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## Bangladeshi Migration to India – The Causal Factors at the Origin

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### Abstract

Migration that involves the crossing of international borders of sovereign countries is a major issue that affects international relations. Illegal Bangladeshi migration to India is one such issue. Bangladeshi migration to India is a result of many factors – environmental, economic, social, and political—each one acting alone or in combination, causing migration. Factors that cause Bangladeshi migration to India are many. Scholars categorise them broadly into “Push” and “Pull” factors. Bangladesh is a country where millions of people are displaced every year due to natural disasters like floods, cyclones, riverbank erosions, and salinity. Added to it, poor economic conditions in Bangladesh and the resultant economic distress have pushed people to cross over to India. The minority communities of Bangladesh, mainly the Hindus, have migrated to India, faced with communal tension and religious discrimination as a result of the Islamisation of the society and polity of Bangladesh. This paper examines the factors that induce migration at the origin—Bangladesh. It also argues that India’s effort to stop illegal migration will be successful only if there is a perceptible change in the migration inducing factors at the origin.

**Keywords:** Illegal Migration, Bangladesh, India, Environmental, Social, Economic

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## **1. Introduction**

The magnitude of migration of people across international borders has grown over the years and it is estimated to be around 272 million globally which is about 3.5 percent of the world population (World Migration Report, 2019, p.20). The majority of this migration takes place over migration corridors developed over the years and the largest such corridors tend to be from developing to developed/ larger economies. In the recent past, the world is replete with examples of displacement and cross-border movement of people due to various reasons like conflicts ( in the case of South Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, and The Democratic Republic of Congo) extreme violence ( such as the Rohingyas were subjected to and sought refuge in Bangladesh) and deep economic or political instability(Venezuela and Mexico). Scholars have noted that the movement of people across international borders, especially from developing to developed countries and between developing countries has a significant impact on International relations (Weiner, 1985; Hollifield, 1992). International migration to India in the past as a result of political turmoil and intense conflict in the neighbourhood had resulted in India getting deeply entangled in the issues that had caused the migration. India's such involvements have resulted in far-reaching consequences for India as well as for the region. The mass exodus of Bangladeshis to India during the liberation war of 1971 resulted in India getting involved in the war which led to a change in the geography of the region with the birth of a new independent country – Bangladesh. Similarly, the exodus of Tamils from Sri Lanka to India due to the ethnic conflict in that country in the 1980s resulted in India getting actively involved in the Sri Lankan- Tamil issue. When India granted Dalai Lama and his follower's asylum in the late 1950s, it resulted in strained India-China relations. Currently, the issue of illegal migration of Bangladeshis to India is a major irritant in the Indo-Bangladesh relations. This is evident from the instances in the past where the leaders of both countries have locked horns over the issue. It has the potential to derail the good relationship that is being nurtured by the prime ministers of both the countries – Narendra Modi and Sheikh Hasina.

The migration of people from Bangladesh to India is not a recent event. It dates back to more than a century as people used to move from the region that presently constitutes Bangladesh to the north-eastern part of India. During the latter half of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, there was a steady flow of labourers into Assam from undivided Bengal when British were developing tea plantations and jute cultivation in Assam. The partition of India in 1947 led to the partition of Bengal as well, into West and East Bengal, with the latter becoming a province of Pakistan as East Pakistan. Later, Bangladesh became an independent country in 1971, as a result of the liberation war it fought with the Pakistani forces. East Bengal becoming a part of Pakistan or the creation of Bangladesh as an independent country did not hinder the migration of East Pakistanis/ Bangladeshis to India, rather it only created more migration.

