

ILLEGAL BANGLADESHI MIGRATION AND ITS IMPACT ON INDIA

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Abstract

The migration of illegal Bangladeshi nationals to India is a major issue that India has been facing for a long time. There is no accurate figure available regarding the number of Bangladeshis settled in India mainly because of the lack of reliable data. Officially, Bangladesh has always denied that there exists illegal migration of its nationals to India. This paper examines the issue of Illegal Bangladeshi migration to India and its consequence. The paper attempt to analyses the impact migration has had on the socio-political, economic, and the security climate of India. An attempt has been made to suggest policy options open to India to tackle this vexing issue facing the nation.

Introduction

Illegal migration of Bangladeshi nationals to India is a serious issue that India has been facing for a long time. It has also been a major irritant in Indo-Bangladesh relations. Bangladeshi migration to India is not a recent phenomenon as there were two instances of huge cross-border movement of people in the past from the region that presently constitute Bangladesh to India. One, at the time of partition of India in 1947 and two, during the aftermath of the liberation war of East Pakistan/ Bangladesh in 1971. As a consequence of the war, Bangladesh became an independent country when it got separated from Pakistan. In both these instances, the cross-border movement of people numbered over millions. And in both these instances, the primary reason for the movement of people was political. India accorded citizenship to Bangladeshis who came to India and chose to stay back in this country in 1947 and also in 1971. But after 1971 the primary reason for the migration of Bangladeshis to India has not been political (a notable exception to this is in the case of Bangladeshi minorities, especially the Hindus) but economic. There are no effective mechanisms put in place in India to keep a track of all the migrants who have come to India and hence we do not have a definite figure about the people who have crossed over to India since 1971. This undocumented/illegal migration of Bangladeshis to India is not without serious consequences for the host nation. It has had severe adverse social, political, economic, and security consequences for India.

Bangladeshi migration: A profile

Though migration from Bangladesh to India is a proven fact there exists wide disagreement among officials and scholars regarding the actual magnitude of migration, mainly because of the lack of reliable statistics. Scholars writing on Bangladeshi migration have thus given varying estimates ranging from 3million to 40 million Bangladeshis in India. The 2001 Census of India, puts the total number of Bangladeshis residing in India at 3 million. (Census of India, 2001) Media and some political parties have quoted figures as high as 40 million.

Indian states of Assam, West Bengal, Tripura, Nagaland, and Meghalaya have become the favourite destinations of Bangladeshi immigrants. Assam is the most obvious case wherein in 1951 there were about 16.2% migrants in Assam which included East Pakistanis (later Bangladesh), Nepalese, and Sri Lankans (Gupta & Gupta, 1990, P.80). In the period 1971-81 migration from East-Pakistan and later Bangladesh accounted for more than a third of the Bengali population of Assam. The tea gardens of Assam employ over six Lakh 'foreign' nationals and Bangladeshi immigrants form a sizeable part of these 'foreigners'. West Bengal is another state traditionally preferred by Bangladeshi immigrants mainly due to the linguistic and cultural similarity between Bangladeshis and West Bengalis. The number of Bangladeshis who have moved to West Bengal is not exactly known but it is assumed that it is no less compared to the figures of Assam. In Nagaland, migrants have moved in large numbers and the state recorded the highest rate of population growth in the country – 56.08 percent during 1981-91 and 64.41 percent during 1991-2001. The population of Muslims more than trebled from 20,642 to over 75,000 in 2001 in which illegal migrants are believed to constitute an overwhelming proportion of it. (Singh, 2006). As per the Language Census of 2011, Bengali speakers in the state of Tripura were 24.14 lakh thrice the 8.87 lakh who speak Kokborok, the language of the largest tribal group in the state. Among the Bengalis in Tripura, Bangladeshi migrants constitute a considerable sum. In Nagaland, even a new community has come up called 'Sumias' as a result of the marriage between Bangladeshi migrants and ethnic Naga tribes in the state.

For categorising a Bangladeshi migrant to India as legal or illegal, there exist two cut-off dates that are creating some confusion. As per the Foreigners Act, any Bangladeshi who had migrated to India after July 8, 1948, can be termed a migrant. But for the state of Assam, the cut-off date is March 25, 1971—the date arrived upon as per the Assam Accord¹. This has paved the way for foreigners who had come to Assam before this date to become Indian citizens. Bangladeshi immigrants have moved to almost all parts of India, especially to the metro cities of India like Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Bengaluru, and Hyderabad where they find employment without much difficulty. Of late, the state of Kerala is also witnessing the migration of illegal Bangladeshis (masquerading as West Bengalis) mainly because of the high wage rate existing in the state. Illegal Bangladeshi nationals have been arrested by the Kerala Police from the state and many of them carried forged documents identifying themselves as Indians. The willingness of Bangladeshi immigrants to work for lower wages than the prevailing wage rate has helped them find employment in places where they have moved in the country.

