



SECURITY CHALLENGES TO INDIA: ISSUE OF ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION FROM BANGLADESH

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Abstract: The phenomenon of migration has existed since the hoary past in human civilisation in search of a better living. But gradually, it has acquired a dimension to become a threat to national security, as perceived by many countries. Factors such as large-scale socio-cultural, economic upheaval and political persecution, segregation, and resultant instability force people to leave their traditional habitat and homeland to seek safety, security, and possible prosperity, often in another land, especially a neighbouring one. Since the Bangladesh liberation war of 1971 and its aftermath phases, illegal immigration from Bangladesh is alleged to have been a continuing process of serious concern for India. Prevailing social-cultural affinities and economic determinants have been crucial in pushing Bangladeshi immigrants to India. Of all the neighbouring Indian states, West Bengal seems to be the most affected region by such Bangladeshi illegal immigrants. The civilisational linkages, ethnic similarities, and geographical proximity between the two regions (Bangladesh-West Bengal) make the cross-border movement of illegal migrants possible. In addition to the problem of illegal immigration, the porous border provides a favourable climate to enter the region and spread criminal networks and activities, including smuggling cattle to drugs and human trafficking. This ever-increasing flow of migrants poses many security threats to the region, such as demographic imbalance because of the increasing population of the other and unemployment for locals in the Border States, very often erupting in ethnic clashes, casting its shadows Centre-State ties in India in so far as West Bengal-New Delhi relations is concerned. The study intends to reason out the factors behind illegal immigration from Bangladesh and analyse its impact on human and social security in a larger framework with a focus on the Centre-State dynamics in the prism of West Bengal with the Union Government of India. The paper also sheds some light on the constructive suggestions that can be considered to mitigate the issue, ensure security, and establish peace in the border region while strengthening the friendly bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh.

Index Terms- Illegal migration, Human security, Federalism, India, Bangladesh, West Bengal.

Migration is a phenomenon in everyone's life. "The concept of the world can be described as a vast area of social interactions shaped by activities that take place inside and among societies on a demographic, cultural, economic, and political level. These interactions create a recognisable configuration of global conditions in every given historical epoch that creates a migration phase by patterning population movements" (Mitchel, 1989). People

move from their origin country to another region for wide reasons broadly under Economic, Socio-cultural, and political factors. Economic factors cover the employment opportunities and scope for business (legal/illegal). Socio-cultural factors define their movement for study, reuniting with their people, cultural affection for the new country etc. Lastly, people's escape from the native region to survive conflict comes under the hats of political factors. However, the security issue is crucial when viewed from West Bengal's current perspective. The issue of illegal immigration frequently affects bilateral diplomatic ties. "According to United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (UNHCR) reports, in 2020, there were 82.4 million forcibly displaced people worldwide – underlining the extent of this truly global issue" (Kynsilehto, 2022). International relations are significantly impacted by the recent population migration across borders, particularly between developing countries and developed to developing nations. "International migration has been steadily increasing in every region of the globe since the end of World War II" (Hollifield, 2012). Apart from this, "History evidences the role of migration in creating states such as the USA and Australia and the vast impact of emigration events in Vietnam, Cuba and Ireland" (Kynsilehto, 2022). Hence, migration has become a global phenomenon and can be forced or voluntary. 'Country' and 'boundary' are readily pushed aside in favour of the survival instinct, and people look for 'illegal' solutions to overcome this hindrance to their well-being. Illegal migration occurs when people cross borders without having received any official authorisation. When migration and refugees cause problems on a global scale, they have a negative impact on international relations and human security in the larger picture. It also provides shelter to people who escape due to difficulties in their region and is considered a safety valve for people in danger. Bangladeshi migrant inflows to India can be viewed as the best example in this regard, which includes both refugees and economic migrants.

