also highlights the link between migration, ethnic conflict, insurgency, border security, and militarisation, demonstrating how demographic change is frequently reframed as a security concern. The study concludes that migration governance in North-East India requires a balanced, inclusive, and context-specific policy approach that integrates human rights, regional sensitivities, development planning, and federal cooperation. Through situating migration at the intersection of demography, identity, politics, and security, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of migration as a central force shaping contemporary North-East India.

Keywords: *Migration, North-East India, Demographic Change, Identity Politics, Citizenship, NRC and CAA, Electoral Politics, Ethnic Conflict, Centre–State Relations, Security and Governance.*

1. Introduction

Migration is one of the most significant demographic and social processes shaping human history and contemporary societies. It involves the movement of people across regions, states, or national boundaries for economic, political, social, environmental, or cultural reasons. In the present era of globalisation, migration has intensified due to uneven development, conflicts, ecological stress, and expanding communication networks. Understanding migration is essential not only for demographic analysis but also for examining its wider social and political implications, particularly in sensitive and diverse regions such as North-East India. Globally, migration has been shaped by economic inequalities, political instability, wars, colonial expansion, and environmental change. International migration flows often occur from developing to developed regions in search of better employment, security, and living conditions. Refugee movements, labour migration, and climate-induced displacement have become defining features

of contemporary global migration [1]. Historically, migration has been a constant feature of human civilisation. Ancient migrations were driven by survival needs, trade, and territorial expansion, while medieval migrations were influenced by invasions, religious movements, and economic exchange. Colonial migration involved forced labour movements, settlement policies, and administrative restructuring. Post-colonial migrations, shaped by political borders, nationalism, and development policies, continue to influence present-day demographic structures. This historical overview highlights the long-term impact of migration on societies [2].

1.1 Migration Patterns in India

Migration in India reflects its vast geographical diversity, socio-economic inequalities, and historical transformations. Both internal and international migrations play a crucial role in shaping India's population distribution. Rural-to-urban migration, inter-state labour movement, and seasonal migration are prominent features of the Indian migration system.

State-wise Migration Pattern in India: State-wise migration patterns in India reveal significant regional variations influenced by levels of industrialisation, employment opportunities, urbanisation, and social development. States with high economic growth attract migrant labour, while economically backward and ecologically vulnerable regions witness high out-migration.

Causes of Migration in India: Migration in India is driven by a combination of push and pull factors. Poverty, unemployment, land scarcity, agrarian distress, and environmental degradation push people out of their native regions, while better wages, education, healthcare, and urban amenities attract migrants to destination areas. Social mobility, marriage, and displacement due to development projects also contribute to migration [3].

1.2 Migration Patterns in North-East India

Migration in North-East India exhibits distinct characteristics due to the region's geographical isolation, ethnic diversity, fragile ecology, and proximity to international borders. Both internal migration and cross-border movements have significantly influenced the demographic composition of the region. Migration has reshaped population structures in several states, generating complex interactions between indigenous communities and migrant populations.

1.3 Historical Causes of People Migration

The historical causes of migration include colonial policies, political reorganisation, partition, border formation, and administrative expansion. In North-East India, colonial plantation economies, post-independence state formation, and geopolitical developments played a critical role in population movements. Historical migration continues to influence contemporary social relations, identity formation, and political claims.

1.4 Socio-Political Consequences of Migration

Migration has far-reaching social and political consequences, including changes in demographic balance, ethnic relations, and access to resources. In North-East India, migration has contributed to identity anxieties, ethnic tensions, political mobilisation, and debates over citizenship and belonging. At the same time, migration has facilitated cultural exchange and economic participation [4].

1.5 Significance of the Study

The study is significant as it provides a comprehensive understanding of migration in North-East India by integrating historical, social, and political perspectives. It contributes to migration studies by addressing

regional gaps and highlighting the experiences of indigenous communities. The research is relevant for policymakers, scholars, and civil society actors concerned with migration management, social cohesion, and inclusive governance.

2. Literature Review

Rajan and Chyrmang (2025) examined labour migration in North-East India within the broader framework of internal migration in contemporary India. The study analysed patterns, drivers, and sectoral absorption of migrant labour, highlighting regional disparities, informal employment structures, and the implications of migration for development and labour governance in the North-Eastern states.

