

**POPULATION MOVEMENT IN THE FLUID, FRAGILE AND  
CONTENTIOUS BORDERLAND BETWEEN BANGLADESH AND INDIA**

A Paper Prepared for Presentation at  
PANEL 24: Migration in South Asia: Causes, Patterns and Consequences  
At the 20<sup>th</sup> European Conference on the Modern South Asian Studies (ECMSAS):

**IN THE SCHOOL OF ARTS, HISTORY AND CULTURE  
UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER  
UNITED KINGDOM  
JULY 7-11, 2008**

**BY  
RITA AFSAR, PhD  
SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOW  
BANGLADESH INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES (BIDS)  
E-17 AGARGOAN SHERE BANGLA NAGAR  
DHAKA  
E-MAIL: rita@sdnbd.org, rita\_afsar@yahoo.com.au**

# **POPULATION MOVEMENT IN THE FLUID, FRAGILE AND CONTENTIOUS BORDERLAND BETWEEN BANGLADESH AND INDIA**

## **1.1. Introductory Remarks**

Trans-border population flux in the post-colonial South Asia is diversified, complex of many elements, phases and incidents, which began with deep rooted scar of an arbitrary Radcliffe border that uprooted tens and millions of Hindu and Muslim populations from both sides of the border and killing many in the communal violence in 1947 when the subcontinent was divided. That mass exodus occurred once more in 1971 with Pakistani atrocities which eventually led to the birth of Bangladesh as an independent nation. In the intermittent period between 1947 and 1971 and the aftermath also cross-border migration between Bangladesh and India did not stop rather continued in different forms, intensity and magnitude often on a continuous basis and also seasonal, and may be sporadic fuelled by some major upheavals be it communal, environmental or displacement as a result of massive construction.

However, it is difficult to distinguish different forms migration due largely to political reasons. Apart from historicity the two countries are heavily motivated politically. Indian government branded all sorts of cross-border migration as illegal and Bangladeshi government refuses to acknowledge illegal cross-border movements by Bangladeshi nationals. Their negative attitudes have been posing serious problems in understanding the issues involved in cross-border migration in a comprehensive manner and deal with those issues realistically.

The paper is essentially divided into four parts. Gleaning through the colonial era the paper documents a few major features of the Radcliffe Border that divided India and Bangladesh in order to generate better understanding of the contextual issues involved in the cross-border migration between the two countries in the first part. For a fuller picture of the context the setting part is then supplemented by the situational analysis of the magnitude and the extent of the cross-border migration between these two countries from the available data along with a discussion on the problems of reliable data which makes empirical research a challenging task. Part two examines the causes of migration both from the demand and supply side applying an economic framework of livelihoods of the inhabitants of both sides of the border. Consequences of migration are presented in part three followed by the management problems and policy issues in the fourth or the last part.

## 1.2. Colonial Legacy of a Fluid, Fragile and Contentious Border

Trans-border migration is diversified in nature as it involves commuting, seasonal, circular, temporary and permanent forms of labour migration, movement of refugees, clandestine migration and even trafficking of women and children. Multiplicity in the forms, nature and modalities of cross-border migration from Bangladesh defy distinction between self-smuggling, commuting, migration-by-consent and trafficking (Andreas, 2000; Kyle and Koslowski (eds.) 2001). This is not simply labour migration because complexity of cross-border migration and trade is rooted in the historical fallacies associated with border demarcation and heavily politically loaded approach.

Bangladesh inherited disputed border relation with India as a legacy of the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. The border between India and Pakistan known as Radcliffe border after Sir Cyril Radcliffe was drawn within six weeks “on the basis of ascertaining the contiguous areas of Muslims and Non-Muslims”. Arbitrariness is the predominant feature of this partition because it was almost impossible to maintain a Muslim-Hindu divide geographically. Thus the border that separated Bangladesh from India had “ran through the Bengali heartland, separating tens of millions of Bengalis on the one side from tens of millions of Bengalis on the other” (Van Schandel, 2006). Thus for example, Murshidabad, a Muslim dominated district of East Pakistan was transferred to India whereas Chittagong Hill Tracts a non-Muslim majority district of India was transferred to Pakistan. Moreover the wandering rivers of active Bengal delta did not fit in this rigid state border and char lands remained disputed ever since.<sup>1</sup> The border also runs across chars – silt islands formed by banks of silt-laden large rivers that are most difficult to administer because of their high fluidity causing great mobility among its inhabitants.

