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Migration from Bangladesh: Impulses, Risks and Exploitations

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ABSTRACT *Migration and emigration from Bangladesh is a pervasive phenomenon. Historically, large-scale migration from the region constituting the present Bangladesh started after tea plantations were introduced to Assam by the British in the early 19th century. Gradually, the number of migrants from this region increased due to geographic location, climate change and poverty. Over the years, there has been a change in the gender pattern of migration, where the proportion of female migrants has increased significantly. These migrants play a significant role in the Bangladesh economy, as remittances constituted about 8.21% of gross domestic product in 2014. This article examines why, despite the many dangers that the migrants face, including violence in the host countries and exploitation by their 'masters', the number of migrants from Bangladesh continues to rise constantly.*

KEY WORDS: Bangladesh, migration, exploitation, sex trade, human trafficking, gender violence, foreign exchange remittances

Introduction

In September 2015 the global media carried tragic and powerful images of Syrian refugees crossing the sea to enter into Europe. They were fleeing their country, due to ongoing civil war in Syria. During their voyage many lost their lives. Initially those who managed to survive and reach the shore were not welcomed by Europe, but growing social protests across the continent compelled many European countries to open their borders for the Syrian refugees. The plight of Syrians came into the limelight because of the political situation in their country and the active engagement of global media on the issue. Many other such tragedies, especially those related to 'illegal' migrants, pass by without even a mention. One country whose citizens have often been caught up in similar tragedies is Bangladesh. To evade poverty at home, many Bangladeshis try to enter other countries using illegal means. In developed countries most of these migrants are engaged in jobs such as street vendors, souvenir sellers, shop workers, restaurant waiters¹ and domestic maids. Many of them are physically abused and sexually exploited; yet they are not willing to return to their country. Such migrants are important not only for the individual households from which they come but also for the economy of Bangladesh.

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In this paper an attempt is made to look into the reasons for migration from Bangladesh, the changing gender patterns and ratios of such migrations, growing risks to the migrants, and the extent of their role in the country's economy. This rest of the paper is divided into three parts. In the first part the history and causes of migration from Bangladesh will be discussed. The second part will focus on changing patterns of migrants and the risks they encounter. In the third part, the violence and discrimination faced by migrants will be examined. As migrants, refugees, immigrants and emigrants represent different categories of people these words are not used as synonyms, although there are overlaps, especially in the case of Bangladesh.

History of Migration from Bangladesh and its Causes

Migration from Bangladesh is a pervasive phenomenon. Historically, large-scale migration from the region constituting present-day Bangladesh started after tea cultivation was introduced in Assam by the British rulers of India in the early 19th century. Once plantations were introduced by the British rulers, large numbers of coolies were needed for the tea gardens. To fulfil this demand, by 1853 the Assam Company had already begun to import labourers from Bengal (mainly Eastern Bengal).² This involved legislation; and from 1863 to 1901 a series of enactments were passed, with the twofold object of ensuring the employer the services of the labourers imported by him for a period sufficiently long to enable him to recoup the cost of recruiting and bringing them to the garden, on the one hand, and on the other, of protecting the labourers against fraudulent recruitment, providing for them a proper and sanitary system of transport, and securing their good treatment and adequate remuneration during the term of their labour contracts.³ Soon after the introduction of tea, in the late 19th century, oil was detected in some of the same areas. Both discoveries transformed the demographic composition of colonial Assam,⁴ and this continues to the present day, also representing a root cause of ethnic violence in the lands in question.

In 1943 Bengal witnessed a great famine that caused many deaths. Its memory still haunts people from Bangladesh (then part of Bengal). At that time many people from the region migrated to nearby areas. During the Second World War many men from Sylhet (now in Bangladesh) joined the British Navy and Army to fight to secure the imperial interests of their colonial masters. After the war ended many South Asian soldiers migrated to Britain due to the networks they established during the war. By 1946 there were around 20 Indian restaurants in London, mainly, Sylheti-owned.⁵ The Sylheti constitute the majority of Bangladeshi expatriate and diaspora population.

