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Bangladesh Illegal Immigration: Effects and Consequences

Abstract

Migration, a worldwide phenomenon, has often been seen as beneficial for both the sending and receiving countries. However, post-9/11, the phenomenon is seen as a mixed blessing. It is also being realized that it is impossible to check illegal migration unless the sending country cooperates. In South Asia, India has been at the receiving end of the problem of illegal immigration from Bangladesh. This paper argues that such illegal migration is posing a threat to internal security because the issue has not been properly securitized. Migrants seem to have successfully bypassed legal hurdles, which has kept certain territories out of reach even for Indian nationals. If Bangladesh’s internal politics and economic deprivation are major factors for this state of affairs, then permissiveness towards illegal immigration in Indian political circles is also responsible. The largely lenient political class has been prompted to take a close look at the issue as an increasing number of Bangladeshis has of late been found to be involved in terror activities.

Key Words: Migration, Security, Bengal, Demography, Infiltration, Smuggling, Illegal Bangladeshis, Chakmas, Hindus, North India.

Introduction

Migration has now come to be regarded as one of the new “security threat” as it involves not only human and personal security and human rights issues but also has internal and international security implications. Illegal immigrants are referred to those migrant across national borders in a way that violates the immigration laws of the destination country. Myron Weiner, a social scientist, identifies five broad categories of situations where refugees or migrants are perceived as a threat - to the country which produces the emigrants, to the country that receives them, and to relations between sending and receiving countries. The first is when refugees and migrants are regarded as a threat - or at least a thorn - in relations between sending and receiving countries, a situation which arises when refugees and migrants are opposed to the regime of their home country; second is when migrants and/or refugees are perceived as a political threat or security risk to the regime of the host country; thirdly, when immigrants are seen as a cultural threat; fourthly, as a social and economic problem for the host society; and finally—a new element growing out of recent developments in the Gulf—is when the host society uses immigrants
as an instrument of threat against the country of origin (Myron Weiner, 1993: 15). Officially recognized as a separate category of states, north-east refers to the easternmost region of India consisting of the contagious Seven Sister States. The presence of illegal Bangladeshi nationals in India remains the contentious issue that undercuts India-Bangladesh relations and is detrimental to security of India.

Historical Background

When the British occupied the north-east, it was largely uninhabited due to rivalries amongst the local tribes and massacres. Initially, under the British, the immigrant population from neighbouring regions like Bengal, Bihar and Nepal etc. were welcomed by the local people and were considered useful for the development of the region. But soon immigrants were seen as encroachers on their lands and reserve forest that affected demography and ecology of the area. Subsequently, in 1873, the British introduced Inner Line under the East Bengal Frontier Regulations of 1873 to restrict the immigrants, particularly Bengali Muslims (S D Muni, (ed.) 2006:78). However, it remained ineffective. In fact, better economic prospects, shortage of local labour and absence of insufficient mechanism have always been the reason for this influx.

After the partition of Bengal in 1905, the over-populated Muslim peasantry from East Bengal started crossing over to the fertile lands of thinly populated Brahmaputra and Surma valleys in the Northeast
corner of India. The formation of the All India Muslim League in Dhaka in 1906 encouraged the migration to increase the Muslim population in Assam for political reasons (R N P Singh, 2002: 32).

In the late nineteenth century, Bengalis became the dominant class in Assam particularly in the southern districts like Guwahati, Dibrugarh, Nogaon, Cachar, Karimganj and Hailkandi, that led to Bengali being made state language and the medium of instruction and the Assamese language was labeled as the dialect in 1937 (Ved Prakash, 2007: 695). Thus the illegal immigration and the policies of the government thereafter were responsible for the rise of separate distinct ethnic identity amongst the locals and the local immigrants. The rise of distinct ethnic identity was also responsible for the hostile attitude towards each other. A large influx of Bengalis during the late 1900s resulted in the dominance of Bengali culture and language in the north-east leading to anti-Bengali sentiment and anti-Bengali riots in 1960s which caused death, destruction and fleeing of Bengali population from the northeast.

When the British left India, the north-east was not affected by the communal riots during the partition. However, there was uncertainty due to influx of refugees who found themselves on the other side of the border. The north-east was suddenly surrounded by countries, each of which was competing for a share of the geo-political space (Vivek Chadha, 2005: 231). According to Professor Partho Ghosh, the illegal immigration from Bangladesh remains imbibed in the system due to the border demarcation done by Redcliff because the terrains remain complex and wishy-washy. This has led to the bad blood between Hindus and Muslims in the region. Both Hindus as well as Muslims were dissatisfied with the demarcation because suddenly they found themselves in a foreign land. He further notes that while illegal immigration was inevitable, the security of the region remained fragile. According to Professor Partho Ghosh, the illegal migration can be divided into three broad categories based on the phases. The first phase of migration was immediately after the partition that was the result of security. The second phase of illegal immigration was due to the Bengali revolt against the language law that was passed in Pakistan which made Urdu the national language in the country with more than 60% of Bengali speaking population. The third phase was related to economic opportunities as East Pakistan was an impoverished state as compared to West Pakistan. In the post-independence of the Bangladesh, impoverishment, ethnic persecution and political situation have induced illegal immigration (Partho Ghosh: 2009).

