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**RAM B. BHAGAT**

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The International Institute of Migration and  
Development, PO Box 695011, India,  
Phone: +91 9778 355 560,  
<https://iimad.org>,  
Mail: [info@iimad.org](mailto:info@iimad.org)

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Author

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## Demography, Migration, and Political Narratives

**Ram B. Bhagat**

Visiting Professor,

Institute for Human Development, New Delhi, India

(Formerly) Professor and Head, Department of Migration and Urban Studies, International  
Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), Mumbai, India

(Email: [rbbhagat@iipsindia.ac.in](mailto:rbbhagat@iipsindia.ac.in))

**Abstract:** Demography is subtly shaping politics. Size, growth, composition, and distribution of the population, as influenced by fertility, mortality, and migration, are the dimensions and components of complex demographic changes. The political discourse often surrounds these issues in a very simplistic way, and even without data. Differential population size, growth, and migration have emerged as prominent parts of the political narratives. In political discourse, issues like illegal and refugee migration and fertility differentials by religious and ethnic groups have been shaping the political imagination. Xenophobia, loss of cultural identity, and threat to national security form the political narratives linked to demographic changes in general and illegal migration in particular. In this context, the census in general and the caste census in particular, the delimitation of parliamentary constituencies, NPR, NRC, and SIR are linked to demographic changes hotly debated and contested. In this lecture, it is argued that Demography is a quantified and measurable science that cannot be left to the speculation of numbers fomenting social anxiety and disturbing social harmony. The lecture highlights some pertinent methodological issues related to concepts, data, and measurement of demographic changes in general and migration in particular, illuminating myths and realities of the political narratives shaping identity politics.

### Introduction:

Demographic change has been subtly shaping politics. Size, growth, composition, and distribution of the population, as influenced by fertility, mortality, and migration, are the dimensions and components of complex demographic changes. The political discourse often surrounds these issues in a very simplistic way, and even without data. Differential population size, growth, and migration have emerged as prominent parts of the political narratives. In political discourses, issues like illegal<sup>1</sup> and refugee migration and fertility differentials by religious and ethnic groups have been shaping the political imagination. Xenophobia, loss of cultural identity, and threat to national security form the political narratives linked to demographic changes in general and illegal migration in particular.

1. Internationally illegal migration is termed as irregular migration or undocumented migration. However, legal frameworks in India use the term illegal migration/illegal migrants.

In this context, the census in general and the caste census in particular, delimitation of parliamentary constituencies, NPR (National Population Register), NRC (National Register of Citizens), and SIR (Special Intensive Revision of Electoral Roll) are linked to demographic changes and illegal migration, hotly debated and contested. However, it is important to emphasise that Demography is a quantified and measurable science, and demographers are known for their methodological integrity. Any speculation of numbers fomenting social anxiety and disturbing social harmony cannot be left unaddressed.

Demography is also rich in concepts and methods for analyzing data to establish empirical facts. Thus, any political narrative needs to be examined conceptually and methodologically if it is based on a lack of data or on defective data in the public domain, as in the case of illegal migration. Remembering the legacy of Prof. K.C. Zachariah, the pioneer of migration and demographic research, this memorial lecture presents his contributions in deciphering a political narrative linked to illegal migration, demographic change, and citizenship politics in India.

Prof. K.C. Zachariah started researching migration in the 1960s at the Demographic Training and Research Centre (DTRC), now known as the International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai where he served as Deputy Director from 1957 to 1966. He carried out a very meticulous analysis of census data on migration based on place of birth and duration of migration. He published two important books, namely *A Historical Study of Internal Migration in the Indian Sub-continent 1901-1931* in 1964 and *Migrants in Greater Mumbai* in 1969, which helped in understanding the migration pattern and characteristics of migrants in the Indian sub-continent. Later, he drafted the *UN Manual VI on Methods of Measuring Internal Migration*, which emerged as a classic treatise in the estimation of net migration based on place of birth and duration. It also has a chapter on the indirect estimation of migration based on age-sex structure data from the census, which is easily available from every census. Professor Zachariah has also worked extensively on demographic changes and migration in Africa, particularly West Africa, during his stint as a United Nations expert on demography at the Cairo Demographic Centre (1966–70) and senior demographer at the World Bank, from 1971 to 1989. After he retired from the World Bank, he joined as Honorary Professor at the Centre for Development Studies (CDS), Trivandrum, and worked on several rounds of Kerala Migration Survey (KMS) along with Professor S. Irudaya Rajan from 1998 until he died in 2023. There were huge publications to his credit on international migration and remittances during his

tenure at CDS, the most important one was '*Researching International Migration: The Lessons from the Kerala Experience*' jointly co-authored with Irudaya Rajan, published by Routledge in 2015. Subsequently, with his encouragement and inspiration, a book on '*Researching Internal Migration*' also appeared with his foreword by Routledge (Rajan and Bhagat 2022).