There have been two instances of mass migration of Bangladeshis/East Pakistanis to India. One was in the aftermath of the partition of India in 1947, and the resultant birth of two independent nations—India and Pakistan. And two, during the liberation struggle and the birth of Bangladesh as an independent country in 1971. In 1947, the partition refugees who fled to India from East Pakistan were given Indian Citizenship and has since settled in India. The liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971 resulted in a mass exodus of over 10 million people from Bangladesh to India (UNHCR, 2000, p.59). They were forced to flee Bangladesh fearing persecution at the hands of the Pakistani military and Islamist forces. But after 1971, there have been no instances of a mass influx of migrants from Bangladesh, but the migration to India continued, for a variety of reasons.

Bangladesh is a country that is ravaged by natural disasters like floods and cyclones almost annually, often in epic proportions. Annually, millions of people are affected by natural disasters where the people suffer both the loss of life and the widespread destruction of the economic assets. Added to this is the problem of riverbank erosion and salinity, which is acute in many areas of Bangladesh. Consequently, a large number of people are internally displaced in Bangladesh. Another powerful 'push' factor was the poor economic conditions that existed in the country. Bangladesh,

at the time of its Independence, was counted among the poorest countries of the world. It was heavily dependent on aid from foreign countries and international organisations. Unemployment and underemployment were high as agriculture and traditional industries showed little progress. As a result, the poor and unemployed looked up to India as a place where they could make a living. Social and political causes also played a part in inducing migration. Islamisation policies followed by the rulers of Pakistan, and later by Bangladesh, alienated the minorities, especially the Hindus, from the national mainstream. Islamisation and the resultant communal tensions that arose in Bangladesh created enormous fear and anxiety among the Hindus in Bangladesh that made them migrate to India. The sharp fall in the population of Hindus in Bangladesh is largely attributed to migration.

The issue of illegal Bangladeshi migration has been a point of discord between India and Bangladesh in the past. Officially, Bangladesh has not accepted that their nationals are illegally migrating to India. This reluctance on the part of Bangladesh to acknowledge Bangladeshi migration has been a hindrance to India's efforts to officially repatriate undocumented Bangladeshis caught in India. Illegal migration has become a contentious issue in India and has led to widespread protests, especially in the state of Assam where a powerful anti-migration movement took place in the 1980s which destabilised the state. Scholars have noted that illegal migration, apart from being a threat to the internal security of India has also dramatically altered the demography of some of the north-eastern states of India leading to conflict between the locals and the intruders (Mayilvaganan, 2019).

This paper examines the major 'push' factors of migration that induce Bangladeshi migration to India. Even while acknowledging that pull factors do play a role in aiding Bangladeshi migration to India, it is to be noted that it is the migration triggering factors at the origin – Bangladesh – in the first place that is the root cause of migration. Any strategy devised by India to tackle this issue of illegal Bangladeshi migration has to take into account this crucial aspect for it to be effective. As Swain puts it, the decision to leave one's homeland is a difficult one, and "people generally choose to remain in their own country, struggling until their hope of survival

wears out” (Swain, 1996, p.193). This very much applies in the case of Bangladeshi migration to India. Faced with no other viable alternatives, the poor rural people of Bangladesh who are internally displaced due to natural disasters and who are under severe economic distress view India as a place where they could make a living, even if it is fraught with the dangers associated with illegally crossing over to a sovereign country.

## 2. Migrants or Refugees?

Scholars writing on Bangladeshi migration often use these terms – migrants and refugees – interchangeably, though there exists a notable difference in the meaning of these terms. The 1951 United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees and the subsequent 1967 UN Protocol on refugees consider refugees as people who are forced to move out of their country to another because of the fear of political persecution and conflicts in their place of residence (UNHCR, 1999). Migrants, on the other hand, are categorised as people who move out of their place of residence in search of economic opportunities elsewhere. It is generally seen as an economic phenomenon. Barring Chakma refugees<sup>1</sup>, the partition refugees of 1947, and the refugees of the 1971 liberation war, all other Bangladeshis who have come to India are categorised as migrants. There is also another term used in migrant literature – environmental refugees – to categorise people who have crossed international borders because of adverse environmental/ climate effects. But these people do not get the protection and entitlements afforded to refugees as they are not considered as refugees as per international law (Panda, 2010).

