

Between the “Hubs and Hinterlands” of Migration in South Asia: The Bangladesh-India Corridor

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Abstract

Immigration from Bangladesh to India comprises the first single largest “bilateral corridor” of international migrants in the Global South. Most are irregular migrants. Would differentiating their stocks from the flows, and investing in the human capital of the former while regulating the latter amount to a policy India ought to innovate in its own economic self-interest?

Keywords: Bilateral Corridors of Migration, India, Bangladesh, Illegal migrants, Involuntary migrants, Refugees, Human capital.

1. Introduction

According to the last two UN *International Migration Reports*, India and Bangladesh, both in South Asia, figure among top twenty countries of origin of migrants in the world. India continued at the topmost rank with a worldwide stock of 17.5 million Indians in 2019 (up from 16.6 million in 2017) permanently living outside the country (United Nations 2019). Bangladesh was at the fifth position in 2017 with 7.5 million Bangladeshis living abroad (United Nations 2018a).² Among other distinctly outstanding features of these two countries relating to international migration are one that India, with 1.3 billion people is among the world’s highest populated countries, second after China; and Bangladesh with 1,063 persons per square kilometer is among those having the highest density of population. Another important dimension of migration involving these two countries together is that at the turn of the century, in the year 2000, Bangladesh-India was the second largest “bilateral corridor” with 3.9 million Bangladeshis of migrant stock in India, just after the Mexico-United States corridor with 9.4 million Mexican migrant stock in the US.³ By 2017, its rank slid down to the fifth position, with the number of Bangladeshis living in India coming down to 3.1 million mainly due to mortality among the generation that had come to India during the war with the then West Pakistan that resulted in the creation of the independent state of Bangladesh in 1971. In 2017, about 40 percent, or two out of every five of the 7.5 million Bangladeshis outside the country resided in India and accounted for some 60 percent of the 5.2 million foreigners living in India itself. It thus makes up the largest “bilateral corridor” of south-south migration,

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² Another freely available and most referred source of latest data on international migration is *World Migration Report*, published biennially by the IOM. Its latest edition, *WMR 2020 (IOM 2019)* presents key data and information on migration as well as thematic chapters on highly topical migration issues.

³ According to the UN, the migration through “bilateral corridor” implies migration from one single country to another single country, not to the whole world; it does not mean two-way migration between them either. (United Nations 2018a).

what I would describe as migration from a prominent ‘hinterland’ of migrants to a major ‘hub’ in South Asia within the Global South.

Overshadowing these remarkable dimensions of international migration between Bangladesh and India, however, an unspecified majority of these Bangladeshi migrants in India are irregular or undocumented migrants, who have entered India illegally and who are often derogatively referred to by the local population as *refugee miya*⁴ or *bahiragoto* (the outsiders), or merely as *Bangladeshi*. The majority would have crossed the borders since a long period of time, voluntarily in the sense that they have not been the conventional “forced migrants” displaced by strife or persecution in their own country. However, the push of the economic and other uncertainties leading to poverty at home and the pull of easy accommodation by the local politicians favouring them to settle and mingle with the local population for the lure of their votes in local and national elections in nearby Indian border states of Assam and West Bengal (and to a lesser extent in the newer states of the North-east India) would perhaps justify them being called “involuntary” migrants or “refugees”.⁵ In this sense, it fits well with the integrative explanation of “refugee movement” that was first provided by Zolberg in 1983, rejecting the traditional dichotomization of economic migrants and refugees, and ousting the latter from the perspective of a separate theorization (Zolberg 1983).