Professor Zachariah's core methodology was the estimation of net-migration based on place of birth data on migration when the duration of migration data was not available. As we know, net-migration is a crucial component of migration dynamics, measuring migration effectiveness in the redistribution of population linked to urbanization. Secondly, he was interested in migration differentials, which he owed to Dorothy S. Thomas, a prominent figure in demography known for her foundational research on migration (Thomas et al. 1938) when Zachariah was a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania during 1960-62. Subsequently, his publications emanating from DTRC (now IIPS) during the 1960s reflected that migration has been a selective process manifesting in migration differentials by age, sex, marital status, educational levels, and occupation, etc. Population changes and composition of population arising from migration were the central concern of Professor Zachariah's writings, tracing their historical path in relation to socio-economic changes at various geographical scales. Professor Zachariah was a great demographer and migration researcher whose statistical acumen was remarkable, simple, and in-depth to inspire the next generation of migration scholars in India and abroad. His legacy is premised on scientific rigour in demographic and migration research, data, and evidence-based conclusions, and the ability to combine census and sample surveys in analysis and research. Professor Zachariah has shown a path to demystify the untrue statements and political narratives that are not scientific and evidence-based through his innovative approach to data, estimation, and measurement.

### **Migration and the Science of Demography:**

The term demography originated from a Greek word, 'demos', which means people. It consists of two words, namely *demos* and *graphein* (to write) means writing or describing people (Guillard 1855). Interestingly, the Greek word *dēmokratia* means democracy, which combines *demos* with *kratos*, meaning rule. This vindicates the extent to which demography and democracy are related in their etymology (Bhagat 2022). Similarly, the etymology of the word 'population' traces its origin to the Latin word 'populus', meaning people. However, the dominant paradigm in demography views people as an aggregate of human numbers largely

insulated from the relational ontology of defining people distinctly practised in the disciplines, particularly in sociology, political science, and philosophy. Its relationship with economics, however, was shaped by its close relationship with statistics of human numbers rooted in Malthusian enunciation of mathematical progressions such as arithmetic, geometric, and their different variants, and subsequently conceptualised in the historical evolution of population size and growth determined by fertility, mortality, and migration in the model of Demographic Transition. Further, it was emphasized that the demographic changes influence the economic and social changes quantitatively and vice versa. However, the relational ontology rooted in a people-centric approach has been, by and large, missing in Demography until the ICPD (International Conference on Population and Development) held in 1994 adopted the principles of right based approach. This helped the evolution of Demography as a discipline of *Demology*- a science of population and its integration with social and political theories. P.R. Cox (1950) was perhaps the first to object to the name of Demography for the science of population and indicated why it should not be called *Demology* to reflect a respectable position of the discipline. Over the years, however, it has been increasingly realised that demographers have a social obligation to engage critically with the societies in which they live, and they have something to offer the public as critical demographers (Massey, 1999).

Any discipline takes a coherent form when it develops a theory or several theories to explain the dimensions of reality it attempts to study from a perspective or different perspectives. More theories are not undesirable but promote dialogues, debates, and discourses. Diversity is an epistemological foundation of knowledge and a key to creativity. In Demography, birth, death, and migration are three basic components of demographic change, and their interrelationship makes the discipline of demography interesting as it spans entire life cycle events like birth, marriage, migration, and death. A simple demographic balancing equation is a powerful tool consisting of natural increase (birth-death) and net migration (in-migration-out-migration) for demographic analysis, provided quality data are available from census and civil/vital registration systems. Many countries, including India, do not have regular and complete data to apply the demographic balancing equation, creating a condition for speculation and political narratives on migration, fomenting nativism, a threat to culture, national security, and xenophobia.

It is also worthwhile to underline that the relationship among various components, such as birth, death, and migration, is dynamic as changes in one component lead to changes in others. The relationship between the components, namely birth and death rates, is generally explained