Das and Dutta (2025) analysed the impact of rural–urban migration on farm productivity in Assam across different farm sizes. Using empirical evidence, the study found that migration affected labour availability and agricultural output unevenly, with small and marginal farmers experiencing greater productivity challenges due to labour shortages.

Debbarma and Behera (2025) reviewed push and pull factors influencing tribal and non-tribal migration to Agartala city. The study revealed that employment opportunities, education, and urban amenities acted as pull factors, while poverty and lack of rural infrastructure pushed migrants, contributing to changing ethnic and social dynamics in urban spaces.

Patangia and Kar (2024) examined the nature, dimensions, causes, and implications of both in-migration and out-migration in North-East India. The study highlighted economic disparity, environmental stress, and political factors as key drivers and emphasised migration's role in reshaping demographic composition and socio-political relations in the region.

Ganguly and Biswas (2024) analysed the labour market situation in North-East India, focusing on employment patterns, migration trends, and workforce participation. The study identified limited industrial growth and skill mismatches as major reasons for out-migration, particularly among youth, leading to regional labour market imbalances.

Madhukulya and Hazarika (2024) examined the effects of climate change on culture, economy, and lifestyle in North-East India, with special reference to the Bodo and Mishing communities. The study showed that environmental stress contributed to livelihood disruption, cultural transformation, and increased migration from ecologically vulnerable areas.

Khan et al. (2023) conducted a statistical analysis of push and pull factors influencing migration in India. The study found that economic inequality, unemployment, and educational opportunities significantly shaped migration decisions, while regional development gaps played a decisive role in directing migration flows across states.

Padhan (2023) explored the causes of student migration in India with a case study of the National Capital Region. The study revealed that quality of education, institutional reputation, and employment prospects motivated student migration, reinforcing regional inequalities in higher education infrastructure.

Shoba et al. (2023) examined inter-state and reverse migration in selected cities of Tamil Nadu. The study identified employment instability, rising living costs, and the COVID-19 pandemic as major causes of reverse migration, highlighting its social and economic consequences for both source and destination regions.

Singh and Biradar (2022) analysed trends and characteristics of migration in India using demographic data. The study highlighted increasing internal migration, dominance of rural–urban flows, and gendered migration patterns, emphasising migration's role in shaping labour markets and urbanisation processes.

Joseph (2022) examined international migration from India to European countries, focusing on expectations, prospects, and challenges. The study highlighted employment aspirations, skill demand, and policy barriers, while also discussing issues related to integration, remittances, and migrant vulnerability in destination countries.

Sharma et al. (2022) reviewed migration of Indian nurses within the global healthcare sector. The study found that wage differentials, working conditions, and career opportunities drove nurse migration, while raising concerns about workforce shortages, ethical recruitment, and healthcare system sustainability in India.

Dutta (2021) analysed causes and trends of migration in India with special reference to rural–urban migration. The study showed that poverty, agrarian distress, and lack of rural employment opportunities pushed migrants towards urban centres, contributing to urban congestion and informal employment growth.

Nagla (2021) examined emerging trends in migration patterns in India. The study highlighted increasing mobility due to urbanisation, industrialisation, and environmental stress, while also emphasising migration's impact on urban growth, housing pressure, and environmental sustainability.

Jesline et al. (2021) systematically reviewed the plight of migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic in India. The study revealed severe livelihood insecurity, mobility restrictions, and social exclusion faced by circular migrants, underscoring structural vulnerabilities within India's migration and labour systems.

Sucharita (2020) examined socio-economic determinants of temporary labour migration in Western Jharkhand. The study identified poverty, landlessness, and lack of local employment as key drivers, while highlighting the precarious working conditions and limited social protection experienced by migrant labourers.

Bashyal (2020) conducted an empirical survey on Nepali migrants in India. The study analysed migration motives, employment patterns, and socio-cultural adjustment, revealing economic necessity as the primary driver and highlighting challenges related to identity, security, and access to basic services.

Khadria (2020) analysed the binaries between skilled and unskilled migration from India. The study argued that such distinctions were increasingly blurred, as both categories contributed to global labour markets, remittances, and development, while facing varying degrees of policy regulation and vulnerability.

