

Impact Analysis of Undocumented Migrants from Bangladesh to West Bengal: An Overview

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Abstract:

Migration has been witnessed from time immemorial which recognizes no border. The unending flow of migrant population from Bangladesh to West Bengal began with partition of Bengal in 1947. The partition of Bengal, one of the cruelest in history divided East Bengal and West Bengal. A massive population transfer began from Bangladesh and majority of them settled in West Bengal with or without valid documents. Migration in West Bengal occurred in a gradual fashion over many decades following the partition. Millions of Hindus migrated to India from Bangladesh where majority of them settled in West Bengal, the peak period being the Bangladesh liberation war in 1971.. The infiltrators from Bangladesh had crossed the border to look out for work and a new home. In due course, the environment in Bangladesh became communally charged and more and more Hindus started feeling unsafe to stay in such a country. The people were forced to think of migrating to the nearest counterpart West Bengal. Lack of proper employment in the place of origin, poverty, scarcity of food, improper medical facilities and sanitation, illiteracy, social unawareness etc were some of the strong push factors for the migrants to come and settle in the nine border districts of West Bengal. With more riots occurring time and again, the exodus of Hindus fleeing to West Bengal became a common story. The worst part of the episode is that over the years they became ghettoized and marginalized socially, economically and politically from the majority community.

The main objective of this paper is to analyze the social, political and economic impacts on the migrant Bangladeshis in West Bengal and the effect of marginalization on the development of the state of West Bengal. The paper also tries to understand government responses and various schemes implemented by the government of West Bengal to settle the refugees and try to imbibe them into the main stream of development .The study is based on intercensal period demographic data of various districts where the migrants have settled. The study has also used some sample interviews to investigate this complex and sensitive issues. These samples have used some open ended questions to understand various impacts and motivating factors which have led to this illegal migration.

Key Words: Partition, Migrants, Marginalised, Ghettoized, Government Schemes, Sample Interviews.

1. Introduction

Movement is an integral part of human existence. Transborder migration from one country to another has been a very controversial and sensitive subject of discussion. Undocumented migration a burning issue worldwide occurs when people are forced to leave their shelter, family ties, culture in search of better life. The partition of Bengal in 1947 was one of the crudest partitions the world has ever seen in history. With this partition West Bengal which shares a common boundary with East Bengal (Bangladesh) started migrating illegally into West Bengal majorly and many other states of India. Demographers are of the view that outmigration of people from resource – poor regions to less poorer regions are bound to occur like water reaching its own level. It has been estimated that approximately 15ml Bangladeshi nationals have occupied the soil of India illegally. It has been observed that undocumented migration causes

harm to our social and economic well being as well as to our national security and harmony (Nath, 2003). The case of East Bengal and West Bengal migration can be well connected to U.S – Mexico migration which was reformed through high level government policy reforms between the two countries (Borderline 81, 2001). Migration in West Bengal occurred in a gradual fashion over many decades following the partition. The infiltrators from Bangladesh crossed the border to look out for work and a new home. In due course, the environment in Bangladesh became unrestful and more and more Hindus started feeling unsafe to stay in such a country. Lack of proper employment in the place of origin, poverty, scarcity of food, improper medical facilities and sanitation, illiteracy, social unawareness etc were some of the strong push factors for the migrants to come and settle in the nine border districts of West Bengal. With more riots occurring time and again, the exodus of Hindus fleeing to West Bengal became a common story. The worst part of the episode is that over the years they became ghettoized and marginalized socially, economically and politically from the majority community.

2. History:

Bangladesh is the centre of Bengali culture and heritage. Geographically, Bangladesh forms the larger and more populated part of Bengal, and the remaining part of which constitutes the Indian state of West Bengal. From the historical point of view Bangladesh was liberated from the English in 1947. From 1947 to 1971, Bangladesh was in the hands of Pakistan. In 1971, Pakistani troops surrendered and the leaders of East Pakistan declared the region independent as Bangladesh. Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in the world with an area of 1, 44,000 sq. km and a population of 120ml. Majority of the population are Muslims. Its dominant religion is Islam. Since 1947, Hindu population in Bangladesh has been dwindling from 30% to 10% in coming years due to terrible political terrorism. West Bengal, the Indian state has housed the poor illegal migrants from Bangladesh especially the Hindus in nine border districts e.g. Kolkata, 24 parganas, Nadia, Maldah, Murshidabad, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Kooch Behar etc. After 1947, massive illegal refugee migration took place which later was considered legal till 1971. Up to 1971, 4.7ml Hindus sought refuge in West Bengal while 10ml more crossed over to India after the Liberation War in 1971 which is a sizable section of undocumented migrants (Guha Roy, 2003).

Bangladesh shares boundary with some Indian states like Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Assam and eastern part of West Bengal. Infiltration of Bangladeshi especially Hindus and other minorities are continuing till today to escape violence and insecurity following Muslim party ruling the country. It

should be borne in mind that these illegal Hindu migrants have been facing communal disharmony, economic instability and curtailment of facilities in Bangladesh which have caused this marginalized group to migrate to their nearest neighbouring region, West Bengal. Indian Border Security Force with their limited resources could not stop this illegal migration posing a threat to the Indian State of West Bengal. This marginalized group have spread themselves over some agricultural based border districts especially 24 parganas, Nadia, Kooch Behar, etc. because of very stiff competition from the local people, and they were forced to work at low wages. (Pramanik, 2003).