In more recent times, the first batch of emigrants from Bangladesh came in the form of 'refugees' seeking shelter elsewhere. In 1947 as result of India's partition, the then East Bengal decided to be a part of Pakistan. The sole criterion for this decision was religion which, in the event, proved insufficient to hold together East and West Pakistan. After 1952 other primordial identity-based conflicts between East and West Pakistan emerged. The economic exploitation and discrimination faced by East Pakistani citizens exploded into a demand for liberation after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman failed to become the country's prime minister in 1970, despite his party, the Awami League, winning a majority of seats in the general elections. During the 'liberation' war, the Pakistan Army unleashed violence on civilians, a million people were killed, and many women were raped.⁶ To protect their lives, many people from East Pakistan

crossed the border into India. Most of them did not go back even after the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. Many others, especially women, sought refuge in Western countries. Many of the raped women became pregnant but did not want abortions, as the Bangladesh state and society demanded. Many of them ran away to other countries with their 'war babies'. They were helped by Mother Teresa and her Sisters of Charity who had been working throughout the war in the refugee camps of West Bengal. A massive adoption scheme was devised and most of the war babies were exported to the Netherlands, Canada and other European countries through contacts established by Mother Teresa's foundation.⁷

In addition, Bangladesh's geography, climate and economic insecurity have acted as push factors for migration. Eighty per cent of the area of Bangladesh is situated in the flood plains of the Ganges, Brahmaputra, Meghna and other small rivers. These deltaic rivers keep on changing their courses, causing floods and submerging *chors* (silt areas).⁸ This leads to the displacement of people every flood year. It also causes loss of standing crops, which discourages continuation of agricultural practices, especially by small- and medium-scale⁹ farmers. On average during the period 1962–88, Bangladesh lost about 0.5 million tons of rice annually as a result of floods. This accounts for nearly 30% of the country's average annual food grain imports.¹⁰ Climate change has led to frequent floods and cyclones in Bangladesh. Both have contributed to internal and external migration. Most of the climate refugees, as they are called, prefer to live in Bangladesh but some do cross into India.¹¹ According to the United Nations Environment Programme's executive director Achin Steiner, 'From 1990 to 2008 Bangladesh averaged annual losses of 1.8 per cent of the country's GDP [gross domestic product] due to natural disasters, yet it is important to remember that addressing the impact of climate change is more than just a question of economics. High tides in coastal areas of the country are rising faster than the global average, which leads to loss of livelihoods and displacement'.¹² He added that 'By 2050 it is estimated that one in every seven people in Bangladesh is likely to be displaced by climate change, and they are also likely to move to urban centres already burdened with meeting the needs of a dense population'.¹³

The phenomenon of climate change severely affects the agriculture-based economy of Bangladesh. Although Bangladesh's economy is stable and has maintained a growth of between 5 and 6% of its GDP for the last two decades, it is not viable enough to occupy all skilled, semi-skilled and non-skilled workers. Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in the world, with 43% of its people living on less than \$1.25 per day, according to the World Bank, and chronic under-nutrition affecting an estimated six to seven million children under the age of five.¹⁴ To evade poverty, unemployment and underemployment, many Bangladeshi migrate to other countries.

Risks Taken and Changing Gender Pattern of Migration

The degree of risk taken by the migrants depends on their legal status. Often poor migrants try to enter a foreign country by illegal means, which attract many risks, hardships and economic costs. Usually illegal migrants undertake perilous passage and many die before reaching their destinations. One such dangerous route is crossing the Panama jungle, used by many from Latin American, Africa and Asia, to reach the USA. In the jungle they have to brave vipers, bats, bandits, diseases and smugglers.

Those who are lucky enough to survive are not sure about the treatment that they can expect after reaching the USA.¹⁵ As the number of illegal migrants and trafficked individuals from Bangladesh rises, these groups face great odds to get into other countries. Although some have been successful in fulfilling their dream, others have lost their lives during their journeys. But the news of hardships and death during the journey has not deterred successive waves of migrants.

One of the main destinations for 'illegal' Bangladeshi migrants is India, for economic and cultural reasons. In going to India illegally many of them risk their lives. There have been many instances when people crossing the border have been fired upon and killed; one such example is killing of 15-year-old Felani Khatun in September 2011 by Amiya Ghosh, an Indian border force constable. He shot her dead at the India–Bangladesh border and, after protests in India and Bangladesh, he was arrested but acquitted in 2013.¹⁶ After the girl was killed, her body was hung on the barbed wire separating the India–Bangladesh border. This brutality was challenged by the Bangladesh government. As a result, in September 2015 the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) of India asked the Indian government to pay Rs 500,000 in compensation to the family of Felani Khatun.¹⁷

In May 2015 about 8,000 people, consisting of Rohingyas from Myanmar and Bangladeshis, were stranded at sea for many days. They were turned away by countries including India, Malaysia and Thailand.¹⁸ After they were stranded in the East Asian sea for many days without food and water, the Philippines came forward and offered refuge to them.¹⁹ Dil Mohammad, the kingpin of that trafficking, was arrested on 17 September 2015, after his arrival in Bangladesh from Malaysia.²⁰ Then on 28 August 2015 off the coast of North Africa, at least 24 Bangladeshis, including two children, died after two boats carrying up to 500 migrants sank off the coast of Libya. The first boat, which capsized early on 27 August 2015, had nearly 100 people on board. The second, which sank later, was carrying about 400 passengers. About 200 people are reported still to be missing.²¹ These are just recent cases; in the past many such incidents have taken place.