Bangladesh has always taken the stand there is no illegal migration of Bangladeshis to India. The refusal of Bangladesh to officially accept illegal migration has been a major hindrance in India's efforts to check illegal migration.

Causes of Bangladeshi Migration

Bangladeshi migration to India is a result of a combination of many factors-- environmental, economic, social, and political. Scholars writing on Bangladeshi migration use 'Push' and 'pull' factors as important variables in analyzing migration. 'Push' factors are factors like economic, social, environmental, or political that more or less force people to leave their original place of residence. Historically, poor economic conditions in Bangladesh and the resultant economic distress have led to Bangladeshis crossing over to India. Added to this, Bangladesh which is greatly prone to natural disasters like floods and cyclones witness huge internal displacement of people, almost annually. Internally displaced people for lack of other alternatives means for livelihood move to India as a last resort. Social and Political factors too play a role in Bangladeshi migration as was witnessed in 1947 and 1971. Migration of minorities, especially the Hindus from Bangladesh is primarily attributed to the insecurity being felt by them due to the increasing

Islamisation of Bangladeshi society and politics after the assassination of Sheikh Mujib Ur Rehman, the first president of Bangladesh (Chakravarty, 1995,p.130).

‘Pull’ factors on the other hand are factors that attract migrants to a place of destination. High wages and better employment opportunities existing in India compared to Bangladesh coupled with social networks and linkages act as powerful ‘Pull’ factors. The porous nature of the long Indo- Bangladesh border which is over 4096 kilometers long also helps Bangladeshis to illegally cross over to India without much difficulty.

Consequences of Bangladeshi Migration

Large-scale migration of illegal Bangladeshis to India especially to the northeastern states has led to a variety of adverse consequences for India. In the northeastern states of India, especially in Assam, it has significantly altered the demography of the districts bordering Bangladesh where the migrant population is threatening to make the local population a minority. The then Governor of Assam, S K Sinha in a report in 1989 clearly spells out the grave danger that India and particularly Assam faces as a consequence of unchecked migration from Bangladesh. (Sinha,1998)The case of Tripura is even starker as its tribal population which was 93 percent in 1947 was reduced to about 53 percent in the 2011 census of India due to the influx of migrants, where illegal Bangladeshis are believed to form a significant part. In West Bengal, though anti-Bangladeshi sentiment is not as severe as in other parts of the state, but it has definitely led to protests against it, especially in the capital city of Kolkata. In the late 1990s capital city of India, New Delhi saw a series of drives initiated by the Delhi police to flush out illegal Bangladeshis, though with limited success.

Social and Political Consequence

The Assam Agitation (1979-1985) was a direct consequence of Bangladeshi migration where the agitators led by the All Assam Students Union(AASU) demanded immediate detection and deportation of Bangladeshi immigrants from Assam. The fear of the Assamese language and culture being undermined in the face of migrant Bengali culture and language propelled the agitation. The agitation often led to violence and communal tensions which paralysed the entire state and affected the whole northeastern region of India. A grievous incident happened in 1983 in Nelle, a village inhabited by Bangladeshi migrants that shook the consciousness of the entire nation. In retaliation for ignoring a call for poll boycott given by the agitators, villagers of Nelle were brutally attacked on the night of February 18, 1983, by a mob of rioters which resulted in the death of over 2000 people. Among the dead were a large number of women and children. Society of Assam was communally polarised to alarming proportions and that tore apart the social fabric of the state. The migrants from Bangladesh consisted of predominantly Muslims and the indigenous tribal and Hindu population viewed them as a part of a conscious ploy by Bangladesh to ‘invade’ India.

Migrants have managed to procure voting cards and have got into the electoral rolls in West Bengal, Assam, Tripura, and some other states of India. Political parties view Bangladeshi migrants as ‘vote banks’ that can be taped and turned to their advantage at the time of elections. This trend is very evident in West Bengal and some of the states of the northeast, most notably in Tripura. Migrants allegedly determine the outcome of the polls in many Assembly constituencies in West Bengal and Tripura. In West Bengal, all the major political parties of the state – Indian National Congress, Communist Party of India(Marxist)(CPM), and All India Trinamool Congress(AITC) have all courted the vote of the migrants for electoral advantage.

Political parties in Assam especially the BJP have been raising the issue of Bangladeshi migration and Islamic fundamentalism on a regular basis. The demand for identifying the illegal immigrants and deporting them became

stronger with migrants increasingly acquiring Indian citizenship using forged documents often with the connivance of corrupt officials. In this context, the demand for updating the (NRC) became more fervent. The NRC contains the list of Indian citizens of Assam which was specifically prepared for the state based on the Census of 1951. Updating of NRC was taken up in Assam by an Order given by the Supreme Court in 2013 and the Court has been monitoring its progress since then.

