

Migration, Identity, and Voting Behavior in Border Regions of India

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the impact of migration on political identity and voting behaviour in the border regions of India. Instead of seeing migration as just a demographic and/or economic phenomenon, the paper approaches it as a politically mediated phenomenon, and explores how its impacts rely upon historical memory, identity divisions, institutional rules, and party competition. The study takes a comparative qualitative approach using a structured, focused comparison of four cases: Assam, West Bengal, Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir, which were chosen to reflect variations across the cases in terms of the migration experience, the configuration of the borders, institutional response, and electoral mobilisation. The analysis is based on secondary sources such as the Census of India, government reports, institutional documents relating to elections and scholarly works on migration, ethnicity, citizenship, and voting behaviour. The paper suggests that migration is electorally salient because of demographic change framed within a security, religious, ethnic or linguistic lens, and when political actors transform such perceptions into organised narratives of inclusion or exclusion. In all the cases, five mechanisms are obtained: perceived threat, identity reconstitution, institutional regulation, clientelist incorporation, and spatial concentration. The article ends by suggesting that the politics of migration are not the same in all parts of India's borders, but will take different forms depending on the local histories, state power, party systems and citizenship laws. These findings have relevance for democratic inclusion, conflict-sensitive border governance, and designing fair documentation processes and enfranchisement.

Keywords: migration, identity, voting behaviour, border regions, India, citizenship, electoral politics

INTRODUCTION

Borderlands take a pivotal role in any polity: they are a place of encounter and exchange, and also a place where issues of identity, security, and political belonging come to a head. People across internal and external boundaries have long been shaping border regions in India which includes seasonal labour migration, forced displacement and permanent settlement (Deshingkar & Start, 2003). In situations where migration changes the demographical balance and/or overlaps with historical resentments, politics of identity may become amplified and directed towards electoral competition (Chandra, 2004; Horowitz, 1985). This is especially relevant to the Indian borderlands e.g. the Northeast, West Bengal, Punjab and Jammu Kashmir where the debate of migration has shaped not only the citizenship legislations but also the party policies and voting trends.

The current paper explores the effects of migration on identity formation and voting behaviour in the border regions of India. It combines both theoretical views and empirical data, and provides examples of cases to demonstrate mechanisms of migration-political consequences. The aim is not to give one causal explanation but to trace the spectrum of possibilities in which migration comes to bear political significance in border politics and project policy implications of democratic state-making.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Three literatures are relied on by the study: migration studies, ethnic politics and identity theories and voting behaviour.

The migration studies offer models of how to see migration as a process with economic, social, and political implications (Castles, de Haas, and Miller, 2014). Indian internal migration is multi-layered and circular and seasonal labour migration, rural-urban migration and cross-border displacement due to legacies of conflicts or partition are all complex and internal to India (Deshingkar and Start, 2003). Migration also has the ability to transform the structure of local communities, thereby shifting social networks, labour markets and political boundaries.

Ethnic politics literature emphasises the role of social categories like ethnicity, language and religion in mediating political mobilisation (Horowitz, 1985; Chandra, 2004). Migrants can be perceived as outsiders or a threat to resources when they are perceived to be distinct along these identity axes, thereby becoming politically salient. Political entrepreneurs, such as parties, leaders and interest groups, can use threats as they are perceived to build exclusion or inclusion narratives that affect the political behavior of migrants and their host communities.

Border regions are in a theoretically unique situation in terms of migration and voting. In contrast to interior constituencies where migration is usually influenced more by economic pull factors, border constituencies are typified by transborder ethnic communities, contentious national identities and state security necessities that give political salience to population movement in ways that transcend normal labor economics. Donnan and Wilson (1999) suggested that borderlands were locations of liminality where the sovereignty of the state is subject to constant renegotiation by everyday practices of the cross-border people. In South Asian terms, the post-1947 Partition-based national borders on the center of ethnically homogenous communities, creating a network of cross-border kinships whose political allegiances and voting behaviors cannot be whittled down to a simple dichotomy of citizen versus foreigner.

Saikia (2020) and Hazarika (2000) have demonstrated how a common language and culture of Bengalis across both sides of the India-Bangladesh border creates a great degree of ambiguity in the construction of illegal migration as a political discourse in Assam and West Bengal a construction that is both a security discourse and an electoral strategy, as well as, a demographic discourse. This border is not, in this sense, just a geographical boundary but a technology of politics of producing and managing ethnic difference in electorally serviceable forms.

