

Bangladeshi Migrants in India: Issues and Government Responses

Geetanjali Dutta

The Author recently completed Ph. D. degree from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.

Abstract

Migration is not a new phenomenon in India and over the last few decades the demand for labour from India's growing economy and stable political system has pulled people from neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh. Because of complicated socio-economic and political issues, there has been a large scale migration from Bangladesh to India. Now the issue of migration, legal and illegal, has created an alarming situation in India from the economic perspectives, national security and political milieu. New Delhi has addressed the issue of migration and expressed its concerns before the Bangladeshi counterparts and trying to resolve the problems related to migration. Since the issue of migration is a matter of serious concern today for India and its bilateral relationship with Bangladesh, there is the need to find out the nature, extent and consequence of migration from its neighbourhood. Looking into all these aspects, this paper will focus on various factors which have led to migration from Bangladesh to India; impact of migration on various issues such as economic, demographic and security; response of Indian and Bangladeshi government on the issue of migration and some possible intervention to resolve the issue.

KEYWORDS: porous boundary, refugee, demography, implications, security and government response

Introduction

The phenomenon of migration is as old as human civilisations. Each civilisation in its history passes through massive movement of people over great distances for better livelihood and secured home. This movement of people in the form of migration has always played a vital role in the structural transformation of societies. However, migration from the ancestral land and their settlement, de jure or de facto, in the host country poses some concerns for both the nations. It has become evident since the beginning of the nineteenth century where economic development, political alignments and socio-cultural aspirations creates and complicates the situation more seriously. If peeped up under South Asian scenario, the national, regional and international mobility is on rise today. Being one of the fast growing economies in the world and most developed among the South Asian nations, India has been turned into a safe and better destination for the people from across the neighbouring countries. On the other hand, over the last few decades, the demand for labour from India's growing economy, in particular, has pulled people from neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (Samuel and others 2011). According to a UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Report, India was projected rank ninth in terms of the number of international migrants (5,436,012) in 2010; accounts for 2.5 percent of all international migrants; and Bangladeshi migrants pose most focal point of attention in India (Behera 2011). People from both India and Bangladesh regularly cross the borders through many unofficial transit points. The

border runs through jungle, hills, villages, paddy and jute fields which makes it easy for them to cross. In some cases, the border cuts through the middle of several villages, while one section of a house is in one country, another is in the other. In West Bengal for instance there are more than 100 villages located right on the zero line, and in many villages there are houses where the front door is in India and rear door opens into Bangladesh (Datta and others 2008).

Porous boundary and ethno-cultural identity

Generally, migrant Bangladeshis are concentrated in West Bengal and Assam in India. Geographical contiguity, socio-cultural affinity, kinship factor and historical reasons between India and Bangladesh have all left the Indo-Bangladesh borders vulnerable to migration. Since Bangladesh and India are parts of the Indian subcontinent and have had a long common cultural, economic and political history, many Bangladeshi feel that India is the most suitable place to move. India and Bangladesh are neighbours sharing a significant land border. Bangladesh shares around 4095km of its border, passing through Indian parts of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura. Difficult terrain and mountainous region along with mere 1500 km fenced border, leaving Indo-Bangladesh border porous, easy for cross-border migration and thus booming illegal trade and services in north-eastern parts of India (Mazumdar 2011). Bangladeshi migrants in India consist of Muslim migrants and Hindu refugees, both categories having different sets of reasons to migrate. Although Bangladeshis have their national identity within the nation-state framework, they identify themselves as Bengalis and share a common ethno-cultural ethos and heritage with Bengalis across the border. In short, socio-economic, ethno-cultural and political factors greatly results in large scale migration of Bangladeshis to India.

Resource and climate refugees

In recent years, it is seen that Bangladesh faces an extraordinary policy challenges due to relentless population pressure and deforestation. Many environmental scientists predicts that in near future, Bangladesh would be at the most risk of new climate change, due to extreme levels of poverty, high dependency on agriculture and extreme pressure over natural resources. Though, these things are happening, government is less sensitive to redirect domestic approach to climate change. A study carried out under the BDCLIM (Bangladesh Climate) project indicate that the average annual run off in the Brahmaputra basin would decline by 14 percent by the year 2050 as a result of climate change (Datta 2012).

