

## **BANGLADESHI DIASPORA IN INDIA: MIGRATION, ETHNICITY, AND IDENTITY FORMATION**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the historical trajectories and contemporary challenges of the Bangladeshi diaspora in India, focusing on migration, ethnicity, and identity formation. Migration intensified during the 1947 Partition and the 1971 Liberation War, driven by political upheaval, economic distress, and environmental displacement. It will also look at the process of cultural assimilation and acculturation with the Indian population especially in the states of West Bengal and Assam. While West Bengal enabled smoother integration due to cultural affinity, Assam has experienced intense conflict, where fears of demographic change and political discourses of “infiltration” have produced exclusion, xenophobia, and violence. Using diaspora theories by Safran, Brubaker, and Hall, the study emphasizes the fluid and negotiated nature of identity, shaped by the tension between self-asserted belonging and state-imposed classifications. It will also attempt to understand the formation of a collective solidarity among the Bangladeshi diaspora in India and the conflicting nature of their identities with other ethnicities such as ‘Assamese’. Despite such adversities, the diaspora sustains cultural resilience and civic participation, underscoring the need for nuanced perspectives on migration and identity in South Asia.

### **Introduction**

The term diaspora comes from the word ‘diaspeirein,’ from Greek ‘dia’ which means ‘across,’ and ‘speirein’ which means ‘scatter’. The concept of diaspora was first used to describe the scattering of Jewish communities outside of Israel. William Safran (1991) defines diaspora as “that segment of people living outside their homeland.” According to the Sage Dictionary of Sociology (2006), the term “diaspora” refers to the dispersion or scattering of a particular group of people from their original homeland or ancestral land (Bruce & Yearley, 2006). This phenomenon can occur due to various reasons, such as migration, forced displacement, or voluntary movement. Diaspora communities often maintain a collective identity and connection to their homeland, even when living in different parts of the world.

The entire human history has been a series of continuous migrations. People have always migrated from one region to another in various periods of time. International Organization for Migration (2016) defines migration as “the movement of people away from their usual place of residence to a new place of residence, either across an international border or within a State.”

The word ‘ethnicity’ has been defined by Oxford Dictionary of Sociology (2014) as “individuals who consider themselves, or are considered by others, to share common cultural characteristics that differentiate them from the other collectivities in a society, and from which they develop their distinctive behaviour, form an ethnic group.”

George Herbert Mead (1934) defines identity as “the individual’s understanding of who they are, derived from their social roles, group memberships, and personal characteristics, shaped by interaction with others.”

Migration is an enduring human phenomenon that reshapes demographics, cultures, and national identities across borders. The Bangladeshi diaspora in India represents one such dynamic where historical dislocations, economic challenges, and ethno-political struggles intersect. India holds a large number of Bangladeshi diaspora who are the population of Bangladeshi origin living mostly in the borderland states like West Bengal, Tripura and Assam. They or their forefathers have migrated from Bangladesh in different waves due to various factors such as political instability, economic hardship, and religious persecution, particularly following the partition of India in 1947 and Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 (Bose & Jalal, 1998: 218-219). Many of first-generation migrants today have become the full-fledged citizens of India while maintaining their distinct culture and identity. William Safran in his essay, ‘Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return’ mentions that the diasporic communities “retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements and ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship” (Safran, 1991, pp. 83-99). The Bangladeshi diaspora in India similarly seem to have a deep connection to their homeland in Bangladesh since they have a strong sense of unity and collective solidarity which stem from their shared identity and ethnic background.

Over the decades, these migrants and their descendants have had to adjust and negotiate their lives between assimilation and alienation, sometimes struggling to assert their identity in the face of legal ambiguities, xenophobic political discourse, and cultural tensions. This paper attempts to explore the historical origin, socio-political context, and contemporary identity challenges of the Bangladeshi diaspora in India.

Furthering this, Brubaker (2005) introduced a more fluid notion of diaspora that focused on diasporic consciousness—the affective attachment and ongoing social construction of identity despite spatial separation. These frameworks are crucial in understanding the Bangladeshi diaspora in India, as they underscore both the physical migration and the emotional, cultural ties that bind diasporic populations to their ancestral homelands.

Diaspora studies often focus on three intersecting themes: origin and trajectory of migration, interaction with the host society, and internal identity formation. The Bangladeshi diaspora in India exemplifies this model. Their migration was born out of various economic and religious reasons, their integration marked by social conflict, and their identity continuously negotiated within India's pluralistic society.

