



Issue of Migration and Refugees between India and Bangladesh: The Problem, its magnitude and Implications

Dr.Piyali Dutta

Former Faculty in the PG department of Political Science, Barnagar College, Sorbhog

ABSTRACT

The problem of migration and refugees is one of the prominent issues of the present states that have often linked with their sovereignty, independence and even existence. According to a UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs report (2009), India was ranked ninth in terms of number of international migrants. India has received refugees and migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan and Srilanka. The influx of such a large number migrants particularly in the Border States has proved to be a huge challenge for India with serious implications for its resources and national security. It has substantially contributed to changing the demographic pattern in the north- eastern states of India, where the locals feel overwhelmed by the outsiders. Under this background the present paper made an attempt to understand the migration and refugee issue between India and Bangladesh and their impact on the north-eastern states of India. The paper will focus into the emergence of the refugee problem, its causes and impact of migration and refugees between these two States.

Key words: Migration, Refugee, Stateless, Inter-State Relation,

Introduction:

The issue of migration and refugee between India and Bangladesh has been a matter of concern since many years. It is one of the bones of the contention between these two nations. The migration from Bangladesh to India takes place in various phases and a number of ethnic groups like Chakmas, Hajongs, Hindu Bengalis, have been migrated from Bangladesh to different parts of India and particularly Northeast India in different periods. The start of the migration can be traced back to the Liaquat –Nehru Pact (1950) which stated that minorities in the both countries should be provided complete equality which also included the freedom of movement. However issue of migration assumes more importance particularly after the India's role in the liberation of East Pakistan. After the creation of Bangladesh an extensive migration was witnessed and has remained a continuous process due to fear and insecurity among the Hindus. In fact, about ten million Hindus took refuge in India during the liberation war of Bangladesh. Similarly Chakmas and Hajongs were displaced from Chittagong Hill Tracts of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in the early 1960s because of

Kaptai Hydroelectric dam on Karnaphuli river, and later due to religious persecution. They had initially crossed over to the lushai hills districts of Assam (now Mizoram). But fearing trouble between the Mizoram and the Chakmas, the Assam Government sent them to Tirap (presently known as Arunachal) division of Northeast. Under this background the present paper proposes to study the influx of migration of refugees from Bangladesh to India. A special focus has been laid on Hindu Bangladeshi refugees. The main objective of this paper is to understand the causes and impact of such migration on North-Eastern states of India.

Conceptual Framework:

The term refugee and migrants are frequently used interchangeably. But there is a difference between these two terms, in their concept and meaning. Refugees are those who migrate across borders leading to the cause of armed conflicts, natural calamities. The United Nations (UN) Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees held on 28th July 1951 defined a refugee as any person who owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself on the protection of that country; or who not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. This Convention was further amended on 10th September 1969 which came into force on 20th June 1974. According to it the term refugee shall apply to every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality (Ghosh, 2016).

On the other hand Migration is generally defined as a permanent change in place of residence by the crossing of specified administrative or political boundaries. Migrants choose to move not because of a direct threat of persecution or death, cause but mainly to improve their lives by finding work, or in some cases for education, family reunion, or other reasons.

According to Myran Wiener migrants are the unwanted people who are not liked by the host community. On the other hand refugees are the people who have been rejected by their own government or the people or who have fled due to oppression by brutal regimes (Ghosh, 2016). However, in the present study the term 'migrant' has been used in a manner as to include both senses.

Historical Background of Migration from Bangladesh to India

The migration from Bangladesh to Northeast India has its own history. Initially, migration had started in the late 19th century British India and subsequently continued upon the partition of India, and even after the creation of East Pakistan in 1947 and Bangladesh in 1971. Though this migration had been taking place historically, these people were not recognised as Bangladeshi migrants until 1971. The Hindu Bangladeshi migrants from Bangladesh mostly settled in three Indian states, namely, West Bengal, Assam and Tripura.

