

ENVIRONMENTALLY INDUCED MIGRATION AND SOCIAL CONFLICTS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Environmental crisis in the developing countries is increasingly becoming an important cause of cross-border migration of population and has been a major reason for social conflicts. South Asia is no exception to this phenomenon, going through major environmental crisis, social conflicts and political instability. The movement of population in the Indo-Bangladesh context is generating a range of destabilising socio-political, economic, ethnic and communal tensions in India. It has embittered Indo-Bangladesh relations, causing tensions between the two countries. This paper focuses on environmental crisis as a reason for the continued migration of people from Bangladesh to India. It shows that scarcity of land and water in the Bangladesh, caused by rapid population growth, environmental change and unequal resource distribution and development, are causing widespread landlessness, unemployment, declining wages and income, growing income disparities and degradation of human habitat. The affected people, unable to satisfy their needs in an economically less-developed Bangladesh, are increasingly moving to India where the prospect of life appears to be better.

Keywords: *Environmental Crisis, Social Conflict, Security Threat, Migration*

I. INTRODUCTION

“Recently non-military threats to security have moved to the forefront of global concern. Underdevelopment, as well as mismanagement and waste of resources, constitutes challenges to security, the degradation of the environment presents a threat to sustainable development...mass poverty, illiteracy, disease, squalor and malnutrition affecting a large portion of the world’s population often become the cause of social strain, tension and strife” (Fisher,1933:10)

Environmental crisis manifest themselves as a cause of conflicts. In recent years, South Asian region is undergoing through the various environmental crisis, social and political instability. India being one of the fastest growing economies of the world and most developed among the countries of South Asia provides various opportunities for economic and social growth. India's growing economy, stable political system, a wide variety of natural resources and cultural diversity has turned it into a safe and better destination for the people to migrate from across the neighbouring countries. Though India’s history provides a record of migration from people across the world but, these days due to rapid population growth and scarcity of natural resources the problem of cross-border migration has turned into a serious problem and threat to India’s security.

This paper focuses on discovering the sequence of environmental degradation-displacement-social conflicts. The paper begins with an introductory note on trends of migration from Bangladesh to India. An attempt has been made to give brief understanding of the emergence of the problem, its causes, and impacts on India’s security. In the last, a possible roadmap is suggested with some practical solutions to the problem. The major findings of the study is that

scarcity of basic necessities like land, water, changing environmental conditions, political instability, social disparities, triggered by massive population growth, environmental degradation, reducing agricultural productivity, unequal resource distribution are causing extensive landlessness, unemployment, declining wages and level of income, growing social differences and humiliation of human habitat have forced people of Bangladesh to migrate to India. The study suggests that the flow of migration would continue persistently, perhaps at a greater rate, unless remedial measures are taken by India.

II. MIGRATION AN OVERVIEW

The phenomenon of migration is as old as civilisations. A Search of secure habitat and better livelihood has motivated the massive movement of people from one place to another that became an indispensable part of each and every civilisation. This mobility has always played a vital role in the structural transformation of the societies that gave rise to many social conflicts. However, migration from the ancestral land and their settlement, de jure or de facto, in the host country poses some concerns for both the nations.^[1] If peeped up under South Asian scenario, the national, regional and international mobility is on rise today.

The flow of migration from Bangladesh to India dates back to 1947, at the time of partition, when number of people fled to adjacent states of India like Assam and West Bengal- especially the Hindus – in search of safe home and to escape the anger of the then Pakistani military. It continued even after partition. During the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, it is estimated that about 10 million people moved to India.^[2] Out of them, many returned after the war but, a sizeable number stayed behind. Even after the announcements of Indian governments in 1971, to grant Indian citizenship to all the immigrant people till then, the problem has existed due to the porosity of the border with the growing economic opportunities as an additional push factor.