Irudaya Rajan et al. (2020) examined internal labour migration during the COVID-19 pandemic, describing it as a crisis of mobility. The study highlighted sudden job losses, mass return migration, and institutional failures, exposing the absence of comprehensive migrant protection mechanisms in India.

Trivedi and Vyas (2018) analysed causes of migration and its impact on migrant income in the TSP region of South Rajasthan. The study found that migration improved household income but also led to social dislocation and dependence on unstable, low-skilled employment.

Kusuma and Babu (2018) systematically reviewed migration and health outcomes among internal migrants in India. The study revealed poor access to healthcare, occupational hazards, and increased health risks, emphasising the need for migrant-inclusive public health policies.

Bala (2017) examined causes and consequences of migration in India. The study identified economic inequality and unemployment as major drivers, while highlighting migration's effects on urbanisation, labour markets, and social stratification in both source and destination areas.

D'Mello and Monteiro (2017) analysed rural–urban migration through a case study of Bijapur Colony. The study found that lack of rural employment and better urban opportunities motivated migration, resulting in improved incomes but also challenges related to housing, sanitation, and social integration.

3. Socio Consequences - Migration Patterns in North-East India

Migration in North-East India has produced significant social consequences by reshaping demographic composition, ethnic relations, and community life. Population movements have altered age–sex structures, accelerated urbanisation, and intensified competition over land, employment, and public resources. Indigenous communities face concerns related to cultural identity, language preservation, traditional livelihoods, and land security, while migrant groups often experience challenges of social integration, economic vulnerability, and marginalisation. Migration has also generated complex socio-cultural outcomes. On one hand, it has encouraged cultural interaction, hybrid identities, and economic dynamism; on the other, it has contributed to social tensions, ethnic anxieties, and the reassertion of “insider–outsider” distinctions. Labour markets, education, health services, and urban infrastructure have been reshaped, creating both opportunities and pressures. Gendered impacts are evident, with changing household roles and increasing female migration. Overall, migration has acted as both a driver and outcome of social change, producing uneven but profound transformations across the North-East [5].

3.1 Demographic Changes

Migration has played a decisive role in reshaping the demographic structure of North-East India. Successive waves of pre-colonial, colonial, post-independence, inter-state, and cross-border migration have altered population size, composition, age structure, and spatial distribution across the region. Census of India, NSS, and government reports reveal that these migration-induced transitions have significantly influenced socio-cultural relations and settlement patterns.

Population Growth and Decline in Specific States

Population growth in North-East India has been uneven due to varying migration flows. Assam and Tripura experienced rapid population increases, especially during the Partition and post-1971 period, largely due to refugee influx from East Pakistan/Bangladesh. In contrast, states such as Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Mizoram showed moderate growth driven mainly by natural increase and regulated internal migration, while Manipur recorded slower growth due to conflict and youth out-migration.

Shifts in Ethnic Composition

Migration has significantly altered the ethnic composition of several North-Eastern states. Assam and Tripura witnessed major demographic transformations due to large-scale settlement of Bengali-speaking migrants, affecting linguistic balance and ethnic relations. While states like Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya remain predominantly tribal, urban centres now host mixed populations, leading to changing inter-group relations and periodic ethnic tensions.

Age–Sex Ratio Variations

Migration has produced notable variations in age–sex ratios across North-East India. Male-dominated labour migration has skewed sex ratios in several urban and industrial areas, while recent increases in female migration for education, healthcare, and service-sector employment have partially balanced these patterns. Simultaneously, youth out-migration from hill states has reduced the working-age population in rural areas, creating demographic and economic challenges.

Impact on Urbanisation

Migration has been a key driver of rapid urbanisation in North-East India. Cities such as Guwahati, Shillong, Aizawl, Imphal, Agartala, and Dimapur expanded rapidly due to inter- and intra-state migration.

While urban growth has generated economic opportunities and cultural interaction, it has also resulted in overcrowding, pressure on housing and infrastructure, environmental degradation, and the growth of informal settlements [6].

