

Economic Causes of Migration of Illegal Bangladeshis to India

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Abstract

Among the many factors that cause the migration of Bangladeshi nationals to India, the economic factors find a prominent place. In migration studies, most often than not, scholars give primacy to economic factors over other factors of migration (Weiner,1985). Bangladesh is one country where economic reasons have played a prominent role in inducing migration-- both legal and illegal-- of its nationals to foreign countries. This paper examines the economic causes that induce illegal Bangladeshi migration to India.

Introduction

India was subjected to mass cross- border migration of people from East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) in the aftermath of the partition of India in 1947 and also in 1971 during the liberation struggle of Bangladesh in 1971 when it got separated from Pakistan and became an independent country. Since then, there have not been any instances of mass movement of people from Bangladesh to India, but migration to India continued. There has been a steady flow of illegal or undocumented Bangladeshi nationals to India which has become a major issue of contention between the two countries. The efforts of India to stop this illegal migration have not been very successful due to various reasons. Bangladesh's official stand of not acknowledging the illegal migration of its nationals to India is one among them.

Bangladeshi migration- both legal and illegal- to other countries has been substantial. Bangladesh's immigration statistics show that over 1.4 million Bangladeshis working abroad in 2015. Bangladesh is one of the leading labour sending countries of the world where its citizens have moved in large numbers to Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) and also to other regions and countries of the world prominently to UK and USA. But, when it comes to the number of undocumented / illegal Bangladeshi nationals in India there is no accurate figure with the Indian Government; yet, it is assumed that it runs into millions. There exists wide disagreement among officials and scholars regarding the actual magnitude of migration, mainly because of the lack of reliable statistics. So we have wide estimates given by various scholars that range from 3 million to 40 million. Sanjeev Tripathi former head of the Indian Intelligence Agency, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), by analysing the census figures of last four decades, 1981, 1991, 2001, 2011 concludes that the number of Bangladeshi migrants in India comfortably exceeds 15 million(Tripathi,2016). The 2001 Census of India, puts the total number of Bangladeshis residing in India at 3 million, out of which over 2 million have been staying in India for over 20 years or more(Census of India,2001 e p.19). Unofficial figures are five times this number. The contribution of Bangladeshi migrant's income to the economy of Bangladesh is yet to be studied. There are several hindrances to such a study; most importantly, Bangladesh is yet to officially accept the fact that its nationals are illegally crossing over to India.

Bangladeshi migration to India can be explained using the 'Push' and 'Pull' factors of migration- the methodology adopted by scholars while analysing migration. 'Push' factors are factors that more or less compel people to leave the place of their original residence. These compelling factors may be poor economic conditions in their place of origin, resulting in economic misery and lack of opportunities for people that force them to move out in search of better economic opportunities elsewhere. Another major factor that compels people to leave is the unfavourable social and political situation in their place of residence. People may leave their country fearing persecution on account of holding to a particular political opinion, race, language, religion, or belonging to a particular social group. Such a category of people is termed Refugees as per

International Law. 'Pull' factors, on the other hand, are factors like, better employment opportunities, higher wages, better facilities, and amenities of modern life in a destination area that encourages people to migrate. In the case of Bangladeshi migration to India both the Push and Pull factors operate. The porous nature of the long Indo- Bangladesh border which is about 4096 kms and the peculiar geographical terrain that consists of riverine, marshy, hilly, and forested lands makes the manning of the border a difficult task for the Indian Border Security Force that mans it. Bangladeshi migrants have moved to all parts of India but particularly to the states of Assam, West Bengal, Tripura, and to the north eastern states of India.

Among the many factors that induce Bangladeshi migration to India the economic factors are prominent among them. It is observed that the poor economic conditions in Bangladesh act as a powerful 'push' factor and the relative economic prosperity in India that offers ample opportunities for employment act as a powerful 'pull' factor that induce Bangladeshi migration to India

Poverty scenario in Bangladesh

Though the economic condition of Bangladesh has improved over the years, it faced severe economic hardships in the first few decades after its independence in 1971. Bangladesh was characterised as a low-income country by the World Bank and the United Nations Development programme (UNDP) placed it among the countries of the world with low human development (Human Development Report, 1990,p.111) The period from 1971 to the early 2000s, was characterised by low economic indicators in Bangladesh. Bangladesh has been able to reduce the number of people living below the poverty line in the last few years, but it was quite high in the initial period after its independence. The government estimated figures were as high as 82.9 percent during the period after its independence. The number of people living in poverty was 56.70 percent in 1991-1992 and out of which 41.10 percent were in extreme poverty (Government of Bangladesh,2015,p.14). Urban poverty was as high as 63 percent in the 1970s but it is showing a declining trend as it declined to 33 percent in the 1980s. But studies have shown that due to rapid urbanisation and the ever-increasing urban population mainly due to high rural- urban migration, the poverty scenario is getting worse. Household Income and Expenditure Surveys conducted in Bangladesh during the period 2005 to 2010 and 2010 to 2016 shows that there has been a slow down in the rate of poverty reduction and the number of extreme poor is on the rise.