In this process both India and Bangladesh share a highly contentious and volatile border stretching more than 4000 kilometers of land areas covering three sides of Bangladesh. They also share 191 exchangeable enclaves and 32 non-exchangeable enclaves between themselves. In May 1974 both countries agreed to exchange the enclaves, and to conduct referendum for the inhabitants to decide

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the Bengal border ran through an active delta and rivers flowing in active deltas are generally mobile. Inhabitants of Bengal for long adopted migration e.g. settler emigration to Assam or migration from Barisal to Dhaka on a regular basis as a strategy to deal with frequent changing of routes by major rivers and river erosion. Special regulations were in place regarding land rights along riverbanks and even ‘under water’ based on *diara* surveys that dealt exclusively with settlement of land rights along rivers (Van Schandel, 2006).

whether they would like to stay or move to their parent country. Whilst Bangladesh enacted legislation to fulfill its agreement, India has yet to do so. The only achievement in this regard is that by transferring Berubari to India, Bangladesh got permission to use the Tin Bigha Corridor, a gateway to Bangladeshi enclaves inside India in 1992 (Yasmin, 2007).<sup>2</sup> However, several border issues remained unresolved that often lead to cross-border confrontations and make the borders potentially explosive as political forces of either side can exploit them.

### **1.3. Magnitude and Extent of Cross-Border Migration**

Different sources put the figure of Bangladeshi migrants between 12 and 20 million. Existing estimates suggest that Bangladeshi migration to India occurs mainly from eastern side of India with three states namely -- West Bengal, Assam and Tripura serving as major conduits of the flow, which also spread further to Bihar, Delhi and Rajasthan and even to Maharashtra (Table 1.2). Little wonder then to find disproportionately large share of Bangladeshi migrants borne by West Bengal (40%), Assam (30%), Delhi (11%) and Tripura (7%), compared to the remaining states that have around 3.7% of the migrants.

However, any estimate on migration from Bangladesh to India must be treated with caution. It is not only a matter of distinguishing forms and modalities involved in cross-border migration but also a question of political sensitivity involved in the approach to the issue which often render getting reliable statistics on the magnitude of temporary workers impossible. In the first place, Bangladeshi *diasporas* are underclass in India where they are neither accepted by the authorities nor by the mainstream population at large. They do not get any leverage from the Bangladeshi government either as it does not acknowledge the incidence of cross-border migration.

Second, there are large streams of commuters involved in illegal trade and other forms of occupations across border but there is no reliable statistics on them. Third, for procuring Indian visa a migrant or a visitor has to indicate the purpose of the visit. So from Indian foreign ministry it is not impossible to get data on temporary work related migration. However, the reality is that large movement of workers actually occurs illegally and in the absence of return migration data from Bangladesh,

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<sup>2</sup> Instead of bisection, the border created more than 200 territorial units of which 74 Bangladeshi enclaves are in Cooch Behar and 123 Indian enclaves are in Rangpur and Dinajpur (for details see Whyte (2002).

it is rather difficult to trace temporary workers from foreign ministry's data base. Wherever possible statistics on the magnitude of different forms of migration are provided, but these are drawn from available sources predominantly emanating from India which are largely based on educated guess and often politically biased as cross-border migration is poorly researched in Bangladesh.

The most disturbing part of data problems relates to variations in the estimates of Bangladeshi populations from different Indian sources. For example, the Governor of Assam in 1998 gave a staggering figure of 13.2 million Bangladesh migrants in India. In the same year an official affidavit put up before the Supreme Court of India estimated a total number of 1024,322 Bangladeshi nationals entered into India with valid documents but overstayed and did not return back to Bangladesh during 1972-1998. During the same period over five million Bangladeshi nationals were detected for entering clandestinely in India and pushed back across the border.<sup>3</sup> In 2003, the then Indian Defence Minister, Mr. George Fernandez reported that on an average 100,000 Bangladeshis enter illegally to India every month (The Times of India, 29<sup>th</sup> September 2003). Moreover despite its denial, the 1991 census report of Bangladesh mentioned about an unique phenomenon of missing population, estimated initially at 10 million and subsequently at 8 million, of whom 1.73 million are Hindus, and 6.27 million are Muslims (Ray, 2002). With these caveats in mind some established patterns of Bangladeshi migration to India have been discussed in this paper along with the causes and consequences.

