



INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

(Peer-reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

DOI : 03.2021-11278686

ISSN : 2582-8568

IMPACT FACTOR : 8.031 (SJIF 2025)

Cross-Border Migration and Its Impact in Manipur 2012-2024

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DOI No. **03.2021-11278686** DOI Link :: <https://doi-ds.org/doi/10.2582/04.2025-22642221/IRJHIS2504025>

Abstract:

The economic and socio-political environment of Manipur, which is one of the Indian Northeastern states bordering Myanmar with an open 352-kilometer border, has been shaped mainly by cross-border mobility. Throughout history, economic dependence, geopolitical stress, and strong ethnic and family ties have all impacted people mobility across this border. Large regional crises, including the 2017 Rohingya refugee crisis and the 2021 Myanmar military coup, have contributed heavily to Manipur's travel history over the past decade, with an influx of displaced people who are looking for refuge. Migration has added to the workforce and border trade but has also raised serious issues of national security, insurgency, land encroachment, and demographic changes.

The Indo-Myanmar Free Movement Regime (FMR), initially set up to enable economic and cultural interactions between border towns, has increasingly been criticized for enabling transnational crime and irregular migration. In 2024, this led to policy shifts to enhance border security and limit the scope of free movement. Securitization through military deployments, fencing, and surveillance has formed the essence of the Indian state response to migration. But most displaced are in the legal underground due to the lack of a comprehensive refugee policy, which has contributed to tensions between migrant groups and between migrant groups and native-born populations.

Migration has both positively and negatively affected the economy of Manipur. In places like Moreh, migrants have added to border trade, agriculture, and the informal labor market, but their presence has also been a cause of worry about competition for employment and wage depression. The situation is made more complicated by the onset of illicit enterprises like drug running, weapons running, and people trafficking across the Indo-Myanmar border. Security concerns have been heightened owing to the availability of insurgent groups that benefit from the population movements, invoking calls for tightened immigration laws and population tracking.

In order to empower Manipur's changing migration patterns to maintain regional peace, economic viability, and protection of the rights of the natives while adhering to humanitarian values, a holistic and inclusive policy framework is necessary.

Keywords: North-east region, migration, refugees, Look East Policy, Act East Policy, borderland, conflict, Myanmar military coup, Rohingya.

Introduction:

Cross-border migration to Manipur has been a persistent and complex issue, deeply ingrained in historical, geopolitical, and economic factors. Manipur's geographical position, whose open 352 km common border with Myanmar renders it an ideal entry point for streams of migration, legal and illegal, has turned it into a critical crossroads. This migration has been propelled by a mix of factors ranging from ethnic affinities, economic opportunities, political turmoil, and humanitarian emergencies. (Atchareeya Saisin, Siriporn Somboonboorana, Rajen Singh Laishram & Somrak Chaisingkananont, 2023)

The migration patterns in Manipur have been shaped over the centuries by pre-colonial ethnic migrations, colonial frontier policies, and post-independence national security considerations. The region has long witnessed the movement of various ethnic groups such as the Meitei, Kuki-Zomi, and Naga, whose kinship and cultural links traverse the Indo-Myanmar border. But modern nation-state borders and severe immigration legislation have progressively restricted this unfettered movement, generating tensions around identity, land control, and demographic transformation (Deeptiman Tiwary, 2025).

In recent years, cross-border migration has grown due to political unrest in Myanmar. The Rohingya crisis of 2017 and the 2021 Myanmar military coup have resulted in large-scale displacement, forcing thousands of refugees to seek shelter in Manipur and other northeastern states. While some migrants have been able to integrate into local society, others have faced hostility, legal uncertainty, and deportation. Besides, the Indo-Myanmar Free Movement Regime (FMR) which previously granted free movement up to 16 km inside the border region has been curtailed due to security concerns, reducing its scope to 10 km in 2024. All the policy revisions are an indication of growing concerns regarding the impact of migration on national security and native communities (Vijaita Singh, December 26, 2024)

The economic impacts of migration are equally long-term. While migrant labor enhances border commerce, agriculture, and the informal economy, their population has also created economic issues for indigenous groups. Wage oppression, job competition, and access to resources are the concerns that have fueled indigenous opposition to unfettered migration. Meanwhile, the region's border towns, particularly Moreh, have become hubs of unofficial commerce, some of which are illicit such as drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and people smuggling, complicating further the discussion of migration (Sumitra Naha (Das), 2022)

Security concerns related to migration have also been of top priority. The increasing number of insurgent groups, human traffickers, and organized crime syndicates along the Indo-Myanmar border has prompted the Indian government to further enhance border patrols and enforcement activities. These efforts, however, have been met with opposition from human rights organizations

and ethnic communities, who argue that such policies disproportionately target vulnerable refugee populations. The absence of a clear refugee policy in India has further complicated things and thousands of uprooted persons have been placed in a state of juridical limbo (Sreeparna Banerjee, 2023).