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Many research and studies have provided piecemeal information. This paper tries to explore the various motives operating behind this migration process, its impact on West Bengal and some probable solutions of the problem. In this study undocumented Bangladeshi migrants are meant to be those who have entered West Bengal without valid documents after March 25, 1971 (March 1980, National Consensus).

3. Causes of migration of the marginalized:

A. Push Factors:

Various factors motivating migration are complex and interrelated. Migration mainly can be attributed to push – pull factors. Push factors have negative characteristics operating at the centre of origin while pull factors are of positive characteristics at the centre of destination. The factors are basically economic, demographic religions, social law and order etc. which are the causes of illegal migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal.

Economic Factor:

It plays a crucial role in the process of migration. Lack of employment opportunities, forced grabbing of land from the weak minority group in Bangladesh, poverty, economic depression created a push like situation for migrants to illegally crossover and settle in West Bengal.

Social Factor:

This factor often causes people to migrate forcefully from place of origin to the place of destination. Due to large scale movement of population after partition, the communities were fragmented. The marginalized Hindu minority group faced problems for matrimonial alliances. Educational curricula were framed according to Islamic teaching which did not suit the requirements of Hindu minorities. There was tremendous social insecurity among women. Hindu girls were forced to become Muslims. If Zamindar was Muslim, the husbands were forced to mortgage their wives to get agricultural works. Girls from aristocratic families migrated to West Bengal to escape from this kind of harassment (Sample study).

Political Factor:

This is highlighted to be one of the major push factors for the marginalized Hindu group from Bangladesh. Political instability, fear of riots, inhuman attitude of political leaders, no democratic rights to minority group, hostile attitude of majority community forced people to leave their home land.

Law & Order:

It needs a special mention when it is connected to illegal migration. Deterioration and discriminating law and order in Bangladesh had pushed the Hindus to West Bengal. Intra – religion and Inter- religion conflicts and violence are very common in Bangladesh creating law and order problem. Due to such a situation, human freedom is at state forcing the Hindus to leave Bangladesh. Police force backs Muslim community more than the Hindus making them feel unsecured and unwanted in their homeland.

B. Pull Factors in West Bengal

The pull factors in West Bengal have been stronger for the illegal migrants from Bangladesh. The centripetal force have been strengthened due to low level of development, insecurity at the centre of origin possibly causing the illegal marginalized migrants to move from Bangladesh (Push) to West Bengal (Pull). The various pull factors are as follows:-

Economic Pull Factor:

During the time of unrest in Bangladesh, lot of migrants looked for opportunities especially economic ones (Thomas, 1975). Jobs attracted the migrants to West Bengal, which was not possible in Bangladesh. The generosity of the inhabitants of West Bengal gave the marginalized class to be absorbed in agricultural, small scale & cottage industries. Poor Bangladeshis could easily obtain job and settle in West Bengal.

Social and Geographic Factors:

West Bengal and Bangladesh has many similarities in terms of language, culture, food habits, ethnic – climate, belief, etc. which has attracted migrants especially Hindus from Bangladesh to flee to West Bengal.

Political Factor:

West Bengal is definitely politically conscious but it follows democratic form of government. It is a peaceful state and communal harmony remains unaltered inspite of external instigation. The only drawback seen in West Bengal is that the political parties try to woo the migrants seeing their poor conditions. For filling up their vote banks the political leaders help them to avail illegal proofs of citizenships like, ration card, voter cards, etc. thereby become eligible of government jobs or settle permanently in the country (Seshan, 1998).

Conclusion:

The issue of the undocumented migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal has always been very sensitive and a herculean task to accomplish. The size and diversity of the problem, problem of authentic information is the limitation of this study. Basically the study is done through various sample studies. The Bangladeshis who have migrated to India has found work as rag pickers, agricultural labourers, rickshaw pullers, construction workers, domestic help, etc. The minorities in the name of migrants have been marginalized economically, socially, politically even in a democratic country like India. This reestablishes the truth and reality behind the history of the two countries. Policy measures from the Indian government have stemmed up from time and again. Both Central and State government considers the issue to be very significant as infiltration of the refugees hamper not only overall development of West Bengal but also the whole country. Many are of the view that they do not support the illegal migrants to be absorbed in India as

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India is already overcrowded. But on humanitarian ground, some are of the view that they should be absorbed granting special work permit.

Central and State Government has come forward with various policy prescriptions like:

- Promotion of human rights protection
- Protection of rights of the minorities.
- Strengthening of democracy.
- Population control.
- Border Fencing and wire fencing.
- Issuance of identity cards and granting work permits.
- Cards to be given to migrants to avail government benefits.
- Strict rules for providing ration cards.
- Economic co-operation between India and Bangladesh

In some cases it has been observed that migrants are even worse off economically in India, than they were in Bangladesh. But peace and security has been the incentive for the marginalized group to stay in India. Therefore refugees have to be given citizenship and integrated legally and economically in West Bengal. According to Dr. Manmohan Singh, "In the increasing globalized world in which we live in, political borders are no longer a social barrier." India cannot be prosperous, dynamic or stable if our neighborhood is not economically prosperous. Thereby influx of Bangladeshi migrants will not stop unless Bangladesh becomes politically stable and economically prosperous.

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