According to a UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Report, India was ranked ninth in 2010, accounts for receiving 2.5% of all international migrants (5,436,012); and Bangladeshi migrants pose most focal point of attention in India.^[3] Bangladeshi's regularly crosses the borders through many unofficial transit points. The presence of dense forest, hills, and similar jute or paddy fields makes the border porous to cross. In some cases, the boundary line was so undefined that the part of house or a village falls in between the line of border.^[4]

After 1991-2001, the movement of immigrants shows a stark downturn. This was the time when, there was a drastic change in the pattern of movement of migrants. Earlier the migrated population was confined to only neighbouring Indian states of Bangladesh like West Bengal, Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya. But, in the recent years, migrants started moving in the far off states of the border like Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Delhi where there is a constant demand of cheap labour.^[5] It has been reported that there are approximately 20 million illegal Bangladeshis living in various parts of India.^[6] Politicisation of the issue by politicians on religious ground and to raise vote bank has played an important role in migrants' entry. Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF) estimated that Bangladeshi migrants influenced the results of elections up to 32% in Assam.^[7]

This unidirectional continued flow of migrants from Bangladesh to India has been due to a wide variety of multi-dimensional and inter-related factors—socio-economic, political, religious and environmental. Often, India got an abrupt and instantaneous flow of Bangladeshi migrants due to some sudden incident, likewise in 1947, 1971 and 1980's. But, this type of instant migration activity didn't continue after the incident gets over.^[8]

So, the continuous and uninterrupted movement of population from Bangladesh to India has been taking place for reasons other than socio-economic, political and religious. Environmental crisis and its consequences in Bangladesh is one of the most prominent factors for the flow of migration these days. This paper emphasises on an impact of environment crisis in cross-border movement of population from Bangladesh to India that resulted in social conflict.

III. ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION IN BANGLADESH

Agriculture is the prime source of economy of Bangladesh, contributes almost 30% to the gross domestic product. The Land use pattern estimates that more than 53% of the land is under agriculture.^[9] Notwithstanding the importance of land for development, Bangladesh presents a Malthusian nightmare, with a big population on too little land.^[10] The man land ration for sustainable food production is already very unfavourable (0.15 acre per capita) with little scope of increase, due to rapid population growth, land degradation, uneven land distribution and land use conflicts.

The massive population growth added more serious threat to the environment. According to fifth five-year plan, the country's population would be 169.8 million by 2020.^[11] The country's population has tripled in last fifty years, giving rise to a demand of non-agricultural uses of land for the expansion of industrial areas, construction of various developmental projects and rapid rate of urbanisation. As a result, fertile agricultural land is being diverted for the construction of roads, complexes, highways, flood protection embankments, etc.^[12]

Various developmental activities have turned landless households to labours that are migrated to urban areas within or outside the country. According to the report, the percentage of landless households (i.e., households without homesteads) vis-à-vis the total households are decreasing at the rate of 3 per cent per year.^[13] For Kaptai Hydroelectric Project, a huge lake was constructed, drowning 40% of the arable lands, about 100, 000 hill people lost their lands, and above all 40,000 of them crossed the border and settled in India.^[14]

Apart from land scarcity, the freshwater resources in Bangladesh also facing a serious threat. Despite being endowed with an abundant water resource, the country is facing a serious problem of degraded quality and declining quantity of freshwater due to pollution in rivers, overuse of water for commercial and domestic use, depletion of underground water level, shrinkage of inland water bodies due to encroachment of agriculture fields and so on.

The geographical location of Bangladesh makes it prone to natural calamities. Each year, extreme natural calamities like cyclones, river bank erosion, accompanied by storm surges, floods and droughts cause human casualties. Apart from this, they also cause loss to crops; livestock, forestry and physical infrastructure (*see Table below*).

Major Natural Calamities in Bangladesh: Their Geographical Spread

Type of Calamity	Geographical Spread
River bank erosion	Severe and most recurrent in 35 up zilas of the a country
Cyclones with storm surges	Severe cyclones with storm surges reach as far as 200 kilometres inland.
Floods	On an average, one-fifth of the total country's area goes under water annually. During severe floods, the affected area exceeds 36% of the country and nearly 60% of the net cultivated area.