The studies of voting behaviour underline the importance of identity, socio-economic interests, party competition, and institutional incentives in determining the electoral decisions (Chhibber and Kollman, 2004; Yadav, 1999). In border areas, identity salience and closeness to national security stories may augment identity-based voting salience, whereas local matters, welfare, and legal status play a role.

The process of political integration of migrants in the host society's electoral systems is a complicated and controversial one. Classical theory of assimilation (Gordon, 1964) presumed that migrants would tend to adopt host-community political identities between generations, yet this linear approach has faced a lot of criticism due to its failure to consider the presence of transnational relationships, discrimination, and structural exclusion. Jaffrelot and Verniers (2020) have observed in the Indian context that migrant communities are more likely to form their own distinct so-called voter blocs, which parties fight over, and which do not necessarily include migrants in mainstream politics. This brings about the clientelistic relationship where the parties demand the migrant's protection and symbolic recognition in the exchange of bloc votes and at the same time, they do not solve their structural marginalization.

Integrating these literatures, the paper takes the structure of migration as changing the demographic and social composition of border communities. Political actors subsequently interpret and organise these changes by narrating identities and using policy tools; voters in turn react to a perception of threat, group interests, or material incentives. These dynamics are mediated by institutional factors, such as citizenship regulations and voting regulations.

METHODOLOGY

The study is a comparative qualitative research design using a structured and focused comparison approach. The aim is not to test any one deterministic causal statement, but rather to find and compare the processes that link

migration to political identity formation and voting attitudes in different types of border environments in India. A comparative design is suitable because the border regions are not homogenous politically as they vary in terms of migration history, ethnic makeup, institutional setups, conflict exposure and party competition. Multiple borderland contexts, then, can allow for the differentiation of common mechanisms from region-specific dynamics. This paper raises three interrelated research questions:

1. Under what conditions does migration become politically salient in India's border regions
2. Through which institutional and political mechanisms is migration translated into electoral mobilization
3. Why do these effects vary across cases?

To answer these questions, the analysis draws on secondary evidence from five categories of material:

- a. demographic data from the Census of India and official survey-based migration reports
- b. election-related reports and institutional documents
- c. legislation and policy documents relating to citizenship, voter eligibility, and border governance
- d. peer-reviewed books and journal articles on migration, ethnicity, and electoral politics
- e. historically grounded case-study literature on the selected regions.

The comparative framework draws on four analytical dimensions for all cases:

- a. the nature of the migration (cross-border, conflict-induced, internal, historical or diaspora-related)
- b. the identity cleavage that is activated by migration (ethnic, linguistic, religious, regional or citizenship-based)
- c. the institutional context in which migration becomes politically relevant (e.g. citizenship documentation, autonomy arrangements, refugee status, or party-mediated patronage)
- d. the electoral outcomes of these processes (exclusionary mobilisation, incorporation, bloc formation or issue salience in party competition).

This standard analytical format allows for comparisons to be made in a systematic manner, while also maintaining historical and regional detail. Cases were not randomly selected, but were selected from the available four cases. Assam was selected because it is the best contemporary case in India of citizenship-centred migration politics, particularly in the form of the NRC/CAA linkage. West Bengal was chosen as it represents a contrasting situation where long-term settlement, class politics and more recent identity-based mobilisation all exist at the same time. Punjab was added intentionally to illustrate the temporal embodiment of migration politics, specifically in terms of the Partition memory and transnational diaspora connections. The choice of Jammu & Kashmir was made due to its securitised borderland, the presence of refugees, the discussions around autonomy and disputed sovereignty, and the different anxieties of the population. All of these cases offer a useful range of variation in terms of the nature of migration and political result, lending themselves to comparison. Demographic and Electoral Context is included in the paper to support the empirical basis. Migration is not marginal but rather constitutive of Indian life and politics is reflected by the 2011 census, which recorded 453 million internal migrants or 37.5% of the population. Official statistics from surveys continue to paint the picture of migration trends across India, both within district and outside district and within state and outside state, continuing at their scale and variety for 2020-21. Though the overall voting turnout in the 2019 general election was 67.4%, the Election Commission has admitted that there are practical challenges for over 30 crore domestic migrants in exercising their right to vote. This disconnect is particularly pertinent to the border area where citizenship documents, domicile, residence and belonging are politically contested. International IDEA also highlights that the issue of migrant enfranchisement is one of the significant challenges in Indian democracy. There are two limitations of the study. First, it is not an original data production or a statistical modelling of the constituencies, but is built by triangulation across credible secondary sources. Second, the selected cases are not statistically representative, so the findings are not designed to result in causal estimates that can be generalised to the national level. Such restrictions, however, do not detract from the contribution of the paper, but instead, they make it a theoretically driven, empirically based comparison of borderland politics.

