

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS AFFECTING INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION: A CASE OF BANGLADESHI MIGRATION TO INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Among the many factors that propel international migration, environmental factors play a prominent role in causing the movement of people across international borders. In the case of migration of Bangladeshi nationals to India, among others, environmental factors like floods, cyclones, riverbank erosion, desertification, and salinity play a significant role. This paper examines the major environmental factors that cause the migration of Bangladeshi nationals to India.

Key Words

International Migration, Bangladesh, India, Environment.

INTRODUCTION

The migration of Bangladeshi nationals to India is not a new phenomenon as it dates back to the time of the birth of that nation in 1971. There was a mass exodus of Bangladeshis to India numbering over 10 million during the liberation war it fought against Pakistan in 1971. The majority of the Bangladeshi nationals who came to India went back after the war. Though there has not been any sudden mass influx of Bangladeshis to India after 1971, yet migration of Bangladeshis to India has continued due to multiple reasons. Of all the major causes of international migration, it has been observed that environmental factors do play a prominent role in pushing people out of a country. In the case of Bangladeshi migration to India, a range of environmental factors are at play that compels people to leave their country and cross over to the neighbouring country, India.

In the case of Bangladeshi migration to India, the terms migrants and refugees are often used interchangeably even when the meaning of these terms differ significantly. The 1951 United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees and the 1967 UN Protocol on Refugees consider Refugees as people who are forced to move out of their country to another for the fear of political persecution and conflicts in their place of residence (UNHCR, 1999). Migrants, on the other hand, are people who move out of their place of residence to another country for seeking better economic opportunities. The nature of movement differs with regard to migrants and refugees as in the case of the former it is voluntary and in the latter it is involuntary. There is another term used in migrant literature—environmental refugees—to categorise people who move out of a country due to adverse environmental events that force them to leave their place of residence like floods, famines, cyclones, desertification, and the like. Here the movement of the people is involuntary but they are not considered as ‘Refugees’ in the proper sense of the term. They also fail to get the protection and entitlements given to refugees as they

are not treated as refugees as per International Law (Panda,2010). Hence the Bangladeshis who cross over to India without valid documents are treated as illegal migrants and are dealt with as such by the Government of India.

There is no official estimate regarding the number of Bangladeshi migrants in India and so, unofficial figures quoted by scholars vary widely from 3 million to 30 million. The porous nature of the 4096 -kilometer long Indo-Bangladesh border, the presence of strong migrant networks and linkages have made the migration of Bangladeshis to India easier. Bangladesh is one country where environmental factors play a significant role in causing international migration. Environmental destruction or degradation in Bangladesh is a major cause of the migration of Bangladeshi nationals to India . A range of environmental factors—floods, cyclones , riverbank erosion, desertification, and salinity – displaces millions of people annually in Bangladesh. This results in a large number of internally displaced people in Bangladesh. These internally displaced people for want of alternative means of livelihood and also for the lack of adequate governmental support find it increasingly difficult to stay in that country. Naturally, India with its vast territory and the perception among migrants that it is easier to find employment in India has made India the favourite destination of Bangladeshi migrants.

Floods

Bangladesh—often referred to as a land of rivers—has over 250 rivers of varying sizes form a network along the three mighty rivers of Bangladesh viz, Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna, which forms a delta that is one of the largest in the world. This delta drains a catchment of some 1.55 million square Kilometres, 11 times greater than Bangladesh. Flooding in Bangladesh is almost a yearly occurrence where 26,000 square kilometres or about 18 percent of the country is flooded by monsoon rains (Jamal, 1993, p.6) . Monsoon rains between the months of June to October that pour into the entire Ganges- Brahmaputra, and Meghna catchment area account for the inundation of large areas in Bangladesh. The unique geographical location of the country bordering the Bay of Bengal to the South , the Great Himalayas, and the Khasi-Garo Hills to the North along with the prevailing monsoons has shaped Bangladesh into one of the most watery regions of the world. Floods in Bangladesh are a result of natural and man-made factors. Topographical aspects, excessive rainfall, climatic conditions, and geographical location are factors that cause floods in Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, close to one- fifth of the country is inundated almost every year causing severe damages to the life and livelihood of the people. In the event of severe floods, 60% of the cultivable land area is affected. The major flood of 1998 left 66% of the land inundated, one million hectares of cropland damaged and 3000 people dead. The damage to rice crops in the 1998 flood was about 2.1 million metric tons(Paul & Rasid, 1993) It is estimated that 4% of the rice crops are lost annually to the floods in addition to causing huge losses to sugar and jute plantations where a large number of people are employed. Added to this the unstable nature of rivers, its frequent change of course, and the inefficient drainage system that increases the damages caused by floods. Among the different types of floods, flash floods are the most destructive, and that causes extensive damages to crop, property, and fish stock due to their critical velocity(Brammer, 1990). Flash floods are more prone in the north, the north-east, and the eastern parts of the country. People are left with no choice other than leave their place of residence in the event of flash floods