through a theory called the *Demographic Transition*, which conceptualizes that a population of a country/territory moves from a state of high birth and death rates to one of low birth and death rates, leading to significant changes in the size, composition, and growth of the population. In the transition process, death rates fall prior to the decline in birth rate, increasing the natural increase of the population until the birth rate falls. The transition is complete when the birth rate equals the death rate, thereby natural increase is near zero. The size of the population may even decline if the death rate exceeds the birth rate. The demographic transition occurs in several stages in response to the socio-economic transition of a country. However, demographers hardly pay attention to the role of migration in demographic transition, as such demography is little theorized (Zaiceva and Zimmermann 2016). On the other hand, the study of migration was considered a ‘stepchild’ of Demography until the mid-twentieth century (Kirk 1960), although some of the visionary demographers, like Donald J. Bogue (1969), indicated migration as a top priority in research and action in the future. However, it was true that, unlike fertility and mortality, the analytical tools for the measurement and estimation of migration and mobility were lacking, let alone a proper definition of a migrant. It is at this juncture that the statistician turned demographer Prof. K.C. Zacharia appeared on the scene with his pioneering contributions in migration analysis, known as survival ratio methods for estimating net migration from census data without using vital statistics in the 1960s. At the same time, migration studies got further impetus by integrating demographic transition with migration and mobility transition by a prominent population geographer, Wilbur Zelinsky, at the beginning of the 1970s.

The theory of demographic transition, first enunciated in a publication of Warren Thompson (1929), was well articulated academically in the writings of Kingsley Davis (1945) and Notestein (1945) during the 1940s, however, hardly incorporated the mobility and migration as a component of demographic transition until Zelinsky (1971) explained the nature of *mobility transition* commensurate with the stages of demographic transition. In the early stage of demographic transition, there is little residential migration, followed by increasing intensity of rural to urban migration as the stages of demographic transition advance, and lastly, at the end, urban to urban migration prevails. Circulation and commutation as a form of mobility never ceases in any stage of demographic transition, but rather intensify with the expansion of transportation and communication as a form of human interaction and advancement of society. In Zelinsky’s view, the original formulation of demographic transition relates only to fertility and mortality transitions, and as such, it should be better termed as a vital transition rather than

a demographic transition. He argued that demographic transition in fact consists of both vital transition as well as mobility transition, which paves the way for an integrated and complete understanding of demographic change. In terms of demographic impact during the different stages of transition, the limited circulation is being followed by emigration with rising natural increase in the wake of mortality decline, and the late stage by immigration as natural increase nears zero or even negative. Most of the developed countries followed this trajectory in their demographic and economic history. Kingsley Davis (1951:98) mentions that a flood of emigrants left Europe during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The proportion of emigrants to the total population of the British Isles was as high as 43 per cent, followed by Portugal, 33 per cent, and Spain, 25 per cent in 1900- three major colonial powers which turned out to be a country of immigrants after the Second World War. Thus, the wisdom of the theory of demographic transition informs us that we should not look into emigration or immigration as an isolated issue, but as part of the trajectory of a nation's evolution from a limited circulation in the pre-transition stage to emigration in the middle stages to immigration in the late stages as the nation advances economically and demographically. Thus, immigration is a part of a demographic cycle of a nation closely associated with its advancement. History is also witness to the fact that hardly any nation has been impoverished due to immigration. Further, demographic transition theory also informs us that demographic changes are population flows over space and time, and one should be cautious in territorial fixing of social and cultural attributes, which are also dynamic and changing. Nations do not simply consist of citizens but also refugees, asylum seekers, diaspora, cross-border displaced persons, stateless persons, and illegal migrants (irregular/undocumented migrants). Humanitarian migration needs a different approach to treatment, legal framework, and data vis-à-vis illegal migration commensurate with UN conventions and frameworks. An appropriate demographic epistemology is critical to divest the demographic anxiety unleashed by unscrutinised political narratives solely based on illegal migration, that too based on incomplete and defective data, and inappropriate demographic measurement for political gains.

### **Migration and Political Narratives:**

The partition of the Indian sub-continent, leading to the independence of India, created long international borders in both western and eastern sectors. What was earlier internal migration suddenly turned into international migration (Davis, 1951). Partition also turned a large population into refugees and cross-border illegal migrants, unknown in India's history before

independence. However, since the 1970s, illegal migration has been a persistent feature of political narratives. It is generally raised in high pitch during the time of the election, as it is easier to mobilise votes by invoking xenophobia and a threat to cultural identity. Although there are no authentic sources of official data, the numbers keep circulating during different political regimes, ranging from as low as 10 million to as high as 20 million illegal immigrants from Bangladesh (Das 2016; BBC 2020; Kalita 2026).