Soon after the partition, the Hindu minority of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) started migrating to India as the social fabric torn apart, economy shattered and administration paralyzed. Many East Pakistanis found themselves in economic denial and started migrating to India. Subsequently, the Immigrant (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950, was passed in the parliament which mentioned that only the people who were displaced because of civil disturbances in East Pakistan could migrate to India. The deportation of people, caused much antipathy in Pakistan, and finally in a conciliatory gesture, the Nehru-Liaquat Ali Khan Agreement of 8 April 1950 was signed which allowed the return of those people to India who had been deported till 31 December 1950. “This led to mass exodus of the minorities both ways” (Ved Prakash, 2007: 523).

However, during the Sino-India War of 1962, it was reported that some infiltrators were seen with Pakistani flags. This resulted in adoption of Prevention of Infiltration from Pakistan to Assam Plan (1964), (Vivek Chadha, 2005: 234). But atrocities in East Pakistan by the Punjabis (West Pakistan) in early 1970s led to unchecked entry of a large-scale Bangladeshi (then East Pakistanis) refugee into India.
Subsequently, the Indira-Mujib Agreement of 1972 redefined the status of illegal immigrants in India as it declared that all those who had come before 1971 were declared non-Bangladeshis.

The arrival of immigrants which continued even after the independence due to ethnic persecution of minorities and economic opportunities has changed the demography, culture, economy and ecology of the region. The constant change of the boundaries of Assam also led to demographic imbalance. In 1895, the North Lushai Hills were made part of Assam; this was soon followed by the inclusion of the South Lushai Hills and the Chittagong Hill Tracts, which had earlier been a part of Bengal. Then East Bengal was merged with Assam in 1905, reducing the Assamese to a minority in their own land. It led to the reversal of those decisions in 1912 (Ved Prakash, 2007:523). It had a political, social, economic and environmental implications leading to the people of north-east voicing their concerns that soon took explosive dimension, which the state and the centre failed to tackle with desired results.

Economically, the unchecked migration has increased the pressure on land, depletion of forest wealth, forcible occupation of government lands and host of other issues that have generated serious problems. However, according to Professor Partho Ghosh, the illegal immigration is not so much an economic problem as the people who are coming to India are contributing in the gross domestic production. But the illegal immigration is a political problem as they are affecting the vote bank and destabilizing the demography (Partho Ghosh, 2009). According to a Bangladeshi researcher “The close proximity can be used to the best advantage of both countries. It can create greater economic interdependence between Bangladesh and India which in my opinion will be an important force multiplier in bringing us closer. In the Financial Year 2007-2008 Tripura imported goods worth 150 Crore taka from Bangladesh, imagine if the trade can be enhanced how much benefit it can bring to the areas close to Tripura and the country as a whole. Similarly, despite the proximity there is little people to people contact between Bangladeshis and the people in the NE states, there is an opportunity to increase that as well (Bangladeshi Researcher (name upheld), 2008).” The massive migration of Hindus in 1960s resulted in agitation against the Marwaries on the Republic Day of 1968. It was due to the rice shortage. The hoardings by the Marwaries, who had exclusive control of all trade in essential commodities and extensive smuggling of rice to East Pakistan. It was observed that in Hojai, which was the rice bowl of Assam, had 0 percent collection of levy rice, while North Lakhimpur, constantly under floods had a 100 per cent figure for the same (E N Rammohan:12).

Chakmas, who also migrated from East Pakistan due to ethnic persecution, were treated as second class citizens in the north-east. They migrated to India due to lack of economic opportunities, under-developed social economic and health care facilities, ethnic killing of Chakmas by Bangladeshi extremists, displacement due to the construction of a dam across the Karnaphuli river at Kaptai in the CHT in late 1970s as well as deteriorating conditions of the minorities in Bangladesh. They were absorbed with the local population as they were scattered, small in number and the ethnic consciousness was still not assertive among the people of the north-east. In 1960s the Chakma refugees were rehabilitated in Tripura and Mizoram. However, the Mizo insurgency led to their rehabilitation in the then North East Frontier Agency (NEFA, presently Arunachal Pradesh).
Indira-Mujib Agreement of 1972

