

Borders, Migration and Sub-Regional Cooperation in Indo Bangladesh Relations

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Abstract

This paper questions the rhetoric of a "borderless world" and whether trans-border economic cooperation could overcome tensions arising out of the existing borders. Conflicts over borders and migration have characterised the relationships among the countries of South Asia. The problems mainly stem from the introduction of the concept of a border by the British under the process of colonisation. The construction of borders was important not only in visualising an exclusive control of the ruler over particular geographical regions, but also in dividing people into "locals" and "migrants". Gradually, there were two discernible changes in the political and economic environment of south Asia: India's policy shift to improve relationship with smaller neighbours, and the promotion of sub-regional cooperation. Nevertheless, migration and border disputes remain as thorny as before because sub-regional cooperation in south Asia is characterised not by deconstruction of borders as political discourses, but by the absence of serious thinking about borders and borderlands.

Migration has always been a major problem not only between India and Bangladesh or in South Asia, it's a problem of the whole world. After the partition of India during the time of Independence 1947, South Asia emerged as a clear zone of loggerheads on the issue of citizens who were not given full safeguard within which they lived. The domination of the state was prevalent in South Asia and the question of minority became a political agenda. Therefore minority did not have the power to overrule the authority. Where minorities became revolutionary to get their rights established, a series of draconian executive action clamped down upon them. As a result, a complex situation arose where interaction between government and a range of non-state actor came, who by hook or by crook, forced their own ideas of nationality, justice and entitlement on the statue books. Hence, citizenship in South Asia proved to have a complex phenomenon with civil and political class continued. Under this perspective, India and Pakistan continued to be bound together by migrants and crossed migrations affected both the countries and this trend continued to dominate the scenario of migration in South Asia. After independence, a major question arose regarding the citizenship of both the countries-India and Pakistan. Between 1947 and 1949 millions of people had crossed and re-crossed the frontier that separate Pakistan from India in order to make final choice of their nationality. On the other hand, Hindus and Sikh who were born and domiciled in that part of India which became Pakistan and who migrated to India, had to

be given the citizenship of new India. On the other hand, Muslims who left India to become citizen of Pakistan had to be excluded. There was also the case of persons of Indian origin living abroad in many countries and for many years, and who might now prefer to reside in India permanently as she had become a free nation. Considering all these issues, the Indian Parliament passed a Citizenship Act-1955 and incorporated in the constitution, Article No 5-11, embodied in Part-II of the Constitution. In this article 5-11, the constitution makers tried to solve the citizenship issues of both the countries, but after independence, major problem arose regarding citizenship right in Indian state particularly in the states like Assam, West Bengal and Punjab where the local citizens demanded deportation of illegal migrants from the state in order to save their own identity. In the present study an attempt has been made to identify the issue pertaining to migration particularly migrations from Bangladesh to Indian states-Assam, Mizoram, Nagaland, West Bengal and Tripura and the reason there of. How to overcome these migration problems in South Asia has also been highlighted. Assam faced separatists' movement organized by United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). All these organizations demanded separate land for them on the ground of ethnicity and regionalism.

I would like to confine my discussion on migration problem which came up after 1971, 25th March when East Pakistan got freedom and Bangladesh was created. This creation of new nation state Bangladesh in South Asiamade a major impact on the minority community who were living in the territory of East Pakistan for long. But, at the onset of Bangladesh and the initial stage of the administration of Bangladesh run by founding father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, made a tremendous impact on the society. In Bangladesh 80% of the people are Muslims and remaining 20% are Hindus, Christian, Buddhists and Tribals. When India got freedom, Indian Union and Pakistan was set up on the basis of an agreement that Hindus in Pakistan would live as minority and the government would protect their right. Similarly in Punjab the Hindu majority Punjabi areas would be included in India having the minorities Punjabis who remained in Pakistan would be protected by the Pakistan government and their right would be safeguarded. But the irony of the fact is that at the creation of Pakistan on 14th August, 1947, the Pakistan government did not protect the right of minorities Hindus and Sikhs. The liberty of minority people was encroached and accordingly they were tortured, their property made enemy property. As a result, Hindu began to migrate in the neighbouring district of Khulna, Jessore and the neighbouring districts of Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya etc. and even the tribes of Chakma who lived in Chittagong hill areas of Bangladesh, were subjected to torture and they were compelled to leave East Pakistan (Bangladesh).

