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Migration influenced by Environmental Issues: A Study in the Context of Assam Bangladesh Cross-Border Migration

Mr. Saruj Saikia

Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, Dr. Nobin Bordoloi College, Jorhat, Assam

Abstract:
Through this study attempt has been made to focuses on environmental crisis as a reason for the continued migration of people from Bangladesh to Assam, India throughout the ages. It is a well accepted concept that cross-border migration is a constant but dynamic phenomenon. Various factors are responsible for it. Environmental issues in the rural areas of developing countries are major causes of concern for this type of cross-border movement of population in South Asia. Such movement of population in the Indo-Bangladesh context is generating a range of destabilizing socio-political, economic, ethnic and communal tensions in India The major climate events that impact Bangladesh significantly are floods and cyclones. Study shows that scarcity of land and water in the rural areas of Bangladesh, caused by rapid population growth, environmental change and unequal resource distribution invoked widespread landlessness, unemployment, declining wages and income, growing income disparities and degradation of human habitat. The affected people, unable to satisfy their needs moved to India where the prospect of life appears to be better. The information collected for the purpose of the study is based on secondary data only. It is analytical and descriptive in nature.

Keywords: Disaster, Environmental Issues, Cross-Border Migration, Immigrants.

1. Introduction:

Migration is a dynamic and constant phenomenon. If we quote United Nations, humanity has been on the move since the earliest times. Some people move in search of work or economic opportunities, to join family, or to study. Others move to escape conflict, persecution, terrorism, or human rights violations. Still others move in response to the adverse effects of climate change, natural disasters, or other environmental factors. The UN Migration Agency, International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines a migrant as any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his or her habitual place of residence, regardless of the person's legal status, whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary, what the causes for the movement are or what the length of the stay is. According to G. J. Hugo, "population mobility is best viewed as being arranged along an continuum ranging from totally voluntary migration, in which the choice and will of the migrants is the overwhelmingly decisive element encouraging people to move, to totally forced migration, where the migrants are faced with death if they remain in their present place of residence. The extremes in fact rarely occur, and most mobility is located along the continuum."

Migration is a complex phenomenon which involves a host of factors. According to Madhumita Sarma (2015) several pull and push factors are associated with migration from Bangladesh to Assam. Pull factors include demand for labour and more important the existing network in Assam. On the other hand economic hardship, unemployment and excess labour force, together with social, political and environmental factors in Bangladesh have led to the movement of people from that country to Assam. The environment-induced migration from Bangladesh to India is a major cause of concern for both the countries and even responsible for internal conflicts within India. Sanjoy Hazarika (2000) in his book "Rites of Passage" has identified land hunger, population pressure and environmental factors in Bangladesh as the primary push factors, which are responsible for the efflux of people, apart from the attraction of greater economic security and the pressure of ethnic Diaspora in India. In this context we can also quote Dr. Mahabab Hossein, who was one of Bangladesh's most prominent development economists who heads the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies in the Capital, Dhaka. He said that the economic viability of Bangladesh has long been in question because of its over-population, poor natural resource base, vulnerability to natural disasters and undiversified economy dependent on the production of two crops, rice and jute. It is true that there are several factors that are responsible for the illegal migration of people from Bangladesh to Assam. Among them the environmental factor cannot be ignored utterly. Previous lots of studies accepted that Bangladesh is prone to various natural disasters such as floods, cyclones, droughts and erosion. These environmental disasters displace people in large numbers by destroying livelihoods, and agriculture lands. Moreover it is a country which is overpopulated since its inception. Because of such situation people cannot afford to the minimum needs of day to day life. As a result they prefer to migrate to Assam, India where they can have better lifestyle in comparison with their homeland. It is a continuous phenomenon which has severe impact upon the demographic pattern of Assam.