## 3. Causes of Migration

In migrant literature “Push” and “Pull” factors are important variables in analysing the causes of migration (Peterson, 1958). Pull factors are factors that attract migrants to a destination like higher wages, social networks, the good prospect of finding employment, and good amenities of modern life. Push factors, on the other hand, are factors that force people to move out of their original environs. In the case of Bangladeshi migration to India, both these factors are

in play; but push factors - environmental, economic, social, and political—are particularly important as they play a predominant role in the migration of Bangladeshi nationals to India.

#### **4. Extend of migration**

There is no accurate figure regarding the number of Bangladeshi migrants in India for want of reliable statistics. The estimate of Bangladeshi migrants in India thus varies from 3 million to 30 million. There are over 3 million Bangladeshis in India as per the Census of India 2001 data and over 2 million have been staying in India for over 20 years (Census of India, 2001 e p.19). Unofficial figures are many times higher than the official figures. The government of India appointed *Task Force on border Management* in 2000 estimates that there are 15 million Bangladeshis in India and about 3,00,000 entering annually (Singh, 2011, p.14). India's then Home minister Indrajit Gupta declared in Parliament on May 6, 1997, that there are about 10 million illegal migrants in India (Borkakoti, 2013). News magazine, India Today citing sources from the Ministry of Home reported in August 1998 that out of those 10 million illegal migrants, Assam had a share of 4 million and West Bengal 5.4 million. The majority of Bangladeshi migrants move to states of Assam and West Bengal, in addition to the north-eastern states and the metro cities of India. The peculiar terrain—riverine, jungles, and hills—and the porous nature of the extensive Indo-Bangladesh border, which is about 4096 km long, has made the infiltration of migrants easier.

#### **5. Environmental Causes of Migration**

Environmental degradation or destruction in Bangladesh is an important cause of the migration of Bangladeshi nationals to India. Bangladesh is affected by a range of natural disasters like floods, cyclones, riverbank erosion, desertification, decreasing groundwater levels, and salinity which displaces millions of people. Among these, floods and cyclones are a regular feature in Bangladesh that occurs almost annually. The internally displaced people, for lack of alternative means of livelihood and also for want of adequate government support, find it increasingly difficult to stay in the country. As a result people migrate from Bangladesh to

India in large numbers due to environmental destruction or degradation.

The unique geographical location of Bangladesh makes it one of the most watery regions of the world. Bangladesh has about 250 rivers of varying sizes forming a network along the 3 major rivers of that country, viz. Ganges-Padma, Brahmaputra-Jamuna, and Meghna (Gaan,1998). Bangladesh lies within the combined delta of these major rivers and this delta is the largest in the world. It drains a catchment of some 1.55 million Square kilometres (Ibid). About 18%-20% of the country is inundated almost annually by floods and it damages 4% of the rice production every year, in addition to causing extensive damages to jute and sugarcane plantations where a sizeable number of people are employed. Nearly 60% of the cultivable land area is affected by severe floods. For instance, a severe flood in 1988 left 66% of the land area inundated, one million hectares of cropland damaged and 3000 people dead. The loss of rice crops itself was 2.1 million metric tons (Paul & Rasid, 1993). Displacement of people is high due to floods and it particularly affects the marginal population who lose whatever meagre assets they possess and are left defenceless against the hardships they face including unemployment due to displacement. Compounding their misery is that people who reside in flood-prone areas of Bangladesh have low indicators in all crucial aspects-- health, nutrition, and education.

Bangladesh is also vulnerable to tropical cyclones that have their origin in the Bay of Bengal which is a breeding ground of catastrophic cyclones. Cyclones accompanied by heavy rains and tidal waves called storm surges cause severe damage in Bangladesh (Ali, 2006). Most of the casualties from cyclones are a result of storm surges. The high velocity of the cyclonic winds increases the height of the storm surges, which lead to large scale coastal flooding as two-thirds of its landmass is less than 5 meters above sea level. It is reported that "Storm surges associated with cyclones attain a height of 13 metres higher than normal in extreme cases and travel as far as 200- kilometres inland"(Quencez,2012, 59). This causes extensive damage to people and infrastructure.