It is estimated that in Bangladesh more than 95 percent of population still continues to depend on groundwater resources in the absence of access to safe surface water resources. Here, out of 8.4 million hectares of arable land, more than half of the land area is under irrigation. Unrestricted exploitation of groundwater for irrigation has caused heavy deposits of arsenic substances in vast tracts of the cultivable land. In consequence, continued uses of arsenic contaminated water for irrigational and domestic purposes have adverse impacts on crop productivity and health. As a result, around 85 million people of the country are at risk of exposure to arsenic contamination and every year, approximately 200,000 people in Bangladesh are affected by arsenic induced cancer (Suryanarayanan 2010). Moreover, groundwater resources are increasingly contaminated through penetration of surface water pollution in the aquifers, which further threatens water security in the country.

Likewise, Bangladesh is vulnerable to frequent drought and flood, which are largely due to global warming and climate change. According to the National Geographic issue of May 2011, in an average year, 40 percent of the total land area is flooded, and annually river erosion washes away one percent of arable land. Bangladeshi scientists estimate that up to 20 percent of the country's land may be lost to flooding by 2030, which may on the other hand create as many as 20 million 'climate refugees'. However this highest risk of flooding creates the highest risk of droughts in Bangladesh which has resulted in survival problem in the country (Datta 2012) and this was illustrated during October 2010, when 500,000 people were driven from their homes by flood waters created by storms. Since opportunities for migration within the country are limited and people are facing food shortage, they choose for migration to India.

Worst demographic pictures

Bangladesh is one of the smallest country that posses about 158 million people, becoming the seventh most populous in the world and is one of the most densely populated country in present days (Kibria 2011). This clears the picture of its density of population i.e. 966 per sq km, whereas, the total cultivable land is only of 8.29 million hectares. According to the latest World Population Data Sheet brought out by the Population Research Bureau (PRB) in 2011, Bangladesh's population is likely to reach 226 million by the mid-2050s, a 37 percent rise from present levels and is expected that the density of population will be increase to about 1350 per sq km by 2030 (Datta 2012). From this data, it means that Bangladesh is unable to control the population pressure and this high rate of population growth particularly in rural areas which is about 90 percent of growth, will bring the population double in less than 40 years and in such a circumstances the state will face the difficulty to provide the basic needs to its all citizens.

Moreover, the government figures put out by the 2011 Economic Survey of Bangladesh reveals that about 40 percent of population live below the poverty line. In this predominantly rural country, overpopulation and environmental degradation have contributed to a large landless population, and Bangladesh has registered a 5 to 6 percent rate of annual economic growth since the mid-1990s (Kibria 2011). Further, more than 90 percent of the population depend on agriculture which account for 20.60 percent of GDP and 48.40 percent of employment. Due to high rate of population pressure, in many instances, agricultural land is increasingly being diverted to other uses such as housing, roads and industrial development to meet the need of the human being. In consequence, gradually there has been declining of available agricultural land in Bangladesh. It is predicted that by the year 2030, the probability of rice requirement will be 39.8 million tonnes, keeping the area more or less constant and the required total yield would have to be 3.8 tonnes/hectare, against the present yield of 2.58 tonnes/hectare, with an average farm size of less than 1.0 acre (Datta 2012). All these problems create unwilling situation in Bangladesh, and most of the times, natives of Bangladesh face food crisis. Because of the growing number of the poor, the access to development programmes is also limited to only a few. This motivates Bangladeshis to cross the border into India, which offers greater economic opportunities with higher wages and employment benefits.

At present, though the Bangladesh government has made substantial progress in the areas of primary education, population control and the reduction of hunger, however,

these developments have not brought any significant and positive changes in the life of all Bangladeshis. Some surveys show that about 56 percent of the respondents express that, lack of industrialization and lack of employment opportunities are the primordial causes of this migration. Thirty-five and a quarter percent of the people have pointed out economic depression and poverty as economic push factor for migration of Bangladeshis to India. Although the exact figures are unknown but the data of the Indian 2001 census, for instance, reveals there were approximately 3 million Bangladeshi migrants in India, representing 60 percent of total migrants (Samuel and others 2011).

Age factor also plays a major role for migration. In Bangladesh, about 61 percent of population is of working age that is 15 to 64-years-old, while 34 percent is under the age of 14, indicating a moderate youth bulge (Kibria 2011). Those who are employed in the formal labor market in Bangladesh, often work just a few hours a week at low wages. Thus, while the estimated unemployment rate is relatively low which is 4.5 percent, the problem of underemployment prevails here at a large extent. In consequence, many unemployed Bangladeshi youths, move towards India, with a hope of getting employment opportunities and higher wages there. More surprisingly, 50 percent of Bangladeshi reports reveal that there is lack of employment and business opportunities at home, 60 percent find financial difficulties and 43 percent express better wages as factors of migration (Datta 2012).