In 1971 Bangladesh witnessed a worse situation officially, all migrants to India from 1951 onwards are illegal but the flow of migration has continued during the period 1951to1971.Besides, a large number of Muslim who had fled Assam in the wake of

communal riots in February-march 1950 came back to Assam, but among them very few Hindus went back to East Pakistan. The genocide in Bangladesh and ruthless and rampant killings of Hindu particularly at the heart of Dhaka city which made a horror to international media giving coverage that Hindus were brutally and mercilessly killed in the street of Dhaka as well as the many rural areas of Bangladesh districts. Following this genocide by Pakistan army in East Pakistan in 1971, hordes of refugees (10 millions) came to India particularly in Assam, West Bengal and Tripura. It was expected that these refugees would go back to Bangladesh after the liberation war. In fact, after liberation, most of these refugees went back to their homeland Bangladesh but one million illegal refugees mostly Hindus stayed back in Assam and some parts of West Bengal.¹

In fact, migration is a complex process which is responsible for many factors. Initially, migrants when enter in a particular country the original inhabitants feel irritant and this adversely affect the lives of the original people in that country. If this trend of migration continues unabated, a problem arise which creates discontent of the people of the country's concern. Many authors of migrations argue that migrants are motivated by the 'push and pull' factors of possible origin, destination areas and are affected to go—other things being equal—to areas where previous streams have proceeded where in network of their predecessors make the migration process easier. According to one definition "migration is a permanent change in place of residence by crossing of specified administrative or political boundaries. The person who fulfils these two criteria is regarded as a migrant". But refugees are not immigrants. The UN Convention on Refugees, 1951, defines refugee "as a person who owing to well-founded fear is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or owing to such fear is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country". According to Myron Wiener "migrant" 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. However, in the present study the term 'migrant' has been used in a manner as to include both senses. Another point to be remembered is that migrants do not necessarily move long distances in one go. Their movement is often incremental —they initially move to areas close to themselves which are compatible geographically and culturally. However, over a period of time this gradual outflow can cross International Borders.²

South Asia is a zone of migrants. There are many reasons behind it like heavy demands of population, poverty, political turmoil, natural disasters, environmental degradation, ethnic and linguistic conflict, artificial border and religious intolerance. Migration is a factor which is a great problem in South Asia particularly India at its centre, represents an amazing and complex phenomenon of human migration. For example, south Bhutanese of Nepali origin have fled to Nepal, Chakmas of Bangladesh fled to India and the Tamils of Indian origin have taken sheltered in India from Sinhalese persecution in Sri Lanka.

The major problems of migrations which can be mentioned here is India–Pakistan refugees flow. Data shows that in 1947-1948 the flow of refugees involving 15lakhsHindus and Muslims, exodus of Burmese Indians is about 1 lakh during the period of 1954-1965, exodus of Srilankan Indians and Tamils about 1 lakh from 1954 and still continuing. These havoc influx of migrations into Indian Territory created a major socio-economic and cultural problem in India. Since partition migration from Pakistan to India went on unabated. This trend of migration continued when Bangladesh was created. Now, the adjoining states of India like West Bengal, Tripura, and Assam, were affected as a result of continues illegal migration from Bangladesh since 1971. The migrated people came in these states and began to live without any valid documents. Now discussion may be made with special reference to west Bengal who has long border with Bangladesh more than 2,200 km. In response to a writ petition filed by the All India Forum of Civil Liberty against the Government of India and the others, the state first declared that not less than 1.02 million Bangladeshi had overstayed their official visas between 1972to1998. In fact, a recent population register programme by the central government estimated that 40 lakhs people of Assam are illegal migrants. These has created a furore in the political parties who demanded cancellation of their population register which was totally politically motivated but the fact is that Rajiv Gandhi-Profullo Mahanto's Assam Accord in 1985 made which stated that the list of illegal migration either Bangladesh or other would be enlisted and they would be deported accordingly. But this stand of the then government was not seriously taken by Monmohan Sing led UPA government and the matter remained in the official file only. The BJP government cited this example again and again and they had hinted that in every state illegal migration would be listed and they would be deported. The political motives of migration, if implemented, may led to disastrous consequences to the people in the state. Now, the moot question of migration may be divided into the following categories.

The Socio-economic Category: in fact, the economy of the north eastern region of India rooted in products like tea, petroleum and forest products. Agriculture is the predominant means of livelihood for bulk of the population. Massive illegal migration from Bangladesh turns into a reduced share of an already limited cake. Initially, migrants settle in the riverine areas and acquire land from locals As a result, for limited land this occasionally causes alienation of tribals from their ancestral tribal land leading to ethnic conflict.

