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Borderland Burdens: Economic consequences of migration in Malda and the Dinajpur Districts of West Bengal

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Abstract

Migration has played a pivotal role in shaping the socio-economic contours of the border districts of West Bengal, with Malda, Uttar Dinajpur, and Dakshin Dinajpur standing out as particularly affected regions. These districts, located along the porous and politically sensitive Indo-Bangladesh border, have historically served as entry points for waves of migrants-both documented and undocumented-driven by a confluence of historical upheavals, geopolitical shifts, and persistent economic disparities. The legacy of the Partition of India in 1947, followed by the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, triggered large-scale population movements that continue to reverberate through these districts. Additionally, ongoing cross-border migration, fueled by poverty, ethnic ties, and environmental stressors, has contributed to a sustained demographic transformation.

This paper seeks to critically examine the economic ramifications of such migration, with a particular focus on four interrelated domains: distortions in local labor markets, mounting pressure on public infrastructure and services, fragmentation of agricultural holdings, and the proliferation of informal economic activities. These impacts are not merely statistical anomalies but are deeply embedded in the lived realities of local communities, influencing employment patterns, access to resources, and the overall trajectory of regional development. By drawing upon a triangulated methodology that includes census data, field-level surveys, and a review of existing academic and policy literature, the study aims to unravel the complex and often contradictory relationship between migration and underdevelopment in these districts. Ultimately, the findings underscore the urgent need for nuanced, region-specific policy interventions that address both the immediate economic challenges and the structural vulnerabilities exacerbated by migration.

Keyword: Malda, Dinajpur Districts, West Bengal, migration, immediate economic challenges

1. Introduction

Migration, as a socio-economic phenomenon, encompasses a wide spectrum of causes and consequences, ranging from voluntary labor mobility to forced displacement due to conflict or environmental stress. Its impact on regional economies is particularly pronounced in borderland districts, where the convergence of geopolitical tensions, cultural affinities, and economic disparities creates a dynamic and often volatile landscape. In the context of eastern India, the districts of Malda, Uttar Dinajpur, and Dakshin Dinajpur in West Bengal exemplify this complexity. These regions, situated along the porous Indo-Bangladesh border, have historically been shaped by sustained and multidirectional migration flows.

The legacy of the Partition of India in 1947 and the subsequent formation of Bangladesh in 1971 catalyzed large-scale population movements across the border, many of which continue to this day. These migrations are not merely historical footnotes; they remain active processes influenced by factors such as ethnic and linguistic continuity, economic hardship, political instability, and environmental degradation in neighboring regions. The permeability of the border, coupled with limited surveillance and enforcement, has facilitated both documented and undocumented migration, leading to significant demographic shifts in the affected districts.

Malda and the Dinajpur districts have thus evolved into migration hotspots, where the influx of people has reshaped local economies, labor markets, land use patterns, and public service delivery.

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While migration has introduced certain economic opportunities such as increased labor availability and consumer demand it has also generated substantial vulnerabilities. These include wage suppression, informal sector expansion, pressure on agricultural land, and overstretched public infrastructure.

This paper seeks to explore the economic consequences of migration in these districts through a multidimensional lens. By analyzing labor market distortions, agricultural fragmentation, strain on public resources, and the growth of informal economies, the study aims to uncover the nuanced ways in which migration interacts with regional development. Drawing on census data, field surveys, and secondary literature, the research highlights the urgent need for targeted policy interventions that address both the immediate economic challenges and the structural conditions that perpetuate underdevelopment in these borderland regions.

2. Historical and Geopolitical Context

The migration patterns observed in the border districts of West Bengal particularly Malda, Uttar Dinajpur, and Dakshin Dinajpur are deeply rooted in the region's historical and geopolitical transformations. The Partition of India in 1947 marked a seismic shift in the subcontinent's demographic landscape, leading to mass displacement and resettlement across newly drawn borders. West Bengal, sharing an extensive boundary with East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), became a primary destination for displaced populations, especially those fleeing communal violence, political persecution, and economic instability. This trend intensified following the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, which unleashed another wave of migration driven by war, famine, and political upheaval. These historical events laid the foundation for a continuous influx of migrants into the border districts, shaping their demographic and economic profiles in lasting ways.