Table 2.1: Relative Share of Bangladeshi migrants in various states

<b>States</b>	<b>Percentage of Bangladeshi migrants</b>
West Bengal	40%
Assam	30%
Delhi	11%
Tripura	7%
Bihar	3.7%
Rajasthan	3.7%
Maharashtra	3.7%

Source: Estimates based on Sinha report, 1998  
[www.saag.org/papers7/paper632.html](http://www.saag.org/papers7/paper632.html)

<sup>3</sup> Supreme Court of India, Writ Petition (Civil) no. 125 of 1998 in the matter of AIFCL & another.

## 2.1. Causes of Migration

Continuous demand for cheap labour from Indian side is one of the major factors behind the flow of Bangladeshi migration to India. Agriculture in Punjab, urbanization in New Delhi, cotton and diamond industries in Gujrat, irrigation projects in West Bengal have attracted main 'sweat labour' (Samaddar, 1999). It is argued that Bangladesh serves as a crucial reserve pool of cheap labour for the economies of Assam, West Bengal, Delhi, Mumbai and other parts of India. Thus Schendel (2005: 230) remarked: "If there were indeed 12 to 20 million unauthorized Bangladeshis in India, there were millions of Indians keen to employ them. The Indian state never developed schemes either to hold these Indian citizens accountable for their illegal practices of employing 'aliens', or to issue temporary work permits to labour migrants from Bangladesh".

- Demand side story

### (i) *Need for cheap labour for India's booming economy*

Availability of cheap labour supply is one of the critical factors determining prices of many commodities including construction materials, food, manufactured goods, etc. Samaddar (1999) for example cited the case of Bharati brick field that sold brick at a much higher price when it faced scarcity of cheap migrant labour in 1993 and 1994 as a result of flushing out strategy adopted by police and security forces in West Bengal to push off cheap migrant labour from Bangladesh.<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding those occasional flushing out measures, his research also suggests existence of a well developed chain of recruiters and *dalals* or agents of brokerage system from both sides for hiring cheap migrant labour from Bangladesh.

Thus for example, contractors of construction sector including brick fields operate on both sides of the border and they employ labour recruiting agents "deep in Bangladesh who recruit labour by advancing Indian money (in the form of plastic cards). Labour supply is thus assured and production is regular". Increasing demand for domestic help in large cities also created demand for cheap migrant labour and Bangladeshi migrant women predominantly provide personal care services. Further, Schendel (2005: 231) has argued that infiltration theory developed by Indian politicians helped drawing public attention to the cost factor of unauthorized

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<sup>4</sup> Prices of bricks soared from Rs.1200 per thousand bricks to Rs.1500 during these periods (see Samaddar, 1999 for a detail account).

immigration in terms of law enforcement and state services, served as vote getter, on the one hand and on the other, stigmatizing immigrant labour to keep them cheap and pliable.

*(ii) Illegal Border trade and fragile livelihoods*

Illegal border trade and fragile livelihoods often promote illegal migration. Evidence suggests that number of Muslim population who migrate illegally largely for economic reason from Bangladesh to India is more than twice or three times as large as Hindu population. For example out of 55,553 illegal immigrants apprehended by BSF in 1991, 13,457 were Hindus and 42,090 were Muslims (Samaddar, 1999). This however, contradicts conventional wisdom which upholds predominance of minority population from the country of origin in the cross-border flows. Commuters not only include daily wage labourers but illegal traders or smugglers from both home and host countries figure prominently. Estimates suggest that goods worth US\$ two billion entered Bangladesh in 2004 (Sobhan, 2005) with the help of informal traders or their agents who physically transport the product across the common border.

Similar incidence of cross-border trade was also observed in the case of Tripura where the local residents complained against border fencing on the ground that it will destroy the area's economy reliant heavily on cross-border informal trade (Bhoumik, 2005). From thriving industries and businesses on both sides of the border that depends on smuggled parts, raw materials and goods, to impoverished residents in the border areas who make a living by acting as 'carriers' – transporting goods to and from the border, all depend on illegal commuting. Considerable numbers of Indian nationals are also involved in illegal migration largely as traders and facilitators of illegal trades.<sup>5</sup> Cross-border informal trade involves minimal level of risks due to institutionalised system of bribes paid to security agencies and low-levels of fines imposed on confiscated goods (Ramachandran, 2007).