Implications of migration

The massive illegal migration of Bangladeshis to India is a genuinely troublesome issue which is negatively affecting demographic composition and disturbing security, social harmony and economic well-being of Indians. It is alleged that smuggling, human trafficking, illegal movements and other displeasing occurrences often torment the border forces and Bangladesh's military camps are mainly cited as being responsible for carrying out disruptive activities thwarting peace and security of India's North-East region.

Demographic implication

In fact, the steady flow of Bangladeshis into India has resulted in demographic changes, basically, in the bordering states of West Bengal and the North-eastern states of Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya. As a result, some districts of Assam, such as Dhubri, Barpeta, Goalpara, Hailakandi and Karimganj, and several parts of West Bengal, such as Murshidabad, South and North Parganas, Nadia, West Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri and Siliguri in Darjeeling, have a large Bangladeshi immigrant population (Behera 2011). The Census of India 2001 Report on migration showed that more than 30 lakhs persons in the state of West Bengal were born in other Asian countries out of which more than 98 per cent were from Bangladesh (www.capabilityapproach.com). In a study by the Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA), Amarjeet Singh says, that about 1.2 million Bangladeshis who entered India with valid travel documents have not returned home and that India managed to push back only 15,000 of them in 2005, 12,000 in 2006 and 11,500 in 2007.

In this way, Nagaland is another destination favoured by immigrants and has recorded the highest rate of population growth in the country; 56.08 percent during 1981-91 and 64.41 percent during 1991-2001. The migration has resulted in the emergence of a new community in Nagaland called the Sumias. Similar demographic changes can

be seen in Tripura too. Accordingly, Nagaland and Tripura, the tribal states are gradually reduced to non-tribal states. It is found that in 2001, across the border of Tripura the tribal population was reduced to 31.1 percent from 50 percent. Hence, this accounts for tribal insurgency in Tripura (Behera 2011).

Likewise, West Bengal population also face similar trend. For example, ten districts of West Bengal bordering Bangladesh - Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, East Dinajpur, West Dinajpur, Malda, Murshidabad, Nadia, North Parganas and South Parganas have steady growth of Bangladeshi population (Datta and others 2008). Border Police Department reveals that about one thousand Bangladeshi cross the border each day and enter West Bengal. Census reports of 1981 and 1991 indicate that during the decade 1981-1991, the number of Hindus in West Bengal decreased by 2.27 percent while Muslims increased by 2.06 percent. Even in Kolkata, the Muslim population rose in the same decade by 53.67 percent whereas the Hindu population increased by 30.79 percent only. In this way, illegal migration has disturbed demographic profile of India.

Economic implication

The massive illegal Bangladeshi migrants not only disturbing the demographic structure of India, but also eating up its resources, employment opportunities, health, literacy and other facilities. Therefore, cross border movement of population in Indo-Bangladesh context is generating a range of destabilizing socio-political, economic, ethnic and communal tension in India. In such a circumstance, problem exists because the migrants have settled down permanently, encroached lands and they are now enjoying the rights of natural citizens. The 85 percent of total encroached forest land in Assam was found to be in the hands of the Bangladeshi migrants, and 43 of the 126 assembly constituencies in Assam have strong presence of migrants that has disturbed political scenario of the state (Pathania 2003). Similar is situation in West Bengal. Moreover, infiltrators are engaged in smuggling of sugar, drug, gold etc. in India. For example, cattle lifting has been a very common phenomenon in these border areas. As more people are forced to migrate from Bangladesh, the economic security and livelihood of the poorer section of people in India are threatened as a result of loss of job opportunities. In states like Assam, Meghalaya and Nagaland, some Bangladeshi migrants have obtained Indian citizenship by producing false documents. This makes them eligible for benefits under the national employment schemes and other development schemes in India resulting in the drain of available national and local resources in the country (Suryanarayanan 2010).

Security implication

The increase illegal migrants from Bangladesh to India have an implication on South Asian security in general and India's national security in particular. In many cases the poor and impoverished Bangladeshis who were forced to move India, faced the problem of social and economic rights in India. Finding no other options, many Bangladeshis join the insurgent movements and engaged in local thefts and crimes. There is strong evidence of insurgent groups such as the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC), National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN-IM) and the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) having operational presence and camps in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh (Suryanarayanan 2010). However, these groups acquire weapons from border regions shared between Myanmar and Bangladesh. West Bengal Intelligence reveals that as many as 125 of the 208

madrasas situated in the border districts of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, North and South Dinajpur, Malda, Murshidabad, North and South 24-Parganas encourage terrorism. Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) has also given its assessment stating that some Bangladeshis are being trained as saboteurs in Pakistan, acting as a security threat (Pathania 2003). Moreover, weak political and economic institutions in Bangladesh are likely to aid insurgency activities in the region in future.