The figures of rural poverty are high too in Bangladesh and that is particularly worrying as the majority of the population live in the rural areas. A world Bank document about the poverty scenario in Bangladesh says that "extreme poverty continues as a significant rural phenomenon" and the poverty rate in rural areas was as high as 35.2 percent in 2010 (The (World Bank, 2013P.xii). During the 1970s the percentage of people residing in rural areas was over 80 percent. The percentage of the rural population is steadily declining but it is still over 60 percent. This shows that a large number of people are poor in Bangladesh and their life chances reduced due to poverty.

The Decline of Agricultural Sector and Unemployment

The major crops of Bangladesh are rice, wheat, jute, and tea, and these account for about 80 percent of the cropped area. Two-thirds of the workers in rural areas and nearly half of Bangladesh's workers are directly employed in the agriculture sector, and about 87 percent of rural households rely on agriculture for at least a part of their income (The World Bank, 2016). Any decline in the agriculture sector is bound to affect the livelihood of millions of people. During the 1970s agriculture showed a declining trend and agriculture growth found it difficult to keep in pace with the population growth in the period 1967-70 to 1979-80(Report to the Like-Minded group, 2003,p.69) The rate of growth of food grain was only 1.24% during this period while the rate of population growth was more than 2.5%. The decline in agriculture output meant widespread unemployment in the countryside, Unemployment in the farming sector ranged between 19 percent to 43 percent in the 1990s. Seasonal unemployment and underemployment are more pronounced in rural areas, where it is a major cause of poverty. The share of agriculture in the GDP of Bangladesh has steadily declined from 55 percent in 1971 to 14.2 percent in 2017.

Small and landless farmers constituted 64 percent of the household but operated on only 23.3 percent of the land in the 1990s (Alam,2003). The fragmented nature of land holdings that exists in Bangladesh meant low

productivity which in turn discourages investment in this sector. The capacity of the farming sector to absorb additional labourers who are pushed out of jobs from other sectors is also low. Adding to the woes of the labourers is the large-scale destruction of the agriculture and allied sectors during the floods, cyclones, riverbank erosion, and other environmental hazards that hit Bangladesh almost annually. A study by Ali (1998) found that prolonged floods and drought have been major causes of agricultural unemployment.

The Decline of Fisheries Sector and Unemployment

A major sector that employs a large number of people in Bangladesh is the fisheries sector. The inland fisheries sector is particularly important due to the wide network of rivers, canals, wetlands, and ponds in Bangladesh. Inland fisheries of Bangladesh are ranked 3rd in the world. In the 1970s inland fisheries sector accounted for about 80 percent of the total fish catch in the country. A study found that about 73 percent of households were involved in fishing in the flood plains in 1987/88 and 8 percent of the population depended on fishing for their livelihood (Toufique, 1997, p.3). About 11 million people are involved in fish marketing and processing. In Bangladesh, there is a strong preference for freshwater fish and 75 percent of the total fish consumed in a year comes from freshwater sources. At present depletion of fish resources, is a major crisis that Bangladesh is facing which threatens the livelihood of a large number of people. Wetlands in Bangladesh are reported to have reduced to half their size and the fisheries catch has dropped on an average of 9 percent every year. The quantity of inland fisheries catch is showing a declining trend over the years—63 percent in 1983, 52 percent in 1993 28.14 percent in 2016-17. This declining trend has seriously affected the employment of people in this sector.

Bangladesh had accused that India's action of diverting the Ganges water had led to a decline in the catch of freshwater fish. Islam, (1992, p.207) has noted that the “entire the entire South-West region and a portion of the north-west region of Bangladesh, that is about 37% of the total area and 30 million people are dependent on the Ganges river as the source of water supply”. The Ganges water diversion by the upper riparian state India at Farakka, 18 kilometres upstream of Bangladesh has resulted in reduced flow of the river into the Bangladeshi rivers especially in the dry months of January to May. This has led to an increase in salinity in freshwater sources and rivers. Inland fisheries in Bangladesh were badly hit as a result of increased salinity in the rivers due to the Ganges water diversion by India (Swain, 1996). The fishing villages that sprang up along the banks of the Ganges in the Khulna District have almost disappeared.

The jute industry, the major industry in Bangladesh, that employed thousands of people faced an acute crisis with the introduction of synthetic fibres in the 1980s, and the majority of them have closed down rendering a large number of people jobless.