3.2 Impact on Indigenous Communities

Migration has had profound and complex effects on indigenous communities in North-East India, a region home to more than 200 tribal groups with distinct languages, cultures, and social systems. Internal and cross-border migration has altered demographic balances, economic practices, and relationships with land and resources. While some interactions have encouraged cultural exchange and integration, many have resulted in displacement, marginalisation, and social tensions. This section examines how migration has reshaped tribal identity, land ownership, and access to resources. Migration has significantly influenced tribal identity and cultural practices. In states such as Assam and Tripura, large-scale migration has created demographic pressures that indigenous communities perceive as threats to their linguistic, cultural, and social autonomy. Changes in population composition have led to cultural dilution, especially among younger generations exposed to urbanisation, education, and media influences. In response, many tribal groups have attempted to preserve their identity through the revival of traditional festivals, reinforcement of customary laws, and demands for cultural and political autonomy.

Land alienation and displacement represent some of the most severe consequences of migration for indigenous communities. Tribal land, which forms the foundation of social organisation and cultural identity, has increasingly been encroached upon due to refugee settlement, migrant habitation, and development projects. In Tripura and Assam, migration has led to the loss of forest land, reduction of shifting cultivation areas, and weakening of customary land rights. These processes have displaced tribal populations from ancestral territories and undermined traditional systems of land management.

Migration has also intensified competition over natural and economic resources, generating socio-economic stress among indigenous groups. Increased demand for land, forests, water, and employment has disadvantaged tribal communities that depend heavily on natural resources for subsistence. Migrant labour has altered local labour markets by increasing competition and depressing wages, while rising population density has strained livelihoods and public services. In several states, such pressures have escalated into ethnic conflicts and land disputes, highlighting the deep social consequences of migration for indigenous communities in the North-East. Overall, migration has reshaped indigenous life in North-East India by challenging cultural continuity, weakening land security, and intensifying resource competition. Although the nature and extent of these impacts vary across states and communities, migration remains a critical factor influencing identity, livelihood, and social stability in the region.

3.3 Cultural Integration and Conflict

Migration in North-East India has produced a complex cultural landscape marked by assimilation, acculturation, resistance, and conflict. The region's ethnic and linguistic diversity means that population movement often reshapes cultural boundaries and community identities. While migration has enabled cultural interaction and exchange, it has also generated tensions when demographic pressure, historical grievances, and political mobilisation intersect. Processes of assimilation and acculturation have been visible in many parts of the region. In areas where migrant populations are relatively small or dispersed, migrants gradually adopt local customs, languages, and social norms to integrate into host societies. More commonly, acculturation occurs through mutual cultural exchange, particularly in urban centres, resulting in hybrid cultural practices among younger generations without complete loss of distinct identities. Alongside adaptation, cultural resistance has emerged strongly among indigenous communities. Large-

scale migration is often perceived as a threat to cultural survival, prompting movements aimed at protecting indigenous languages, traditions, and customary rights. Tribal councils, student unions, and community organisations play a key role in asserting cultural autonomy and resisting perceived domination by migrant groups [7].

Migration-induced demographic changes have also contributed to ethnic conflicts across the region. Competition over land, political representation, and economic opportunities has fuelled tensions in several states. Such conflicts are often intensified by identity-based mobilisation, militant movements, and contested state policies related to citizenship, land rights, and migration control. Language has become a central arena of cultural contestation. Migration has encouraged multilingualism in urban spaces but has also led to language shift and the marginalisation of several indigenous languages. In response, linguistic movements have sought to preserve mother tongues through education, literature, and cultural institutions, reinforcing language as a symbol of ethnic identity. Festivals, rituals, and food practices have likewise transformed under the influence of migration. Traditional festivals have adapted to multicultural participation, rituals have been hybridised through inter-community interaction, and cuisines have evolved through cultural exchange. Overall, cultural integration and conflict in the North-East reflect an ongoing process of negotiation between continuity and change shaped by migration [8].

3.4 Social Stratification and Class Formation

Migration has significantly transformed social stratification in North-East India by introducing new class formations into societies that were traditionally organised around kinship, clan systems, and customary roles rather than rigid class hierarchies. The arrival of migrant communities brought market-oriented economic relations, wage labour, and private ownership, altering earlier subsistence-based and communal economic structures. These changes have been particularly visible in states such as Assam, Tripura, Manipur, and Meghalaya. Migration has led to the emergence of distinct working classes, especially in urban and semi-urban centres. Migrant labourers dominate low-paid and insecure jobs in construction, transport, domestic work, and the informal sector, forming a new urban proletariat. Indigenous workers often face competition from migrant labour willing to accept lower wages, weakening their bargaining power and deepening class-based divisions that cut across ethnic identities.