*(iii) Smuggling and trafficking goes hand-in-hand*

To a great extent smuggling and trafficking operates in an ambiguous area that is neither purely voluntary nor involuntary from the perspective of the migrant. This is because a large number of them know "that they will be smuggled illegally across border to work, and they sometimes know the nature of their work – what they often

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<sup>5</sup> Fascinating incidents of illegal trade has been documented by Van Schendel, 2005

do not know is the terms of the ‘contract’” (Kyle and Koslowski (eds.) 2001). Women constitute a significant proportion in this flows for multiple reasons be it their ignorance which makes them easy prey to *dalals*’ false promises of employment or greater eagerness to escape poverty in the context of extremely limited opportunities for earning cash income or because of greater demand from *dalals*’ side given the high profit margin derived from trafficking (INCIDIN Bangladesh, 2002). In many cases women migrants realize that they are trafficked only after they reach destinations e.g. India, Pakistan, the Gulf States or South East Asia, where they are largely for economic reason sold to sweatshops or brothels (Schendel, 2005).<sup>6</sup> Estimates suggest that each year around 5000 women and children are trafficked to Pakistan through India (Gazi, 2001).

- Supply side story

- (i) *Growth of migration industry*

Migration industry composed of well-organized network of *dalals* in Bangladesh and India together with recruiting agencies, recruiters, touts, brokers, informers, travel agents and their employees and contacts in many Bangladeshi border side villages help escalating new forms of transnational flows.<sup>7</sup> Migration industry facilitates migration to India and minimises the risk of settlement by offering necessary document e.g. passport, ration card, etc for substantial sum of money (Mahmood, 1998). Under the situation potential migrants may be lured by employment trap set by *dalals* and women migrants may end up as prostitutes (Blanchet, 2002).

Research also suggests that a considerable number of women migrants are sold as wives to widowed villagers along railway routes in the north Indian states of Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Rajasthan (Blanchet, 2003). Moreover as indicated earlier, a large number of migrants tend to move into relatively prosperous urban centres like New Delhi and Mumbai where there is constant demand of cheap labour cannot be dismissed for both men and women migrants (Ramachandran, 2006).

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<sup>6</sup> Schendel has also argued that although men, women and children are smuggled across the Bangladesh-India border but the trafficking of women has attracted most attention. From his own research he cited the cases of reverse migration of Indian girls in search of work or to marry a Bangladeshi man.

<sup>7</sup> For details on migration industry see Castles and Miller, 2003.

*(ii) Survival and betterment framework*

Using both survival and betterment framework ([www.saag.org/papers7/paper632.html](http://www.saag.org/papers7/paper632.html)) as the major causes of migration many Indian scholars tried explain cross-border migration from Bangladesh. With a more than 1000 persons cramming per square kilometre land in Bangladesh where the average GNP per capita is around five hundred dollars and the employment opportunities are limited, migration whether internal, cross-border and overseas is always high. India is often preferred because of geographic proximity and cultural affinity facilitated by strong presence and support from social networks, apart from economic dictates. According to Lin and Paul (1995) pull of Indian economy is high because job prospects is much higher in large cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and so is the daily wage rate, and over and above, the lower price of food and consumer goods which increases purchasing power of an unskilled agricultural wage earner in India at least five times that in Bangladesh make Indian economy considerably attractive for Bangladeshi migrants.<sup>8</sup>

Prospect of long-term settlement which Ramachandran (2005) has termed as ‘becoming Indian’ should not ignored. With relatively lesser cost of migration offered to broker than for example migration to ME countries and cheaper way to buy Indian official documents necessary to prove Indian identity, many men, women and children migrate India. They generally occupy the lowest social echelons and join the vast ranks of the urban poor living in slums and shanties in large cities of India.