The Indira-Mujib Agreement of 1972 redefined the status of Chakma refugee in India as it declared that all those who had come before 1971 were declared non-Bangladeshis. In the subsequent years, Bangladesh denied the presence of its nationals including Chakmas in India thus, refused to repatriate. Subsequently, there was return of a large number of Chakma refugees to Bangladesh after various diplomatic exchanges between New Delhi and Dhaka. On their return, Chakma found their land occupied by the Bangladeshi settlers. In 1990s, the attacks on Chakmas made them flee to Assam. As per the 1972 understanding between India and Bangladesh, Bangladeshi nationals who came to India after March 25, 1971 would be sent back for resettlement. The Agreement had also put illegal infiltration under three categories: (a) the person convicted by court; (b) apprehended in the process of inadvertent or deliberate crossing over and; (c) all other categories of illegal entrants, i.e., identified as such in areas far from the border and in other states of India. The Indian security side has, however, been complaining that in reality the Bangladeshi side has been receiving the persons in category (b) only. With regard to persons in category (c), Bangladesh has been insisting on the complicated procedure of deportation through consular channels (R N P Singh, 2002: 146). The Agreement legalized the illegal entrants who had committed an offence under the Indian Citizenship Act (E N Rammohan, 27). The Agreement was highly resented by the natives of the north-east which resulted in a large scale agitation led by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP). The agitators pressurized the Assam government and Government of India to make arrangements to stop it by putting permanent barricades on the borders; detecting and deporting the foreigners out from the country; their names be deleted from the electoral rolls; the possibility of the inclusion of their names in the electoral rolls be eliminated by building up an adequate and strong election machinery; and the Indian voters in Assam be issued identity cards with photographs. Several rounds of talks between the student’s union leaders and the government representatives were held with regard to the issue of detection and deportation of illegal immigrants (R N P Singh, 2002: 137). The matter remained unresolved due to the differences over the cut-off year. The AASU favored the use of the National Register of Citizens of 1951 as the basis for establishing citizenship, whereas the Prime Minister insisted that 1971 be taken as cut-off year (Vivek Chadha, 2005:240). The rebel movement in Assam was finally launched in 1979.

Illegal Migrant (Determination by Tribunal) Act

Consequently, enactment of Illegal Migrant (Determination by Tribunal) Act or IMDT Act came into force in 1983. The Act was meant to detect and deport illegal migrants through tribunals. As against the Foreign Act of 1946, which confers upon Central Government certain powers in respect of entry of foreigners into India, their presence therein and their departure there from and which is applicable to the whole country, the IMDT Act is referred as “Illegal Migration (Protection by Tribunal) Act” by Harinmay Karleka as it makes the determination of illegal status most difficult given to the fact that
illegal immigration from Bangladesh was actively promoted by important political figures in Assam. Second, the complaint against a person for being illegal immigrant could only be filed by someone who lives within a 3 km radius of the residence of the accused and that the complaint’s affidavit had to be supported by that of another person who also lived within a range of 3 km from the residence of the accused. Third, the Act is applicable only to those arriving in India after 25 March 1971. Finally, the definition of illegal immigrant was mentioned as one without being in possession of a valid passport or any other travel document or any other lawful document. This made conviction difficult because one could always claim the loss of passport, and the responsibility to prove again fell on the litigant (Harinmay Karlekar, 2005:85).

The Home Ministry informed the AASU delegation in 1980 that 9, 67,000 immigrants had entered Assam during 1961-71; 2, 14,000 being displaced persons in the wake of 1965 Indo-Pak War and subsequent communal riots. The breakdown of the remaining 7, 53,000 illicit immigrants were given as Hindus- 631,000; Christians 30,000; Buddhists- 65,000 and Muslims-27,000 (Ved Prakash, 2007: 768). In 1974, Indian Border Security Force (BSF) detected a large number of people entering India with permits issued by the Bangladesh district authorities. The Indian High Commission in Dhaka contested the authority of the district officials to issue such permits. The Bangladesh Foreign Office dismissed such contention and mentioned that Bangladesh was allowing the return of Indian nationals who had migrated to Bangladesh under special permits (Avatar Singh, 2003).

The Union Ministry of Home Affairs admits that the functioning of the IMDT Act has been “unsatisfactory”, and in a presentation in mid-1999, in connection with a court case, disclosed that action under the Act had been taken as follows: Total enquiries (against suspected illegal migrants) initiated: 3,02,554; Enquiries referred to the Screening Committee: 2,96,564; Enquiry reports referred to the IMDT Tribunals: 31,264; Persons declared as illegal migrants by the IMDT Tribunals: 9,625; Number of illegal migrants expelled: 1,461 (Wasbir Hussain, The Hindu: 176). According to Sreeradha Datta, “due to ethnic, linguistic, cultural, physical and social similarities, Bangladeshi nationals tend to merge easily with the local population making it impracticable to identify them” (Sreeradha Datta, 2004:137). This is particularly true of West Bengal where they speak same language and have same facial features.