There is a remarkable change in the gender pattern and ratio of migration from Bangladesh. As in the case of other countries from the developing world, the migration-related statistics of Bangladesh are tilted in favour of males, with around three million working in different destinations. But in the last few years there has been a steady increase in the number of female migrants who migrate either alone or with a spouse. As reported in *The Daily Star*, according to the June 2015 statistics of the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), a total of 37,304 female workers from Bangladesh had gone to different countries in 2012; this increased to 76,007 in 2014. One country that stands out in terms of employment of female workers from Bangladesh is the United Arab Emirates (UAE).²² According to the BMET statistics, the UAE is home to 27% of the total female migrant workers of Bangladesh. Two basic reasons can explain this rising trend. First, the demand for female workers in the UAE is higher than in other countries. Second, attractive salaries in the UAE draw more female migrant workers there than other countries. After the UAE, Lebanon hires a large number of female migrant workers. While the country has only 1.3% of the total Bangladeshi migrants, it nevertheless has the second highest percentage of female migrants (24.3%) compared with all other countries. About 97,000 female workers reside in Lebanon.²³

The changing gender pattern of migration can be attributed to the rise in the number of females trafficked for sexual exploitation or bonded servitude, while boys are trafficked to the Middle East to become camel-racing jockeys or to work in the most badly paid sectors. There are no concrete data on this but many girls from Bangladesh are reportedly forced to engage as sex workers in India, the Gulf countries and in East Asia. During the author's visit to Dhaka in 2015, he was informed by a professor of law that many girls themselves opt for these countries, so that they can make a lot of money from sex work and then return to their 'own' land. Unfortunately, almost no one returns. While at the airport to catch a flight from Dhaka to New Delhi, the author met a group of around 100 young girls waiting for a flight to the Gulf. The only language they knew was Bengali. A shopkeeper at the airport informed the author that most of them were from rural areas and were going to work as 'slaves' fulfilling all the desires of their masters in the Gulf. Their parents had paid money to an agency to get them there.

Host Country Behaviour towards Migrants: Violence and Exploitation

Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr have argued that national borders seek to protect those within them from 'pollution'. The individuals from across the border are regarded as pollutants whose presence pollutes the citizens of a country.²⁴ As migrants are considered to be pollutants, they are met with various forms of discrimination and violence in the host country. Even when they are 'allowed' to settle down in a country, they are expected to follow certain defined 'norms' such as the Tebbit test propounded in the United Kingdom some years ago.²⁵ Often, under pressure from political and economic constituencies, the host country restricts its visa policy for the citizens of particular countries. Migrants are accused of 'cultural invasion' through demographic transformation. They are also blamed for taking away job opportunities from the local workforce. Quite often, migrants face violence from the locals. Bangladeshi migrants have faced both these problems.

In 2014 Saudi Arabia stopped issuing visas for Bangladeshis even for the *Umrah* (a pilgrimage to Mecca, performed by Muslims, which, in contrast to the Hajj, can be undertaken at any time of the year). The Saudi officials claim that in 2014, many for whom an *Umrah* visa were issued did not return to their country after performing the ritual. Permission was restored on 5 August 2015, after a visit by Bangladeshi Foreign Minister Mohamed Shahriar Alam to Saudi Arabia, during which a plea was made to the Saudi State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Nizar bin Obaid Madani.²⁶ To keep away migrants, India is fencing its 4,096 kilometre-long land border with Bangladesh. Earlier, due to border demarcation disputes between the two countries, the fencing was severely criticised by the Bangladesh government. But, as the demarcation issue has been resolved by the signing of a Land Border Agreement, India has been allowed to carry out the fencing.