*(iii) India as transit to onward migration*

Passage to India is also used as a transit to onward migration -- Pakistan and the ME countries, a move the Indian press describes as “ex-filtration”. In 2000 Fredrick (2000:68) estimated around 1.5 to 2 million Bangladeshi migrants are there in Karachi. To avoid the heavy barbed-wire fencing running across much of the India-Pakistan border, Bangladeshi often chose either the most dangerous route through Thar desert and the Rann of Kutch or the line of control between India-held and Pakistan-held Kashmir. Neither is safe and often those infiltrators, mostly women and children died due to thirst while crossing the Thar Desert (Rahman, 1997). The danger of police raid and subsequently confinement in Indian jails in the latter route has been

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<sup>8</sup> With high inflation and the escalation of the food prices in India like its neighbour, one may tempt to contest this proposition. It is also important to examine whether the flow and pattern of migration has changed in the advent of the global inflation and food crisis.

amply evidenced (Sharma, 1998). Anecdotal evidence suggests that while traversing this long route from Bengal to Kashmir they are accompanied by brokers at several points who leave them near the border to cross over to Pakistan alone.

There is a well-established network of brokers who charge money for their service which does not however ensure immunity from police raid. Motivation for earning cash income is very strong and this is supported by kinship and social networks both in India and Pakistan and deeply entrenched *dalal* or brokerage system who often mediate between origin and destination to facilitate cross-border migration (Ahmed, 1997; Frederick and Kelly, 2000). Thus in her Frontline article ('on a dangerous journey') Parveen Swami (5 March 2003) remarked: "No number of barbed wires, fences and machine guns, it is clear can stop the movement of the desperately poor to where they think they may find food and shelter".

*(iv) Natural calamities and man-made disasters*

Destabilising factors such as ecological vulnerabilities emanating from massive floods, draught, river erosion, cyclones and communal riots that render millions people homeless causing involuntary migration. Bangladesh suffers from many climate dependent riverine floods, riverbank erosion, tropical cyclones and droughts. Massive floods and riverbank erosion cause loss of land, displacement of human population and livestock, disruption of production, evacuation and loss of property. According to existing estimates, natural hazards displace millions of people each year of which riverbank erosion alone displaces 60,000-70,000 people on average (Elahi et al. 1991; Hye, 2006).

Research also suggests that the number of people crossing over to India increases during period of environmental disaster albeit inherent law of migration contemplates short distance move to areas which are compatible geographically and culturally.<sup>9</sup> The UNCHR report on world's state of refugees put this figure of environment led involuntary migration at around 12-17 million who migrated to neighbouring Indian states of West Bengal, Assam and Tripura driven largely by survival motive.<sup>10</sup> Samaddar (1999) argued that constructions of big dams, bridges

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<sup>9</sup> Ahmad, Imtiaz quoted in Sanjoy Hazarika, India and its North East: The Challenges of Regionalism and Migration, in Kousar J. Azam (ed) Ethnicity, Identity and the State in South Asia. South Asian Publishers, New Delhi, 2001, p. 200.

<sup>10</sup> Note this is cumulative one-way figure since 1950s and without any statistics on return migration it is difficult to say the exact magnitude of migrants.

and barrages etc often result in massive population displacement. Flood Action Programs (FAP) alone “have affected wetlands, fisheries and char lands, leading to further erosion, salinity, and the decline of employment potential for women in particular”, all of which in the long run induce migration (p.157).

Insecurity led migration by religious minorities is another dimension of push migration across border. Ever since the birth of Bangladesh Hindu population grew only marginally and their relative share in the total population declined considerably. According to 2001 census the size of Hindu population was 11.6 million which means since the past 27 years only 1.7 million population was added yielding a 0.6% annual average growth rate. By contrast Muslim population almost doubled from 61 million to 111 million and the annual average growth rate was 2.2% during the same period. Therefore, share of Hindu population to the country’s total population declined from 13.5% to 9.2% during the same period and by 1.79% since 1991, whilst the relative composition of Christians and Buddhist population did not change.<sup>11</sup>

Obviously, it indicates out-migration by Hindu population, which is destined largely to India. During the same time districts in West Bengal bordering Bangladesh showed higher population growth rate than non-bordering districts which tend to suggest population expansion through cross-border migration (Samaddar, 1999). Insecurity could be one of the major factors behind their migration. This insecurity could be economic due to loss of land and other assets; political and psychological from the point of view of the religious standing in the new or changed religious contour of the old settlement where the threat of communal tensions is high accruing from marginalized status of minority religious group.