According to Wasbir Hussain, “There is need to make a clear distinction here, between indigenous Assamese-speaking Muslims and Bangladeshi migrants before analyzing the demographic and security implications of such population growth. Aside from Guwahati, Assam’s capital (that is part of the Kamrup Metro district), the heartland of the indigenous Assamese Muslims—whose origins can be traced to the forays of the pre-Mughals in the 13th century—is located around the tea growing eastern districts of Jorhat, Golaghat, Sivasagar and Dibrugarh. In Jorhat district the Muslims comprised just 3.89 per cent of the total population in 1971, rising to 4.32 per cent in 1991. The growth rate was 48.04 per cent between 1971 and 1991. In Sivasagar, Muslims accounted for 6.65 per cent of the population in 1971, climbing to 7.63 per cent in 1991; in Dibrugarh from 3.66 per cent of the total population in 1971 to 4.49 per cent in 1991; and in Golaghat, Muslims comprised 5.17 per cent of the population in 1971, rising to 7.11 per cent in 1991. It is interesting to note, in this context, that the growth rate of the Hindu population in Jorhat, Sivasagar, Dibrugarh and Golaghat was between 32 and 49 per cent over the 1971-1991 periods closely comparable to the rates of growth for the indigenous Muslim population. Evidently, the Muslim growth rate in areas dominated by indigenous Assamese speaking Muslims, located far from the
Bangladesh border, has been registering marginal increases, as compared to areas located close to the border (Wasbir Hussain, Asian Intelligence:2004).

According to the report of the Intelligence Bureau presented to the 38th Conference of Directors General and Inspector General of Police held in Delhi on 4-5 November 2003, there were 375,000 illegal Bangladeshis even in Delhi. The division bench of the Delhi High Court was formed comprising Chief Justice B.C.Patel and Justice A.K.Sikri, directing Delhi Police, on 22 September 2003, to identify and deport 3,000 illegal Bangladeshi immigrants per month Delhi government, however, told the court on 8 September 2004 that only 3,147 had been deported since February 2004 (The Pioneer, 2004).

The IMDT Act could not resolve perennial immigrant problem in the north-east. Subsequently, the Assam Accord of 1985 was conceded, which fixed the cut-off date to determine illegal migrants in Assam was March 25, 1971, the day Bangladesh was born. The Accord mentioned that all those migrants who had come and settled in the state on or before this date shall be regarded as citizens and those illegal migrants who are found to have arrived in the state after this date are to be detected and expelled in accordance with the law (Assam Accord, South Asian Terrorist Portal). With the signing of Assam Accord, the rebel groups launched a militant struggle against the government as they asked government to revoke the Accord and instead enact a law that deports all illegal immigrants irrespective of their time of immigration.

In 2001, the IMDT Act was challenged in the Supreme Court by Sarbananda Sonowal, a former President of the AASU seeking a declaration that the IMDT Act was unconstitutional. It led the Supreme Court of India to set aside IMDT Act in 2005. The Court mentioned that IMDT Act “has created the biggest hurdle and is the main impediment or barrier in the identification and deportation of illegal migrants.” It directed the State Government to constitute sufficient number of tribunals under the Foreigners Act to deal with the situation effectively. The decision was seen as detrimental to the interests of millions of Bangladeshi immigrants in the country (D N Bezboruah, 2006: 53).

In February 2006, the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs, chaired by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh dropped the idea of enacting legislation in lieu of the controversial IMDT Act and decided to amend the Foreigners Act to ensure that anybody whose citizenship is in doubt gets a ‘fair hearing’. In fact, it means that tribunals would be set up in Assam under the Foreigners Act, 1946, as was the case when the IMDT Act was in force, to examine the veracity of complaints against suspected Bangladeshi migrants. A tribunal hearing is, however, not mandatory anywhere else. This decision by the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs was reportedly taken after a recommendation from the Congress Government in Assam. Subsequently, the Supreme Court in December 2006 held that the Foreigners (Tribunals for Assam) Order 2006, which puts the onus of providing a person a foreigner on the complainant as unconstitutional (D N Bezboruah, 2006:53).
Implications of Illegal Immigration