2. The Waves of Bangladesh-India Migration

Bangladesh and India share 4,096 kilometers or about 2,500 miles of common border. The bordering Indian provinces are the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram in the north-east and West Bengal in the north-west of Bangladesh. There were three partitions in 1947 - of the British India and of the provinces of Bengal and Punjab - that created the new nation-states of India and a spatially fragmented West and East Pakistan. It engendered the largest recorded population transfer in history amidst horrific mass violence and large-scale deaths. Between 1946 and 1965, nearly 4.7 million Hindus and Sikhs moved into India and approximately 6.5 million Muslims moved to West Pakistan (Roy 2012). Unlike the splitting of the Punjab, which witnessed rapid transfer of minority populations amid widespread violence though, the Bengal Partition led to relatively small-scale violence that characterized more graduated exchange of Hindu and Muslim minority populations. Between April and July 1950, 1.2 million Hindus left East Pakistan and 600,000 Muslims from West Bengal moved to East Pakistan. India and Pakistan were entangled in a two-decade long engagement with each other over delineating their territories and deciding who could and could not be their citizens, and what would construct their respective citizens’ national identities (Roy 2012).

Bengal's partition involved almost two-thirds of its areas being carved out to create East Pakistan. It produced the longest international border between two countries in South Asia and millions of new citizens who were marked as majorities and minorities based on religious demography. Beginning with 1947, continuous waves of Bangladeshis facing persecution, hostility, and poor economic conditions in what was then East-Pakistan have migrated illegally to find sanctuary in these border states of India. This illegal migration from Bangladesh to India, comprising both economic migrants and refugees, has

⁴ *Miya* is an Urdu word to address as “Gentleman”, but in Assam, it is derogatively used as a Muslim of Bengali origin.

⁵ There were no checks and balances to monitor the citizenship documents for being enrolled in the voters’ lists. See Goswami (2019). The immigrants entering India had nothing to lose, particularly as *de jure* they didn’t have that status because India has not been a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention; *de facto* they had the protection of the politicians and their parties.

continued unabated since. While some of them have subsequently gone back to their homes in Bangladesh, large majority have settled down as new communities in the local population.

Having its genesis in the partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan (with Bangladesh as the then East Pakistan) in 1947 and later into Pakistan and Bangladesh in 1971, the waves of immigration into India were fuelled by communal tension, social strife and political turmoil. For example, in 1971 when fatalities ensued in the wake of the *Mukti Bahini's* (the liberation brigade's) War of Liberation for secession from Pakistan, at least 10 million Bangladeshis migrated to West Bengal and North-eastern states of India (Jha 2018). The majority of these migrants were those fleeing persecution of rape, murder, forced conversion and so on (Ghosh 2012).

There is no reliable figure on the exact number of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh in India. Some analyses of change in the growth of population and demographic profiles of Bangladeshis in India in the last four censuses of India – 1981, 1991, 2001, and 2011- suggest their numbers to be over 15 million with some reliable approximation (Tripathi 2016). They have been residing largely in the Indian states along the Bangladesh-India border, although some moving subsequently to other parts of India, even to remote areas including the National Capital Region (NCR) of Delhi in the north. Mostly illiterate, and hardly educated even till primary levels and comprising significantly large number of women, a substantial proportion of them take up petty and manual jobs – both unskilled and low-skilled - in urban areas – as helpers, porters, rickshaw pullers, cart pullers, painters, carpenters, auto mechanics, tyre-repairers, and so on, mostly in urban informal employment in the metropolises, big cities and large towns in India and also as agricultural workers in their peripheral rural areas. Women have been mainly into the occupation of housemaids in urban middle-class household.

India is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugees' Convention nor to the 1967 Protocol, which has 140 countries as signatories. Despite this, India has been hosting the largest numbers of refugee population in South Asia. India's relatively sound economy compared to those of the neighbouring countries, and the liberal democratic polity have contributed to the country becoming a magnetic "hub" for migrants fleeing persecution in other parts of the region, which comprises what I call the "hinterland" of migrants looking for a safer and better life (Khadria 2011). "Refugees" from Tibet, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Pakistan, and the "illegal immigrants" that irregular immigrants from Bangladesh are derogatively called, have found shelter in India. While refugees coming from Tibet, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and Myanmar have been treated somewhat systematically, even if in somewhat ad hoc manner, the influx of the so-called "refugees"/ "illegal immigrants" from Bangladesh has remained a contentious problem. Thus, while the Tibetan refugees are perceived as 'peaceful' community living harmoniously with other local Indian groups, the Bengali refugees, comprising Bengali Hindus, Bengali Muslims and tribal groups coming from Bangladesh after 1971, and prior to that from erstwhile East Pakistan after 1947 have been, in sharp contrast, looked at with suspicion.