The world is witnessing a wide range of movements due to the drawn and redrawn boundaries. Division of India led to the creation of Pakistan in 1947; millions of people got displaced and still fighting for their identity. "The largest mass exodus in human history, according to the UNHCR, was caused by the partition, which resulted in the displacement of 14 million Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims" (Das & Ansary, 2017). Another wave of Bangladeshi refugees invaded West Bengal in 1971. with the creation of Bangladesh from Pakistan. "Around 10 million Bengalis sought asylum in India during the Bangladesh Liberation War, which started illegal immigration in 1971 with the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign nation" (Alam, 2003). Since the inception of Bangladesh, illegal migration has been a serious threat to the security concern of both nations. Hindus had moved in huge numbers from East Pakistan to West Bengal following the partition of India. "East Pakistan/Bangladesh had a huge population flight to India both during and after the liberation war for Bangladesh in 1971" (Chakrabarty & Jha, 2021). Religion was considered the main factor in the creation of Pakistan as per the two-nation theory of Jinnah, which was questioned when language and ethnicity delineated the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. "There are bonds of kinship. Politically, they were under the same rule as colonial Bengal. Before the British invasion, They lived under the rule of the Nawabs of Bengal" (Shamshad, 2016). Border regions of India are experiencing high demographic pressure due to increased inflows of Bangladeshi migrants. It has significantly altered the demographic profile of India's northeastern states, where the native population feels overrun by outsiders. Due to this, friction between the two sides has been building and has negatively impacted their way of life. Recent research on international migration has placed a significant emphasis on the economic conditions that exist in

different countries and sees differences in earning and work opportunities as major motivators behind illegal immigration.

Bangladeshi Migrants and the West Bengal Scenario: Process and Reasons

The problem of illegal migration has been critical to relations between India and Bangladesh. West Bengal is one of the troubled states of India since it has long been home to illegal Bangladeshi immigrants. Along with the northeastern states of India, West Bengal is one of the states that Bangladeshi migrants have massively occupied. Linkage Theory can be used to discuss illegal immigration. Bengal is divided between two ethnolinguistic zones named Bangladesh and West Bengal. Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority sovereign country, whereas West Bengal is a Hindu-majority Indian state. But despite the religious difference, the Migrants are well-occupied in the state due to ethnic factors. The ethnic, linguistic, and cultural similarities made it challenging to trace Bangladeshi migrants in West Bengal. Also, the people and administration support their stay in the state because of those linkage aspects. Both push and pull factor is responsible for this threat. The vulnerable economy and increasing population, political unrest, religious intolerance, social unrest, population pressures, and environmental crises in Bangladesh act as push factors. In contrast, employment opportunities, better life, land availability, improved economic prospects, educational and medical resources, a comparable cultural affinity and political support in West Bengal are the pull factors for the migrants. “The migrants benefit from all services accessible to Indian citizens by receiving ration cards, voter identity cards, and jobs cards” (Das & Ansary, 2017). As a result, a profound demographic change is noticed in the border district of West Bengal. Migrants also contribute a lot to the politics and security concerns of the state.

The emergence of fundamental Islamic ideologies in West Bengal is a significant security threat to the state. “Jamat-ul-Mujaheddin (JMB) of Bangladesh (JMB) planned Bardhaman blast in 2014 has witnessed as the threat to human security concern in India” (Chakraborty & Konar, 2014). “The state Home Ministry has listed seven formidable ‘fundamentalist Muslim organisations functioning in West Bengal’, out of which four are highly active. These include, the Jamait-e-Islami-e-Hind, Jamait-Ahle-Hadis, Students Islamic Organization (SIO), Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) and Tabligh-e-Jamat. It is believed that the ISI is cultivating hostile hard-line Islamic groups in Bengal in the absence of any rebel formations” (Kumar, 2010). “Recently, in February 2022, Crime Investigation Department (CID) has arrested a wanted Bangladeshi Terrorist from 24 Parganas district of West Bengal” (Times of India, 2022). During the British Raj, Kolkata was transformed into a port metropolis and the hub of colonial administration and trade. Consequently, due to its internal river transport facility, port facility, etc. Since its inception, Kolkata has been the country's largest metropolis in the east and has been a major factor in drawing people to the region from neighbouring states. “ISI agents have been crossed over to Kolkata from Bangladesh and arrested by West Bengal police in 2002” (Rather, 2013). Additionally, “Through interviewing some migrants, Jha and Chakraborty found out the difficulties faced by them in preparing passport and migration documents. Therefore, they prefer migration through Dalals” (Chakrabarty & Jha, 2021).