While migration continues to shape Manipur's socio-political and economic fate, it is important to change course from the present path to a new one that balances security necessities with humanitarians. Addressing the root causes of migration, strengthening legal mechanisms, and fostering regional cooperation with Myanmar are steps toward sustainable management of migration. The need for a top-level policy embracing security, economic development, and safeguarding of human rights has never been so pressing given the evolving character of threats and strategic significance of the region.

Historical context and migration trends:

Migration in Manipur has been a century-old phenomenon, driven by geopolitical developments, ethnic movements, colonial policy, and post-independence administration. Being a borderland region, Manipur traditionally witnessed uncontrolled population movements, with communities moving across the Indo-Myanmar border in pursuit of trade, sustenance, and security. However, the pattern and dynamics of migration changed dramatically with the passage of time due to colonial experiences, international border demarcation, conflicts, and policy shifts. The history of migration in Manipur is comprehensively divided into two large phases:

The colonial and pre-colonial period (before 1947) saw unregulated cross-border travel, tribal migration, and inter-ethnic trade. In the past, the Meitei, Kuki, and Naga communities traversed the area due to kinship relations, trade, and battles. The Seven Years' Devastation (1819–1826) when Burma invaded Manipur saw people being forced to displace. Then British colonial rule normalized borders with increased surveillance on migration (Jelle J.P. Wouters, 2023).

The post-independence era, 1947-2011, saw immense transformation due to India's policies of national integration, internal rebellions, and enhanced border security. The Indo-Myanmar border, while officially demarcated, remained permeable and permitted migration to persist, especially among the Naga, Kuki, and Chin communities. The 1962 Burmese military coup resulted in massive migration of Chin, Kuki, and Naga refugees into Manipur. Subsequent political instability, including the 1988 pro-democracy uprisings in Myanmar and Manipur's counter-insurgency activities in India, also impacted migratory trends.

Migration trends (2012-2024):

Migration patterns in Manipur from 2012 to 2024 have been driven by political instability in Myanmar, economic opportunities, and security concerns. The 2017 Rohingya crisis and the 2021 Myanmar coup led to large-scale displacements, which spurred large-scale undocumented migration

into Manipur. The waves of migration have reorganized ethnic groups and strengthened border control(S. Priyokumar Meitei, Prof. M C Arunkumar, 2017)

Migration Patterns and Population Increase: Manipur grew in population each year at the rate of 2.6% between the years 2020-2024, which was higher than that of the entire nation. An influx of Myanmar migrants, especially following the 2021 armed forces takeover, played a significant role in the population growth of the nation as over 30,000 refugees found their way into Northeast India during the first half of 2023. Owing to ethnic as well as kinship ties, most of them found shelter in Mizoram as well as Manipur(Loitongbam, Bishwanjit Singh, 2016)

Although a biometric data collection exercise in 2023 identified a large number of illegal migrants in strategic border areas to the Manipur government, 1,165 illegal immigrants were found in Chandel, 1,147 in Tengnoupal, and more than 5,457 in Kamjong, as per the survey. May 2023's ethnic violence, however, rendered further data collection difficult and amplified tensions that accompany migration(Bikash Singh, 2024). Due to security concerns, the Indo-Myanmar Free Movement Regime (FMR) originally granted freedom of movement in a radius of 16 km and was cut to 10 km in 2024.

Policy and legal reactions:

Several key legislations, such as the Foreigners Act of 1946, the Citizenship Act of 1955, and the Passports (Entry into India) Act of 1920, form the backbone of India's legislative framework controlling migration in Manipur. Due to the lack of a recognized refugee policy in India, the majority of displaced persons are in a condition of legal ambiguity. These regulations control the entry, stay, and deportation of foreign nationals.

The legal framework for immigration control is the Passports (Entry into India) Act, 1920, which mandates all foreign nationals to produce valid passports and visas before entering India. Irregular migration has resulted from unequal enforcement, most notably across porous borders like those of Manipur's(GOI).

Foreigners who are found to be residing in the country unlawfully can be arrested, deported, or have their rights restricted by the state under the Foreigners Act of 1946. It is challenging for most undocumented migrants in Manipur since they are the ones who are to show that they are here legally(GOI, 1946).