In the beginning most refugees came from the urban areas, but later the pattern changed. In fact, between 1911 and 1931, more than a million Bengalis migrated from Mymensing to the low density districts of the Brahmaputra valley in Assam and by 1951, more than half a million Bengalis had migrated to Assam. After that the introduction of the passport system in October 1952, first by Pakistan and then by India, further fuelled fear among the potential migrants, which led to their movement to India. The torture of Pakistan army over the linguistic and religious minorities also led massive flow of refugees from East Pakistan to India. About 10 million refugees arrived in India, out of which 80% were Hindus. In the following tables' state –wise breakup of these refugee arrival has been shown:

Table 1.1

Percentage distribution of East Pakistani refugees in different Indian states (Until November 1971)

State	Number of Refugees	Percentage
West Bengal	7,500,000	76
Tripura	1,400,000	15
Meghalaya	700,000	6
Assam	300,000	3
Total	9,900,000	100

Source: Partha,S.Ghosh (2016:21)

Table 1.2

Non-Muslim refugees from East Pakistan to India, 1947-August1970

Year	Number of refugees
Partition to 31 st December 1961	4,078,000
1962	13,894
1963	18,243
1964	693,142
1965	107,906
1966	7,565
1967	24,527
1968	11,649
1969	9,768
1970 (Until August 1970)	159,390
Total	5,124,084

From the above table it is clear that migrants or refugees from East Pakistan, consisted mostly Hindus .This influx continued even after the creation of Bangladesh that those who migrated from Bangladesh began to be considered illegal Bangladeshi migrants. Though there is no reliable figure on the exact number of

migration from Bangladesh in India. An analysis of population growth and developing statistics for Bangladesh and India in the last four Census of 2011, 2001, 1991, and 1981, shows reasonable increase. Most of them have settled in states along the border with Bangladesh, and some subsequently moved to other parts of India, including its remote corners.

Causes of Migration between India and Bangladesh

Collective violence is one of the main causes of migration between these two countries. Besides these regional imbalances and other kinds of disparities like Political instability, fear of riots and terrorism in Bangladesh inhuman attitude and activities of the political leaders, domination of religious fundamentalists in Bangladesh worked as push factor for migration from Bangladesh to India. On the other hand Indian political patronage to the migrants for vote bank has worked as pull factor for Bangladeshi migration. Sanjay Bhardwaj in his article *Illegal Bangladeshi Migration: Evaluating India-Bangladesh Approaches* discusses some of the immediate causes of migration into different states of Northeast India.

- **Lack of demarcation of borders:** India and Bangladesh shares longest border connection. It covers a length of 4,096.7 km abutting five Indian states viz. West Bengal (2,216.7 km), Tripura (856 km), Meghalaya (443 km), Mizoram (318 km), and Assam (262 km). Not being fully demarcated on the ground, the boundary, in many places, cuts through rivers, mountains, char lands, agriculture lands, and public institutions, and has resulted in the emergence of many enclaves on the border areas. Effective policy of such long and complex border is difficult. Thus the lack of permanent boundary pillars and fencing on the border creates patrolling problems, and facilitates illegal movement across the border.
- **Identity Crisis:** The emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 as an independent country, with secularism as one of the pillars of the constitution, did not change the fate of the Hindus in that country. The forced imposition of Islamisation has led to identity crisis among the religious minorities. The Bangladeshi identity was forged by taking recourse to Islamic loyalties that were first crystallised during the movement for Pakistan and later by a process of systematic Islamisation by the ruling military and political regimes.
- **Rise of Islamic Fundamentalism:** Various factors were responsible for the resurgence of Islamic intolerance in Bangladesh in the last decade, as manifest in the name of terrorist activities, extremism and communalism. After the 2001 elections, there was a tremendous increase in the attacks on minorities, moderate Muslims and democratic forces. The BNP alliance was notably supported by the Jamaat-i-Islami, and the Islamic OkiyoJote. The Islamist The growth of Islamic fundamentalism and extremism was fuelled by the constant economic underdevelopment, poverty and unemployment in the country. The religious fundamentalist forces were able to use the unemployed and illegal immigrants for small incentives.
- **Socio-Economic Complexities:** Migration is primarily a product of economic and political crises that push people into leaving their homelands, usually involuntarily. Poor governance,

economic disparities and frequent political confrontation and stand-off in the country also caused migration from Bangladesh. The frequent strikes, boycotts and political violence have reduced the scope of employment even for daily wagers. These factors compel the people to move towards an emerging India for better employment opportunities and stability. The Indian economy is growing at a faster rate and the migrant workers get plenty of employment in the construction, agriculture and tertiary sectors.