A massive unrest broke out in Assam at the end of the 1970s, leading to the Assam Accord signed in 1985. The accord promised that the Govt of India would detect and deport all illegal foreigners who entered Assam on or after 25<sup>th</sup> March 1971. It has implications for the citizenship provisions as the principles of citizenship changed from *jus soli* (birth-based) to *jus sanguinis* (parentage/descent) first through the Citizenship Amendment Act in 1986 and later in 2003. More recently, an NRC list was also prepared, which rendered 1.9 million people of Assam as illegal immigrants, although not acceptable to the state govt of Assam (Bhagat, 2022). It may be noted that all illegal immigrants identified through NRC may not have crossed the border; many of them would have been born in Assam, but in political parlance, all illegal migrants were called *ghuspeithei* (infiltrators). The issue of *ghuspeithei* is constantly raised during the election times more prominently in the eastern and north-eastern states. It is also to be mentioned that the issue of illegal migration has been more prominent in eastern and north-eastern India among the immigrants originating from Bangladesh, although cases of recent illegal Bangladeshi immigrants have also been reported from other parts of the country (The Times of India 2025; The Hindu 2025). However, in many cases, it becomes very difficult to distinguish between a refugee and an illegal migrant due to the lack of a legal framework and non-adoption of the UN definition of refugee, as India is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention 1951 and Refugee Protocol 1967. The recent Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 attempts to exempt some of the religious groups, like Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian communities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan who entered into India before 31<sup>st</sup> December 2014, shall not be treated as illegal migrants (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2019). The basis of religion and national origin, with a cut-off by the end of 2014, however, does not provide a complete solution to the persistent mixing of the categories of refugees with illegal migrants. On the other hand, a failure of the real-time identification and deportation of illegal migrants perforce renders certain categories of population stateless. It is not only ironical but also tortuous path with the spectre of NRC rattling over certain ethnic groups, although anxiety prevails among everyone lacking documented citizenship, with the

changing requirement of legal proofs, as citizenship act has been amended several times during the last few decades in the wake of the political narrative on illegal migration in the country. High population growth and changes in the religious composition of the population in the bordering districts and states are considered proof of illegal migration/infiltration across the borders, without having detailed data and analysis either on natural increase or net migration. As we know, demographic change can occur not only due to in-migration but also due to out-migration as well. It is thus very important to know the contribution of both components in the growth and composition of the population. For example, the state of Bihar is known as an out-migrating state, but out-migration rates from Haryana, Goa, and Delhi are higher than Bihar. However, as the in-migration rate is much lower in Bihar, the state of Bihar turns out to be a net losing state due to out-migration, while Haryana, Goa, and Delhi are net gaining states due to higher in-migration rates compared to their respective out-migration rates. For a smaller territory, the impact of the net-migration could be even huge. Thus, a net balance is the real answer to the questions emerging from demographic change, along with knowing the magnitude of natural increase. Often, the naïve interpretation of just picking up in-migration without considering the out-migration fuels the political narrative of demographic threat and anxiety. A complete demographic analysis applying the demographic balancing equation would throw light on this, provided we have a robust birth and death registration in the country; otherwise, there is enough scope for the sentiments and anxiety to sustain a political narrative based on contrived demographic imagination. It is important to underscore that a complete birth and death registration system is a prelude to the preparation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) if at all required. On the other hand, the narrative of *ghuspeithe* entered into the electoral roll is one of the reasons for the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) drive by the Election Commission of India, being undertaken in several states of the country since August 2025. The process of SIR being an intermittent drive subjects everyone to scrutiny on the criteria of citizenship, age, and residency, and the burden of proof lies on the individual. It leaves a lot of scope for injustice and violation of constitutional rights. However, if birth and death registration is linked with voters' registration, the revision and updating of the electoral roll could become a continuous exercise, ensuring its purity and integrity. This linkage may allow for the immediate addition of a voter when a citizen turns 18, and the prompt deletion of a name when a voter dies. Because a birth certificate also records the parents' details, it would be highly difficult for an illegal migrant to be added to the electoral roll. Currently, the intensive revision of the electoral roll under SIR is intended to delete deceased voters and exclude those who have migrated or are illegal migrants. However, these issues could largely be prevented if

the registration systems, namely birth, death, and electoral registrations are linked. Media reports indicate that SIR, as it stands, is not only controversial but may also disproportionately exclude women, marginalized communities, and internal migrants (Rajagopal 2025; Biswas 2025).

### **Way forward:**

To conclude, it may be pertinent to reiterate that political narratives on illegal migration are a powerful tool to evoke Xenophobia. Truth could be most healing, but all citizens should not be subjected to scrutiny through a pan-India process of either NRC or SIR. A robust birth and death registration system linked to the electoral roll would be an appropriate way to secure the nation and protect the rights of the people. It may take some time. In the meantime, let us remember that a meticulous analysis of demographic change, composition of population, and contribution of migration through the estimation of net-migration and migration differentials, as Professor Zachariah has shown, will always guide us to demystify an incomplete, misconceived, and contrived political narratives creating a demographic anxiety and national threat for political gains. Needless to emphasize that such narratives harm the poor, marginalised, and minorities more than anyone else.

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