Compounding this legacy is the porous nature of the Indo-Bangladesh border. Stretching over 2,200 kilometers, much of it passes through rivers, agricultural fields, and densely populated rural areas, making surveillance and enforcement extremely challenging. This permeability has facilitated undocumented migration over decades, often driven by economic desperation, familial ties, and the search for better living conditions. Migrants frequently cross the border without formal documentation, settling in areas where enforcement is lax and integration is socially feasible.

Further complicating the migration narrative is the ethnic and linguistic continuity between populations on both sides of the border. Bengali is widely spoken in both West Bengal and Bangladesh, and many migrants share cultural, religious, and familial affinities with local residents. This shared heritage often blurs the lines between migrant and native populations, making it difficult for authorities to accurately assess the scale and impact of migration. As a result, policy responses are frequently hampered by data limitations, political sensitivities, and the challenge of distinguishing long-term settlers from recent arrivals. Together, these historical and geopolitical factors have created a complex and enduring migration dynamic that continues to shape the socio-economic realities of Malda and the Dinajpur districts.

3. Economic impacts of migration

Migration has significantly reshaped the economic landscape of Malda, Uttar Dinajpur, and Dakshin Dinajpur, producing a complex mix of benefits and challenges. One of the most visible effects is on the labor market dynamics, where the influx of low-skilled migrant workers has led to a surplus of labor, particularly in agriculture and informal sectors. This oversupply has exerted downward pressure on wages, making it difficult for both migrants and native workers to secure stable and adequately compensated employment. Many migrants find work in unregulated sectors such as brick kilns, construction sites, and domestic services, contributing to the expansion of the informal economy. This informalization, while offering short-term employment, often lacks legal protections, social security, and upward mobility. Moreover, native youth in these districts face increasing competition for limited job opportunities, resulting in rising underemployment and prompting further out-migration to urban centers in search of better prospects.

The pressure of migration is also acutely felt in the agricultural sector, where rising population density has led to the fragmentation of landholdings. As families grow and land is subdivided across generations, the average plot size diminishes, reducing agricultural productivity and profitability. Migrants, who often lack formal land ownership, typically engage in tenancy or sharecropping arrangements. These informal systems limit their access to institutional credit and government support schemes, perpetuating cycles of poverty and low investment in agricultural infrastructure.

In addition to labor and land pressures, migration has strained public resources and infrastructure. The rapid increase in population has overwhelmed educational institutions and healthcare facilities, leading to overcrowded classrooms, understaffed clinics, and declining service quality. Informal settlements have proliferated around urban and semi-urban centers, often lacking basic amenities such as clean water, sanitation, and electricity. These unplanned expansions contribute to urban sprawl and pose significant challenges for municipal governance and resource allocation.

Despite these challenges, migration has also introduced certain economic stimuli, particularly through remittance and consumption patterns. Many residents of these districts migrate to other Indian states for work, sending remittances back home that support household consumption and local commerce. However, while remittances bolster short-term economic activity, they rarely translate into long-term structural development or capital investment. On the other hand, the presence of migrants has expanded local consumer markets, increasing demand for goods and services and fostering small-scale entrepreneurship. This has led to the growth of informal retail, transport, and service sectors, which, although economically vibrant, remain vulnerable due to their lack of formal regulation and support.

In sum, migration has produced a multifaceted economic impact on Malda and the Dinajpur districts simultaneously driving labor availability and market expansion while exacerbating resource strain, informalization, and agricultural stress. Addressing these issues requires a nuanced understanding of the local context and a

coordinated policy response that balances economic inclusion with sustainable development.

4. Policy Challenges and Gaps

The economic and social complexities arising from migration in Malda, Uttar Dinajpur, and Dakshin Dinajpur are compounded by significant policy challenges and systemic gaps. One of the most pressing issues is the lack of reliable documentation and data on migrant populations, particularly those who have entered the region through informal or undocumented channels. Without accurate demographic and socio-economic data, policymakers struggle to assess the true scale of migration and its impact on local resources, labor markets, and infrastructure. This data deficiency undermines the effectiveness of targeted welfare programs, employment schemes, and development planning, leaving both migrants and host communities underserved.