At the same time, migration-related development and state policies have contributed to the rise of an indigenous middle class. Access to education, reservations, and government employment has enabled many tribal individuals to enter salaried professions. This has created internal stratification within indigenous societies, dividing rural subsistence-based groups from urban, educated professionals. Migration has also facilitated the growth of migrant-dominated entrepreneurial and commercial classes. Trading, transport, retail, and wholesale sectors in many North-Eastern states are largely controlled by non-tribal migrant communities with greater access to capital and networks. This economic imbalance has often generated resentment among indigenous populations, though it has also encouraged the gradual emergence of indigenous entrepreneurship through cooperatives and small businesses [9].

3.5 Impact on Education and Skill Development

Migration has played a crucial role in reshaping education and skill development patterns in North-East India. In-migration to urban centres has increased demand for educational institutions, straining infrastructure, teachers, and facilities, while outmigration from rural and hill areas has led to declining enrolment and even closure of schools in remote regions. Thus, migration has unevenly redistributed educational opportunities across space. Literacy and educational attainment have been influenced in contrasting ways. Some migrant groups contribute to higher literacy levels and increased demand for

private and English-medium education, while economically vulnerable migrant families face barriers such as poverty, mobility, language difficulties, and lack of documentation. These disparities reinforce socio-economic stratification through unequal educational outcomes. Language diversity further complicates education in the region. Migration has intensified multilingual classrooms, creating learning challenges for both migrant and indigenous children. The dominance of English, Hindi, or migrant languages has reduced the use of tribal languages in formal education, contributing to cultural marginalisation and lower academic confidence among indigenous students. Migration has also stimulated the growth of private, vocational, and skill-based education in urban areas, turning cities like Guwahati, Shillong, and Aizawl into educational hubs. However, this urban concentration widens rural–urban gaps and disadvantages economically weaker indigenous households. Meanwhile, large-scale youth outmigration for higher education and skill training has improved individual prospects but contributed to brain drain and local skill shortages. Overall, migration has had a multidimensional impact on education and skill development expanding opportunities for some while deepening inequalities for others. It has transformed educational aspirations, labour market skills, and mobility patterns, highlighting the need for balanced policies that ensure inclusive and equitable access to education across North-East India [10-13].

4. Political Consequences - Migration Patterns in North-East India

Migration in North-East India has had far-reaching political implications affecting poll results, identity mobilisation, citizenship discussions, governance patterns, and security relations in the region. Demographic change is the most immediate result of migration; its political implications are much more complex and durable. The fragile ethnic make-up of the region, drawn up as administrative units during the colonial period, proximity to Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, and China in its periphery has contributed to a range of political issues involving migration that are tied into cultural survival, territory, and state centre relations. This section attends to these political implications with secondary data, exploring how migration alters power dynamics, political discourses, and institutional reactions in the North-East.

4.1 Political Consequences

Migration in North-East India has not only transformed demographic and social structures but has also profoundly reshaped the political landscape of the region. Owing to colonial boundary-making, ethnic plurality, and proximity to international borders, migration has acquired complex political significance. Cross-border, inter-state, and internal migration have influenced electoral behaviour, political representation, administrative arrangements, and conflict dynamics, particularly in states such as Assam, Tripura, Manipur, and Meghalaya. Migration has become a key factor in political realignment and identity-based mobilisation. Changes in population composition affect voter profiles and electoral outcomes, often generating anxieties among indigenous communities regarding political marginalisation. These concerns have fuelled regional movements, ethnic assertions, and demands for protective policies. At the same time, migrant populations have emerged as important voter groups, shaping party strategies and policy debates. The political implications of migration are examined through extensive use of secondary data. Election Commission of India records and delimitation reports help trace how demographic changes alter constituency boundaries, voter distribution, and political power balances. Such data are particularly relevant in states like Assam, where long-term migration has necessitated repeated delimitation exercises. Government policy documents and peace accords provide further insight into institutional responses to migration-related challenges. Measures such as the NRC, CAA, ILP regulations, and land protection laws reflect attempts to regulate migration and safeguard indigenous interests. Peace agreements, including the Assam Accord and Bodo Peace Accords, illustrate how political negotiations have sought to address migration-induced tensions.