Border Regions and Migration Patterns in India

The mobility in India's border areas is multi-layered and multi-modal, comprising of cross-border migratory movements, internal labour mobility, conflict-induced displacement, refugee settlement, and historical resettlement of populations on the border. The geographical distribution of such types of mobility, and the political implications of each type are not uniform throughout the country. The analysis of migration in the region of Assam, West Bengal, Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir, where it is understood not only as an issue of the labour market and welfare but also one of sovereignty, citizenship, ethnicity, religion and territorial control, is unique. This analysis is provided with the background of the demographic scale of migration in India. 453 million people were recorded as internal migrants in the 2011 Census, which represents 37.5% of the overall population. Recent official statistics from the year 2020–21 also report that migration is a structural phenomenon of the Indian economy and society, and that there is significant migration occurring both within districts and across districts and states. These trends have political significance because migration can change the nature of the social composition of constituencies, the nature of access to land and livelihood, and documentation and residence issues and electoral entitlement. The electoral aspect of migration is also important. IECE has mentioned that domestic migrants are one of the major groups that are vulnerable to the issue of disenfranchisement in India, as more than 30 crore migrants have faced difficulties in casting their votes at their places of registration. This is a key observation for analysis of the borders: in places where migration is already politicised obstacles to registration and voting can not only impact on participation rates, but could exacerbate feelings of exclusion, illegality, and unequal citizenship.

Case Study: Assam and the Politics of Citizenship

No other state in the country can claim to have such a migration-centred electoral discourse as Assam. Political salience of migration in the state was a product of the interplay between demographic change, Assamese sub-nationalism and institutionalized conflicts over citizenship. In the Assam movement of 1979-1985, undocumented movement from modern-day Bangladesh was defined as a danger to the political rights, land rights, and cultural identity of the indigenous Assamese population. Incorporating this concern, the Assam Accord made 25 March 1971 as the cut-off date, and turned historical migration into an ongoing legal and electoral issue. The practice of migration is formalized in some states through procedures of verification and documentation of migration, which is important for Assam in comparison to many other border areas. The NRC process was less about identification and more a citizenship exercise by large numbers of people with direct consequences on political belonging, voter confidence and party mobilisation. Recent scholarship reveals that the NRC has also raised profound concerns about due process, documentary inequality, and denationalisation politics, and further illustrates how legal mechanisms may be engines of electoral conflict instead of its neutral vehicles of governance. Migration, in Assam, is thus not only demographically consequential because of the perception of the population but also because the state institutionalises such perceptions through documentation regimes, which are subject to political play. To illustrate the arguments of this paper analytically, Assam presents three interrelated propositions: the first is that anxieties about the population are politically mobilised if they are channelled into historically entrenched identity claims; the second is that institutions like citizenship registers amplify rather than simply record anxieties; the third is that the political parties gain electoral benefit when they derail migration as an existential question of community protection.

West Bengal and Cross-Border Migration

Assam has a contrasting pattern regarding the data of the state of West Bengal. Migration from outside of the Bangladesh border has been an important political issue for a long time, but its political manifestation in the electoral arena has not been connected with any single citizenship-verification process, but rather with class organisation, class patronage and sub-regional political identities. This lends analytical significance to West Bengal, where it can be seen that migration does not necessarily give rise to exclusionary politics. Rather, the electoral consequences of it are mediated by the organizational strategies of parties toward migrants, the extent to which migrants become embedded in the local community, and the extent to which political competition favors the incorporation of migrants into the local community through class-based strategies or identity-based polarization.