Source [15][16][17]

Natural calamities coupled with human-induced environmental disaster, have created havoc for the deprived and marginalised section of the society, compelling them to move into vulnerable areas like low-lying marshy lands, cyclone-prone belt and offshore islands, leaving them exposed to environmental disaster. Consequently, at the time of any natural calamity, the affected population forced to migrate to safer and better destinations. One study suggests, that the number of people crossing over to India increases during periods of environmental disaster.^[18]

IV. LINKS BETWEEN ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS AND MIGRATION

The movement of people on the permanent or temporary basis from one region to another usually inspired for the search of better livelihood and to get rid of life-threatening crises. However, environmental stress and degradation has emerged as a serious threat to the life of people of developing countries, that unprecedented numbers of people migrates from native place to another in search of better livelihood.^[19]

There are three important sources of environmental crisis: environmental change, population growth and uneven resource distribution.^[20] Environmental change can be defined as deterioration in the quality and quantity of a renewable resource. This decline occurs faster than it is renewed by natural processes. Every day changes including soil erosion, salination, deforestation and various types of pollution, in addition to episodic changes like floods, drought and similar disasters collectively leads to environmental crisis.^[21]

Population growth is no doubt causes the environmental crisis. Population growth increases the demand of consumption, so do economic activities in order to keep pace with demands. This, in turn, leads to decline in the productivity of the resources due to their overuse. As a result, the per capita availability of a resource gets reduced.

The Environmental crisis is also caused by the uneven distribution of environmental resources. Natural resources are concentrated in certain geographical units and it sometimes confined to some hands of the society, making them scarce for the remaining population.

Interaction among these three creates profound socio-economic stresses and increases human vulnerability, which sometimes turned to social conflicts. Homer Dixon^[22] has identified common patterns of interaction—resource capture (i.e., economic marginalisation) and spatial (i.e., ecological) marginalisation. *Resource capture* happens due to severe deterioration in the quality and quantity of renewable natural resources with steady population growth encourages powerful groups of the society to deviate the resource distribution in their favour engulfing the claims of weaker and deprived groups of the society. *Ecological marginalisation* occurs when already massive population growth and uneven distribution of resources compels deprived and poor population to shift to ecologically fragile areas such as coastal regions, riverbanks, hill tracts etc. Immense population pressure, lack of knowledge and capital to protect the local resources, accounts blatant damage to vulnerable ecology and causes chronic poverty.^[23]

Economic and spatial marginalisation caused by everyday environmental change typically increases the vulnerability of the poor to episodic change, breaking down previous defence mechanisms against ecological stress.^[24] One of the major consequences of these two patterns of interaction has been the migration of people from one region to another within a state or from one state to other neighbouring states as environmental migrants.^[25]

The Above discussion can be evidentially seen in Bangladesh which is the main focus the paper. The country is passing through a massive environmental stress point, with extreme pressure of large population on limited natural resources. Uneven distribution and scarcities of natural resources triggered by intense population growth, uneven resource distribution and environmental degradation, are causing ecological and economic marginalisation of the

deprived population. Already, Almost 80 percent of Bangladesh's population lives in the rural areas, out of which 53% are classified as poor living at the subsistence margin by the World Bank. While the country's population is growing rapidly, producing a bigger labour force, the shrinking land base is resulting in a decline in cultivated areas at a rate of 1 percent per year. As per 2011 estimation, the population density of Bangladesh is 964 per sq. km, one of the highest in the world.^[26] Furthermore, recurrence of natural disasters in the form of cyclones, riverbank erosion and floods worsens their conditions. These natural calamities left them homeless; the sluggish urban industrial economy is incapable of absorbing such a large population. The absence of hope of survival in other parts of their own country, leaves them with no other option but, forced to migrate to India which provides more stable conditions to survive comparably.^[27]

V. ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS AND SOCIAL CONFLICTS

It is important to note that migration induced by environmental crisis has the potential to aggravate conflict in India and it may be a stress multiplier by accumulating existing socio-economic fault lines or by increasing competition for land, water, ethnic tension, distrust. It is apparent from the instances likewise in Assam, 2012,^[28] that pressure of massive population growth on limited natural resources has been a decisive factor for conflict between insiders and alien population.