Reports of committees and commissions, along with scholarly and media analyses, offer official and critical perspectives on migration-related political issues. Together, these sources enable a comprehensive understanding of how migration has shaped governance, identity politics, and centre–state relations in North-East India [14-17].

4.2 Demographic Change and Electoral Politics

Migration has significantly reshaped electoral politics in North-East India by altering voter composition, constituency boundaries, and party support bases. Demographic changes resulting from cross-border migration, internal mobility, refugee inflows, and displacement have directly influenced electoral behaviour and political calculations. States such as Assam and Tripura clearly demonstrate how migration-driven population shifts affect voting patterns, representation, and political mobilisation.

Changing voter composition has been most evident in Assam and Tripura. In Assam, districts like Dhubri, Barpeta, Karimganj, and Goalpara have recorded rapid increases in voter enrolment due to sustained migration, enhancing the electoral influence of migrant-origin communities. In contrast, Upper Assam has experienced slower voter growth because of youth outmigration, creating regional imbalances in political influence. In Tripura, large-scale refugee settlement transformed migrants into the majority population, decisively shaping electoral outcomes and long-term party dominance.

In states such as Meghalaya, Manipur, and Nagaland, migration has had a more localised electoral impact. While Inner Line Permit (ILP) regimes have limited large-scale inflows, internal rural–urban migration has created demographic pockets that influence municipal and local elections. In tribal-dominated states, electoral change is more closely tied to internal community dynamics than to external migration. Delimitation exercises and reservation patterns have also been affected by migration-induced demographic shifts. In Assam and Tripura, constituency boundaries have been redrawn to reflect population changes, often increasing representation in high-migration areas while reducing it in indigenous-majority regions. These adjustments have intensified debates over political equity, tribal representation, and reservation protection, especially in Scheduled Tribe constituencies. Migration has further influenced electoral outcomes and party strategies. Political parties adapt their narratives to appeal to migrant and indigenous voters, leading to identity-based mobilisation and polarised voting. Migrant-dominated constituencies often support parties perceived as inclusive, while indigenous groups rally behind ethnic or regional parties seeking cultural and political safeguards. Overall, migration remains a decisive factor shaping electoral behaviour, party competition, and political discourse in North-East India [18-20].

4.3 Identity Politics and Ethno-Nationalist Mobilisation

Identity politics has been a defining feature of North-East India and has intensified with migration-induced demographic change. Internal and cross-border migration has heightened cultural anxieties among indigenous communities, leading to political mobilisation around ethnicity, language, land, and territory. As population composition shifted, identity became central to political debate, with ethnic groups seeking to protect cultural survival and political rights. Migration has contributed to the rise of ethnic and regional political parties across the region. In Assam, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) emerged from the Assam Movement as a response to fears of illegal migration and cultural marginalisation. Similarly, parties such as AIUDF represented migrant-origin communities, reflecting ethnic and linguistic polarisation in electoral politics. In Tripura, the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT) mobilised tribal identity following demographic inversion caused by refugee influx. In states such as Nagaland and Mizoram, ethnic parties like the Naga People's Front (NPF) and the Mizo National Front (MNF) have emphasised

customary laws, cultural autonomy, and political self-determination. In Manipur, identity mobilisation among Meiteis, Nagas, and Kukis has been shaped by internal migration and territorial claims, deepening hill–valley divisions and ethnic contestation. Student unions, pressure groups, and civil society organisations have played a critical role in sustaining identity politics. Organisations such as the All-Assam Students’ Union (AASU), Naga Students’ Federation (NSF), Khasi Students’ Union (KSU), and Young Mizo Association (YMA) have acted as cultural guardians and political mobilisers, influencing policy debates on migration, land rights, and citizenship. Secondary literature on the region highlights migration as a major catalyst for ethno-nationalist mobilisation. Scholars emphasise demographic anxiety, land and resource competition, historical neglect, and demands for autonomy as key drivers of identity politics. Together, ethnic parties, student movements, and civil society organisations illustrate how migration, identity construction, and political mobilisation are closely intertwined in shaping the political landscape of North-East India [21].