The illegal immigration is one of the main reasons for the beginning of the insurgency in the northeast. The South Asian Terrorism Portal website has listed 38 insurgent groups in Assam. Prominent among them are the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), Dina Halim Daigah (DHD), United Liberation Front of Barak Valley (ULFBV), and Kamtapur Liberation Organization (KLO) (Assam Assessment 2009, South Asia Terrorist Portal). Many of the small groups are the offshoot of major groups. The objective of most of the groups is independence from the India which is the stumbling block for peace in the region. Most of these groups are not just terrorist groups; they are organizations, having a rigid and clear cut philosophy and a well coordinated system of action. According to Professor Partho Ghosh, for ULFA the illegal immigration is no more an issue. They now want independence as they feel Indian government is responsible for their economic, social and political deprivation and for a step motherly treatment. However, their demand is irrational because even if Assam becomes independent, the population pressure of Bangladesh will engulf them in no time. They are no match to Bangladesh’s demography and military. At the same time, ULFA has no experience of establishing a state within a state like LTTE and cannot challenge the Indian state. The very fact that ULFA is not even active beyond its own region shows the limited potency of ULFA (Partho Ghosh, 2009).

As a matter of fact, soon after the signing of the Assam Accord, the Bangladeshi Muslims who had initially identified themselves as Assamese speaking started registering themselves as Bengali speaking. It is alleged that the political leadership has supported illegal immigration of Bangladeshi because they constitute themselves as committed voters for such leadership. These immigrants were clandestinely provided with ration cards and their names were included in the voters’ list. “Their ability to obtain ration cards and also to enroll themselves as voters not only gives them a backdoor entry to Indian citizenship but also provides them with a political clout that facilitates the settlement of more Bangladeshi illegal migrants in India”, (R N P Singh, 2002:145). However, according to Professor Partho Ghosh, the Assamese Muslims, who had assimilated themselves with rest of the Assamese population, has not identified themselves with the Muslims of Bangladesh due to the ethnic cleansing organized against Muslims (Interview with Partho Ghosh, 2009).

Earlier the large scale of infiltration and illegal immigration was highlighted during the Mangaldoi constituency of Darrang district by-election. As the voters list of the constituency was updated, it was found that out of the list of 600,000 voters, objections were raised to the inclusion of 70,000 voters, on the grounds that they were foreigners. This led to the setting up of a tribunal by the Chief Minister, Gopal Bora. The tribunal declared that 45,000 of them to be foreigners leading to the postponement of the Mangaldoi elections till the mid-term poll. This accentuated the problem and led the chief minister to direct deletion of the names of foreigners from the voters list; however, his directions could not be implemented as his government fell on September 4, 1979 (Vivek Chadha, 2007:238). Subsequent election results that have brought in considerable Muslim population in the state legislative assembly reflect the growing clout of the Bangladeshi immigrants in the political process of the region. Recently Assam’s former Governor, Lt Gen. (Retd.) S.K. Sinha mentioned that if unabated infiltration of foreigners is
allowed to continue, the situation in Assam will be worse than that of Kashmir in days to come and one should not be surprised if a Bangladeshi national manages to become the Chief Minister of the State. He was even quoted as saying that “The influx of these illegal migrants is turning these districts into a Muslim majority region. It will only be a matter of time when a demand for their merger with Bangladesh may be made” (Economic Times: 2009). Any attempt to delete the names of illegal immigrants from the electoral rolls and their subsequent expulsion from India raises ever louder howls in the name of “protection of minorities rights” and on humanitarian grounds. The overall Muslim population of the north-east has grown from 16 to 18 percent in 1950s and 1960s to over 40 percent now. The demographic imbalance in the north-east can be understood by comparing the annual and decadal population growth rate of India and Assam which reflects an astonishing figure (Ved Prakash, 2007:755).

The Muslim population in Assam is 30 per cent which is next to Lakshadweep and Jammu and Kashmir. While a line of demarcation between the Hindus and the Muslim living in upper Assam in terms of education and economic development could not be drawn because of social setting. However, the Muslim populations living in lower Assam, most of these immigrants from Bangladesh, are backward economically and educationally. Their children study in private madrassas which are unregistered and which do not have a uniform and regulated curriculum.