Economic Consequences

The huge influx of migrant Bangladeshis into Indian states has led to some negative consequences. One, it has led to a lowering of the wage rate in areas where Bangladeshi migrants are settled as they are willing to take up jobs for extremely low wages. This has led to conflicts between the local labourers and Bangladeshis. Two, the environmental damages that are associated with migration are serious issues for the states that witnessed it. The cutting down of forests for making way for new settlements, overuse of natural resources, and pollution of rivers and other water bodies by the migrants damage the natural ecosystem of the land (Nath & Nath, 2011). The migrants purchasing land in the tribal areas have occasionally led to conflicts. Another concern is the economic burden the migrants impose on host societies. The host country has to provide basic services to the migrants especially in areas of health care and education. It has been reported that Bangladeshi migrants avail themselves the services and benefits provided by India meant for its citizens like the subsidized food grains and health services by fraudulently acquiring documents that give them access to these. This has led to widespread resentment among the poor Indian citizens who view migrants as people who take away the resources rightfully meant for them.

Security Aspect

Illegal Bangladeshi migration to India is a threat to national security. Pieces of evidence of migrants' direct involvement in terrorist activities in India have not been found yet. But their involvement in gun running, fake currency rackets, smuggling has all been widely reported. Migrants have been active in illegal trade in drugs, cattle, trafficking in women and adolescent girls. Islamic radicalism has been on the rise in the northeastern region of India, especially in Assam. This is a direct consequence of religion-based demographic changes witnessed in this region as a result of Bangladeshi migration. This region has also seen a sharp increase in the number of madrasas, and most of them constructed illegally and working without governmental approval (Subhakanta,2011). A worrying factor is that migrants are generally poor and illiterate and are hence more susceptible to Islamic fundamentalism propagated by some of these madrasas. Spurt in Islamic fundamentalist organisations in Assam like Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, Muslim United Liberation Front of Assam (MULFA), and Islamic Liberation Army of Assam points to the threat faced by radical Islam. This growth in fundamentalist outfits has been made possible due to the support they receive from the growing number of Bangladeshi immigrants. Separatist movements raging in the northeastern states of India also receive considerable support from Islamist groups in Bangladesh. United Liberation Front of Assam(ULFA), the separatist group active in Assam, once had its leaders based in Bangladesh and operating from there.

Policy Options Open to India

India has adopted various measures to check cross-border migration from Bangladesh. Physically fencing the Indo-Bangladesh border was given top priority and it is nearing completion. Border security Force which mans the borders have been provided with modern gadgets like thermal sensing devices, night vision goggles, speed boats, etc., to detect illegal migration. Floodlighting and installing CCTV cameras at sensitive migration-prone areas have been taken up. An integrated Border Management System (IBMS) has been put in place that integrates manpower, sensors, networks,

intelligence, and command and control solutions to take prompt and informed decisions at the ground level. India's efforts to check migration have been mainly focused on strengthening the borders. But this one-dimensional approach alone may not be sufficient to check migration as long as the conditions that push people to India remain strong in Bangladesh. A lasting solution to this problem lies in Bangladesh becoming economically stronger and be able to absorb the people who are displaced due to natural disasters or economic distress. India on its part must do all that it can to help Bangladesh become stronger including giving preferential access to Bangladeshi goods, transfer of technology, and expertise. Scholars like Hazarika (Hazarika,2000,p.261) have suggested issuing work-cum-residence permits to Bangladeshi migrants as that would help India to monitor the migrants entering India and also uses their services efficiently. Work permits would also encourage Bangladeshi migrants already stationed in India to come forward and avail this service as that would make them legal.

Conclusion

Illegal Bangladeshi migration to India is a proven fact but there exists some vagueness regarding the exact magnitude of migration mainly because of the lack of reliable statistics. Even on this, the most conservative estimates peg the migration at no less than three million. Bangladeshi migration has led to a variety of consequences for India. Not only it has significantly altered the demography of the states like Tripura and Assam but it has also been a major source of discontentment among the people of India. Intense anti-migration agitation was witnessed in Assam and other northeastern states of India which posed serious consequences for India's security. Politics and society were deeply impacted in the states where the migrants form a significant percentage and where they could decisively influence the outcome of elections. Added to this are the environmental destruction and the economic cost imposed by the migrants on the host societies. India has devised various measures to tackle this menace and strengthening the Indo-Bangladesh border is primary among them. In addition to this, it is also time to think of innovative measures like issuing work permits or job cards to migrants which will help the authorities to keep a track of the migrants entering India.

Notes

1. Assam Accord was concluded between the Government of India and the representatives of Assam agitators in 1985, which ended the Assam agitation.

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