Development and displacement

Apart from the decline of agriculture and traditional industries, big infrastructural development projects have also displaced thousands of people in Bangladesh. The development projects like the construction of hydropower dams, flood control mechanisms, the building of roads and highways uproot a large number of people from their homes. In the 1980s and 1990s major infrastructural development projects like Jamuna Bridge Project, Dhaka Water Supply Project, and Road Rehabilitation II Project have displaced thousands of people. But the most destructive project in terms of displacement of people and the harm caused to the environment was the Karnaphuli Multipurpose Project (1957-62) devised to accelerate the economic development of the country. The kaptai hydro-electric dam was built as a part of the project in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) area in the south eastern part of the country which was inhabited by the native tribal population displaced about ninety thousand people. The construction of the dam also led to the inundation of 400 square miles including 54,000 acres of cultivable land, which was about 40% of the total acreage of CHT. Added to this was the state-sponsored repression unleashed on the Chakmas, the dominant tribal group among the CHT tribal population. As a consequence of repression and displacement due to developmental projects, the CHT people migrated en masse to the bordering states of India. What made the matters worse was that the tribals who were displaced from the CHT area were never adequately compensated and most of the CHT people who came to India have not returned to Bangladesh.

The other development projects too have displaced people, for instance, the Jamuna Bridge Projected is estimated to have affected over 80,000 people. Dhaka Urban Development and Dhaka Water Supply Project together led to the displacement of 3,400 households and over 20,000 people.

The misery of the project affected people is made worse by the fact that Bangladesh lacks a clear-cut resettlement policy for the resettlement of people displaced due to major projects. Moreover, whatever the compensation the displaced people manage to receive is often thoroughly inadequate. The compensation is calculated as per the market value of the land acquired, but the official market value is often only half the real value of the land as people devalue the land in the registration records to avoid paying high registration fees. Bangladesh being one of the densely populated countries in the world, the government finds it difficult to procure compensatory land for the displaced. The project affected people become internally displaced in Bangladesh for want of adequate compensation or resettlement policy. A major chunk of these internally displaced migrate to India due to severe economic hardships when they fail to find jobs or alternative means of livelihood in their country.

Rural –Urban migration

The decline of the agricultural sector and allied activities and the resultant unemployment in the rural areas has led to increasing migration of the rural population to the urban areas of Bangladesh. The major cities and towns of Bangladesh receive a constant flow of migrants from the countryside. The urban population grew by 6.5 percent during the period 1970- 1990 in Bangladesh while the corresponding figure for India during the period was 3.4 percent. Urban growth in any country is accelerated by rural-urban migration but in Bangladesh, it contributes between three-fifths to two-thirds of this growth (UN, 1993). Bangladesh's city and its capital -- Dhaka -- is the sixth most populous city in the world with a population of about 8.9 million people as per the 2011 census of Bangladesh. Much of this growth in population is a result of rural-urban migration over the years. It is estimated that by 2025 nearly half of Bangladesh's population will reside in the urban areas.

Migration to India

A major reason for the migration of Bangladeshi nationals to India, especially during the initial decades after its independence, was the economic deprivation of a large section of its citizens. The decline in traditional sectors led to large-scale rural-urban migration to the cities and towns of Bangladesh but its cities failed to absorb the additional manpower as the Bangladeshi cities had already been facing widespread poverty and unemployment. The lack of opportunities in the Bangladeshi cities meant that the internally displaced had to devise some strategy to cope up with the economic distress. Scholars have argued that Bangladeshi migration to India is basically a survival strategy adopted by the people who were faced with imminent economic destitution if they stay in Bangladesh. India, with its huge economy and geography, acted as a powerful 'pull' factor that propelled Bangladeshi migration. The porous nature of the long Indo-Bangladesh border and the cultural and linguistic similarities between Bangladeshi and west Bengalis helped their cause.

Conclusion

Though there is no unanimity among the scholars or government officials regarding the number of Illegal or undocumented Bangladeshi migrants in India, it is assumed that they run into millions. The 2011 census of India puts the figure at 3 million. Bangladeshi migration is a result of powerful 'push' and pull 'factors. In migration studies among the many factors that induce migration, the economic factors are often given primacy over other factors by scholars. In the case of Bangladeshi migration to India too, we see that economic factors play a predominant role. The low economic development that characterised the Bangladeshi economy in the first few decades of its independence pushed large sections of its population into poverty. The lacklustre performance of the agriculture and allied sectors made matters worse since the vast majority of the population were depended on them for their livelihood. Traditional industries like jute too declined due to the introduction of synthetic fibres. Another major sector that saw a declining trend was the inland fisheries. All this led to increased rural- urban migration but the Bangladeshi cities were unable to absorb the additional

labour force. For the people who were rendered jobless and those who could not find alternative means of livelihood, India stood as an option that they could explore. Geographical proximity and the porous nature of the long Indo –Bangladesh border made it easier for the Bangladeshis to cross over to India in large numbers without much difficulty.

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