Some of these madrassas are based on hate campaign against other religious communities (Abu Nasair Syed Ahamad, 2007:191). In January 2009, the then Union Home Minister, P.Chidambaram said that “I don't regard a Bangladeshi as a Muslim or a non-Muslim. He is a Bangladeshi. He has no business to come to India unless he has a visa. He has no business to live here unless he has residence permit. He has no business to work here unless he has a work permit. He is a Bangladeshi. His religion is completely irrelevant” (The Economic Times, 2009)

Tripura has a different type of infiltration problem. A large number floating Bangladeshi population crosses the border at daybreak for work and return home at sunset. They go for work each morning—men are mostly rickshaw-pullers; women are mainly maids and children as rag pickers— and return to Bangladesh in the evening (Ved Prakash, 2007: 792). “Tripura is the only state in the North-East where the indigenous people (read ‘the sons of soil’) have been outnumbered after India’s independence by the exogenous group! The uncontrolled post-1947 influx of Hindu migrants from East Pakistan outnumbered the tribal majority population which consequently has been declining gradually, and sometime steeply, from 1931 Census onwards till 1981 Census. The 1991 Census proved a turning point (S Sailo, 1993), because the tribal population percentage registered an increase for the first time since 1931. It rose from 5, 83,920 (28.44 percent) in 1981 to 8, 53,245 (30.95 per cent) in 1991. But earlier, the reduction of tribal population from 50.09 per cent in 1941 to 28.95 per cent in 1971 had posed a threat to state's tribal identity”(Ved Prakash, 2007:2265).

In 1999, Nagaland set up a Committee of Officials to examine the influx of “suspected Bangladesh migrants into the state and devise measures to deal with it”. It was formed in response to the concerns expressed by various organizations and individuals, including the Governor, on the alarming rise of illegal immigration to the state. Unofficial figures put the influx of such persons at over 60,000, mostly settled in and around Dimapur, working as agricultural labourers in the foothills and plains area, besides doing other manual jobs. It is also noted that the State Chief Electoral Officer had directed the officials to ensure that no bogus names were included in electoral rolls during the then ongoing process
of special roll revision. He also pointed out that “there has been an ‘abnormal increase’ of more than 3 per cent in the electorate during the special revision in most of the constituencies, contrary to the national average annual increase of 2.5 per cent (Ved Prakash, 2007:2166).

Besides, sections of border population are being subverted with the circulation of anti-India and fundamentalist propaganda originating from Bangladesh. According to Bangladeshi researcher, “the wall of mistrust that has gradually erected over the years needs to be brought down. Both countries have concerns which need to be addressed. We need to identify what are the irritants that are causing problems and then look at a fresh approach to get rid of them. There needs to be more dialogue between Bangladesh and India at all levels. If we can identify very specifically what those problems that has led to trust deficits, then we can make headway (Bangladeshi Researcher, (name upheld), 2008).” During Oct-Nov 2001, calendars iconising Osama-bin-Laden were found in circulation in Karimganj district of Assam. Police also seized CDs and audio cassettes in Tezpur in November 2001 propagating fundamentalism. Again in Nov 2002, Karimganj police discovered a large number of audio cassettes containing inflammatory anti-India speeches of Moulana Dilawar Hussain Syeeedi, a JEI-BD MP. Apart from the material glorifying Osama-bin-Laden, a large number of cassettes glorifying Saddam Hussein have been in circulation on both the sides of the border (R N P Singh, 2002:149). There are also security threats due to the rise of Islamic militancy that has started consolidating itself particularly because Bangladeshi infiltration remains unchecked and illegal immigration continues to be sensitive issue that is misused for political purpose. There are a dozen Muslim extremist organizations working in the region like: Muslim Liberation Tiger of Assam (MULTA); Muslim United Liberation Front of Assam (MULFA); United Muslim Liberation Front of Assam (UMLFA); Muslim Liberation Army (MLA); Muslim Security Council of Assam (MSCA); Muslim Security Force (MSF); Muslim Tiger Force (MTF); Muslim Volunteer Force (MVF); Harkat-ul- Jihad (HUJ); Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HUM); Islamic Liberation Army of Assam (ILAA); Islamic Sevak Sangh (ISS); Islamic United Reformation Protest of India (IURPI); Islamic Revolutionary Front (IRF); Islamic National Front (INF); United Islamic Liberation Army (UILA); United Islamic Revolutionary Army (UIRA); and Zomi Revolutionary Volunteers (ZRV). It is reported that HUM and HUJ are directly raised by ISI and thus are the most fanatical in their ideology. The purpose of these organizations is to spread Islamic fundamentalism in the entire north-east. Among others, the report names Jamaat-e-Islami and Islamic Chhatra Shibir, organizations which have maintained an anti-India stance are supporting the insurgent groups.

There is also a rise of madrassas in the border areas. According to the BSF survey, while Kolkata, the state capital and a city of 14 million, had only 131 seminaries (read madrassas) and 67 mosques, the small border town of Krishnanagar in Nadia District had 404 seminaries and 368 mosques. Many of them, particularly those recognized by the government, stick to their students, who are often from deprived background (Hiranmay Karlekar, 2005:80).