The Political Category: the political fallout of a relentless influx is even more far reaching. General Shanker Roychoudhury, M.P, told in the Rajya Sabha in April 2000 that –on account of illegal migration, Bangladesh's demographic border intruded upon India's political border over a 10-20 km deep area. A survey has shown that out of the election result in West Bengal is determined by Bangladeshi migrants. As for example, out of 292 Assembly Constituencies in west Bengal Bangladesh immigrants decides the fate of polls in

as many as 52 constituencies which are entirely based on political interest. Similarly, a study has clearly shown that in other 100 Assembly Constituencies they (Bangladeshi migrants) can determine the outcome of provincial election results.

Strategic implications of massive influx into the North Eastern Region had been well summed by Lt. Gen. S.K. Sinha, the then governor of Assam, in his report to the president in 1998. According to him –demographic invasion of Assam may result in loss of geo-strategically vital districts of lower Assam. It will be only a matter of time when a demand for their merger with Bangladesh may be made... International Islamic fundamentalism may provide the driving force". Those who think this possibility far-fetched may recall the words of a 'pro-India' leader like Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in his book — Eastern Pakistan; Its population and Economics. According to Sheikh Mujibjur Rahman, — Because East Pakistan must have sufficient land for its expansion. it must include Assam to be financially and economically strong.³ He has pointed out that –the long cherished design of greater East Pakistan making inroads into the strategic land link of Assam with the rest of the country, can lead to severing the entire land mass of the North East, with all its rich resources, from the rest of the country. The—chicken-neck" area is strategically very important from military and strategic point of view. The rampant growth of alien Muslim population and the consequent growth of hundreds of Madrasa along the border districts of Assam and West Bengal amount to demographic borders of Bangladesh in truing upon the political border of India by 50 to 20 km .This belt travels along the borders of West Bengal, covers most of the —chicken neck area, (Siliguri Corridor) connects itself with Nepal and travels along Assam, all the way upto Cachhar area. In case of an armed conflict with either Bangladesh or China, having such a population with suspect loyalties along the borders would be a major cause for concern.

In the contexts of Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relations migration is undoubtedly an important issue. The volatile nature of Bangladesh politics and the conflicts between Bangladesh National Party (B.N.P) and Awami League (A.L) over this issue has created a problem in Bangladesh which could not be easily overcome. It is a fact that the radical influence on Bangladeshi society increased during the Bangladesh National Party (B.N.P) led four party coalition governments. The migrants, who infiltrated at that time was also become a convenient root for Pakistani as well as Bangladeshi terrorists to enter into India. In fact, Bangladeshi had become a hub for ISI activities but Sheikh Hasina government has been trying to reverse this trends. Her government is acting against Islamist groups and against North Eastern insurgent group but India is afraid of these insurgencies and terrorists' group in Bangladesh and in the disguise of migration they may enter into the bordering state of India particularly Assam, Manipur, Tripura and West Bengal. This possibility of migration induced problem may vitiate the Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relations. Recently, Assam

illegal migration problem is a much debated political issue regarding the National Population Register. I would therefore highlight Indo-Bangladesh illegal migration and its consequence.

Assam is confronted with serious ethnic problems since its creation. Assam is the oldest state in the North-East with a rich heritage of history and culture. It is known as the land of blue hills and green valleys, interspersed with majestic rivers and streams. Assam was known as Kamrupa in ancient times with Pragjyotispur as its capital. The Ahom rule was marked by smooth administrative setup, their revenue collection was just and their council of ministers was efficient⁴. Assam, under the Ahoms attracted the attention of the Mughal who were keen to extend their kingdom eastwards. Unlike the rest of India, Assam had successfully resisted Moghul rule. The repeated invasion of the Mughals brought the first Muslim settlers in Assam. The Muslim settlers blended well with the culture and everyday life of Assam. Some of them had also acquired the confidence of the Ahom kings and were given titles of officials. The Ahom king Rudra Singha had also imported skilled Muslim personnel in certain trades including blacksmith, architecture, Persian translation, tailoring, painting, drum-beating etc Muslims⁵. The Muslims were not looked upon as different from the Assamese identity and were regarded as indigenous. The story of Assam's ethnic conflict begins more than a hundred and fifty years ago in 1826 when the British conquered Assam. The history of Assam was most significantly shaped by the British who gained control over the state by the Treaty of Yandaboo, 1826. The language and religion of Assam was distinctly Indian origin. The historical fact was that Assamese language was an Indo-Aryan origin for which Assamese people spoke in that language. In the thirteenth century, the Ahoms, a tribe from Thailand, entered into upper Assam through Burma (now Myanmar), intermarried with the local population, adopted the Assamese language, culture, creed and custom and, in time of need, converted from Buddhism to Hinduism. In the sixteenth century Hindu Vaishnavism spread throughout the Bramaputrariver valley of Assam. During this century The British East India Company which ruled India having its centre of ruling based in Calcutta, The British East India Company with its business motive spread its dominance over the entire North Eastern Region and gradually it extended its influence in the entire North East region and in 1838 Assam was incorporated into the Bengal Presidency. The British rule was largely responsible for the influx of migrants from neighboring Bengal into Assam. The Bengali migrants were highly educated and well versed in English as a result of rich cultural heritage and longer period of being exposed to British rule. Therefore, the British administration found this section of people more suitable for employment as clerks, accountants and artisans. Later, a number of literate Bengalis entered Assam to work as lawyers, doctors, engineers and teachers.⁶In 1874, according to the decision of the British government Assam was separate from Bengal with an eye to govern for better administration and for this purpose Assam was placed under the control of a Chief Commissioner with its capital at Shillong (now in Meghalaya). In 1905 the British partitioned