Most damaging cyclones in the recent past occurred in November 1970, May 1985, April 1991, 1997, 1998, 2007, 2009, and 2017. Casualty figures were quite high in super cyclones that hit the Barisal coast in 1970 and the Chittagong coast in 1991. In Barisal 30,000 died while in Chittagong the figure was 1,38,866 (Islam & Peterson, 2009:132). No official figures are available regarding the people displaced due to cyclones. But it is believed that millions are displaced due to cyclones and tidal surges.

Cyclones, in addition to causing huge loss of human life, also cause vast destruction of property and other economic assets of the people. Hundreds of thousands of livestock perish during a cyclone and rural people who depend on livestock farming are severely affected. For instance, 75,000 cattle perished in the cyclone of 1991. Cyclones also adversely affect crops, trees, vegetation, fisheries, and infrastructure. Damages to paddy crops are severe. Standing crops are destroyed and harvested crops are washed away by the sea surge. The coastal belt which is rich in trees and vegetation is affected by cyclones and tidal surges, and many species of mangroves and homesteads are also affected. Cyclones affect all sectors of the rural economy- agriculture, fisheries, traditional industries like jute making, etc., where a large number of people are employed. Hence, the displacement of people is high in the event of a severe cyclone. Added to this is the fact that cyclone relief work in Bangladesh has been thoroughly inadequate; which has aggravated the miseries of the cyclone-affected people. The cyclone preparedness programme in Bangladesh, initiated in 1971 at the request of the United Nations General Assembly was also not taken seriously by successive governments. For instance Custers (1992) note that the number of cyclone shelters constructed was around 300 in 1991, when a cyclone struck, whereas at least 5000 was needed to deal with the disaster.

Another environmental hazard that Bangladesh faces is the issue of riverbank erosion and the problem of changing river courses. Bangladesh receives 80% of its total rainfall during the 4 months from June to September which creates the ideal situation for floods that causes bank erosion. The low gradient of the soil aids this process as well. Haque(1998) who studied the effects of riverbank erosion in Bangladesh found that it causes an enormous amount of



damage to human habitats. Losses are such that people never recover from it, especially the poor. Migration to cities becomes the only viable option for them. The poorest segment of society not only lose property but also experience socioeconomic deterioration as a result of displacement. Haque observes that this group is also likely to undergo further suffering from natural hazards at some point of time later. Added to this is the problem of changing river courses. It is said that river Jamuna has never had the same course for two successive years in the last 150 years, causing displacement of people. The same is the case with several rivers in Bangladesh. Gain (1998) states that one million Bangladeshis are affected by riverbank erosion.

The problems of decreasing groundwater levels and salinity are acute in the North and North-Western areas of Bangladesh. Diversion of Ganges water that flows to Bangladesh by the upper riparian state, India is cited as the reason for the increased salinity in the region by Bangladesh. Scholars have noted that “the entire South-West region and a portion of the north-west region of Bangladesh, that is about 37% of the total area and 30 million people are dependent on the Ganges river as the source of water supply” (Islam, 1992:207). This region of the country receives very little rainfall as well. India’s construction of a barrage at Farakka, 18 kilometres upstream of Bangladesh has led to a reduction in the flow of the Ganges to that country. Bangladesh argues that the reduced flow of the Ganges, especially in the dry season from January to May has led to the intrusion of saline water which has severely affected agriculture and riverine fisheries, on which millions are dependent. Scholars find merit in these arguments (Swain, 1996). Swain also found that the dwindling urban economy of Bangladesh failed to absorb the migrants from the Farakka-affected region and as a survival strategy migrants had crossed over to India through the porous Indo-Bangladesh borders (Ibid).