Wasbir Hussain succinctly notes that “The population explosion in Bangladesh, with 2.8 million added every year in one of the poorest and most densely populated countries in the world, creates the push factors for this silent demographic invasion. These are, however, compounded by an expansionist political ideology, implicitly or explicitly supported in the corridors of power in Bangladesh: the idea of Lebensraum (living space), which has been variously projected by the country’s leadership for a long time, though the use of the expression itself is relatively recent” (Wasbir Hussain, 2004). “Bangladesh can
hardly de-link itself from its neighbourhood and the wider milieu of nations. The Bengalis of Bangladesh thus have been developing what Howard Stein calls a sense of ‘psychogeography’ a mental map of belonging, even though spatially they may be situated in other countries of the world (Howard F Stein, 1987:147). Even pro-Indian President of Bangladesh like Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rehman had once said “East Pakistan must have sufficient land for its huge population and Assam will give it full scope for expansion”.

Bangladesh, one of the world’s most densely populated and poorest countries, has suffered an increase in the intensity and frequency of climate-related problems. The United Nation Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has predicted that Bangladesh could lose nearly one-fifth of its land by 2050 because of rising sea levels due to global warming (Ruma Paul, 2008).

The issue of illegal immigration from Bangladesh has been brought to the notice of Bangladesh Government over several occasions. The Government of India has also taken a number of steps including tightening of border security, deploying a large number of paramilitary forces and intensifying patrolling to stop illegal infiltration. However, the illegal immigration of people from across the border still continues (R N P Singh, 2002:151). Efforts by Indian security agencies to push back illegal Bangladeshi migrants have been until now obstructed by erstwhile Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) and the Bangladeshi Government refuses to acknowledge that these are Bangladeshi migrants and propagates that India is pushing back Bengali speaking Indian Muslims (R N P Singh, 2002:146). According to Professor Partho Ghosh, “Illegal immigration is an issue we have to live with but it is important for us to manage it” (Partho Ghosh)

At the same time there is a decline in the Hindu population in Bangladesh since the partition. There was about 31% of Hindu population in 1947 that dropped down to 19% in 1961. By 1974, the Hindu population further declined to 14% and in 2002, it was estimated that the Hindu population in Bangladesh was only about 9% of the total population (S K Datta, 2002: 89).

According to Sreeradha Dutta, “The question of influx of Hindu refugees from Bangladesh into India has been closely intertwined with the larger issue of illegal immigration from Bangladesh. Despite the absence of statutory regulations, it is essential to differentiate ‘refugees’ from ‘illegal immigrants’. People who flee Bangladesh due to persecution and seek refuge in India such as Bangladeshi Hindus and Chakmas are treated as refugees. Those Bangladeshi who cross over into India seeking livelihood or economic migrants are treated as ‘illegal migrant’. There is another category of Bangladeshi who commute daily to their jobs in India but do not stay over (Sreeradha Datta, 2004: 138).” Thus the layered and complex issue of illegal immigrants and refugees, backed by political interests, has in fact made the migration of Bangladeshi immigrants easier.

There are also fears that foreign agencies including the ISI of Pakistan are using this easy practice of migration from Bangladesh to set up cocoons of terrorists in India to destabilize the political systems and create instability in the country (R N P Singh, 2002:142). It is widely believed that Islamic militancy has been consolidating because of unabated Bangladeshi immigration. There are a dozen extremist organizations working in the north-east. Some of these organizations are directly raised by Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), thus, are the most fanatical in their ideology and are maintaining anti-Indian stance. “The Army has identifies villages with ‘curious’ population mix, in and around Siliguri...
that provide safe haven for the ISI operatives. Chapra is one such village, 55 km from Siliguri, with the population of 25,000, the nerve centre for illegal border trade and fake currency racket of Saudi Riyals and other currencies. There is Islampur, a town 70 km from Siliguri, with a population of 1 lakh, a known ‘stronghold and hub of ISI functionaries’. The town has a skewed demographic mix: some 2,000 Pushto and Baluchi settlers from Afghanistan, engaged in money laundering and ‘suspected ISI activists’; 6,000 Iranians who settled here in late 1960s, all of them without any vital documents and involved in narcotics smuggling; and some Saudis who ‘indulge in smuggling and other illegal activities’ (Ved Prakash, 2007:784).

The interrogation of Md. Nurul Haq by the BSF in Cooch Behar district in September 2003 revealed that there were camps of the MULTA being run in Bangladesh with the help of Pakistani instructors, to train Muslim youths for creating an independent nation. The training includes both indoctrination and handling of weapons and explosives. Haque further revealed that MULTA had been inducting weapons into India for the last two years, and those were being coached at different locations in Barpeta district. The recruitment was done mainly from amongst the poor and illiterate migrant Muslims. The trained recruits were told to await instructions after which acts of violence would be launched targeting, in particular, the security forces (R N P Singh, 2002:149).