the densely populated Bengal province into a predominantly Bengali Hindu province in the west and created a new province, "Eastern Bengal and Assam." Both the Bengali Hindus and the Assamese bitterly opposed the British's decision of Bango Bhango. In 1912, this partition (Bango Bhango) was annulled, and Assam was reconstituted as a separate province with the inclusion of Sylhet, a predominantly Bengali Muslim district and Cachar, a predominantly Bengali Hindu district in it. These boundaries remained intact until 1947 when a major part of Sylhet was transferred to Pakistan by referendum. Subsequently, the tribal populated hill regions of Assam were formed into separate states.⁷ Contemporary Assam is thus only a portion of what was termed "Assam" only a few decades ago. Throughout this century Assam has been the fastest growing area in the subcontinent. The first wave of migration into Assam began shortly before the middle of the nineteenth century when the British created tea plantations in the hill areas. Unable to persuade Assamese cultivators, most of whom owned their own land, that they should work as tea pickers in the plantations, the British brought in a labour force from the tribal region of southern Bihar.⁸ This migration was accompanied by an influx of educated Bengali Hindus into positions in the administrative services and in the professions. The British dismantled the Ahom ruling structure, made Bengali the official language, and recruited Bengali Hindus to run the administrative services smoothly. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Assamese nationalists were pitted against the Bengalis as well as against the British, both of whom were seen as alien rulers. The 1891 census estimated that one-fourth of the population of the Brahmaputra river valley was of migrant origin. Thus, the population of present-day Assam that is of indigenous origin may well be below 9.5 million-perhaps only 7.5-8 million. The largest influx of migrations took place after 1900 when Bengali Muslims moved into the Brahmaputra river valley from East Bengal. Assam was densely populated than East Bengal. Here, Bengali Muslims occupied thousands of acres of land, cleared vast tracts of dense jungle situated at the south bank of the Brahmaputra. In this way Bengali Muslims made influence in the south bank of the Brahmaputra River and occupied fertile lowlands which were submerged by flood water in course of time. The relevant data revealed that the majority number of people who came from Mymensingh district settled here since Mymensingh was the densely populated district of East Bengal (now Bangladesh).⁹ By 1911 as many as 1,18,000 migrants had moved into the district of Goalpara alone, representing 20 percent of the population. In the next two decades the Muslim migrants moved further up the Brahmaputra river valley. Though some Muslims had settled in Assam as early as the thirteenth century, this new influx rapidly changed the religious as well as linguistic composition of the state. As Assam's links to the rest of India grew, other migrants moved there as traders, merchants, bankers, moneylenders, and small industrialists. These various migrations not only transformed the ethnic composition of Assam; they also fostered a political climate in which questions of ethnicity and migration became central. Various