### **Historical Background of Bangladeshi Migration to India**

Migration from present-day Bangladesh to India has a long and layered history. During the colonial period, the movement of labour across the Bengal region was common under British policies that disregarded ethnic and linguistic divisions. The British East India Company encouraged labour mobility to meet the demands of plantation economies, infrastructure projects, and urban growth. For instance, Bengali-speaking labourers from eastern Bengal (now Bangladesh) migrated to

Assam and other parts of British India to work in tea plantations or as part of railway construction crews. This migration was often seasonal or temporary, but it laid the groundwork for later, more permanent population shifts. As Ghosh (1998) notes, "the colonial state's utilitarian approach to labor created networks of mobility that persisted beyond its rule" (p. 45).

However, the largest and most politically significant migration wave occurred during and after the 1947 Partition, which divided British India into India and Pakistan (East Pakistan now being Bangladesh). The Radcliffe Line, hastily drawn to demarcate borders, split Bengal along religious lines—West Bengal to India and East Bengal to Pakistan—ignoring the region's cultural and linguistic unity (Bose & Jalal, 2004). This triggered one of the largest population exchanges in history, driven by communal violence and fear. Millions of Hindus fled East Pakistan to India, while Muslims moved in the opposite direction. Estimates suggest that between 1946 and 1951, approximately 3 million people crossed the Bengal border, with many settling in West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura (Chatterji, 2007). Bose and Jalal (2004) describe this as "a partition not just of land but of communities, leaving scars that shaped migration for decades" (p. 137). The violence consisting of riots, massacres, and forced displacements created a refugee crisis that India struggled to manage, setting a precedent for future inflows.

The second and more decisive phase came in 1971 during the Bangladesh Liberation War, when millions of refugees, when East Pakistan seceded from Pakistan to form Bangladesh. The Pakistani military's brutal crackdown, known as Operation Searchlight, targeted Bengali civilians, intellectuals, and Hindus, sparking widespread atrocities. This led to an unprecedented exodus, with over 10 million refugees—mostly Hindus but also politically persecuted Muslims—flooding into India between March and December 1971 (Shamshad, 2017). The Indian states of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, and Tripura bore the brunt of this influx. India initially opened its borders on humanitarian grounds, providing shelter in makeshift camps. After Bangladesh's victory in December 1971, many refugees returned, but a significant number stayed, either due to fear of reprisals or destroyed livelihoods back home (Chatterji, 2013).

After 1971, migration from Bangladesh to India continued, albeit at a slower pace and with different motivations. Economic disparity became a primary driver, as Bangladesh faced poverty, unemployment, and overpopulation, while India offered better job prospects, particularly in informal sectors like construction, agriculture, and domestic work (Samaddar, 1999). Environmental factors also played a critical role. River erosion and flooding, exacerbated by Bangladesh's deltaic geography, displaced rural communities, pushing them toward India's border states (Shamshad, 2017). For example, the erosion of the Ganges-Padma river system has rendered thousands landless annually, prompting cross-border movement (Homer-Dixon, 1994). Familial and social networks, established during earlier migrations, further facilitated this flow. Samaddar (1999) argues that "migration became a survival strategy, blurring the lines between voluntary movement and forced displacement" (p. 112).

**Push and Pull Factors** - Migration from Bangladesh to India has often been driven by a confluence of push and pull factors. On the push side, poverty, overpopulation, and natural disasters such as riverbank erosion and cyclones frequently displace people from rural Bangladesh.

On the pull side, India represents better employment opportunities, safety from political or religious persecution, and familial connections.

In rural Bangladesh, high population density and limited agricultural land have created chronic underemployment. India, with its more diverse economy, serves as an attractive alternative, especially in sectors like construction, domestic work, and small businesses.

Furthermore, political instability in Bangladesh has periodically triggered migration. The political turbulence of the 1980s under General Ershad, and more recent concerns over minority rights, particularly for Hindus and Ahmadiyya Muslims, have motivated people to seek security across the border (Kibria, 2011). Religious minorities, fearing persecution, have consistently looked towards India as a safe haven.

Over the decades, many of these migrants became Indian citizens through regularization processes, while others remained in legal limbo, categorized alternately as "foreigners," "illegal immigrants," or "infiltrators" depending on the prevailing political climate (Shamshad, 2017).

**Legal and Political Complexities** - The post-1971 period also saw India grappling with the legal status of these migrants. Many who arrived during the Liberation War were eventually naturalized through processes like the Assam Accord of 1985, which set March 25, 1971, as a cutoff date for citizenship eligibility in Assam (Baruah, 2009). However, those arriving later faced a uncertain fate. India's lack of a uniform refugee policy meant that Bangladeshi migrants were variably labelled as "refugees," "illegal immigrants," or "infiltrators," depending on political narratives (Shamshad, 2017). In Assam and West Bengal, this fuelled tensions, with social movements like the Assam Movement (1979-1985) led by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) decrying "foreign infiltration" (Baruah, 2009). The 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) further complicated matters by offering a path to citizenship for non-Muslim migrants from Bangladesh (pre-2014 arrivals), while excluding Muslims, intensifying debates over identity and belonging.