2. The area of the Study:

The area of the present study is based on Bangladesh and Assam which is a state in the north-eastern region of India. Geographically, Bangladesh is located between Assam and Meghalaya in the North, West Bengal in the West, Tripura, Mizoram and Myanmar in the East and the Bay of Bengal in the South. It is one of the major neighboring countries of India which sits in between 24° 00 N latitudes and 90° 00 E longitudes. The country shares almost ninety-five percent of its borders with India. The total area is 148,460 sq. kilometers and population density is 1106 per sq. kilometer (Bangladesh Census Report 2011). The country enjoys a tropical monsoon climate with mild winter, hot humid summer and warm rainy monsoon season. About 68 percent of its population depends on agriculture and agriculture related works. A vast area of southern Bangladesh is a delta with low elevation. It also hosts the confluence of three major rivers in the world, the Ganges, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna. The country is at the receiving end of most calamities caused by human activities in upstream notably deforestation and soil erosion in China, Nepal and India. It is prone to cyclones, flood, drought, salinity intrusion and other natural calamities (Climate Change and Bangladesh, 2007).

Assam is a state of republic of India which shares international borders with Bangladesh in the South West and Bhutan in the North. Within the federation of India the state shares boundaries with six other states namely Arunachal Pradesh in the North and North East, Nagaland and Manipur in the East and South East, Meghalaya and Mizoram in the South and Tripura in the South West and West Bengal in the West. Assam together with these states excluding West Bengal shares 1879 kilometers border with

Bangladesh, including its share of 262 kilometers of which 92 kilometers is riverine (Goswami, 2006). The geographical location of Assam is 24 N°- 28 N° and 90 E°- 96 E°. Topographically the north-eastern part of India is mountainous and hilly and Assam is partially hilly with two river valleys, Brahmaputra and Barak. Assam enjoys a tropical monsoon climate consisting of cool dry winter and hot wet summer. According to official source the total area of the state is 78,438 sq. kilometers with a total population of 312.05 lakh at a density of 398 per sq. kilometers (Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam). About 69 percent of its population depends on agriculture and agriculture based industries. It is a multi-hazard state prone to floods, earthquake, storms and landslide besides man-made disasters. The state faces acute flood and erosion problem. It has a history of disasters ranging from large earthquake and severe floods (Assam State Disaster Management Authority).

3. Significance of the Study:

It is worth mentioning that a few notable studies have been done in recent years by the demographers as well as by social and political thinkers about the nature, the dimensions and the magnitudes of Bangladeshi migrants living in India. Most of the studies have only focused on the social, political and economic factors. In this study attempt has been made to discuss the impact of environmental causes that force the people of Bangladesh to move to Assam and its impact on this province of India.

4. Objective of the Study:

This study focuses upon migrants in Assam, India who originate from the region which comprises today's Bangladesh. The cause of this cross-border migration is multifaceted, but in this study emphasis is given upon the environmental and climatic causes which have a special relevance as Bangladesh is among countries that are most prone to natural and climate-linked calamities such as perennial floods, cyclones, riverbank erosions, storm surges and droughts (Asian Development Bank, 2011).

5. Methodology:

Research methodology is the most important aspect of any study. It facilitates the materials and provides reliability and validity to it. The information collected for the purpose of the study is based on secondary data only. Secondary data have been collected from various published and unpublished sources like relevant literature, news papers, journals, scholarly articles, related websites, social media and others. It is analytical and descriptive in nature.