For similar reasons reverse flow of Indian nationals to Bangladesh also occurs although little information is available on this account. From newspaper clippings Schendel (2005) cited a few evidence. For example, in 1998 about 10,000 migrants from Mizoram (India) moved to Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) (The Hindu, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1998). During Gujrat violence in 2002 several hundreds of Indian Muslims flee to Bangladesh and 200 migrants were recorded by the Times of India (18<sup>th</sup> May 2002). Ahmad (2001) also noted that there are around 100,000 Indian migrants who have legally migrated to work in different multinational companies in Bangladesh.

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<sup>11</sup> According to Guha Thakurta (1999), “a total of 5.3 million Hindus, i.e. on average 200,000 per year have gone “missing” during 1974-1991”.

### 3.1. Consequences of Cross-Border Migration

Researches from India reveal that in Kolkata and Delhi Bangladeshi migrants have carved out a niche for themselves as domestic helps, construction labours, rickshaw pullers and rag pickers. In Mumbai “they are crucial as weavers and zari (embroidery with gold or silver threads) workers (Namboodiri, 1998; Padmanabhan, 1998; Lin and Paul, 1995). Rickshaw pullers and day labourers in many border towns such as Agartala (Tripura), Silchar (Assam), or Siliguri (West Bengal) are overwhelmingly drawn from Bangladeshi migrants (Maheswari, 1998; Samaddar, 1999; Hazarika, 2000). There is also a large volume of commuters and seasonal migrants who travel to and forth across the border (Hossain and Banerjee, 2004). Bangladeshi women from Rajshahi for example provide cheap labour to Indian cigarette and bangle factories and in 1998, 10,000 rickshaw pullers in Shiliguri town came from Bangladesh illegally (Maheswari, 1998). To quote Samaddar (1999) who cites borderlanders’ expression on this: “the border means coming and going; ‘*asha jawa*’; ‘*okhane chash, ekhane lekhapara*’ (cultivation there, studies here); ‘*opare chash, epare bash*’ (land for tilling there, house for living here)”.

Ramchandran (2004) further remarked that on the one hand, Bangladeshi migrants have adapted local norms and practices e.g. learning Hindi, putting *bindi* (a dot on forehead), etc and on the other, they have established kinship bonds with Indian Muslim communities through marriage, thereby strengthening their ties to India. It may be worthwhile to mention that one of the Bangladeshi migrants remarked, “After crossing the border, we all become West Bengalis”.<sup>12</sup>

Notwithstanding their adaptation, typically a migrant who crosses the border becomes a ‘transnational’ migrant for all intents and purposes given the complexities and complications including legality issue involved in cross-border migration. Whilst Bangladeshi migrants who transgress illegally become transnational and stateless, for similar reason Indian migrants living illegally in Bangladesh may find greater flexibility in border regulation. For example, in 2001 West Bengal authorities abandoned border fencing when they found about 1500 Indians lived illegally in Char Meghna on Bangladesh territory (Schendel, 2005).

Fall back position of the Bangladeshi migrant to India is further compounded by the fact that they have little option to come back home as the Bangladeshi

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<sup>12</sup> See Blanchet (2002) for detailed narratives from Bangladeshi migrants in India.

government does not acknowledge any forms of cross-border migration from Bangladesh to India. This does not however, mean that they do not move back and forth crossing the border or cease to maintain connection with their friends, relatives and family members living in the home country.

- Complexities of stateless unrecognised migrants

Schendel (2005) put forward three strong arguments to explain transnational character of millions of Bangladeshi migrant in India. In the first place he argued that these migrants are not accepted as Indian citizens either by the government or by the mainstream Indian population. They live as 'floating underclass' and stateless persons whose physical living should not be equated with psycho-social sense of belongingness. Second, pursuance of good life in terms of decent income, freedom from oppressive social control and prospects for a better future are the dominant economic rather than nationalistic motivating factors behind their migration to India. For most Bangladeshis in Delhi "the dominant identity, at least for the moment, is human beings whose basic need is to fill their stomachs" (Lin and Paul, 1995). Third, like their counterparts all over the world, they think transnationally when they remit money and make occasional visit back home.