I

Impact of Migration on North Eastern States:

The huge influxes of Bangladeshi migrants have large socio-political implication impact on North-eastern States. Some of these are discussed below:

- ❖ **Demographic Impact:** Among the different states of Northeast India the impact of illegal migrants has been most marked in Assam. Assam has been traditionally been a migrant receiving region because of its chronic labour shortage and resource affluence, including fertility of the soil. Though there is no documented data on the number of illegal migration, it is assumed that out of 26 million people residing in Assam, around 6 million are Illegal Bangladeshi migrants. In case of Tripura the migration changed the demographic character of the state altogether. The process of non-tribal population however had its origin much earlier. It has started in the beginning of the 20th century when both Muslim and Hindu Bengali migrants had started arriving in princely state of Tripura in large numbers, threatening the numerical dominance of tribal population. Again, thousands of Chakmas and Hajongs fled to Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram Tripura following the construction of the Kaptai hydroelectric dam and the ethnic conflict in Chittagong Hill Tracts during the 1970s and 1980s. At present there is a huge increase in illegal migration in different states Northeast India which is shown in the following table. For example, Arunachal Pradesh had a population of 8, 64, and 558 in 1991 which had gone upto 13, 82,611 by 2011. Manipuri population was 1 million 837 thousand in 1991 and it has gone up to 2 million 721 thousand in 2011. Meghalaya's population has gone up from 17, 74,778 to 29, 64,007 in 2011. Mizoram's population registered an increase of 29.18% during this period. 43. Nagaland's increase is most shocking. From 12, 09,546 it has gone up to 19, 80,602. All these figures clearly show the dominance of Bangladeshi migrants in to different states of Northeast India (Sarma and Bhuyan).
- ❖ **Conflicts:** Migration of Bangladeshis into India, especially into Assam and Tripura, has led to numerous clashes, most of which revolve around the land and language issues. The resentment of the Bengalis in Tripura has led to even greater violence than in Assam, perhaps because of the fact that the original majority communities of Tripura have now been reduced to minorities. In case of Assam the Assam Movement; Bodoland land movement had its roots in influx of migrants from Bangladesh to India.

- ❖ Environmental Degradation: The huge influx of migrants from Bangladesh to India is one of the main cause deforestation in Northeast India Large areas of forest land were encroached upon by the immigrants for settlement and cultivation. A growing population places increasing pressure on the land from which the requirements such as food, fuel wood and timber are met. As requirements of food increase, even marginal lands need to be put under the plough.
- ❖ Terrorism: The border between India and Bangladesh is virtually open at many points which give opportunity to the terrorist organisations Northeast India to have their base in Bangladesh. All major groups of North-East including United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Issac&Muivah) (NSCN) (IM), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF), National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA), Revolutionary Peoples' Front (RPF) of Manipur and Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) etc., have been finding safe havens in Bangladesh. NSCN (IM) had, in the post, received delivery of huge quantities of arms on the beaches of Bandarban district of Bangladesh through international arms suppliers. Leaders of ULFA and NDFB like ArabindaRajkhaba, PareshBarua, RanjanDoimary frequently visit and live in Bangladesh. Arrested ULFA leaders like PradipGogoi have confirmed how ISI operatives used to arrange air travel of ULFA cadres from Dhaka to Karachi for purposes of indoctrination and training. AnupChetia of ULFA, who had been arrested in Dhaka in 1997 during Sheikh Hasina's regime had later applied for political asylum in view of favourable political climate following installation of Khaleda Zia led BNP government in 2001