To conclude, despite their serious demographic, economic, security and political ramifications in the north-east, these developments continue to remain substantially outside the realm of the security discourse in the country. Bangladeshi infiltration remains unchecked and illegal immigration continues to be sensitive issue that is exploited by vested political interests. Meanwhile, the Bangladesh government claims that there is not even a single Bangladeshi migrant in India. Additionally, deportation policy may seem ‘un-implementable’ and can be regarded as ‘inhumane practice’ raising international criticism particularly when the deported population is not accepted by the Bangladeshi government which demands them to prove their Bangladeshi nationality.

A decade of agitation by the rebel groups, both peaceful and violent over the illegal foreign national issue, has not brought concrete success. Further, unresolved border problem of enclaves and adverse possessions along with the difficult terrain keep the border porous and open for easy infiltration. Additionally, recent mutiny by Bangladesh Rifles has also made the borders porous and unguarded on the Bangladesh side and thus enabling illegal migration from there much easy.

Illegal migration and their settlement will remain a security challenge for India if no immediate concrete actions are taken that would involve deporting and checking illegal immigration. In fact, the deportation of the illegal Bangladeshi migrants has the potential to create a major political and communal problem particularly the people involved have the support of the politicians (R N P Singh, 2002:143). Border security and border management on India’s eastern border needs to be looked upon as an important national security issue. This issue of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants should be taken up seriously by the security forces and the political leadership without any vested interests.
Conclusion

Illegal immigration unfettered can create security threats at the individual, national and international levels, such as exploitation of migrants, social tensions and economic and political instability. To check illegal immigration establishing and maintaining adequate border controls is imperative. However, border control has to be strong enough to stop illegal activity, but not so strong that it impedes the flow of business and other legal travelers. States need to develop legislative and administrative mechanisms that stem the flow of irregular migration. It is important that Foreign Act 1946 is enforced in the northeast like the rest of India. However, control mechanisms must be balanced so that national security concerns do not override the human rights of the irregular migrant. BSF and Bangladesh border security personnel needs to work out strategies to deal with organized criminal activities in the border areas. Further creating awareness among the local population that the new groups could turn against them and harm their interests can check the illegal immigration. There have been efforts to design programs involving the local citizenry particularly the village elders in detecting illegal migrants by K.P.S. Gill, the then Assam cadre Indian Police Service official. Also a comprehensive and continuous process of the proper mapping and movement of populations in the region is another essential aspect of any effective border management policy and checking illegal immigration. Detailed population profiles of the border areas need to be created, documenting ethnicity, attitudes towards terrorist and separatist groups, levels of interaction with mainstream politics, engagement in illegal and subversive activities, and attitudes towards security forces.

Illegal migrants must be denied all benefits flowing from the government, and their access to private sector employment, as well as acquisition of properties must also be curtailed. A process of gradually disenfranchising the illegal migrants needs to be initiated. A solution to the problems of illegal migrants also needs to factor in the easy employment opportunities currently available to them. To this end, once an effective identification system is in place, employers should face strong penalties for employing illegal aliens. Legislative changes also need to be brought about, making any transaction of immovable properties with illegal aliens void. These measures are imperative if the flow of illegal immigrants is to be curtailed, and if the existing system of incentives for such migration is to be dismantled. Preventing unauthorized settlements along the borders and initiate special development programmes will restrict illegal migration. Promoting the concept of Village Voluntary Forces (VVF) in the border districts and facilitating legitimate trade between the two countries will aid border security and border management. It is also important to strengthen local education, economic opportunities and training programmes and incentives must be offered to encourage people to stay in their country of origin. Bilateral cooperation and capacity building in can be seen as a key in achieving the desired end. In case both countries wish to develop close bilateral economic relations, they have to not only allow cross-border investment and transfer of technology, but also to facilitate market access to a wide range of small and middle-sized businesses. Bangladeshi handicrafts, ethnic clothing, Jamdani Sarees, marine, poultry and dairy products, fruits and vegetables could then be easily exported to India. It is more convenient to buy goods and services from each other than from distant sources. Finally, a twin approach, social and diplomatic and military-to-military Confidence Building Measures can go a long way in stemming the institutionalization of terrorism in Bangladesh, which would have a direct effect on India’s security. In fact, this could be a basis to a South Asian Task Force to deal with terrorism in the region, suggested by
none other than Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina when India’s External Affairs Minister, Pranab Mukherjee, visited Dhaka in February 2009. In order to check political and economic instability in Bangladesh, India needs to come up with proper and timely assistance. Politically, this can be done by assisting Bangladesh in state building. Economically, both countries can work towards establishing a free trade zone and transit facilities. Economic inter-dependence will ensure social, political and economic security.

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