Unlike their early 'repatriates', they often retain regular contact with relatives in Bangladesh through transnational networks of increasing complexity" (Schendel, 2005). Research on female migrant labour from Bangladesh to Mumbai and Kolkata unveils that they live their working life in India, possessed all official documents needed to survive there, but voted in successive elections in Bangladesh, and used remittances to buy property in their villages (Thomas, 2000).

- Problems of reliable estimates on remittances

In the absence of reliable data on the magnitude of migrants and remittances, consequences from cross-border migration are difficult to assess not to talk of quantification. Estimates from Indian sources suggest that Bangladesh earns 15 billion dollars annually by Bangladeshi migrants which contradicts estimates available from Bangladesh (Pathania, 2003). In the 2006 fiscal year remittances earned by Bangladeshi migrants from all over the world was equivalent to US\$ 4.8 billion (Bangladesh Bank, 2007) and the foreign currency reserve of the country was US\$ 3.4

billion. Moreover Bangladesh does not publish remittances data from India and in the absence of formal recording from the recipient country and in the context of high prevalence of informal nature of remittances transfer it is difficult to ascertain the magnitude of remittances.

Cross-border informal migration and trading is facilitated by well developed network of capital markets or private forms of banking known as *hundi* or *hawala* based on trust and personal acquaintance at both sides of the border which help in transferring remittances at the quickest time with least transaction cost. For example, over 150 *hundi* agents offered their financial services to customers in a relatively small border town of Champainawabganj in Western Bangladesh in 2002 (The Daily Star, 22 September 2002).

- Smuggling and trade links

Pathania (2003) also argues that Bangladesh's thriving leather and processed meat industry is booming due to cattle smuggling from India at a throw away price and then exported to the ME countries at almost 3-4 times the cost price. On a monthly basis, value of the smuggled cattle from West Bengal is worked out from Indian sources at about 0.5 million dollars. She further added the cattle smuggling industry provided employment opportunity to the laid off workers of the jute industry in Bangladesh. Whilst one may not argue with smuggling industry's absorption potential the question may be raised as to who were involved in this business prior to laid-off workers of jute industry which took place around 2001-02 where as cattle smuggling has been in vogue for much longer time. The potential of generating employment opportunity in this industry for the border Landers from the Indian side cannot be ignored either.

However, it is not only cattle smuggling but also the entire black marketing across border is highly profitable to traders of both sides. Official estimates from India suggest that the value of goods annually smuggled to Bangladesh from Northeast India alone exceeded Rs.20 billion or US\$ 450 million (Kalyan Barooah, 2002). It is often assumed that at least 40 to 50% of the economies of both India and Bangladesh are black (The Daily Star, 21 May 2002; Confederation of Indian Industry, Press Release, November 2000: [www.ciionline.org/news/pressrel/2000/Nov/28nov2.htm](http://www.ciionline.org/news/pressrel/2000/Nov/28nov2.htm)).

- Vicious cycle of low wage

According to Samaddar (1999) migration of people from areas of low-productivity to high productivity areas does not establish equilibrium either for home or for the host country. This is because the wage rate in the economically depressed areas does not improve enough with the shortage of labour supply on the one hand, and on the other, wages do not level off at destination due to abundance of labour supply. Therefore he is in opinion that the pattern of economic development in South Asia and the accompanying structural adjustment have created and exacerbated the segmented nature of the labour market and the reproduction level of skilled labour i.e. enskilling process remained narrow in scope.

#### **4.1. Management Problem and Ambivalent Policies**

- Problems of identification of migrants

For a culturally and geo-politically diverse country like India it is extremely difficult to distinguish Bangladeshi migrants from the mainstream Indian population because of physical resemblances, cultural and linguistic affinity with Indian Bengalis. They also share cultural norms with Indian Muslim communities. In India only 30% to 40% births are registered compared to 12% in Bangladesh. In the absence of large scale birth registration and any centralized register for citizens, it is both difficult and expensive for the Indian state to identify migrants from Bangladesh and determine their magnitude. Moreover many of them have fraudulently procured ration cards, birth and school certificates, voters identity card and those with money and connections, it is not very difficult to manage even Indian passport. It is not uncommon to find tripartite support networks in the process of migration and aftermath. To quote Schendel (2005: 220): “Unauthorised migration took place within an extended community that transcended the border. Economic and political actors on either side were mutually dependent: earlier immigrants offer newcomers shelter and support, Indian employers were keen to exploit cheap labour, and Indian politicians were interested in expanding their electorate”.