## **6. The Threat of Sea level rise and migration**

Bangladesh is identified by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) as one of the ten countries in the world that is extremely susceptible to a rise in sea level associated with global

warming. A study quoted by UNDP says that “about 27 million people are predicted to be at risk of sea-level rise in Bangladesh by 2050...” (UNDP, 2019). A study done by the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) on the impact of the greenhouse effect suggests that one-meter rise in sea-level by the year 2050 would inundate 15.8% of the total area of Bangladesh (SAARC Documents, 1994). If these predictions come true, the rising sea level has the potential to displace millions of people. Bangladesh, with its high density of population, will find it increasingly difficult to accommodate these internally displaced people. Naturally, migration to India would become the only viable option for the internally displaced.

## **7. Economic Causes of Migration**

Bangladesh is now one of the fastest-growing economies of the world, where it has registered a growth rate of over 6 percent annually since 2005. It has a Gross National Income (GNI) per capita of 1940 US Dollars in 2019 which is not very low compared with India’s GNI per capita of 2130 US Dollars for the same period. Not only the economic indicators have improved in Bangladesh, but it has also performed better than its South Asian neighbours like India and Pakistan in the human development indicators like average life expectancy in the Human Development Report of 2019, brought out by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). In the Report, Bangladesh was placed at 135 among 189 countries of the world, whereas India was placed at 129.

But, the picture was quite different a few decades back. Bangladesh, once termed as the “international basket”<sup>2</sup> case, was among one of the poorest countries of the world when it became independent in 1971. Bangladesh is one country where economic conditions were identified as a major factor that caused migration—both legal as well as illegal. Poor economic conditions and the resultant economic misery coupled with fewer opportunities for economic advancement have propelled this movement. Bangladeshi migration to India had compelling economic reasons.

The period from 1971 to the early 2000s, was characterised by low economic indicators in Bangladesh. Poverty figures show that Bangladesh has managed to greatly reduce the number of people living below the poverty line in the last few decades, but it was quite high in the initial period. The government estimated figures were as high as 82.9 percent during the period after its independence. The people living in poverty was 56.70 percent in 1991-1992 and out of which 41.10 percent were in extreme poverty (Government of Bangladesh, 2015, p.14). Urban poverty was quite high too, but it is also showing a declining trend. It declined from as high as 63% from the early 1970s to 33% in the mid-1980s but, Household Income and Expenditure Surveys conducted in Bangladesh during the period 2005 to 2010 and 2010 to 2016 show that “the rate of poverty reduction has been slowing down and the number of extreme poor have been increasing in urban Bangladesh” (Raza, 2018). Moreover, urban poverty is likely to go up since the urban population is expected to rise to 44 percent by 2050 from 37 percent in 2018.

The figure of rural poverty is more crucial here since the population of Bangladesh is predominantly rural with the majority of people employed in agriculture and allied activities. A World Bank report cites that “extreme poverty continues as a significant rural phenomenon” and the poverty rate in rural areas was as high as 35.2 percent in 2010 (The World Bank, 2013P.xii). Bangladesh is also a highly overpopulated country and its population density is one of the highest in the world—1,104 persons per square km in 2019. These staggering levels of population density places huge stress on land and other resources of the state in addition to adversely affecting the quality of life of the people. In stark contrast to this, India which is ranked second in the world population has a population density of only 460.