Religiously-grounded citizenship policies were introduced by the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 (CAA), that naturalizes specific non-Muslim refugee groups from neighboring countries at a high-speed rate while leaving others behind, including the Rohingya. The biased policy has been protested, mainly in areas like Manipur where various ethnicities are part of composite migratory streams(MINISTRY OF LAW AND JUSTICE, 2019)

To detect and remove illegal immigrants, Manipur has proposed conducting the National

Register of Citizens (NRC), which was conducted for the first time in Assam. Having in mind, however, that processes of documentation at border regions are prone to being incorrect and politically provocative at times, worries regarding its effect on indigenous inhabitants remain (Government of Assam)

Immigration law cases:

Some milestone court judgments that deal with the intricacies of citizenship, illegal immigration, and refugee rights have influenced India's immigration policies. These cases have played a leading catalyst in the change in the legislation to regulate migration within the Northeast, specifically Manipur, hit by cross-border activities and hosting a foreign imprint running along Myanmar. The quest constantly changing and aiming to address issues of population matters, humanitarian responsibility, and concerns related to national security is apparent within the controversial legislation on immigration (Das legal advocate)

1. Union of India v. Sarbananda Sonowal (2005): Consolidating Immigration Laws

The IMDT Act was challenged in this case for failing to identify and expel illegal immigrants, particularly in Assam. Through the reversal of the Act, the Supreme Court emphasized the role of the state in preventing changes in demographics and strengthened the Foreigners Act of 1946. Even though centered in Assam, the decision impacted other Northeastern states, including Manipur, and created calls for an NRC to address such problems (SARBANANDA SONOWAL vs UNION OF INDIA, 2005)

2. Assam Citizenship Issues Sanmilita Mahasangha v. Union of India: The Section 6A of the Citizenship Act, under which post-1971 migrants were to be settled in Assam, was challenged by petitioners who alleged that it was discriminatory against indigenous people. The complex interrelations between citizenship, ethnic identity, and migration were brought out by the Supreme Court's intervention in the NRC process. Such demands for the enforcement of the NRC in Manipur, also under pressure to migrate from Myanmar, have been triggered by the case (Assam Sanmilita Mahasangha and others v. Union of India, 2015)

3. Union of India v. Muhammad Salimullah: National Security versus Refugee Rights

In this case, Rohingya refugees did not wish to be deported. In the name of national security, the Court allowed deportations on a case-to-case basis despite knowing humanitarian concerns. This case is especially relevant in Manipur where the state took a tougher approach than Mizoram's lenient attitude as refugee entries from Myanmar have been on the rise since 2021 (Mohammad Salimullah v. Union of India, 2021)

Government actions and policy measures:

Enhanced border security checks, increased fencing of the Indo-Myanmar border, and restructuring of the Free Movement Regime (FMR) are some steps that have been initiated by the

government of India to address the problem of migration in Manipur. Due to fear of illegal migration and security issues, the FMR that hitherto enabled border inhabitants to travel 16 km visa-free has now been limited to 10 km (Tual Sawn Khai, 2024)

The Immigration and Foreigners Bill, 2025, has been laid down as a solution to escalating tensions over migration. It would tighten border security, unify existing immigration laws, and implement biometric tracking technology to better regulate the movement of migrants. Through distinguishing economic migrants from asylum seekers, providing for court supervision of deportation cases, and streamlining foreigner registration procedures, the bill seeks to speed up refugee administration. Its ability to have a disproportionate effect on disadvantaged groups, particularly stateless people, is still a cause for concern. (Sanjay Hedge, 2025)

Policy recommendations include strengthening Foreigners Tribunals for the purpose of due process for deportation hearings, creating Parliamentary and Public Consultation Mechanisms for immigration and citizenship laws, and implementing a Refugee Protection Act for granting legal status and protection to displaced people in a manner to reconcile security and human rights. To facilitate humanitarian obligations and border security management, international engagement with Myanmar must also occur.

Cross-border migration's effects on Manipur:

Migration has had a serious impact on the population, economic, social and security status of Manipur. Owing to changes in the pattern of settlement and rates of population growth as a result of migration, the population structure of the state has changed radically. Ethnic clashes resulted in large-scale displacement between 1951 and 1961 in the northern hills whereby whole villages have vanished, especially in the areas of Tamenglong and Ukhrul. A long-term restructuring of Manipur's social landscape came in the wake of involuntary Kuki exodus to Myanmar during the construction of the Naga homeland movement, which disrupted settlement patterns (Sougaijam Priyokumar Meitei, 2016)