Jammu & Kashmir

The political and demographic complexities that exist in contemporary Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) stem from the unclear history of the partition of British India in 1947 when Maharaja Hari Singh acceded to India and Pakistan held that the state should have consented to Pakistan. Political and demographic complexities in contemporary Jammu Kashmir (J&K) are the legacy of the partition of British India in 1947, when the state acceded to India under Maharaja Hari Singh, which was contested by Pakistan, thereby initiating a dispute formally unresolved. Later UNSC resolutions to hold a plebiscite were never acted upon, and the Line of Control which was set up following the 1972 Simla Agreement, was essentially a partition without a resolution of the competing claims of sovereignty. These stalemate issues set the broader backdrop for the constitutional, political, and demographic issues that were developing. With this unique status came Articles 370 and 35A, which were intended to give autonomy to J&K and also to enable the state government to determine who would have a permanent residence there and how the land would be treated. The supporters saw these measures as protection for cultural identity and regional distinctiveness, while critics saw them as a barrier to national integration and economic development. In this context, migration and displacement have become a political phenomenon. The displacement caused by insurgency, inter-regional labour migration and contestations over settlement and entitlement have exacerbated concerns about identity, autonomy and representation. The internal differences in J&K have worsened due to the religious and ethnic character of Jammu, Kashmir Valley and Ladakh which have had different political aspirations, cultural affiliations and economic interests. The issues of local fears of economic marginalization, wage depression, cultural dilution, and the territorial issue of disputed status and perceived demographic fragility have often been prevalent in the context of labour migration within the region and into the region. The interpretation of such changes is often influenced by religion, which affects social perceptions and political mobilisation. It is complicated even more when it comes to Rohingya refugees who have settled in Jammu and are now enmeshed in a web of securitized and nationalist narratives. While migration is a symptom of their vulnerability as a people, their state reactions have been mostly couched in terms of illegal immigration, demographic and security concerns, and have given refugee concerns second place in the state's political/pro-strategic agenda. The politics of migration has become a part of conflict, securitization, and disputed sovereignty in Jammu & Kashmir. In contrast to Assam, where the primary institutional pathways are seen to be documentation and citizenship, J&K shows how the process of migration can gain political salience through the security discourse, territorial anxiety and competing debates on autonomy and demographic balance. The case thus extends the argument of this paper, in that the migration-voting relation can be created in various institutional forms, which, in the regional context citizenship law, security governance, or contested constitutional status can achieve.

Punjab: Historical Migration and Political Mobilisation

The first massive Punjabi emigration was not spontaneous at all: it was created by British colonial policy. After the annexation of Punjab in 1849, the colonial government assimilated the region into a massive system of economic exploitation. Land tenure was restructured with the construction of canal colonies and large irrigation systems in western Punjab, displacing established agrarian communities, which forced many Punjabis to find other livelihoods (Sharma, 2020). Recruitment of Sikhs and other Punjabis into the colonial army occurred actively by the British as well, and it was based on the racialised theory of the martial races and such military service was a pathway to travel throughout the empire, whether it was East Africa or the Straits Settlement (modern Malaysia and Singapore) to British Columbia (Kaur, 2023).

Punjab politics are still influenced by the Partition legacy that witnessed the large-scale transfer of population and redefined communal demographics. The trends of migration since then have not only involved cross-border movement but also transnational migration to other countries like the UK, Canada and Australia hence affecting local identities and politics. The impact of diaspora relations and remittances on economic organization, and memory of Partition and Punjabi ethnic identity have been mobilised by political forces that has been utilized by political forces to affect voting (Pandey, 2006).

A study of the movement in Asian Survey published in 1997 on the period 1966-1997 shows that the politics of internal faction within the Akali Dal was repeatedly used against it by external forces, the Indian National Congress and the diaspora based Khalistan organisations and in the process a cycle of instability was created

where no Akali government was able to finish its term (Ganguly, 2000). Another paper in the National Journal of International Politics and Security also reports the same finding showing that the diaspora networks maintained Khalistan mobilisation via the internet and the transnational media long after the insurgency itself had been crushed in India itself (Arif & Butt, 2021). Ter-Arkhev scholars have stated that, in the 1990s, the communities of Punjabi-Sikhs in the diaspora have remained influential in fuelling and inciting secessionist ideas in modern India (Alexeyev, 2023).

Mechanisms Linking Migration to Voting Behaviour

This section identifies mechanisms through which migration affects voting in border regions.

Perceived Threat and Backlash

If host communities view migrants as an actual or potential threat to the availability of land, employment or services, a politics of exclusion can develop. Economic or cultural threats, if framed by political actors as a threat to the identity of the host community can galvanise support for parties vowing restrictive policies. In practice, for example, such a threat perception has been powerfully articulated in Assam and portions of West Bengal (Baruah, 1999; Chandra, 2004).

Identity Reconstitution and Political Entrepreneurs

When migrants become either new political constituencies or when the identity boundaries of host communities are consolidated, it represents a reconstitution of collective identities rendered by migration processes. Political entrepreneurs capitalise on this process of reconstitution by articulating narratives and policy platforms that resonate with identity grievances. Theorians of ethnic parties or regional movements argue that when migrants are depicted as the external threat to local identity, these actors often reap the benefits (Chandra, 2004).

Institutional Channels: Law, Documentation, and Rights

Citizenship and documentation laws can turn migration into a matter of politics. The concept of citizenship is more real when it comes to processes such as the NRC or voter list revisions because it influences the right to vote and political mobilisation. The administrative procedures can be felt or felt to be exclusionary in that they define political loyalties and protests (Government of India, 2011 Census).