Agriculture, the sector that employs the majority of the labour force, showed a declining trend in the 1970s and 1980s. Bangladesh found it difficult to keep the agricultural growth in pace with population growth, during the period 1967-70 to 1979-80. During the period, the rate of growth of total crop output lagged behind the population growth rate (Report to the Like-Minded group, 2003p.69). The rate of growth of food grains output was no more

than 1.24% during this period while the rate of population growth was more than 2.5%. The decline in agricultural production led to widespread unemployment in the countryside, which in turn led to rural-urban migration. A study by Ali (1998) found that prolonged flood and drought have been a major cause of agricultural unemployment and the actual amount of land available for cultivation varies widely each year. The unemployment rate in farming ranged between 19 percent to 43 percent in the 1990s. Seasonal unemployment and underemployment are more pronounced in rural areas, where it is a major cause of poverty. Small and landless farmers constituted 64 percent of the household but operated on only 23.3 percent of the land in the 1990s (Alam,2008). The fragmented nature of land holdings reduces productivity and also discourages investment in this sector.

Rice, wheat, jute and tea are the major crops of Bangladesh and account for over 80% of the cropped area in the country. In addition to these major crops a wide range of minor crops like sugarcane, oilseeds, etc. are also cultivated. Agriculture now employs 40.6 percent of the labour force and contributes to 18% of the GDP (Statistical year Book, 2019). Another sector that employs people in large numbers is the fisheries sector. The inland fisheries sector of Bangladesh is ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> in the world (after China and India) and accounted for about 80 percent of the total fish catch in the 1970s. About 8% of the population depended on fishing for their livelihood “and about 73% of households were involved in subsistence fishing in the flood plains in 1987/88” (Toufique,1997,p.3). Around 11 million people are involved in fish marketing and fish processing. Any decline in this sector is bound to have serious repercussions for the economy and the lives of millions of people. The inland fisheries’ share in total fish production has declined to 28.14 percent in 2016-17. Wetlands are reported to have reduced to half its size and fisheries catch has dropped on an average 9% every year over the past decade. Inland fish catch has also declined due to the depletion of fish resources which has affected the employment pattern of the inland fisheries sector. At the same time, a positive aspect is that Bangladesh has given more attention to inland aquaculture of indigenous and exotic varieties of fish, which is showing encouraging results.

The industrial sector was dominated by Jute production that employed thousands of people and the decline in demand for jute in the world market with the substitution of synthetic fibres in the seventies hit Bangladesh hard. Jute mills suffered huge losses and a lot of them have closed down resulting in the unemployment of industrial workers. The highly fragmented landholding structure that exists in Bangladesh implies that the capacity of the rural farming sector to absorb displaced labourers from other sectors is extremely low. People employed in agriculture and also its share of GDP in Bangladesh is on a decline. Consequently, the percentage of people employed in manufacturing and services has gone up tremendously in the last two decades. The strong performance of these two sectors mainly aid the economic revival in Bangladesh. Noteworthy is the performance of its textile industry and particularly, the ready-made garment industry which is now only second in the world behind China. Experts opine that over-reliance on exports in one sector—textiles—can be harmful like it had discovered in the case of the jute industry in the late 1970s.

## **8. Social and Political Cause**

Social and political factors also play a part in inducing migration of Bangladeshis to India. Bangladesh under its leader Sheikh Mujib Ur Rahman adopted a secular constitution after its independence from Pakistan in 1971 but after the assassination of Mujibur Rahman in a military coup in 1975, the secular principles were abandoned by the successive rulers. Bangladeshi society was radicalised with the rapid Islamisation of society and polity. Added to this, the various laws passed by the military rulers vitiated the communal situation. These laws were perceived by the minority communities in Bangladesh—Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists—as favouring Muslims and adversely affecting non-Muslims. Minorities, especially the Hindus felt threatened by the policies adopted first by the rulers of Pakistan (when Bangladesh was still a part of Pakistan) and later by the military rulers of Bangladesh. Hindu community of Bangladesh has migrated to India in large numbers over the years starting from the partition days. The Acts like the Enemy Property Act and the Vested Property Act contributed to the migration of the Bangladeshis to India.