3. The Resentment and its Elusive Resolution

These continued waves of migration from Bangladesh to India have substantially contributed to altering the demographic composition in the northeastern states of India, particularly Assam, which the local population has felt extremely sensitive about and expressed resentment, often violent, at the presence of the outsiders. In Assam, for example, the presence of a disproportionately large number of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and erstwhile East Pakistan, and their enrollment in voters' lists through corrupt collusion amongst the immigrants, the middlemen and the local politicians, led to a six-year long mass movement of protest known as the "Assam Agitation" from 1979 to 1985 that called for

their deportation.⁶ At the root of this movement against illegal immigration has been the debate around the dilution of the native way of life which is submerged in taking extreme pride in one’s own language, culture, folk festivals and art, etc., sometimes labelled even as the “Assamese chauvinism” (Garg 2018). In this context, the indigenous Muslims have shared sentiments with the indigenous Hindus of Assam in terms of language, food, festivals and other social identities such as surnames. But this was not so for the Bengal-origin Muslims, which intensified the schism between the local Assamese and the Bengali immigrants around the issue of Bengali replacing Assamese as the state official language and as the medium of education in Assam from 1836 to 1873 under the British rule.

To quell the resentment that was at the root of the violence and insurgency in Assam and the North-east, the Indian Parliament passed the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) (IMDT) Act in 1983 in an attempt to address the problem. The agitation culminated in an agreement called the “Assam Accord” that was signed on August 15, 1985, between the central and state governments and the leaders of the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad - two leadership associations which spearheaded the Assam Movement, of which the latter subsequently became a new local political party called the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) that came to form the government in Assam under a youngest chief minister the same year. The Assam Accord envisaged that all foreign nationals who had entered Assam on or after March 25th, 1971—the day after the Pakistan Army began full-fledged operations against Bangladeshi civilians seeking independence from Pakistan, causing them to flee to India in large numbers—were to be detected, their names deleted from the electoral rolls, and subsequently deported under the Foreigners Act, 1946. But little headway was made in that direction. This has led to continuation of simmering tension in the entire region thereby adversely affecting the day to day life. Often it has fueled insurgency in some of the north-eastern states (Goswami 2019).

India has tried to find a bilateral solution by taking up the issue with Bangladesh a number of times, but Bangladesh neither acknowledged the presence of any large number of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in India nor initiated any effective steps to regulate the illegal entry of its citizens into India. India’s long drawn efforts to stem the tide by putting up a barbed-wire fence along the border and strengthening border surveillance have not been effective enough to show any positive outcome. Similarly, apart from being extra-legal, India’s practice of occasionally pushing illegal Bangladeshi immigrants back across the India-Bangladesh border has not been result-oriented as the immigrants either voluntarily chose a different porous border to re-enter India or were forcibly pushed back into India by the Bangladeshi patrol guards.

To implement the “Assam Accord” the Supreme Court of India directed the State Government of Assam to identify and count the illegal immigrants, mainly the Bangladeshis and put a deadline for coming out with the first list. As it was not possible to identify the illegal immigrants in Assam, in December 2014, the Supreme Court of India initiated updating of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam. Under this initiative, in contrast with the other states, the migrants of Indian origin who had settled in Assam could qualify either as Indian citizens or for a route to citizenship. It was decided to identify the genuine citizens of India and their legal descendants domiciled in the state prior to March 25 1971 by creating a National Register of Citizens (NRC) either from the Voter’s List of country’s first national election in 1951 or by enrollment or passing out certificates issued by the educational institutions