Another factor that has pushed millions of undocumented Bangladeshis to settle illegally in India is the political support rendered by the state government to illegal migrants. “There is also a solidarity exists among the

majority of west Bengal people, members of political and civil society towards the Bangladeshis” (Shamshad, 2016). The state government opposes the Centre’s policy of sending migrants to their homeland, citing the ethnic Bengali sentiment. But, “The politicisation of Matua¹ community that has been used as a vote bank for state politics tells a different story. The large community’s political support is divided between TMC and BJP, which considerably impacts the state election” (Nandy, 2019). Additionally, Cooper’s camp², consisting of Bangladeshi refugees in the Nadia district of west Bengal, also owns an essential share in vote bank politics. Hence, the issue is having a considerable impact on centre-state relationships also. The state government is often accused of being cordial to Bangladeshi infiltration. The Siliguri corridor, widely known as the ‘chicken neck’, is highly significant in connecting Bengal with the Indian northeastern region. The rapid changes in the demographic characteristics of the Siliguri corridor are a result of the increasing number of Bangladeshi immigrants. There’s a noticeable increase in the Muslim population of border regions. “A village called Chopra is the nerve centre for ‘illegal border trade and fake currency racket of Saudi rials and other currencies. ISI functionaries have also developed a strong base in Islampur.” (Kumar, 2010). Bangladesh is also used as a route to India for Pakistani terrorist groups. “At present, the northeast and India–Bangladesh border has been used as a transit route to strike the heartland of India rather than its periphery” (Kumar, 2010). Bangladesh started spreading all over Siliguri and negatively affecting its strategic importance.

The porous and un-demarcated Border conflict between the two regions is the prime reason behind illegal migration. “During the liberation war in Bangladesh, around 10 million Bengalis sought asylum in India, which began illegal migration in 1971. During the 1970s and 1980s, ethnic strife in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) drove thousands of Chakmas to India” (Alam, 2003). The Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) of 1974 and the long pending demarcation of boundaries and exchange of enclaves added sufficient fuel to the issue of illegal migration. After the agreement in 2015, there are still issues people are facing due to identity crises which added fuel to the problem. Access to the Tinbhaga corridor is encouraging migrants to cross the border Hassel freely. “In 1993, the two governments agreed that if a person is caught while crossing the international border, the commander of the two border forces shall together determine the nationality of the person – and accordingly he will be deported to the country in question” (Pattanaik, 2011). Again, deportation has its own problem while executing, placing the person before a court, refusing of concerned country etc., and there are many who cross the border due to their livelihood. So, a work permit seems more effective here. “The demography of the bordering states has undergone a change which has created various problems of threatened identity and insecurity” (Pattanaik, 2011).

¹A distinct subgroup of lower caste Hindus with a migration history from East Pakistan or Bangladesh is the Matua community. This underprivileged community belongs to Namasudra. The Matua people had arrived in West Bengal at various points in time. Harichand Thakur served as this community's leader. In the district of 24 Parganas, Thakurnagar is home to Matua Thakur Bari (N). After his passing, his wife took on the role of mother and protector for this neighbourhood. The majority of Matua Thakur's family members are currently involved in politics. The Thakur family has a considerable following. Ershwhile their support was divided between CPI(M) and TMC. Presently it is shifted to BJP and TMC. Prime minister Narendra Modi also visited them during 2019 Election campaign.

² The largest refugee in the Indian subcontinent in the Nadia district of West Bengal is called Cooper's Camp. The residents of Cooper's Camp have faced various difficulties throughout the past 72 years. There are 7000 people living there. Most of them were compelled to give their belongings to Muslims in their home countries. The oldest and least known refugee camp in South Asia is a hub for Hindus who left their homeland (Pakistan and East Pakistan) and moved to India during the partition.