Violence against Bangladeshi immigrants occurs in many parts of the world. Termed 'illegal', Bangladeshi migrants have faced violence in the Indian states bordering their country. Radical groups in the area have centuries-old grievances against them. They are considered to be an economic and cultural threat to the region. Many contrasting figures have been presented by these groups to justify their position; in reality,

according to the United Nations data of 2013, the number of Bangladeshis in India is around 3.2 million.²⁷ The number of violent attacks in Assam has increased since the Nellie massacre in 1983 when more than 2,000 ‘migrants’ were killed.²⁸ Over the years, the number of groups protesting against the ‘migrants’ has increased, and clashes and mass violence have become an almost a regular affair. Intermittent violence between Bodos and Muslims has been termed as ‘communal’ fights between Hindus and Muslims, which they are not. Twelve per cent of Bodos are Christian and the rest of them follow the Brahma sect and traditional Bathou religion.²⁹ The ethnic and religious composition of the area is as follows: 35% Bodos, 20% Muslims, a few tribals, and about 30% non-tribal groups; in addition, there are Assamese Hindus, Bengali Hindus, etc.³⁰ The main cause of the tension between these groups is economic: the migrants are frequently accused of encroaching on fertile lands in Assam. This dispute, as mentioned above, has its roots in the colonial history of the region. Migrants during British colonial rule were settled on ‘wastelands’ on which they worked for years and turned into fertile lands. Now these lands are the cause of tensions between the ‘migrants’ and the locals.

In West Asia, especially in the UAE and Saudi Arabia, 30.28% of women migrants from Bangladesh work as housemaids. Most of them live like slaves or virtual prisoners of their masters. They are sexually exploited and often beaten if they seek wages.³¹ In Thailand there have been rampant cases of exploitation of women, including from Bangladesh, working in the flourishing sex trade. In many cases, after being ‘used’, women are sold on cheaply or detained by the police for illegal entry into the country.³² In Malaysia too, cases of abuse of maids are increasing. Most of these maids are from Bangladesh, and victims of illegal human trafficking. In 2012 the Malaysian and Bangladesh governments signed an agreement, according to which only the government of Bangladesh was authorised to send workers to Malaysia. Under it, about 10,000 Bangladeshi workers currently work in Malaysia. In September 2015 Malaysia agreed to reopen its labour market for private agencies also.³³ In February 2015 Bangladeshi workers faced targeted violence in Italy, home to the second largest number of Bangladeshi migrants in Europe, after Britain. Lazio, Lombardy and Veneto have substantial Bangladeshi populations.³⁴ Many Bangladeshi expatriates currently living in Libya are planning to return to Bangladesh or to go to another country because of the increase in violence in that country. According to Bangladesh’s foreign ministry officials, though nearly 37,000 migrants have been repatriated from Libya since 2011, an estimated 40,000 Bangladeshis still work there. Their return will certainly affect individual households and have an impact on Bangladesh’s economy, where remittances constitute 8.2% of GDP. The current market value of 1 Libyan dinar is equivalent to Tk 56, down from Tk 63–65 last year.³⁵

As discussed, violence against Bangladeshi migrants is growing and yet there is no substantial decline in the number of Bangladeshis attempting to enter other countries. Migration is still seen as important for the state as well as for individuals, as remittances play a crucial role in the Bangladeshi economy. According to the World Bank, total remittances received by Bangladesh in 2013 was \$14.5 billion, which increased to \$15 billion in 2014–15. In 2014, the remittances constituted 8.21% of the GDP of Bangladesh.³⁶ In the January–March quarter of 2015 Bangladesh earned \$3,771.16 million of remittances, which is 8.49% higher than in the previous year. These remittances have supported Bangladesh’s economy to maintain a 5.5–6% growth in GDP.³⁷

Conclusion

This article has discussed the scale and patterns of migration taking place from Bangladesh, and why it is playing a significant role in the country's economy. The push factor for migration is stronger than the pull factor because most of the migrants work as menial labourers in the host countries.

Migrants have been victims of exploitation by both home agencies and host countries. Under the guise of migration, human trafficking has been taking place from Bangladesh to many parts of the world. Women and children from Bangladesh are trafficked into India, East Asia and West Asia for commercial sexual exploitation and to serve as bonded labour. To check this activity, especially human trafficking of females, the government of Bangladesh has been issuing licences to recruiting agencies, and these are renewed regularly and overseen by the agency. In 2013 the government of Bangladesh revised its Overseas Employment and Migration Act, which includes: emigration rules; rules for conduct and licensing of recruiting agencies; and rules for wage earners' welfare fund. Despite such steps migrants are being exploited by domestic agencies and they also face multiple challenges in host countries.

Migration from Bangladesh can only be checked by addressing the consequences of climate change and global initiatives to aid and develop the country. Bangladesh is a least-developed country where poverty reigns. Unless its economy expands to occupy skilled, semi-skilled and also non-skilled labourers, migration will remain a major factor and the suffering of migrants is bound to continue.

Notes

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