6. Discussion on Findings:

6.1 Bangladesh Perspective:

Cross-border migration is not a new phenomenon witnessed by India. India has received immigrants from almost all neighboring countries since long ago. But the immigration from Bangladesh has raised concern as the flow has been mainly in unilateral and continuous. Though the very basis of division of India on religious line was the main cause for this phenomenon, there are some other factors also. Among them the environmental cause is really a matter of concern. Bangladesh is prone to natural calamities because of its location. Sarfaraz Alam (2003) in his scholarly article mentions that Bangladesh is frequently ravaged by large-scale natural disasters such as riverbank erosion, cyclones accompanied by storm surges, floods and droughts. Each year, these extreme natural events hit large areas of the country and cause human casualties and misery. Apart from this, they also cause loss to

crops, livestock, forestry and physical infrastructure. The whole country lies within the combined delta of the three major rivers: the Ganges, the Brahmaputra-Jamuna and the Meghna. The low deltaic terrain, extreme rainfall in the nearby hills, and high flows from these large catchments cause normal flood every year. The country also witnessed severe floods in the past decades. During severe floods, the affected areas exceed 36 per cent of the country and nearly 60 per cent of the net cultivable land. Bangladesh is also prone to recurring tropical cyclones originating from the Bay of Bengal. Cyclones accompanied by heavy rains and tidal waves called storm surges, cause most of the damage. An average of 1 to 3 severe to moderate cyclonic storms hit Bangladesh every year, with storm-surges as much as 13 meters higher than normal, in extreme cases, which can reach as far as 200 kilometers inland. A notable numbers of catastrophic tropical cyclones struck the coastal areas of Bangladesh during the past years causing colossal damage to the country. For example, in the tragic cyclone of 1991, more than 13.7 million people were affected, approximately 139,000 people died, and 139,058 people were injured and the total loss of livestock and poultry was about one million. Riverbank erosion has also been a regular natural phenomenon along the major and some minor rivers in Bangladesh adversely affecting the people and their properties. According to him competition over land, water and other natural resources is acute in the rural areas of the country. The scarcities of natural resources have impelled the poor and the marginalized sections of the society to move into disaster-prone areas and marginal lands, leaving them even more vulnerable to environmental disasters. The socio economic and administrative approach of the local government functionaries is not positive towards those people. The natural environmental hazards intensify the risk to human life and cause severe economic dislocation which in turn leads to permanent displacement of more than a million people annually. Only limited opportunities exist in the urban areas of Bangladesh for rural-urban migration because of very low level industrialization. At the same time, there is lack of living space in other parts of the country where secured and sustained livelihood can be had. Consequently, in the event of any natural calamity, which makes lives too vulnerable for the affected people to securely stay in the country, they usually migrate to Assam and other neighboring states of India. One study suggests that the number of people crossing over to India increases during periods of environmental disaster.

In addition to natural disasters there are some man-made disasters which affected the environment and the socio economic condition of the people. Examples of such disasters are the Farakka Barrage (Swain, 1996) and also the Kaptai dam which has displaced around 100,000 people and inundated 54,000 acres of land, hence destroying the livelihood of the indigenous people of those areas (Bangladesh District Gazette, 1975). With the loss of agricultural land and means of livelihood people were forced to leave their country. Most of them migrated to Assam and other North Eastern states of India including West Bengal. Scholars are of the opinion that similar geographical, socio-cultural, and racial-linguistic linkages coupled with easy accessibility of the border have induced the people of Bangladesh to move towards India, especially, to the states bordering Bangladesh. The numbers of illegal migrants into Assam have actually created an alarming situation in India. This problem has attracted serious socio-political attention during the recent years. It is so because the inflow has become a one-way traffic and a continuous process and its intensity is varying with the changing of socio-economic, political and environmental conditions of Bangladesh. The changing environmental condition and ecological aspects are really a push factor for the cross-border migration between Bangladesh and Assam though all the aspects are interrelated to each other.