There are suspicions that many mosques in West Bengal are used for radical elements and small arms smuggling. In many cases, the Bangladeshi migrants do not give up their religious and ethnic identities and this feeling generates the feeling of regionalism and rise of Muslim fundamentalist groups and fundamentalism in the region. According to a study, some Islamic fundamentalist outfits, like HUJI, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, Islamic Liberation Army of Assam, Islamic Sevak Sangha, Muslim United Liberation Front of Assam, Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam, United Reformation Protest of Assam, People's United Liberation Front and Muslim Volunteer Force have tried to establish their foothold in Assam (Behera 2011). There are also many evidences that, Islamic fundamentalist and extremist organizations, such as Jamait-e-Islami-e-Hind, Jamait-Ahle-Hadis, Students Islamic Organization (SIO), Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) and Tabligh-e-Jamat are growing in Bangladesh and they are able to expand their activities in West Bengal. There are also groups which are directly involved in subversive activities such as HUJI (www.idsa.in). Ultimately, Bangladesh is responsible for the growth of radicalism, particularly Islamic fundamentalism, regionalism and encroaching sovereign space of other nations. This indirect invasion has caused destruction of local culture and created a demographic imbalance, which have turned as one of the root causes of communal violence in India (thenethindu.blogspot.in). S.K. Sinha, the former Governor of Assam, through his Report on Illegal Migration into Assam, 1998, suggested that the large numbers of Bangladeshi migrants to India has resulted in reducing Assamese people to a minority in their own state and it poses a grave threat both to the identity of the Assamese people and the national security.

With regard to crimes committed by Bangladeshi migrants, 20 percent of crimes in India mainly in the form of burglary are committed by the migrants where glaring reference goes to Bangladeshis. Many surveys reveal that, robbery in the Kolkata border, mostly committed by Bangladeshis. Moreover, in Bihar 19-20 lakh Bangladeshi nationals have settled down in four districts of Purnea, Katihar, Araria and Kishanganj and these districts have now become the strongholds of cross-border smugglers and arms mafia. In Punjab Bangladeshis were caught up in the organ trade scandal (Pathania 2003).

Response of India and Bangladesh

If we look back over the last four decades, we can only say that India-Bangladesh relations have been a source of disappointment and frustration for the people of both the countries (www.observerindia.com) and the issue of migration takes the centre stage of discord in Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relationship. The issue of illegal migration from Bangladesh to India is highly sensitive and has developed serious concerns in India. Responding to a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in 1999, the Supreme Court of India asked the Union government and the state government of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura to file affidavits on the repatriation of illegal Bangladeshi migrants. It had sought a direction from the court to

the centre to identify these Bangladeshi nationals and repatriate them with the help of National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and other agencies. However, only a limited number of illegal settlers have been identified and deported.

To resolve all the problems related to migration, various issues have been discussed in the meetings between the border officials, yet, Bangladesh finds it difficult to accept the fact that its citizens are illegally crossing over into India in search of livelihood and comfortable life. Further, academic communities in both countries have viewed the problem in the light of sociological and historical factors, but Bangladeshi politicians have been very defensive and unwilling to examine the issue through a rational prism, yet, some important steps have been taken by both the nations. Regarding the issue of illegal Bangladeshi migrants in India, the Indian government has initiated a few legal measures to address the problem. On the basis of the tenets of the Joint Communiqué signed in 1992 between the two countries, both India and Bangladesh have now acknowledged the problem of illegal immigration and decided to cooperate with each other in order to minimize the magnitude of the problem (Mazumdar 2011). Realizing terrorist activities carried out by outfits based in both countries, like Banga Sena and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami, recently, India and Bangladesh have agreed jointly to fight against terrorism.

The 14th SAARC Summit of 2007, which was followed by reciprocal visits by the representatives from both sides bore positive implications for the rejuvenation of improved bilateral ties between the two neighbours and undoubtedly fostered mutual understanding (Mazumdar 2011). Bangladesh's assistance in securing a violence-free North-East India and non-hostile border in the east seemed to gain a positive inclination.