4.4 Citizenship, Documentation and Legal–Political Debates

Citizenship and migration constitute one of the most sensitive and contentious political issues in North-East India. Owing to historical migration, porous international borders, colonial legacies, and post-independence geopolitical developments, citizenship debates are deeply intertwined with demographic anxieties and identity politics. Legal frameworks and documentation processes aimed at regulating migration have therefore acquired intense political significance in the region.

India’s citizenship regime, primarily governed by the Citizenship Act, 1955, along with subsequent amendments, reflects region-specific responses to migration pressures. The 1985 amendment following the Assam Accord introduced a special cut-off date for identifying illegal migrants in Assam, institutionalising migration as a legal and political concern. Other laws, including the Foreigners Act and immigration-related rules, empower the state to regulate non-citizens but face practical challenges due to historical migration patterns and inadequate documentation.

The National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019, have intensified political debates in the North-East. The NRC process in Assam, aimed at identifying citizens based on pre-1971 records, placed a heavy documentation burden on vulnerable populations and resulted in large-scale exclusions. The CAA, which provides citizenship to selected religious migrants, was widely opposed in the region as it was perceived to contradict the Assam Accord and threaten indigenous demographic balance.

Documentation requirements and the functioning of Foreigners Tribunals have further politicised citizenship. Many individuals, particularly from poor, displaced, and flood-affected communities, struggle to produce required documents, leading to legal uncertainty and exclusion. Detention centres for those declared foreigners have drawn criticism from human rights groups, highlighting the humanitarian costs of rigid citizenship enforcement.

The politics of “illegal immigration” has thus become a powerful narrative shaping public discourse and political mobilisation. Indigenous groups frame migration as a threat to land, culture, and political rights, while migrant-origin communities view citizenship verification as discriminatory. Together, these legal and political processes reveal deep tensions between constitutional principles, human rights, national security, and regional identity, making citizenship a central axis of political conflict in North-East India [22].

4.5 Migration, Conflict and Security

Migration has emerged as a major factor shaping conflict and security dynamics in North-East India, transforming population movement into a sensitive political and security issue. Demographic shifts resulting from cross-border migration, internal displacement, and refugee flows have intensified ethnic anxieties, challenged territorial control, and influenced political representation. As a result, migration is increasingly viewed not merely as a demographic process but as a potential threat to social stability and security.

Migration has often acted as a trigger for ethnic tensions in the region. In Assam, large-scale migration has fuelled fears of cultural and political marginalisation, leading to mass movements and episodes of communal violence. In Tripura, demographic inversion following refugee influx contributed to prolonged ethnic conflict and insurgency. Similarly, internal migration in Manipur has sharpened competition over land and political power among Meitei, Naga, and Kuki communities, reinforcing identity-based conflicts.

Insurgency and armed mobilisation in the North-East have frequently drawn upon migration-related grievances. Several militant groups have framed themselves as defenders of indigenous identity against perceived demographic invasion, linking migration to demands for autonomy or sovereignty. These narratives have sustained cycles of violence and complicated peace negotiations across states such as Assam, Nagaland, and Manipur.

Competition over land and natural resources has further turned migration into a security concern. Claims over forest land, riverine areas, and urban space have generated violent clashes between indigenous groups and migrants in states like Assam, Meghalaya, and Arunachal Pradesh. Where land is closely tied to identity and customary rights, economic competition easily escalates into security dilemmas.

Border management has also become central to migration-related security debates. Porous borders with Bangladesh and Myanmar have heightened concerns over illegal migration, insurgent movement, and refugee inflows. While security measures such as fencing, patrols, and surveillance have been intensified, they remain difficult to enforce due to terrain, cultural ties, and cross-border mobility traditions.

State responses to migration-related security challenges include documentation drives, detention, policing, and militarisation. Mechanisms such as Foreigners Tribunals, detention centres, and heightened security presence have raised serious human rights concerns, particularly regarding prolonged detention and unequal treatment. Conflict-induced displacement further perpetuates insecurity, creating a cycle in which migration fuels violence and violence generates new migration, reinforcing instability across the region.