ethnic groups viewed the state government as an instrument by which to extend, consolidate or transform their position in the economy and social system. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century's it was the Bengali Hindus who used their dominance in the government administration to consolidate their position in the educational system, in the professions, and within the state administration itself. In the 1930s and 1940s, when electoral politics were introduced, the more numerous Bengali Muslims won control over the state government and then attempted to use their position to facilitate further migration of Bengali Muslims from East Bengal, to strengthen their political position, and then to press for the incorporation of Assam into the proposed Muslim majority state of Pakistan.¹⁰ The British government rejected Muslim League's demand of Assam, but agreed to partition Assam by transferring Sylhet district to Pakistan. Once this large Muslim-populated area was removed from Assam, the Muslims were no longer in a position to dominate the state government. After the partition of India in 1947, the Hindu middle class population of Assam, gripped the government machinery of the newly created state of independent India. In this way it was a fact that for the first time in a hundred and fifty years the Assamese were back in power. As soon as the Assamese asserted vigorously the supremacy of their cultural identity and tried to establish economic and social equality in comparison to the Bengali Hindu middle class. In fact, the Hindu middle class populations are in competition with the Assamese to get jobs in the administrative services as well as the job in private sector. This competition between the Assamese and the Bengali Hindu middle class led to the struggle which created ethnic conflict for some time. But under the necessity of ground reality they dissolved the self-created state boundaries and the central government was called upon by various groups within Assam for protection and safe guard of their right. The central government declared Assamese as the official language of the state and formulated a policy which preferred to "sons of the soil" (i.e., Assamese Bhumiputra) in employment in the state administrative services. Following this policy the government appointed Assamese teachers in the schools; and Assamese language was taken as the medium of instruction in schools, colleges, and universities. In this campaign to assert their culture and improve the employment opportunities of the Assamese middle classes, the Assamese won the support of two migrant communities, the tea plantation laborers and the Bengali Muslims. Both declared to census enumerators that Assamese was their native tongue, and both voted for the Assamese-dominated Congress party. As a result, Congress easily won every one of the state assembly and parliamentary elections from 1952 to 1977. These two migrant communities were used as a vote bank politics. In the early months of 1983 the Assamese and local tribal's violently turned against Bengali immigrants and descendants of immigrants. Four thousand people were massacred, many were made homeless, and thousands fled the state in fear. The political arrangement that had enabled Bengalis and Assamese to live together had already fallen apart by 1979, and for the last three years Assam has been the scene of a popular political movement against illegal

immigration from neighboring Bangladesh. The preparation of National Register for detection of illegal migrants in Assam has evoked furor among the political parties of Indian states particularly West Bengal, Tripura and Assam. The B.J.P has stated that nearly two crore illegal people coming from Bangladesh has been living in West Bengal. May be a political vendetta of the central government. But the fact is that the illegal migration has not been high on the agenda of the government of India. In fact, migration happens due to economic reason and the government's apathy to protect the minority communities and safeguard their right.

No comprehensive policy has yet not been implemented to overcome the illegal migration problems, the government policy was either halfhearted or guided by political motives of the ruling elite of both India and Bangladesh. The result of National register commission taken by Assam government is undoubtedly a right decision but what is necessary to make the list final has been to exclude the genuine people from the list who are legal inhabitants of the state. BSF in both India and Bangladesh, Tripura and Bhutan and Assam side must be strengthening to restrict illegal migrations. The cut of date 24th March 1971 should not be changed under any circumstance.

The ethnic problem should be solved. A comprehensive plan is to be formulated by the state government in collaboration with central government to fulfill the demands of ethnic communities living in Assam from time immemorial. Some argue that preparations of population register in order to identify the illegal migrants are no doubt a necessity but more important is to solve the problems of Assam who are constantly crisis ridden for ethnic strife.

¹Hazarika, Sanjoy, 'Illegal Migration from Bangladesh: Problem and long term perspective', Dialogue, Vol.3, No.3, p.25-26.

²Ibid. p2

³Cited in the report of Assam Governor, S.K. Sinha to the President in 1998.

⁴Hazarika, Sanjoy, Strangers of the Mist', Viking, New Delhi, 1994, p.41.

⁵Dev, Bimal, J, and Lahiri, Dilip, K, Assam Muslims. Politicsand Cohesion'Mittal Publication., New Delhi, 1983, p.2.

⁶Rafiabadi, H.N, Assam, From Agitation to Accord', Genuine Publication and Media Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1985, p.10.

⁷Weiner, Myron, The Political Demography of Assam's Anti-Immigrant Movement', Population and Development Review, Vol. 9, No. 2, June., 1983, p.282.

⁸Weiner ,Myron, Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978,pp.75-143.

⁹A detailed account of the migration from East Bengal and the reasons for it are described in the Census of India, 1931, Vol. 3, Assam, Calcutta: Government of India, Central Publications Branch, 1932.

¹⁰ Guha, Amalendu, *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947*, New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 1977.

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