Floods create immense miseries to the life of the people especially the poor who have fewer resources upon their disposal to fall back upon in the event of a disaster. Floods greatly affect the marginal population who lose whatever meagre resources they have. Compounding their misery is that during the times of flood and its aftermath they find it difficult to find work and consequently they are left without any wages. People residing in flood-prone areas have low indicators in crucial sectors like health nutrition and education.

Cyclones

Bangladesh is most vulnerable to tropical cyclones that originate from the Bay of Bengal which is a breeding ground of tropical cyclones. The most damaging cyclones in the recent past occurred in the years 1970, 1985, 1991, 1997, 1998, 2007 and 2009. Casualty figures from these cyclones were quite high. For instance, the super cyclone that hit the Barisal coast in 1970 left 30,000 dead and millions homeless. In Chittagong, 1,38,866 people died when a super cyclone struck the port city in 1991 (Islam and Peterson, 2009, p.132). There are no accurate or reliable figures available regarding the number of people displaced due to these cyclones. But it is believed that millions are displaced due to cyclones in Bangladesh. Apart from causing huge loss of human life, cyclones inflict huge destruction on the property and other economic assets of the people. The entire rural economy is severely affected as thousands of livestock perish during a severe cyclone. It was estimated that about 75,000 cattle perished in a cyclone that hit Bangladesh. Cyclone causes heavy destruction of crops both standing as well as harvested, uproot trees and vegetation, affect fisheries, and destruct infrastructure. Cyclones badly affect all sectors of the rural economy- agriculture, fisheries, traditional industries like jute making, etc., where a large number of people are employed. Naturally, the displacement of people is quite high in the event of a severe cyclone. What makes the distress of people acute is that the cyclone relief work has often been found to be tardy in Bangladesh in the past.

Apart from the high velocity of the cyclonic wind that causes widespread destruction it also leads to the formation of storm surges which has had a devastating impact on the country in the past (Ali, 1996). Storm surges are formed due to the high velocity of the cyclone and when accompanied by heavy rain it leads to large scale coastal flooding. Scholars have noted that “storm surges associated with cyclones attain a height of 13 metres higher than normal in extreme cases and travel as far as 200 kilometres inland” (Quencez, 2012, p.59). Standing crops perish and harvested crops are washed away by sea surges.

Desertification

A big Irony in the case of Bangladesh is that even when the country is ravaged by floods and tidal surges almost annually it also faces acute water shortages in Barisal, Khulna, Jessore, and Rajshahi districts. Experts have pointed out that more than 1.20 crore acres of cultivable land in about 21 districts may turn into arid land (Gaan, 1998, p.31). Desertification is reducing the area of farmland under cultivation in these districts and the volume of Rabi crop production has reduced drastically. These areas face acute water shortages after the cessation of the monsoon and are largely dependent on the surface flow of water. But, due to the water diversion in the upstream areas the low-lying areas do not receive enough water for cultivation which has resulted in the destruction of a large quantity of crops in the Khulna and Rajshahi region.

River Bank Erosion

Bangladesh faces severe riverbank erosion that leads to the loss of lands that are cultivable or suited for habitation. Bangladesh receives 80% of its total rainfall in the 4 months period from June to September which creates the ideal situation for devastating floods that leads to riverbank erosion. Riverbank erosion is aided by human activities like deforestation and irrational use of natural resources both in the up and downstream of the rivers. Many towns and villages are threatened by riverbank erosion. A study done in 1985 revealed that 85 towns and villages are subjected to severe erosion. About 1200 kilometres of river banks are under active erosion of which about 500- kilometers face severe erosion problems. A study done using satellite images of the areas affected by erosion showed that the Ganges-Brahmaputra- Meghna basin lost 10,6300 hectares of land due to erosion during the 1982-92 period. Most of these lands were used for agriculture thus aggravating the misery of the people. Riverbank erosion takes place gradually over a

while and so it receives much less public attention though it affects a large number of people. Riverbank erosion displaces a large number of people from the countryside who are then forced to move to cities of Bangladesh and from there to states of India. Added to the problem of riverbank erosion is the issue of changing river courses in Bangladesh. The mighty rivers of Bangladesh—Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna—regularly shift courses during the time of monsoons inundating large tracts of land inhabited by the people leading to a huge displacement of people.