Ethnic tensions between indigenous communities such as the Meitei, Kuki, and Naga people have increased because of the increasing migrant population. Violence in the form of the May 2023 violent clashes has resulted because migration has been seen as a threat to indigenous identities, land rights, and political representation. Various ethnic groups have opposed policies that are meant to curtail migration and stop land encroachments, something that has stoked historical grievances and distrust (Anshuman Behera, Nov 11, 2023)

The permeable Indo-Myanmar border, with its easy flow of weapon smuggling, drugs smuggling, and trafficking in human persons, has brought to the foreground security issues for migration. Borders security has been increased as the migratory currents have been being used by subversive organisations like the Kuki National Organization (KNO) and United National Liberation

Front (UNLF) to maintain their activities. Humanitarian discourses regarding refugee and displaced treatment have been evoked by deportation campaigns and militarization at borders against illegal immigrants(Bhagat Oinam) (n.d)

Migration has influenced the economy in both positive and negative ways. In major sectors like Moreh, migrant workers fuel border agriculture and trade; however, uncontrolled migration has led to competition for employment and wage repression, which has implications on employment within the locality. Through migration, land resources have also been very strained, minimizing land for farming and degrading the ecosystem. Manipur's economic and political situation has also been affected by growing numbers of migrants, as particular groups use changes in demography in an effort to win votes(Kshetrimayum Myleodee Devi & Ashraful Islam, 2022)

These issues have acquired a new dimension as a result of the recent migratory patterns (2012–2024). Ethnic issues have been exacerbated by the utilization of social media, and migration has become a contentious political issue. Aggressiveness has been enhanced as a result of the utilization of online media to discredit the legitimacy of certain ethnic alignments. Militias have started using border areas as tactical strongholds, making India's border security operations more difficult. The position of insurgent groups in migration has also changed. Taking all this into account, the migration problem of Manipur is still multifaceted and dynamic. It has caused demographic changes, economic instability, security issues, and political tensions. A multi-dimensional approach that strikes a balance between humanitarian and security concerns is required to address these problems and make migrant and local communities live in peace and stability.

Impact on the Indigenous Population: Uncontrolled migration into Manipur after 1949 has fundamentally changed the composition of the population of the state, which has impacted its indigenous population.

The population had been growing normally up to 1951, when it suddenly picked up pace. With the highest increase between 1961 and 1981, the population increased from 0.29 million in 1901 to 2.85 million in 2011. Migration has been found to have contributed significantly to this increase, particularly between 1961 and 1971, according to studies and government records. Mass migration was identified as a major contributing factor in a 1976 draft of state policy, with the number of Nepali (Gurkha) people increasing from 2,860 in 1951 to over 37,000 by 1981(Gouradas Takhellambam, Priya Sherawat, Bijoy Singh Takhellambam, Shanti Devi Phurailatpam, Shilpa Devi, Takhellambam, Rahul Brahmacharimayum and Joykishan Sharma Hanjabam, 2021)

United Committee Manipur (2005) estimated that between 1961 and 2001 there were around 538,887 migrants in the state and that they were responsible for a further 165,601 births. Approximately 31% of Manipur was migrant by 2001. Land resources are facing extremely heavy pressure because of this demographic change. In 1901, there were 13 per square kilometer, while in

2011 it reached 128. The limited space available for agricultural purposes was also strained by the record growth rates in hill districts like Senapati and Churachandpur, and districts like Imphal, Thoubal, and Bishnupur (Naorem Korouhanba, 2024).

It has hit both hill and valley areas. The hill tracts cannot sustain high growth of population due to their fragile terrain and few possibilities of cultivation. The valley, covering meager 10% of the state but the center of most of the agriculture, is suffering from declining productivity and diminishing area under cultivation due to the growing number of migrants.

Besides environmental and resource concerns, migration has disrupted society and the economy. The takeover of employment, property, and land by migrants results in natives being displaced. Labor markets, municipal authorities, trade, and even elections are dominated by migrants. Large-scale migration has also been attributed to environmental degradation and ecological imbalances such as deforestation (Monirul Hussain & Pradip Phanjoubam, 2007)

Besides, migration has, in some areas, contributed to higher criminality and militancy. Demographic changes have been exploited by some groups for political and territorial advantage, including illegal deforestation, arms smuggling, drug smuggling, and land grabbing. For the sake of political manipulation of election results, political elites have used these occurrences, which has boosted political instability and social tension throughout Manipur.

Security and humanitarian duties in balance:

Balancing security tasks with humanitarian tasks requires a balanced approach with reference to the intricate sociopolitical processes of migration in Manipur. The policy recommendations among them are:

Initiating public and parliamentary consultative mechanisms for ensuring inclusive and transparent immigration and citizenship policies.