Clientelism and Incorporation

Reactions to migration are not necessarily exclusionary. The parties can include migrant communities by patronizing them, giving them material rewards to vote. In the long term, migrant communities can obtain entitlements and a sense of locality, transforming the local politics balance towards moving away from pure identity-based cleavages (Chhibber & Kollman, 2004).

Spatial Concentration and Electoral Geography

Spatial concentration of migrants has implications for political outcomes by forming electoral pockets in which the vote of migrants can impact local outcomes. The electoral influence of localised migrant populations can be increased by gerrymandering, constituency boundaries, and localised mobilisation.

DISCUSSION: VARIATION ACROSS CONTEXTS

The study of migration in all four Indian states has revealed that there are both similarities and differences in how migration affects voting behavior at the border. Migration creates similar effects in the way people vote in each state however, those effects occur in different ways depending on the context. For example, Assam's legal-institutional process of verifying citizenship strengthens exclusionary movements. While in West Bengal, the impact of migration on politics is dependent upon many factors including where settlers have settled, patronage networks, and how much of a class vs. an identity-based strategy parties' use. Finally, migration politics in Punjab is primarily driven by historic memories, diaspora connections, and symbolic claims over group identity rather

than current demographic concerns. However, due to the fact that migration is viewed through the lens of sovereignty, security, and constitutional status in J&K (Jammu & Kashmir), it is distinct from the other three states. Because of this difference, migration alone does not explain changes in election outcomes. What explains changes in election outcomes are political interpretations of migration, who interprets the migration politically, through what institution(s) they interpret it politically and in relationship to which existing social divisions/cleavages. Stated alternatively, migration is made "electorally relevant" when movement is framed as either a threat, entitlement or representation. Therefore, the very same population movement could create backlash in one area, assimilation into the electorate in a second area, and a demographic-security politics around immigration issues in a third area. Overall, the comparative structure developed within this study provides evidence to support a larger theoretical concept that border areas are not simply peripheral areas influenced by immigration patterns they are instead experimental areas where democracy and civic engagement are being contested/ negotiated regarding citizenship and identity.

Policy Implications

Several policy considerations follow from this analysis.

Protecting Rights and Ensuring Due Process

The administrative procedures that define citizenship or eligibility to vote should be transparent, have due process and easy redress to prevent disenfranchisement and political radicalisation. Legal aid and outreach to marginalised groups should be provided with documentation drives.

Promoting Social and Economic Inclusion

The salience of migration as a political grievance can be diminished through policies that minimize competition over basic services by investing in education, health and livelihoods. The social protection of vulnerable populations (including migrants) is targeted, which minimises the opportunity of exclusionary mobilisation.

Political Incentives for Integration

Electoral incentives matter. Promoting inclusive politics in the political parties and providing the migrants with institutional means of representation (e.g., designated local seats or consultative councils) can alleviate tensions. A bridging role can be played by civil society and local leadership.

Conflict-Sensitive Governance in Borderlands

The border areas need a regime that is sensitive to their social and security dynamics. The combination of security policies and development interventions and dialogue processes will help to minimize the likelihood of the legitimate security considerations being used as pretexts to participate in exclusionary politics.

CONCLUSION

It was argued here that migration and identity formation is contingent, mediated and historically specific rather than linear in the context of voting behaviour within border regions of India. Using a systematic comparison of Assam, West Bengal, Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir, the paper demonstrates that migration is electorally consequential when demographic change is mediated through entrenched identity cleavages and institutionalised by law, documentation, security policy or party competition. We classify these different mechanisms into five major ways: perceived threat, identity reconstitution, institutional regulation, clientelist incorporation and spatial concentration. These mechanisms, however, are not universal. In contrast, political effects depend on contexts shaped by regional history, state capacity, citizenship and voting institution design, and purposeful action taken by political actors. Thus, migration should never be regarded as a direct trigger of electoral polarisation. However, it is only politically consequential when the data is stored, structured and ruled in certain formats. More broadly, the contribution of the paper is to integrate migration studies, ethnic politics and voting-behaviour research in a two-sided problem within Indian borderlands. It empirically shows that migration in India is both voluminous and structurally persistent, but migrant access to elections is institutionalized unevenly. The findings

have normatively important implications: transparent citizenship processes, stronger procedural protections and more effective measures to facilitate the electoral participation of mobile populations in border regions are needed for meaningful democratic inclusion. This analysis can be extended in future research based on constituency-level election data, district-level demographic change, and original interviews with migrants, party workers, election officials, and community leaders. In so doing, this work would elucidate processes that take place between macro-level patterns of migration and micro-level electoral choices.

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