⁶ The collusion has been so deep-rooted that detecting illegal immigrants from Bangladesh has not been easy. The subtle differences in accents, dialect, and features between an Indian Bengali and a Bangladeshi are not easily discernible. Ironically, an illegal Bangladeshi immigrant is more likely to be equipped with an Indian identity document than an Indian Bengali who may take his or her Indian citizenship for granted. The fact that most Bangladeshis now already hold ration cards, voter identity cards, or even the unique-identity Aadhaar cards further compounds the difficulty.

prior to that date. The final list, when announced in 2018, led to a huge controversy as some 4 million nationals of India were left out, a recount in 2019 reducing it to 1.9 million. This is one major reason why the exercise of citizens-stocktaking through a National Register of Citizens (NRC) in India's north-eastern state of Assam, thus indirectly counting the stock of illegal immigrants settling in the post cut-off date of 24 March 1971, fixed by the Supreme Court of India under the "Assam Accord", is of utmost significance in the broader context of Bangladesh-India migration (Khadria 2016b, Garg 2018).

What came paradoxical to the exercise of NRC was the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) 2019, made into an Act. It legalized providing shelter and the right to naturalize for those people of Indian origin who belonged to six minority religious communities, namely Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Christians and Parsees from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh who came to India even illegally before 31st December 2014. It also reduced the minimum residency period for Indian citizenship from the existing twelve years to seven years.

This is a paradox that has become a contentious issue in the state of Assam and a few other states in the North-east of India (The Hindu 2018, The New York Times 2020)⁷. The concern of the people in Assam, and the North-east is that a person who has come illegally should be dealt with according to the Constitution of India which allows no discrimination based on religion in a country that has been secular. Moreover, there is a fear that Bangladeshi immigrants who have entered India illegally would convert and reconvert from one religion to another to derive undue advantage from such a legislation.

4. Contradictions in Indian Policy on Migration

However, in terms of international diplomacy, this does not seem to be affecting India's policy stance in relation to its treatment of the issues relating to immigration of foreigners, including undocumented or irregular refugees, including Bangladeshis, because India is not a signatory to the UNHCR convention.⁸ In contrast, being the largest country of origin of migrants on the world map, during the last two or three decades India has shown a consistent enchantment towards the Indian emigrant professionals, especially those emigrating to the developed countries, and has been celebrating back home their success stories abroad. This dichotomy between immigration and emigration policies is not unique to India but more widespread, including even those countries which are signatories to the UNHCR convention. Justifiably, immigration policy changes in the US, the UK and elsewhere, where Indian migrants constitute significant stocks and flows, frequently draw attention of the Indian government, media, business and industry. Changes in the H-1B visa regimes and fees in the US including spousal work authorization for H-4 visas, and visa caps on skilled migrants from non-EU countries in the UK are live examples of this concern. India is also quite proactive in protecting Indian migrants living in the Gulf countries. For example, the issuing of ECR (emigration check required) passports has been a proactive measure of the Indian government to safeguard the low skilled and uneducated migrants from exploitation in the destination countries in the Gulf, although it has remained controversial due to loopholes allowing for abuse and corruption. In fact, over time, Indian Gulf

⁷ The Citizens Amendment Bill was passed in ruling-party dominated lower house of the Indian Parliament in January 2019 but was not placed in the upper house in the February session because of the violent resistance in the North-eastern states of India, including some ruled by the same party as the Central government. Eventually, it was passed in December as the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019.

⁸ India however treats refugees within its territories well. It has been incurring huge expenditures in looking after Tibetan and Sri Lankan refugees, substantial enough to gain its rightful place as an important donor country. See Tripathi (2016).

migration policy has undergone paradigm shifts - from emergency protection of Indian emigrants through consular support (e.g., preparing to evacuate the large numbers of those losing jobs in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and plummeting oil prices), to enhancing their welfare through low-cost insurance policies, and further to their participation back in India’s development, e.g., by incentivizing larger volumes of remittances coming to India from the Gulf as compared to from other destination countries (Khadria 2016c).