6.2 Assam Perspective:

G.J. Hugo in his article "Migration, Development and Environment" (2008) opines that although environmental degradation causes migration, the migration, on the other hand, also causes environmental degradation in the receiving countries. The same case occurs in the case of Assam also. The uncontrolled cross-border migration from Bangladesh to Assam has a far reaching impact upon the environment of Assam. The settlement of the migrated people in the foothills and river banks cause erosion of the very broad base of the state's biodiversity. It is argued that the continued high rate of population growth among the migrated people, as well as the high density of population in Assam's marginal areas like foothills, flood-prone river banks and the fringes of the forest parks and wetlands, and the use of forests for settlement by migrants, has led to the destruction of grazing and wetlands and the natural habitat in many areas of Assam (Bhagabati et al., 2006). Various studies show that Assam is experiencing loss of biodiversity during the recent years. Most migrants often settle in general common areas such as 'chars and chaporis', 'bathans', 'banks of beels' (Das, 2001), that do not have any distinctive title of ownership to any individual entity. This type of people even occupies illegally government lands, fringe areas of National Parks, World Heritage Sites, Satras etc. Scholars are of the opinion that such type of illegal activities has very adverse effect upon the geo-ecological condition of the reserved forest areas in particular and the common affected areas as a whole. The environmental impact of migration on the state is discussed very aptly in "Biodiversity of Assam, Status, Strategy and Action Plan for Conservation" published by EBH Publishers (India) on behalf of Assam Science Society, Guwahati. According to the scholars the major causes for the loss of biodiversity in Assam can be categorized into two broad categories (Bhagabati et al., 2006). These are Proximate Causes and Root Causes. Proximate causes include population growth and density, habitat destruction caused by anthropogenic factors, overgrazing, poaching, flood and bank erosion, application of agrochemicals, bio piracy and political patronizing. Root causes include lack of understanding and some development activities without adequate environmental risk assessment, replacing traditional modes of agriculture and exotic and unique plantation with new "foreign" ones, being opposed to uncontrolled exploitation for quick economic gains and migrant's lifestyle habits and different traditions at variance to indigenous conditions. All these factors are related to each other in any way and posing great threat to the biodiversity of the state. It is argued that destruction of natural habitat is also being aided and abetted through commercial felling of trees, use of forest land for settlement and cultivation. In addition overgrazing by domestic stocks, especially in grass lands, poaching, application of agrochemicals and bio-piracy are also draining the bio-resources of the region (Chatterjee et al., 2006).

7. Conclusion:

It is a well accepted view that the problem of climate change migration is inherently complex. It is now a global issue and the Indian subcontinent is not exception to it. The case of cross-border migration between Bangladesh and Assam is really a matter of concern. It is a major problem from the environmental degradation point of view. Effective climate change governance at several levels is an urgent need of the hour. The biodiversity of Assam is badly affected by the unsystematic use of the natural resources. Adding fuel to it, the migrant population from Bangladesh makes the situation more vulnerable. The indigenous people of Assam are concerned about the biodiversity because they have lived in the existing areas for generations and their culture as well as their livelihood is familiar to those areas. They are accustomed to the situation and their survival skills do not impact in negative way. The

migrated people on the other hand tend to look to their own interest and try to fulfill their basic needs. While doing so they destroy the environment around them which put negative impact on the ecological balance. The inflow of Bangladeshi population must be checked. A comprehensive vision and strategy for conservation of natural resources and forest land must be applied. According to social thinkers lack of policy for rehabilitation of displaced people affects the environment. The people especially the migrants displaced due to natural calamities or conflicts are usually rehabilitated in the forest areas or government lands. This affects the biodiversity in the areas selected for their settlement (Bhagabati et al., 2006). To save the biodiversity of the state further migration and spread of settlement must be stopped. A thorough and transparent process for land purchases should be put in place so that no illegal and unauthorized transactions and land transfer take place. This will prevent the purchased of land by migrant farmers (Lahkar et al., 2007). Strict measures should be taken to prevent encroachment, deforestation activities and also haphazard human settlements. Assam has already lost huge areas of dense forest but still enjoys a reasonable level of forest area per capita (Madhumita Sarma, 2015). If the continued cross-border migration from Bangladesh to Assam will go on there will surely be a deleterious effect upon the forest cover per capita. To preserve this existing situation the policy makers, civic bodies and all concerned must put priority for formulation of sustainable environmental preservation policies.

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