4.6 Inter-State and Centre–State Political Dynamics

Migration has significantly shaped inter-state and centre–state political relations in North-East India by intensifying demographic pressures, identity claims, resource competition, and security concerns. While the nature of these dynamics varies across states depending on historical experience and ethnic composition, migration has consistently increased political bargaining, administrative coordination, and conflict management between states and the Union government.

Inter-state relations in the North-East have been particularly affected in border areas where colonial-era boundaries do not align with ethnic settlement patterns. Migration has complicated disputes between states such as Assam–Nagaland, Assam–Mizoram, and Assam–Arunachal Pradesh by altering population balances in contested zones. Migrant settlement, shifting cultivation, and labour movement in border districts have frequently triggered land disputes, violence, and prolonged negotiations, often requiring central mediation.

Centre–state relations have been most strained over citizenship and migration policies. The NRC process in Assam and opposition to the CAA across several North-Eastern states exposed tensions between national objectives and regional priorities. While the Centre emphasised uniform citizenship regulation and border security, state governments and civil society groups raised concerns about demographic impact, cultural survival, and human consequences. These disagreements illustrate the persistent friction between constitutional authority and region-specific political sensitivities.

Autonomous district councils under the Sixth Schedule have emerged as important intermediaries in centre–state politics. Councils such as the BTR, KHADC, GHADC, and TTAADC actively negotiate with both state governments and the Centre on issues of land rights, settlement regulation, and cultural protection. Migration has strengthened their demands for greater authority, adding another layer of complexity to governance and intergovernmental relations.

Security coordination further complicates centre state dynamics. Migration-related conflicts often require joint action by state police and central forces, sometimes leading to disagreements over strategy, intelligence sharing, and the use of laws such as AFSPA. Alongside security concerns, disputes over development projects, resource allocation, and infrastructure often intensified by migrant inflows—shape negotiations between states and the Centre.

Overall, migration has become a key factor influencing inter-state relations and centre–state political dynamics in North-East India. Citizenship debates, boundary disputes, security management, and development policies are all deeply intertwined with demographic change, revealing migration governance as a product of ongoing political negotiation rather than purely administrative control [23].

5. Conclusion

Migration in North-East India represents a complex and multi-dimensional socio-political process shaped by the region’s unique history, ethnic diversity, geography, and socio-economic conditions. The study demonstrates that migration has continuously influenced demographic patterns, identity politics, governance structures, security dynamics, and centre–state as well as inter-state relations. Rather than being a linear or isolated phenomenon, migration in the region operates through overlapping historical and contemporary forces.

The findings highlight that migration has produced significant demographic restructuring, particularly in states such as Assam and Tripura, where population changes have altered cultural balances and political equations. These demographic shifts have affected community relations, urbanisation, labour markets, and access to resources, while also intensifying anxieties among indigenous populations regarding cultural survival and political representation. The study further establishes that migration has had far-reaching political consequences. Electoral politics, party systems, and identity-based mobilisation in the North-East are closely linked to demographic change. The emergence of ethnic and regional parties, along with debates surrounding citizenship through mechanisms such as the NRC and CAA, illustrates how migration has become deeply politicised and central to regional political discourse.

From a security perspective, migration has intersected with ethnic conflict, insurgency, border management, and militarisation. Population movements have both triggered and been shaped by conflict, leading to cycles of displacement and insecurity. These dynamics underline the close connection between migration, governance challenges, and peace-building efforts in the region. The policy implications of the study emphasise the need for balanced, humane, and context-sensitive approaches to migration governance. Strengthening documentation processes, enhancing inter-state and centre–state coordination, empowering autonomous councils, promoting inclusive development, and ensuring human rights—

oriented security measures are crucial for long-term stability. Theoretically, the study contributes to migration scholarship by demonstrating that migration in the North-East functions as both a demographic and political force. It enriches understanding of identity politics, federal governance, and the security–development nexus, showing how migration reshapes institutions, power relations, and social order. Finally, the study underscores the importance of future research based on empirical fieldwork, comparative analyses, and interdisciplinary approaches. Addressing migration-related challenges in North-East India requires sustained collaboration among policymakers, scholars, and civil society to promote social coexistence, protect vulnerable communities, and ensure democratic and equitable development in the region.

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