Another critical challenge lies in the approach to border management, which has traditionally prioritized national security over socio-economic integration. While surveillance and fencing efforts aim to curb illegal migration, they often fail to address the root causes driving cross-border movement, such as poverty, displacement, and familial ties. Moreover, security-centric policies tend to overlook the humanitarian and developmental needs of migrant populations, resulting in exclusionary practices and missed opportunities for inclusive growth.

Compounding these issues is the developmental neglect of the affected districts. Despite experiencing high rates of migration and population growth, Malda and the Dinajpur districts have received limited attention in national and state-level development initiatives. Infrastructure investments, employment generation programs, and social welfare schemes remain inadequate relative to the demands of the growing population. This neglect perpetuates cycles of poverty, informal employment, and resource strain, further exacerbating the vulnerabilities created by migration. Addressing these policy gaps requires a shift toward data-driven, inclusive, and region-specific strategies that recognize migration not merely as a security concern but as a developmental imperative.

5. Recommendations

Addressing the economic consequences of migration in Malda, Uttar Dinajpur, and Dakshin Dinajpur requires a comprehensive and region-specific policy framework. First and foremost, there is an urgent need for integrated borderland development, which entails a multi-sectoral strategy that simultaneously strengthens infrastructure, improves access to quality education, and generates sustainable employment opportunities. Such an approach would not only alleviate the immediate pressures caused by migration but also foster long-term resilience and inclusive growth in these districts.

Equally important is the implementation of targeted skill development programs aimed at enhancing the employability of both migrant and native populations. Vocational training tailored to local economic needs such as agro-processing, construction, and small-scale manufacturing can reduce dependence on informal and precarious employment, while also stimulating

entrepreneurship and innovation. These programs should be accessible, inclusive, and linked to market demand to ensure meaningful economic integration.

In the agricultural sector, land reform and improved access to institutional credit are critical. Migrant workers, many of whom operate as tenants or sharecroppers, often lack formal land rights and are excluded from financial services. Strengthening land tenure security and expanding credit access through cooperative banks and microfinance institutions can empower these workers, enhance agricultural productivity, and promote investment in rural development.

Finally, cross-border cooperation with Bangladesh presents a strategic opportunity to address migration holistically. Bilateral engagement on migration management, border security, and regional development can help mitigate the drivers of forced migration while fostering economic collaboration. Joint initiatives in trade, infrastructure, and environmental management could yield mutual benefits and contribute to stability in the border regions. These recommendations, if pursued with political will and administrative coordination, can transform migration from a challenge into a catalyst for inclusive development.

6. Conclusion

The economic consequences of migration in Malda, Uttar Dinajpur, and Dakshin Dinajpur are not isolated phenomena but are deeply embedded within a broader tapestry of historical legacies, geopolitical realities, and developmental imbalances. The region's proximity to the Indo-Bangladesh border, coupled with its experience of partition-induced displacement and ongoing cross-border migration, has created a unique socio-economic environment marked by demographic fluidity and structural vulnerability. Migration has undeniably contributed to certain economic benefits, such as increased labor availability and the expansion of local consumer markets. These dynamics have supported informal entrepreneurship and sustained agricultural labor supply, particularly in contexts where mechanization remains limited.

However, these gains are offset by significant challenges. The continuous influx of migrants has placed immense pressure on already strained public resources, including education, healthcare, housing and sanitation. Informalization of the labor market has become widespread, with many migrants engaged in precarious, unregulated employment that offers little security or upward mobility. Furthermore, the fragmentation of agricultural land and limited access to institutional credit have perpetuated cycles of poverty and underdevelopment, particularly among migrant communities. These conditions have exacerbated socio-economic inequality, not only between migrants and native populations but also within the broader regional economy.

To address these multifaceted challenges, there is a pressing need for nuanced, region-specific policy interventions that go beyond conventional security and surveillance frameworks. Policies must be designed to integrate humanitarian considerations with economic imperatives, recognizing migration as both a developmental challenge and an opportunity. This includes investing in infrastructure, expanding access to education and vocational training,

reforming land and credit systems, and fostering cross-border cooperation. Only through such a holistic and inclusive approach can the border districts of West Bengal move toward sustainable development and social cohesion in the face of ongoing migratory pressures.

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