Role played by the states in resolving the migration Issue:

Although India has traditionally been providing shelter to refugees from other countries in the region, it has yet to develop any national refugee laws. Both India and Bangladesh has not signed the UN Refugee Convention of 1951. However several agreements have been signed between these two nations regarding issue of migration like Immigration Act 1950, 1974, 1983. In case of India the issue makes seasonal appearance during the election time which otherwise remains business of the Border Security Force and Foreign Tribunal who are authorised to deal with this issue as mandated by the state. Whoever party come in to power have also always used this issue as a way to come into power. +In 2014 Loksabha election BJP vowed to resolve the issue if they come into power. In one of the election rally NarendraModi said ‘ As soon as we come to power at the centre , the detention camps housing Hindu migrants from Bangladesh will be done away with’’. In 2017 the Central Government submitted a bill regarding amendment of the citizenship Act 1955 in Loksabha. The bill saysHindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians not to be treated as illegal immigrants. Never the less this will definitely raise many problems and many ethnic conflicts. Therefore state must consider this issue in an integrated manner in order to understand the implications of human flows, to maximise their benefits, as well as to respond to their challenges.

Besides, the following recommendation can be helpful in strengthening the issue between these two nations:

- ❖ Border fencing must be completed forthwith on a war footing. The Annual Report 2012-13 indicates that the entire 2,762.11 km India-Bangladesh border has been fenced³⁷. In reality, the fencing and Border Security Force (BSF), with limited resources, cannot stop the infiltration. The existing Border Security Force posts and the BSF water wing should be strengthened (Bhardwaj,2014).
- ❖ The Central Government should appoint a National Immigration Commission to frame a National Migration Policy and a National Refugee Policy. The Commission should examine ways of strengthening the Foreigners Act 1946, as well as feasibility of Identity Cards for both citizens and non-citizens and Work Permits for migrants.
- ❖ The whole migration issue must be seen from humanitarian aspect. An effective development strategy, good governance and institutionalisation of liberal democratic values in Bangladesh can address the problem of migration to a large extent.
- ❖ The Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunal (IMDT) Act of 1983 should be repealed.
- ❖ The issue of illegal Bangladeshi migrants is often looked through the political prism in India and used for vote-bank politics, especially at the state level. Govt. must evolve a comprehensive policy to deal with the problem of illegal migration. This policy should be hammered out after nationwide consultations and consensus building involving all political parties, state governments, communities and NGOs.
- ❖ The member countries of SAARC can adopt convention or declaration on refugees in which member states would agree to ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention.

Conclusion:

The issue of migration between India and Bangladesh has been a burning issue for Northeast India. To deal with the problem India will have to take the initiative to enter into a bilateral agreement with Bangladesh under which the two countries would agree to take back their nationals staying illegally in the other country after due verification process. However Considering Prime Minister Narendra Modi's interest in developing the eastern part of India, we can hope that present NDA government will take proper initiative to solve the problem immediately.

References:

1. Ghosh, S. P. (2016). Migrants, Refugees and the Stateless in South Asia. India: Sage Publication.
2. Pattanaik, S. S. (ed) (2012). Four Decades of India Bangladesh Relations: Historical Imperatives and future direction. New Delhi: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.
3. Bhardwaj, S. (2014). Illegal Bangladeshi Migration: Evaluating India-Bangladesh Approaches. Retrieved on 3rd February, 2018 from https://www.claws.in/images/journals_doc/2042080227_SanjayBhardwaj.pdf
4. Sarma, R and Bhuyan A. Illegal Immigration of Bangladeshis into India :(National Security Challenges). Retrieved on 3rd February, 2018 from https://paperroom.ipsa.org/papers/paper_42931.
5. Pattanaik. S. (2014). Politics of Illegal Immigration and India Bangladesh Relations. Retrieved on 3rd February, 2018 from https://idsa.in/issuebrief/PoliticsofIllegalImmigration_sspattanaik.