Furthermore, in September 2011, both the countries have signed an agreement on border demarcation to end the 4-decade old disputes over boundaries. This came to be known as the Tin Bigha corridor. In this regard, India also granted 24-hour access to Bangladeshi citizens into the Tin Bigha Corridor. The agreement included exchange of adversely held enclaves, involving 51,000 people spread over 111 Indian enclaves in Bangladesh and 51 Bangladesh enclaves in India. The total land involved is reportedly 7000 acres. Apart from this, on 9 October 2011, Indian and Bangladeshi Armies participated in Sampriti-II (Unity-II), a 14 day long joint military exercise at Sylhet to increase synergy between their forces

Conclusion and Suggestion

Controlling of flow of migration from Bangladesh to India is a complicated task since the problem itself is intertwined with historical, geographic, socio-economic and political issues. It is a challenging task but not impossible to resolve the issue. The illegal migration can be controlled to a large extent through various measures as undertaken by India and Bangladesh individually or jointly. Both the countries should get concerned over the negative implications of illegal migration and in this perspectives both the countries should work sincerely with a time bound manner to control the rates of migration. To make the approach successful some of the possible interventions, as mentioned below, can be helpful to reach out the target points of both the countries. However, success or failure of migration policy much depends on response and commitment of leaders of both the sides and cooperation of the people from each parts of the boundary.

Firstly, at the unilateral level, India should evolve a more effective mechanism to address the present problem of migration. This would range from ensuring that local political parties should resist the urge to use the migrants as vote banks. Bangladeshis who are already present in India could be allowed to work but should not be allowed to vote and get involved in politics.

Secondly, from the Bangladesh point of view, there is the need of successful population control measures, sustained economic growth and industrialization. If the steady population growth can be controlled, then the country will be able to reduce the poverty level and will be able to provide sufficient basic necessities to each and every people.

Thirdly, it is a challenging task for the government of India to identify the Bangladeshi migrants because of ethnic, linguistic, cultural, physical and social similarities. Yet, government must go for better border management and effective record keeping of its nationals so that outsiders are easily identified and discouraged from infiltrating.

Fourthly, both the countries should work out plan and strategies to well define and demarcate disputed border areas.

Fifthly, the Indian companies should be encouraged to invest in Bangladesh for generating employment opportunities there.

Sixthly, Bangladesh should take initiative for high rate of growth and development. As a result, several Bangladeshis illegally residing in India will choose to return to their homeland.

References

“Aam Aadmi: Illegal Immigration From Bangladesh: Cause and Solution”, <http://thenethindu.blogspot.in/2012/07/aam-aadmi-illegal-immigration-from.html>.

Behera, Subhakanta, (2011), “Trans-border identities; A study on the impact of Bangladeshi and Nepali migration to India”, *ICRIER Policy Series*, no 1.

Datta, P, Sadhu, S, Bhattacharya B.N. and Majumdar P.K. (2008), “Demographic Effects of Forced Illegal Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal: A Qualitative Study”, *Dialogue*, October-December, 10 (2): 1-14.

Datta, Sriradha (2012), “Bangladesh: Illegal migration and Challenges for India”, in Dahiya Rumel and Behuria, Ashok (Eds), *India's Neighbourhood, Challenges in the Next Two Decades*, New Delhi: Pentagon Press.

“Illegal Bangladeshi Migration to India: Impact on Internal Security”, <http://www.idsa.in/event/IllegalBangladeshiMigrationtoIndia>.

“India Bangladesh-Relations: Past, Present and Future”, http://www.observerindia.com/cms/export/orfonline/modules/orfdiscourse/attachments/bangla_1210851392822.pdf

Mazumdar,S.N. (2011), “Illegal Immigration: A Cause of Deep Concern in India-Bangladesh Bilateral relations”, <http://www.globalindiafoundation.org/Bangladesh.pdf>.

Nazli, Kibria (2011), “Working Hard for the Money: Bangladesh Faces Challenges of Large-Scale Labor Migration”, [www.migrationinformation.org/ Profiles/ display. cfm? ID=848](http://www.migrationinformation.org/Profiles/display.cfm?ID=848)

Pathania, J.M. (2003), “India & Bangladesh - Migration Matrix- Reactive and not Proactive”, <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/paper632>.

Samuels, Fiona, Niño-Zarazúa, Miguel, Wagle, Sanju, Sultana, Tahmina and Sultana Mirza Manbira (2011), ‘Vulnerabilities of movement: cross-border mobility between India, Nepal and Bangladesh’, <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/docs/7404.pdf>

Sarker, Jyoti Parimal, ‘Bangladeshi migration to West Bengal: A cause of concern’ [www. capabilityapproach.com/pubs/Jyoti%20Sarkar.pdf](http://www.capabilityapproach.com/pubs/Jyoti%20Sarkar.pdf).

Sinha, S.K.(1998), ‘ Report on Illegal Migration into Assam’, submitted to the President of India’, 1998.

Suryanarayanan, Sowmya (2010), ‘Bangladesh - Water, Migration & Security Concerns’,http://www.worldsecuritynetwork.com/showArticle3.cfm?article_id=18217&topicID=54