The socio-economic impacts of the migration can be seen at various levels of the society, the region receiving the migrant community will face pressure, which adversely affects the development and security of the country. It is expected that due to ethno-cultural linkages and economic opportunities India receives a massive influx of migration population. Migration into high populated area leads to more complex challenges like the expansion of slums, environmental degradation and spread of diseases. Lack of protection from state authorities, the absence of basic necessities, feeling of dispossession and helplessness exposes the migrant population to involve in illegal activities which is a threat to internal security of the country.

To date, it is difficult to accurately isolate examples where climate change is driving conflict or is the core reason for migration. Yet, there are increasing numbers of examples where the impact of local or regional climate change is placing major stress on weak or conflict-prone states with potentially disastrous results. In a major January 2011 report to the European commission, the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London reaffirmed that, **“In areas with weak or brittle states, climate change will increase the risks of resource shortages, mass migrations and civil conflict.”**^[29]

VI. FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

From the above discussion, the linkages between environmental change induced migration and its impact on the security of India are slowly coming to the forefront. However, the linkages are more theoretical than a certainty due to lack of proper statistical data and study of the problem. It is a time when it will be important for Indian defence, diplomacy, and planners wings to carefully consider the priorities in coming years. There are number of issues that need to be solving in upcoming future:-

- To link the regional and global pattern of environmentally induced migration, more intense and exhaustive study of south Asian environment crisis is needed.

- Although, it is clear that the changing climatic factors are adversely affecting the monsoon cycles of the region, which will cause a decline in agricultural productivity of Bangladesh and India both. Estimation of such adverse impacts and its solution must be studied deeply.
- Rapid population growth, lack of financial and technological capacity and political will, declining natural resources and increasing poverty in Bangladesh will encourage the population to migrate to India. It will be increasingly difficult to break this vicious circle, which implies clear essential for further work.
- In context to India and Bangladesh, it is compulsory to understand the ways in which environment change will cross political borders, especially the Himalayan Ecosystem, which will in turn give rise to natural calamities in both the countries and then in turn affect its population.

In order to solve the problem a number of suggestions have been listed below:-

- Borders should be fenced as soon as possible, under the recent agreement Land Border Agreement (LBA) and strict rules should be made to curb the problem of influx of illegal migration from Bangladesh.
- Bangladeshi citizens living in India can be given work visas but, but should not be allowed to vote and get involved in politics.
- The Indian companies should be encouraged to invest in Bangladesh for generating employment opportunities there.
- Statistics and details of the reasons motivating migration, mapping of the most vulnerable areas, the duration of stay, pattern and areas of interest, and so on, are some key issues that should be researched upon to solve the problem.
- Keeping records of Adhaar card, proper ration card, strict laws against corruption among government employees etc. may give effective and transparent results of population census.
- Identification of climate change hotspots using satellite data will immediately provide a priority area for intervention from governance-stand point.
- Hard options like building of dykes, sea walls, protecting mangroves and so on, while the soft options could include extending research and development assistance for alternative agricultural technologies and desalinization of water can be effective in long-term basis.
- From the Bangladesh perspective, there is the need to take successful population control measures and upsurge sustained economic growth. It can solve the problem of poverty in the country leading to decrease in immigration.

VII. CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussion clearly suggests that the situation is further worsened by changing the environmental situation in the Bangladesh, which in turn will give rise to the most serious threat to security of India. However, the Land Border Agreement, between the two countries may give effective results if implemented properly. But, it is clear from the above study that the situation involving the relocation of individuals call for a humanitarian response, relief measures and policy responses, that factor in non-traditional security risks and threats. It also necessitates both the countries to have developed a consensus to discover a mechanism to tackle issues of climate change and equally focus on examining the accommodation and resilience capacity of host countries.

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