Decreasing groundwater level and salinity

Another environmental hazard Bangladesh faces is the rapid decrease of groundwater levels and salinity that is acute especially in the north and north-western areas of the country. Salinity in this region is attributed to the diversion of water by the upper riparian state, India, and the consequently reduced flow of Ganges to Bangladesh (Islam & Islam, 2011). Reduced flow of Ganges to Bangladesh especially in the dry season from January to May has led to intrusion of saline water that has had disastrous consequences for the agriculture and riverine fisheries sector on which millions of Bangladeshis depend for their livelihood.

Internal Displacement in Bangladesh and Migration

As Swain argues the decision to leave one's homeland is not a simple one and people generally chose to remain in their own country, struggling until the hopes of survival peters out (Swain, 1996). This is very much true in the case of Bangladeshi migration to India. One of the direct consequences of environmental destruction and degradation in Bangladesh is the migration of Bangladeshis to India from the affected areas. Studies done by scholars have proved this aspect. Scholars have pointed out that that millions of migrants displaced due to environmental and economic reasons have moved to the Indian states of Assam and West Bengal. This has been confirmed in academic researches done by Hazarika and Swain (Hazarika, 2000; Swain, 1996). A high percentage of people leaving Bangladesh has been attributed to environmental insecurity, which includes among others direct ecological factors, poverty, and lack of decent livelihood.

Migration trends are very visible in the Khulna and Rajshahi divisions of Bangladesh. Scholars have noted that water insecurity is mainly responsible for the movement of Bangladeshis from this region (Ahmed, 2009). It is estimated that a least two million Bangladeshis have disappeared from the Khulna division during the period 1981-1991. The same trend is visible from the Rajshahi division too. The southern part of the Rajshahi division—the Pabna region—showed a low population growth rate compared to the whole of the Rajshahi division which the scholars have attributed to the outmigration of Bangladeshis. The high flow of environmental refugees to India from the Rajshahi and Khulna divisions is blamed on India for its construction of a Barrage at Farakka, 18 kilometres upstream of Bangladesh that led to a reduced flow of Ganges to Bangladesh. Internal displacement of people is very high in Bangladesh. Environmental factors like floods, cyclones, riverbank erosion, changing of river courses, desertification, decreasing groundwater level and salinity, etc. displace millions of people from the countryside on a regular basis.

The countryside is the most affected by natural disasters. This is significant because close to 70% of the population lives in the countryside as per the 2010 data. The rural economy is badly hit as disasters like floods and cyclones damage large quantity of crops, standing as well as harvested. Other sectors where a large number of people are employed like fishing, jute making, and cattle rearing are badly affected during the occurrence of natural disasters. In Bangladesh people dependent on rural-based employment is high and any disruption here is bound to have disastrous consequences for a

large section of the population. A considerable section of the population affected by natural disasters employed in the countryside migrate to the cities of Bangladesh. Bangladeshi economy was characterised by low economic development from the period 1971 to the early 2000s. The urban economy of Bangladesh found it increasingly difficult to absorb the huge migration of Bangladeshis from rural areas. Traditional industries like Jute making declined due to the introduction of synthetic fibres and this led to the loss of jobs in an industry where a large number of people were employed. Industry's share in the DGP was hardly 15% in the 1980s and the average wage was only Taka 50-60 a day for skilled workers in the early 1990s. Again, the people who migrated to Bangladeshi cities found it difficult to find jobs because of the labour surplus situation prevailing there. For the unemployed and internally displaced Bangladeshis, the neighbouring states of India like Assam, West Bengal, and Tripura presented opportunities to find jobs even if it was a low-paid one.

Bangladeshi migrants have moved to all parts of India especially to the states of Assam, West Bengal, Tripura, and to the metro cities of India like Delhi, Bangalore, and Mumbai. Here they have found jobs in the unorganised sectors and are employed as construction workers, porters, domestic helps, rickshaw pullers, and wage labourers.

Conclusion

The role environmental factors play in causing international migration has been well established. The migration of Bangladeshi nationals to India is due to a variety of reasons and environmental factors are foremost among them. In Bangladesh a range of environmental factors--floods, cyclones, riverbank erosion, decreasing groundwater levels, and salinity—cause huge internal displacement of people. Internally displaced people in Bangladesh who are under severe economic distress and also due to lack of alternative means of livelihood look up to India as a place where they could make a living. Consequently, India with its huge territory and ample opportunities for economic advancement has become a favourite destination for Bangladeshi migrants.

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