## **9. Enemy Property Act and Vested Property Act**

During the time of India-Pakistan war in 1965, Pakistan enacted an ordinance called Defence of Pakistan Rules (DPR) by which various measures were undertaken purported to defend the country. Under the provisions of the DPR, East Pakistan Government made an order 'East Pakistan Enemy Property Administration and Disposal order' which came to be known as 'Enemy Property Act'. By this Act, India was proclaimed an enemy country and Pakistan declared the assets of those who have moved to India as enemy property. Now, the properties and assets of such people who had moved to India could be taken over by the government. The Act was discriminatory, as Muslims who had moved to India were excluded from the category of the enemy and hence their property was not taken over by the government.

Bangladesh, when it became an independent country, brought out an order replacing DPR—vesting of Property and Assets Order, 1972— which was only a slight modification of the Enemy Property Act. Bangladesh too continued with the policy started by Pakistan of taking over the property of the minorities that left East Pakistan/ Bangladesh and moved to India.

## **10. The Case of 'the Missing Hindu' Population**

Barkat & Zaman (2000) showed that the mass out-migration of Hindus from Bangladesh occurred from 1960 onwards (mostly to India) as a consequence of the implementation of the Enemy Property Act and the Vested Property Act. This phenomenon of mass out-migration of Hindus from Bangladesh is referred to by scholars as the 'missing Hindu population' of Bangladesh. Barkat and Zaman had examined the census figures of Bangladesh for 33 years from 1961 to 1994 and established that 5.3 million Hindus were missing from the population, which can be accounted for, only by assuming that they had migrated to India. The size of outmigration was not constant through the 1964-1991 period. The study shows that the approximate size of the missing Hindu population was as high as "703 persons per day during 1964-71, 573

persons per day during 1971-81, and 439 persons per day during 1981-91" (Barkat & Zaman,2000, p.118).

## 11. Islamisation and its Effects on Migration

Islamic groups in Bangladesh consist mostly of Imams, Ulamas, Madrasa teachers, and their students totalling over a million people. They exert considerable influence on the governments that rule the state and also on the socio-political life of Bangladesh. Sheikh Mujib Ur Rahman, the first president of Bangladesh, within a few years of his rule, deviated from his avowed policy of secularism and started leaning towards Islamisation when he realised that his government was losing popularity. He reintroduced the study of Islam and Arabic in school curricula after it was withdrawn from the schools earlier. Mujib Ur Rahman even Islamised his speeches by using common Islamic phrases such as "Allah", "Inshallah and started ending his speech with "Khuda Hafiz" in place of "Joi Bangla" which he had been using earlier. He was also soft in dealing with the Islamist groups in Bangladesh who had collaborated with Pakistani forces in committing atrocities on Bangladeshi freedom fighters.

However, the Islamisation process in Bangladesh only started explicitly after the assassination of Sheikh Mujib Ur Rahman, in a military coup in 1975. Thereafter, Bangladesh saw a steady rise in the growth of fundamentalist Islamic forces, which received political patronage from the military governments that ruled Bangladesh. Minorities felt insecure when the Bangladeshi rulers, particularly military-backed governments of Zia Ur Rahman and that of General H.M. Ershad, deviated from the path of secularism enshrined in the Bangladeshi Constitution of 1972. Zia Ur Rahman after assuming the office of the president of Bangladesh, was quick to delete Article 12 of the Bangladeshi Constitution which proclaimed 'secularism' as the fundamental principle of state policy. Consequently, the word 'secularism' was replaced by "total faith in the almighty Allah". Added to it, General Ershad in 1988, made Bangladesh a Muslim nation by declaring Islam as the state religion.

Democracy, though returned to Bangladesh in 1991, Khaleda Zia, who became Prime Minister on two occasions (1991-1996 and 2001 - 2006) continued the appeasement of Islamist forces. Khaleda Zia allied with the Islamist parties like Jamaat-e-Islami which had opposed Bangladesh's independence. Khaleda's party—Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)—“consider itself as a defender of Islamist Bengal” (Mohiuddin, 2008, p.466). Except for Sheikh Hasina, (the present prime minister) the governments that ruled Bangladesh—both military and civilian—followed a policy of appeasement of Islamist forces that alienated the Hindus from the national mainstream.