The smuggling of illegal weapons poses a significant threat to India's national security. Due to the lack of roads and longer distances between BOPs, border patrolling is particularly challenging. As a result, militant organisations abuse certain sections of the border to bring weapons and drugs and pass into Bangladesh. The border economy is primarily based on activities like smuggling and other criminal activities by illegal migrants, which results in conflicts between the two regions. “An estimate places the overall worth of products being trafficked from India to Bangladesh at \$900 million, or three times the amount of authorised trade” (Saleh Shahriar, 2021). “The Indo-Bangladesh border has emerged as smuggler’s paradise. There is hardly any cooperation between the border forces (BDR and BSF) of the two countries to check to smuggle” (Pattanaik, 2011). It is crucial that the issue receives the proper attention and be resolved through an all-encompassing national security policy.

With regards to Bangladeshi migrants’ inflow towards West Bengal in particular, mainly they are economic migrants or have come for treatment. Rising unemployment is now a burning threat to West Bengal because of Bangladeshi migrants as they offer cheap labour. Because of the high inflow, there are profound demographic changes in the border region of West Bengal also. The local people depend on the other side of the border for their living, and they don’t consider the restrictions as their lives depends on that. The formation of char lands³, and porous and populated borders made the fencing work difficult hence stopping migration, and other smuggling activities is difficult for both sides of the forces. Recently “In the first six months of 2021, India’s Minister of State for Defence, Ajay Bhatt, notified parliament that 441 infiltration attempts were attempted along the India-Bangladesh border. He said that 740 infiltrators from Bangladesh had been arrested. ‘Dhakka-passport’ is the business of assisting someone crossing the border illegally without a passport and visa (mostly from Bangladesh into India; lit. push passport; in Murshidabad and Dinajpur, India)” (Sarkar, 2016).

How the Government is Responding?

Concerned governments, security personnel, intelligence agencies and several NGOs worldwide have been trying to mitigate illegal Bangladeshi migration. “Independent India started the foremost opposition from the United Minorities Front (UMF), followed by All Assam Students Union (AASU) in 1979, as a result of which fencing started along across the border. Subsequently, Assam Accord⁴(1985) and Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) IMDT⁵ took place to accomplish the same” (Kumar, 2010). “To ‘create a sense of security’, the union government launched the Border Area Development Programme (BADP) in 1987” (Das P. , 2008). Along with this, the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) are the most vibrant

³ Charlands are freshly formed riverine land masses that have through time been created by the gradual deposition of sand, silt, and clay from the four major rivers. The Padma, the Meghna, the Jamuna, and the Brahmaputra are some of the best riverline char in Bangladesh.

⁴ The Assam Accord was a Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) that the leaders of the Assam Movement and representatives of the Indian government signed. It was executed on August 15, 1985. According to the 1985 law, all foreigners who entered Assam after March 25, 1971, would be classified as non-citizens and expelled. People who arrived from outside India between January 1, 1966, and March 24, 1971, were to be denied citizenship for ten years before being granted it again.

⁵ The Assam Accord of 1983 had an impact on the creation of the IMDT Act. It wasn't the same as the Foreigners Act that was in effect everywhere in the nation. While the IMDT Act stated that it was the complainant's responsibility to prove the citizenship of a suspected illegal immigrant, the Foreigners Act requires the suspected illegal immigrant to prove his or her nationality. Additionally, prior to the IMDT Act's amendment in 1988, only people who lived no more than three kilometres from the location where a suspected illegal immigrant was staying were eligible to file a complaint, and only after paying a fee.

