Cross-border Infiltration – The Next Big Challenge

Mains: *GS III – Internal Security*

Why in News?

Cross-border infiltration has emerged as India's most pressing internal security threat, with demographic shifts, political exploitation and economic strains turning a regional concern into a national crisis demanding urgent action.

What were the important internal security threats to India?

- **Fundamental threats** – In the early 2000s, India's primary internal security threats were
  - Terrorism and separatism in Kashmir
  - Left-Wing Extremism (LWE)
  - North-East insurgency
- **Decline in insurgency** – Though these issues persist, their intensity has declined considerably.
- **Naxalism** – Once active in 182 districts in 2009, has now shrunk to just 18 in 2025.
- Former PM Manmohan Singh had called it the *"single biggest internal security threat"* in 2006.
- According to the Home Ministry, it could be eliminated by March 2026.
- **North-East insurgency** – It has *declined by nearly 90%.*
- This progress is largely due to improved infrastructure, integration of alienated communities, and peace accords with insurgent groups.
- **Terrorism in Kashmir** – It has experienced a relative calm following the 2019 abrogation of Article 370.
- However, a complete resolution remains elusive, as Pakistan and its intelligence agency ISI continue to fuel unrest in the region.
- Keeping the Kashmir issue alive is essential to their strategic interests and political survival.
- With these longstanding challenges somewhat under control, illegal infiltration has now surfaced as the most pressing internal security threat.

What the consequences are of cross border infiltration?

- **Emerging national crisis** – Infiltration is no longer a border-specific problem.
- Its effects are now deeply felt across the Indian heartland, creating far-reaching social, political, and economic consequences.
- What was once framed as a humanitarian issue has transformed into a national crisis.

- **Social consequences** – The influx from Bangladesh and Myanmar has altered the demographic makeup of states like Assam, West Bengal, Tripura, and other North-Eastern areas.
- Ethnic balances have been disrupted, causing friction over land, language, and identity.
- The Assam Movement's legacy looms large, while debates on the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) remain active and politically sensitive.
- There is a growing perception among locals that infiltrators benefit from welfare schemes and political appeasement.
- This belief has sparked ethnic nationalism and communal tensions. Radical groups are quick to exploit such sentiments, posing further threats to social cohesion.
- This issue is no longer limited to border regions.
- Migrants have reached deep into the mainland from Bihar to Punjab and Uttarakhand to Karnataka.
- Major cities like Delhi, Hyderabad, Gurugram, and Pune are witnessing increasing numbers, putting pressure on urban services and housing.
- **Political consequences** – Most political parties have embraced vote-bank strategies, facilitating fake documents.
- They help infiltrators settle on government lands, especially along river beds and forest areas, and turning a blind eye to the consequences.
- Such actions compromise national security for short-term electoral gains and alienate local populations.
- This deepens mistrust between citizens and the state.
- If unaddressed, it could lead to unrest, especially in vulnerable regions where demographic pressures are mounting.
- **Economic consequences** – Illegal infiltration strains both employment and public services.
- Most undocumented migrants work in agriculture, construction, and domestic labour, flooding the market with cheap labour.
- This depresses wages and displaces local workers.
- Moreover, many infiltrators are involved in the informal or grey economy, engaging in cattle smuggling, narcotics trafficking, fake currency, and illicit trade.
- These activities not only weaken the formal economy but also empower organised crime syndicates, some with terrorist links.
- Public resources such as healthcare, education, and welfare are stretched further by the undocumented population.
- These burdens threaten to derail India's vision of becoming a developed nation, "Vikshit Bharat" by 2047.

What are the impediments in monitoring?

- **Vulnerable borders** – India's borders are increasingly vulnerable due to evolving tactics by hostile actors.
- Along the India–Myanmar border, difficult terrain enables insurgent movement and illegal entry.
- Despite the best efforts of border forces, the vast and varied geography presents major

enforcement challenges.

- **Increased narco terrorism** – In Punjab, narco-terrorism has gained ground, with drugs and arms being dropped by drones.
- Cyber radicalisation and sleeper agents disguised as labourers further complicate detection.
- **Change in approach of terrorists** – Recent arrests of Pakistani militants along the Bangladesh–Meghalaya border suggest a strategic shift by Pakistan's ISI, which is now exploiting weaker points along the eastern frontier.
- In 2011, in Malda district, a head constable was killed by cattle traffickers.
- **Large Illegal settlements** – A local survey revealed that a 500-meter stretch was fully occupied by illegal Bangladeshi settlers, making security operations difficult and compromising local intelligence networks.
- Such realities prove that infiltration isn't just about border violations; it can weaken internal coordination, disrupt intelligence, and enable collusion with enemy states during crises.

Kautilya wrote in the Arthashastra *Centuries ago: "In the territories lying on the borders, the conqueror should establish fortified towns populated with trustworthy people and soldiers.*

Foreigners should not be allowed to settle in border territories."

What lies ahead?

- The newly announced Demographic Security Mission is a timely and necessary move.
- But for real impact, it must adopt a zero-tolerance approach.
- Those involved in facilitating fake IDs and documents must face strict legal consequences.
- Enhanced border fencing, surveillance technologies, and citizen verification systems are vital.
- Illegal infiltration is not just a regional challenge; it is a fundamental test of India's political will, policy resolve, and social cohesion.
- It calls for a unified national response that rises above short-term politics.
- If this issue remains unresolved, it could destabilise communities, threaten India's internal peace, and obstruct its development trajectory.
- A day may come when unchecked infiltration poses a serious threat to the country's democratic fabric and sovereignty.
- By then, any electoral advantages gained today will seem trivial.
- As Kautilya warned, a kingdom that neglects its borders invites disorder. It is time for India to act decisively to protect its future

Reference

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