In contrast, India lacks a comprehensive policy framework on immigration despite being a preferred destination for large numbers of migrants from various countries and the most from its neighbour in the east, Bangladesh. Rather than having a well-crafted immigration policy, India deals with immigration related issues on a case-by-case basis in a short-term ad hoc manner, e.g., inviting objections to inclusion or exclusion of particular person in the Voters List anywhere in India or in the National Register of Citizens in Assam on grounds of questionability of legitimacy of his/her Indian citizenship. Despite creating tension in some parts of the society and becoming a focal point of debate among the policy makers, the academia and the security forces, immigration has failed to generate a healthy debate on the issue, not to speak of an amicable policy stance.⁹

Since all the major source countries of migrants to India are other developing countries, where, like in the case of India, the majority of highly skilled professionals tend to migrate to the developed countries of the global north and the semi-skilled to the rich countries of the Gulf, only the unskilled and low-skilled are left with the option of crossing over to neighbouring India (Joseph and Narendran 2013). Because of factors like a shared history, contiguous and largely porous borders, and cultural and linguistic affinities, majority of migrants who come to India are poor, downtrodden and those who cannot afford going to the so-called “greener pastures of the west” in the global north.

Though over the decades the reasons for migration have become fairly diverse and the economic and political factors as well as social networking have emerged as the main forces propelling the migrants to enter into India, there were both push and pull factors at work: shrinking employment opportunities in the domestic economy, rapid population growth and poor living and working conditions at home in Bangladesh on the push side; and expanding economic opportunities and better chances of livelihood (Samadar 1999; Hazarika 2002, 2018; Samuels et al. 2011, Siddiqui 2013) and a thriving democracy in India on the pull side.

Though the contribution of Indian emigrants, especially the high-skilled professionals and knowledge workers and their eventual return, in the development of the host societies as well as in India, has been fairly debated and documented (Khadria 1999), systematic understanding about the contribution of immigrants in India is rather scarce (Nandy 2005; Joseph and Narendran 2013). This is because the mutually exclusive two-fold distinction between destination countries – what I have called the “hubs” - and the origin countries - the “hinterlands”, primarily determined by the dominant proportion of either immigrants or emigrants in the population of a particular country under consideration continues (Khadria 2011).

As I have argued elsewhere, Indian policy needs to differentiate between the stocks and flows of immigrants in the country (Khadria 2016a). It would no doubt be in the larger interest of India as a sovereign country to put an effective control on the unabated flows of illegal immigrants from across the borders and minimize them. At the same time, there are avenues for creating enough space to integrate their accumulated stocks and tap the potential contribution of involuntary immigrants in the social and

⁹ See Khadria (2009a, 2009b, 2009c).

economic development of the country. This would come through long-term and consistent investment in their human capital, provided the policy makers are ready for some fresh thinking on policy innovation (Khadria and Kumar 2015, Khadria 2016b). It would be quite apt to mention that, besides adding to the social and cultural diversity, like voluntary immigrants these involuntary immigrants too have been contributing to the Indian economy by putting their hard labour in various roles, particularly in the informal sectors as construction workers, domestic help, cleaners, bar and restaurant workers, petty traders and so on. Unfortunately, these have been overshadowed by the negativity of the criminal elements among those undocumented immigrants – those resorting to theft, robbery, trafficking etc. As a result, the positive contributions these immigrants make in destination countries have not been assessed or measured cardinally in terms of their quantitative share in these countries' gross domestic product (GDP). There is a need to facilitate evidence-based research and assessment of the immigrants' contribution in the destination economy with a new perspective (IOM 2019, chapter 5). In many countries, the parallel economy, where the illegal immigrants operate, mostly in the informal sectors, with payment of wages and salaries made through cash and unaccounted transactions rather than the banking or other formal channels, hides their marginal contribution over and above the natives operating in the same informal sectors. This applies to the contributions Bangladeshi immigrants make to the economy of India, irrespective of whether in the informal or parallel sectors.