### **Identity, Ethnicity, and the Idea of "Belonging"**

William Safran's conceptualization of diasporas includes the idea of collective memory and a sustained connection to the homeland (Safran, 1991). This memory becomes part of their group identity and a source of cultural resilience. For Bangladeshi Muslims in India, this often translates into maintaining religious customs and rituals, retaining distinct cultural practices, language dialects and preserving traditional clothing and foodways which often mark them apart from native populations.

Diasporic identity is not static; it evolves in relation to the host society and internal communal dynamics. Bangladeshi migrants in India often negotiate multiple identities—national, religious, linguistic, and ethnic. This identity is layered with nostalgia, cultural pride, and survival instincts. For instance, in West Bengal, shared linguistic and cultural heritage with Bangladesh allows for relatively smoother integration. The Bengali language, food, and customs serve as a bridge between migrants and locals, though socio-economic hierarchies persist. In West Bengal, due to the close cultural affinity, it becomes difficult to differentiate the diasporic migrant population from the local population. Religion as a criterion for differentiating the diaspora from the locals can't be used, although the majority of the migrants are Muslims only. Therefore, the only

difference exists in terms of the language of the diaspora community who along with the use of standard Bengali speak different dialects and versions of Bengali such as Sylheti, Mymensinghi, Chittagonian or Noakhali, the languages which originate from different parts of Bangladesh from where they mostly migrate.

In contrast, in Assam and parts of Northeast India, identity formation is far more contentious due to linguistic, cultural and ethnic differences. In Assam, where linguistic and religious differences are more pronounced, the diaspora maintains a distinct identity. Celebrations of cultural symbols, the use of Bengali and its other dialects, dress patterns and culinary customs serve as markers of ethnic continuity and difference from the larger population.

The sense of collective identity is further reinforced through community networks, marriages within the diaspora, and creation of ethnic enclaves. In some cases, this solidarity becomes a source of resilience against external hostility. Yet it also serves as a focal point for accusations of non-assimilation and dual loyalty.

Identity formation is a **socio-psychological process** that involves both internal self-perception and external recognition. As Stuart Hall (1990) notes, cultural identity is not fixed but constantly “in process,” shaped through history, culture, and power relations. Erik Erikson’s psychosocial theory also emphasizes identity development as a life-long negotiation, particularly salient in contexts of displacement and migration (Erikson, 1950).

For diasporic communities like the Bangladeshis in India, identity formation involves memory and ancestry i.e., the preservation of language, religion, and historical narratives about the homeland (e.g., Bangladesh Liberation War) serve as emotional anchors. This **crystallization of identity** happens over time, influenced by lived experiences, host-society reactions, and political recognition. In the case of the Bangladeshi diaspora in India, identity becomes a site of negotiation between self-defined meanings and state-sanctioned classifications.

A helpful conceptual distinction in diaspora studies is between asserted identity (how one perceives and presents themselves) and accorded identity (how others or institutions classify them). The inconsistency or misalignment between these two can result in **identity conflict** (Jenkins, 2008).

Many members of the Bangladeshi diaspora in India assert their identity as legitimate Indian citizens, Bengali speakers, and members of local communities, particularly in states like West Bengal. Others may assert a dual identity — one that acknowledges Bangladeshi heritage while also embracing an Indian national or sub-national identity.

However, the state, media, and dominant public discourses often accord these individuals a different identity — that of “illegal migrants,” “infiltrators,” or “foreigners.” In Assam, for instance, the NRC process and CAA debates have politically constructed the Bangladeshi migrant as the “other,” regardless of legal status or duration of residence (Shamshad, 2017).

This discrepancy leads to profound **identity conflict**, both at the psychological level (feelings of alienation, fear, and stigmatization) and at the social level (exclusion from citizenship rights, hostility from locals, and cultural suppression). These individuals are often caught in a liminal

space, not fully recognized as Indian, yet unable or unwilling to identify exclusively with Bangladesh.

### **Acculturation and Cultural Negotiation in Host States**

"Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups" (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936)

Assimilation refers to the process by which migrants adopt the cultural norms of the host society, whereas acculturation is the process through which migrants adapt to a new culture while retaining elements of their original identity. In India, the Bangladeshi diaspora has had varied experiences depending on the host state. The Bangladeshi diaspora in India experiences both phenomena, although the degree and direction vary by region.

In West Bengal, due to linguistic and cultural continuity, acculturation has been relatively seamless. Such affinity allows for smoother integration with the host society. Many Bangladeshi migrants acquire Indian citizenship, engage in local politics, and participate in public life. Their descendants often identify as Indian Bengalis, albeit with a conscious awareness of their roots. Many migrants have adopted Indian modes of living while still celebrating Bangladeshi customs. However, despite these integrations, Bangladeshi-origin citizens often face subtle discrimination in jobs, housing, and political representation.