Developing refugee protection policies through a specific Refugee Protection Act that can grant social support networks, channels of migration, and legal status to displaced persons.

Strengthening bilateral collaboration between India and Myanmar to regulate migration through accords on safe repatriation and refugee control, intelligence sharing, and cooperative border patrols (Tarun Kumar, 2025)

Developing Economic and Social Integration Programs to support migrant groups and host populations, reducing tensions and fostering harmony through employment opportunities and educational initiatives.

Policy recommendations:

A holistic policy approach that considers the complex sociopolitical interactions of the region and balances humanitarian obligations with national security interests is required to manage cross-border migration in Manipur. The following propositions are intended to develop a model for

sustainable migration management:

1. Enhancing Border Surveillance and Security:

Employing state-of-the-art surveillance technologies such as drone monitoring, biometric tracking systems, and AI threat detection to enhance border fencing across the Indo-Myanmar border.

Amending the Free Movement Regime (FMR) to preserve cultural and ethnic ties while ensuring better regulation. issuing digital passes to cross-border travelers and establishing regulated entry points.

Employing additional paramilitary personnel to enhance border security and the exchange of intelligence between Indian and Myanmar governments for preventing illegal trafficking and infiltration.

2. Establishing an Overall Refugee and Asylum Policy

Enacting a Refugee Protection Act to have legal frameworks to distinguish between stateless individuals, economic migrants, and asylum seekers.

Granting certified refugees provisional legal status in order to acquire legal protection and humanitarian assistance without compromising security compliance.

In order to avoid random deportations and ensure due process in the identification of refugees, foreigners tribunals must be empowered.

3. Enactment of Immigration and Citizenship Reforms:

Creation of a Manipur National Register of Citizens (NRC) and an open verification process to identify real citizens and illegal migrants.

In order to protect national security interests, the Citizenship Act of 1955 has to be modified to include provisions for fair and non-discriminatory naturalization of long-term migrants.

In Manipur, state-level forums are being organized to ensure local perspectives are incorporated in citizenship and migration policy-making decisions.

4. Strengthening Bilateral Cooperation between India and Myanmar:

Strengthening diplomatic ties with Myanmar to frame cooperative migrant control measures, like safe return programs and joint border security controls.

In order to curtail the driving forces of migration, economic alliances that create jobs in Myanmar are encouraged.

Setting up bilateral task forces to exchange intelligence on transnational crimes involving migration, i.e., people and drug trafficking.

5. Community and Socioeconomic Integration Measures:

Formulating inclusive development programs that alleviate tensions and promote economic development by offering employment to both host populations and migrants.

Granting migrant and indigenous groups access to legal representation, health, and education in an effort to avoid social unrest and exclusion.

Supporting projects for intercommunal dialogue to resolve ethnic conflicts resulting from changes in population due to migration.

6. Altering Migration Control Laws:

Introduction of the Immigration and Foreigners Bill, 2025, which streamlines migration management by consolidating and revising current laws.

In order to ensure that no one is arbitrarily jailed or deported, Immigration Tribunals would have to be established to determine deportation cases in a fair manner.

Bringing India's migration policy into alignment with global best practices, embracing models of protection of refugees like the UNHCR Guidelines and modifying them according to India's sociopolitical scenario.

Conclusion:

It is important to point out that Manipur's cross-border migration current from 2012 through 2024 needs to be understood within the context of historical events and ethnic clashes that have influenced the migration trend. Migration in the region exhibits periodicity as witnessed through displacement of the Kuki groups by ethnic conflicts, their rounds of forced migration and return, and ongoing controversy regarding their status. The government, too, has contributed its share, at times swinging open the doors to the entry of displaced peoples, at others slamming them shut with administrative measures and policy changes. Besides this, ethnic conflict has seen a transformation in character. Questions of identity and belonging have increasingly than before been contested in virtual spaces, a shift in how questions of migration have increasingly become perceived and contested. An understanding of how migration has shaped Manipur's sociopolitical dynamics in the last decade is enabled by an analysis of these factors.

Since Manipur became integrated with India in 1949, the Government of India pledged to safeguard its own law, tradition, and customs. But the promise has been watered down by the unchecked migration taking place, resulting in colossal pressure being put upon the indigenous populace. The resultant environmental destruction, economic marginalization, and demographic changes are in direct conflict with the principles embodied in international human rights documents such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966).

The Manipur local population will be further excluded if strict migration policies are not implemented. Before the harm is caused and cannot be undone, there is a need to act now to regulate migration, secure land rights, and protect the political and cultural identity of the local population.

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