Bangladesh also witnessed increasing instances of communal tensions and conflict which were attributed to the policies followed by the governments that ruled the country. There were reports of a series of violent incidents against Hindus in Bangladesh when BNP assumed power in 2001. Scholars have noted that “Systematic human rights violations encompassing forced evictions, rape, attacks against the places of worship, abductions, forced conversions, etc. compelled many Hindus to flee from their homes”(Rahman,2012). Choudhury (2000) have noted that after the Islamisation of Bangladesh, Hindus felt increasingly insecure as they had little sense of protection, either social or official. Scholar shave argued that mounting communal tension created a sense of insecurity in the minds of the minority community and it was the principal cause of migration of minority community to India (Chakravorti, 1995).

## **12. Conclusion**

Environmental, economic, and social factors have been the major causes of the migration of illegal Bangladeshis to India in the past. Cyclones, floods, riverbank erosion, and decreasing groundwater level and salinity have traditionally led to a huge displacement of people in Bangladesh. Worsening the situation was the poor economic conditions in Bangladesh, particularly in the first three decades after its independence in 1971. The decline of traditional industries like jute and less than satisfactory performances of agricultural and allied activities led to widespread unemployment,



especially in rural areas. Consequently, the internally displaced people in Bangladesh had very few opportunities to sustain themselves and hence saw India as a place where they could migrate with ease and find employment, however menial it might turn out to be. The reason for minorities of Bangladesh migrating to India is not only economic; but political and social as well. Minorities, particularly the Hindus have fled to India in large numbers which are evident from the sharp decline in the percentage of the Hindu population in Bangladesh.

Governments of the day in India have mainly tried to tackle the issue of illegal migration by strengthening the borders and also by the detection and deportation of illegal Bangladeshis, but with limited success. Any attempt to stop illegal Bangladeshi migration to India would be successful only if we address the root causes of migration at the origin. The fact is, Bangladeshi migration would not cease to exist only by strengthening the borders or by efficient policing, as long as the conditions exist in Bangladesh that forces them to migrate. It is predominantly the poor rural Bangladeshis who cross the borders faced with severe economic distress or environmental destruction at their place of residence. For them, migration to India is a survival strategy when all their efforts to stay in Bangladesh fail.

Unarguably, natural disasters like cyclones cannot be prevented; but the displacement of people can be greatly reduced with better early warning systems and other cyclone mitigation measures. Economic conditions have vastly improved in Bangladesh and it has been able to drastically reduce the number of people living below the poverty line. Now it is one of the better-performing economies of the world. It is now hoped that a resurgent Bangladeshi economy would be able to absorb the internally displaced people due to environmental disasters and reduce the likelihood of migration to India. India on its part must do all that it can to help Bangladesh economically like giving preferential access to its markets since an economically strong Bangladesh is in India's interest too. To check illegal migration, in addition to strengthening the borders, India could also consider issuing work permits to Bangladeshis as suggested by scholars like Hazarika (1999), who have done extensive research on this subject. The migration of

minorities from Bangladesh will stop only in the absence of communal tensions and insecurity felt by the minorities. Sheikh Hasina, who has been in power since 2009, has been able to rein in Islamist forces to a great deal and that has boosted the confidence of the minorities. It is as much in Bangladesh's interest as it is in India's to check fundamentalist and terrorist forces in Bangladesh considering the damage it had already done to that country's society and politics.

## End Notes

1. Chakmas are tribal people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts of southern Bangladesh who were forced to flee that country due to State repression and also displacement as a result of the building of the Kaptai hydroelectric dam by Bangladesh in the 1960s. Chakma people who fled to India in thousands were settled in the north eastern states of India.
2. Bangladesh was infamously described by Henry Kissinger as an "international basket" case when it became an independent country, suggesting that it was poor and it would require huge continuous assistance from the international community.

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