Initiative taken by the present union Government to check illegal migration to the region. Apart from this, the judiciary is equally concerned about India's increasing migration. It has brought IMDT act down; it has enquired about the MPNCC to check illegal migration. "In 2018, both the nations discussed issues relating to security, border management, bilateral cooperation in counter-terrorism and checking insurgency including intelligence exchange, operationalisation and implementation of various Agreements/ MoUs signed between the two countries" (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2018). "So far, 3,750.87 km of border roads have been constructed out of the sanctioned length of 4,223.04 km. The ongoing work is to be completed by March 2024." (The Economic Times, 2022). The international sphere has also taken constructive initiatives to mitigate migration as it threatens human security and considers no boundary. "The UNHCR established a five-person Eminent Persons Group (EPG) in 1994, led by P. N. Bhagwati, a former chief judge of India, to aid South Asian nations in creating domestic refugee laws. In 1997, the EPG put up model refugee law. At its conference in Islamabad on January 24, 2004, it subsequently issued the South Asia Declaration of Refugees, which also included the model refugee laws. Additionally, Shashi Tharoor, who had previously worked in the UNHCR headquarters in Geneva, introduced the Asylum Bill 2015 as a private member bill in India's Lok Sabha on December 18, 2015" (Tripathi, 2016). "The problem still exists despite the collaborative Coordinated Border Management Plan (CBMP) that both nations adopted in July 2011" (Nandy, 2019). Police have detained several criminals and terrorists in Kolkata and West Bengal in general. West Bengal is home to an extensive group of terrorists from Bangladesh. Even with all the safety precautions taken, Indian intelligence frequently fails to identify Bangladeshi criminals. Criminals from Bangladesh who are operating illegally are handling Indian documents by paying substantial payments. The state government's stance seems not in the high agenda. And the reason being the issue can get communalised easily because of the similarities shared by both people. Immigration general and illegal immigration trends upward from a poorer to a wealthy nation. The state also gets cheap labour, and vote bank politics is responsible for the state's welcoming nature behind migration. But the rapidly increasing security threats made both centre and state rethink and mitigate the issue.

However, the state government is not very aggressive towards them due to the Socio-cultural linkages. As a result, it poses serious challenges to the state's security concerns. The state's attitude towards the issues is also creating a clash in centre-state ties. Locals do not understand that the border is a political construct because their everyday lives depend on it and force them to cross it. The close socio-cultural and ethnic affinity between the two regions sometimes makes the political order less significant. The present govt in west Bengal has been supporting migrants, citing the reason of socio, cultural oneness and one history. She said, "all immigrants from Bangladesh settled in the state were bonafide Indian citizens and told them they should not be worried about the new citizenship law. She also started the 'Snehalaya scheme' to shelter them" (Maitra, 2020). Local politicians also help Illegal migrants get voter IDs and ration cards. This evidences West Bengal's policy formulation towards Bangladeshi migrants n bypasses the union government's stance on illegal migrants. On the other side, Modi said on this issue, "'After May 16, these Bangladeshis better be prepared with their bags packed,' Modi had said at an election rally in Serampore in West Bengal, which shares a porous border with Bangladesh" (Outlook, 2022). Hence, West Bengal has a crucial role regarding illegal Bangladeshi migrants. The state government's stance on

migration issues also encouraging union-state clashes over the matter and poses serious security concern for the nation as a whole.

In search of solutions;

The bilateral collaboration followed by centre-state coexistence is needed the most to resolve the threat. Border Security Force (BSF) and Border Guard Bangladesh's (BGB) coordination to protect the border area is indispensable. Fencing work should be done within the time frame with the help of technological solutions. Above all, the concerned state government, along with west Bengal, should be on board when deciding policies regarding Illegal Bangladeshi migrants because they are affected by the infiltration. Governments at all levels should handle the problem of illegal immigration from a humanitarian perspective. Both the country should unanimously work to give work permits to certain migrants who come for livelihood to reduce economic migrants and make their stay legal. "Along with reviewing current legal provisions that deal with the identification, deportation, naturalisation, and citizenship of Bangladeshis, implementing the National Population Register must be given first priority" (Nanda, 2005). A joint verification process is essential to identify its genuine nature. The depoliticisation of migrants is much needed to resolve the issues. India must manage its borders tightly and keep better records of its citizens so that outsiders may be easily spotted and deterred from infiltrating. The bilateral institutional framework should be strengthened even more, and the Indian and Bangladeshi governments should meet frequently. People near the border should be aware of the region's strategic importance in national security. It's time for a fresh take on border management. It will be counterproductive to prioritise security over the economy of cross-border trade and migration. Instead, creative solutions might be developed to control their international activity better. This will undoubtedly result in more practical, considerate of others, and efficient border administration.

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