Assam presents a more complex picture. The fear of "demographic invasion" among ethnic Assamese populations has led to persistent demands for the identification and deportation of Bangladeshi migrants. The influx of Bengali-speaking Muslims and Hindus has often been seen as a threat to the Assamese linguistic and cultural identity. This has led to multiple phases of anti-immigrant agitations, most notably the Assam Movement (1979-1985), which culminated in the Assam Accord of 1985. The National Register of Citizens (NRC) update in Assam, meant to identify illegal immigrants, created widespread fear and uncertainty among the Bangladeshi diaspora, even those with decades-long residency (Shamshad, 2017). Despite this, many members of the community have adopted Assamese language and customs, seeking to blend in and assimilate with the dominant population and reduce suspicion.

### **Conflict and Resistance: The Assamese-Bangladeshi Identity Clash**

The conflict in Assam is emblematic of how ethnic tensions can shape diasporic experiences. Native Assamese communities have long perceived Bangladeshi immigrants as a demographic threat. The indigenous Assamese people fear being outnumbered and reduced to a minority in their own land. The issue of illegal migration has been politicized by parties across the spectrum, often leading to violent confrontations. This has led to rise of identity-based politics, which often results in violent clashes, ghettoization, and exclusion from state resources. Clashes like the Nellie massacre of 1983 are testimony to the hatred and suspicion of the local people towards the people of Bangladeshi origin (Kimura, 2013: p.7).

The NRC exercise in Assam, aimed at identifying genuine citizens, left nearly 2 million people stateless in its final draft, many of whom are suspected to be from the Bangladeshi diaspora

(Shamshad, 2017). This has created anxiety and fear among the community, irrespective of their actual citizenship status.

The term “Bangladeshi” is often wielded as a political slur, used to delegitimize not only undocumented migrants but also settled Indian citizens of Bengali Muslim origin. This stereotyping undermines the legal and social identity of many and entrenches a permanent state of suspicion and surveillance. Such use of language creates a moral panic, positioning the diaspora as a threat rather than as contributors to society.

However, resistance is not one-sided. Over time, the Bangladeshi diaspora has built grassroots networks, NGOs, and political alliances to assert their rights. Many have contested elections, run local businesses, and actively participated in civil society, thereby reconfiguring their identity from passive migrants to active citizens (Sharma, 2016: p.8).

### **Contemporary Challenges and Governmental Responses**

The status of the Bangladeshi diaspora in India remains contentious. Despite their significant contribution to the economy particularly in low-wage and labour-intensive sectors, they often face social exclusion and political scapegoating. Several political parties have used the rhetoric of “infiltration” to stir electoral sentiments.

Recent government policies such as the NRC and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) have further complicated their status. While the CAA offers a path to citizenship for persecuted religious minorities from Bangladesh, it explicitly excludes Muslims. This selective approach has heightened fears of statelessness among Muslim migrants, many of whom have lived in India for generations (Sharma, 2019).

Moreover, the lack of documentation among older migrants creates challenges in accessing basic services like healthcare, education, and legal aid. Children of undocumented migrants face a bleak future, as their statelessness limits educational and employment opportunities (Sharma, 2019).

The borders between India and Bangladesh in the states of Assam and West Bengal remain porous and unchecked in certain areas leading to continuous influx and migration from the other side of the border. The governments of both West Bengal and Assam vow to seal their borders permanently and stop cross-border immigration but these remain only promises and hence unaccomplished tasks.

### **Conclusion**

The paper has explored multifaceted experiences of the Bangladeshi diaspora in India, tracing the historical, socio-political, and cultural dynamics that shape their lives. Beginning with the waves of migration during the Partition of 1947 and the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, the diaspora's movement has been shaped by complex dynamics of political upheaval, economic hardship, and environmental displacement. These migrants, primarily settled in states like West Bengal and Assam, have tried to negotiate identity and belonging amidst often hostile political climates. While West Bengal has enabled relatively smoother assimilation due to cultural and linguistic affinities, Assam presents a contrasting picture of exclusion, where the fear of demographic change has fuelled xenophobic sentiment and legal ambiguities, exemplified by the NRC and CAA. The diaspora's identity formation reflects a constant negotiation between asserted

and accorded identities, entangled in narratives of citizenship, legality, and cultural memory. Despite adversities, the Bangladeshi diaspora continues to contribute meaningfully to Indian society, while simultaneously asserting its rights through civic engagement and grassroots resistance. This paper concludes that understanding diaspora communities requires a nuanced approach that considers historical trajectories, contemporary politics, and evolving notions of identity, citizenship, and belonging in pluralistic societies like India.

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