5. Conclusion

The task of regulating the flow and deporting the irregular immigrants back to Bangladesh is indeed challenging. Some people suggest that a “bundle of multipronged, well-coordinated strategies pursued under an appropriate legal framework might be better able to address this problem in a more effective manner” (Tripathi 2016). Strategies suggested include (1) Enacting a national refugee law: So that refugees are clearly defined and can be distinguished from illegal immigrants, and forging a bilateral agreement between India and Bangladesh that provides for taking back nationals who stay illegally in the other country, after due verification. The main hurdle would be to successfully detect the Bangladeshi immigrants, assign them to separate categories of refugees and illegal migrants, resettle or repatriate them, and prevent any further influx. (2) Deterring migration at the source: Because the majority of them are economic migrants, a more lasting and effective solution would be through economic development in Bangladesh, particularly along the border with India. For this India and other donor countries and agencies need to work alongside Bangladesh.¹⁰ India may also consider linking its economic assistance to Bangladesh to the cooperation and support promised and received in reducing the migration problem. (3) Resorting to international cooperation: It has been pointed out that India has been a member of the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) Executive Committee since 1995 and that of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) since 2008. It may now consider being more proactive with the affairs of these two organizations. It is also highlighted that western countries, which generally used to see the refugee issue from an activists' viewpoint and were more concerned about refugees' rights and privileges, are now faced with a large influx of foreign population that is affecting their national security, may now be in a better position to appreciate India's concerns: “India should keep its options open to avail itself of advisory services or any other assistance offered by the UNHCR to deal with refugees from Bangladesh, particularly for repatriation or third-country settlement. The UNHCR's involvement may also help in preventing a further influx of refugees because its first priority has always been to engage with the

¹⁰ See DFID (2007).

country of origin to create conditions for the return of refugees that in turn help to prevent further outflow.”¹¹ Similarly, India may also consider availing itself of assistance from the IOM, which could act as a neutral party in the joint verification mechanism for assessing Bangladeshi immigrants’ status.

Notwithstanding the above long-term policy strategies that have been suggested, whether one likes it or not, it would be impossible to wish away the large stocks of “illegal”, “irregular” or “undocumented” Bangladeshi immigrants in India back into their country of origin within any conceivable length of time (Khadria 2016a, 2016b; Khadria and Kumar 2015). Apart from the difficulty of not being able to distinguish between a citizen of Indian origin and a Bangladeshi immigrant who had entered India illegally, because of common ethnicity, language and culture, the fact remains that they have lived in this country for decades, often over two or three generations, and will continue to stay. The flows too cannot be reversed but can at most be minimized and regulated to optimum levels of legal immigration. As a destination country it would be in India’s self-interest to nurture the adopted stocks of these cross-border involuntary immigrants by investing in their potential human capital - their education and their health, which have strong positive externality effects on the entire population, not distinguishing between legitimate Indian citizens and illegitimate Bangladeshi expatriates. In other words, *economic integration* rather than deportation must be the *mantra* of the immigration policy objective of “leaving no one behind” spelled out in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda whereby the governments have pledged to facilitate “Safe, Orderly, and Regular” migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies” (SDG target 10.7) (Khadria 2017). Such a strategy would receive further boost from the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) signed by all but a few Member-States of the United Nations at Marrakesh, Morocco in December 2018 (United Nations 2018b).

The bottom-line therefore for India would be to derive a lesson from the basic dictum of “self-interest” that the father of economics Adam Smith (1776) gave the world as the basic driver of individual human activity some two and a half centuries ago, and apply it in crafting an innovative cross-border immigration policy in dealing with involuntary and/or illegal migration to India from Bangladesh. This would help in the *optimization* of human capital formation in India and *maximization* of the contribution of immigrants to India’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) - both resulting in higher average productivity of the pan-Indian labour force – on an efficiency rationale, and not a charity or philanthropy-based welfare rationale.

¹¹ It is being argued that the UNHCR will be particularly effective because Bangladesh accepts the UNHCR’s assistance in the repatriation of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar.

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