- Vacillating policies and attitudes

Continuously changing regulations and evasions, change in policy thrust from “homecoming” to “infiltration” and finally to deporting clearly indicate ambivalence

in Indian attitude toward cross-border migrants from Bangladesh. The Assam government switched from homecoming to infiltration thesis in 1980s after violent anti-Bengali disturbances over land, resources and election issues. Authorities in Delhi and Mumbai adhere to the same doctrine after a decade after the rightist parties came to power there, the West Bengal government also join the bandwagon albeit after 1999 (Schendel, 2005). Notwithstanding imposition of some of the regulatory measures and barbed wire fences, the Indian state did not take any measure to identify slave-importing schemes working from Indian soil and protected by the state agents who derive benefits from them both at the border and at the place of employment (brothels, brickfields, factories, homes).

- Non-recognition on the part of Bangladesh creates more problems than respite

On the other hand, the Bangladesh state did not interfere with the flourishing migrant export industry but occasionally involved in thwarting slave-importing schemes destined for India given that these are less beneficial economically but more embarrassing politically as it involves publicity risk from human rights groups both at home and abroad. Increasingly, cross-border migration is associated with security threats and destination based crime (Ramachandran, 2005).

However, mutual blaming by India and Bangladesh periodically for harbouring insurgents antagonistic to their national interest has long been in place. Whilst India accuses Bangladesh for allowing access to United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), Bangladesh also blames India for sheltering the Swadhin Bangobhumi Andolon (SBA) and United Peoples Democratic Front (UPDF), and also criminals and local *mastaans* (goons) wanted in Bangladesh. India currently claims that there are 119 anti-Indian insurgent camps inside Bangladesh, while Bangladesh put the number anti-Bangladeshi camps at 39 in India (Ahmed, 2007).

What is worse is instead of working for the welfare of migrants and for a politically and economically viable policy measure consistent with globalisation and regional cooperative framework, “Bangladesh callously ignored the plight of millions of Bangladeshi citizens whose right to work and decent life were thwarted at home and who voted with feet, thereby exposing the multiple ways in which the economic, political and social system in Bangladesh has failed them. It stripped migrants to India

off their Bangladeshi citizenship because they were in a national space where the Bangladeshi state found it inconvenient to acknowledge them. By turning the Bangladeshi *diaspora* into a numbers game, and by variously criminalising and disowning individual migrants, politicians in both countries gambled with the future of millions of Bangladeshis living, by force or by choice, beyond the territory of their state” (Schendel, 2005: 234).<sup>13</sup>

#### **4.2. Policy Recommendations**

Cross-border migration between India and Bangladesh needs clear understanding, recognition, more information on the magnitude and operation of undocumented migration and effective management. Effective management is very much dependent on mutual as well as bi-lateral agreement along with regional, multilateral and international cooperation. It is clear that no barbed wire and draconian legal measures so far could stop cross-border population movements. Given the economic bottom-line, political sensitivity, cultural and socio-religious complications, the opening of a legal channel of migration may be considered as the most feasible option. It also raises the question of how best to manage it.

In this regard it may be worthwhile to consider allowing entry of migrant and providing them a free pass that would entitle them to have minimum wage and other entitlement accessible to an Indian daily or contractual labour while at work. Like Thailand’s MOUs with Burma, Cambodia, and Laos that enable migrant workers in Thailand’s to receive equal wages and benefits, and has a provision of security money to the tune of 15% of their wages to assure returns and provide funds for development in migrant areas of origin, similar type of MOU could be drawn between Bangladesh and India. However, in order to minimise the scope of proliferation of greater illegal migration with the apprehension of detection and crack-down of illegal migrants, the national identity cards to all residents in India may be issued beforehand.

Efforts to combat the illegal movement of people require to go beyond improved policing and address the causes of the movement and of the involvements of various agents e.g. *dalals*, brokers and smugglers supporting it. Policies and programs need to be consistent and comprehensive across the both participating

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<sup>13</sup> However, one may contest his allegation of ‘criminalization’ of individual migrants in the absence of reliable statistics and evidence. Instead one may argue that policies and political bias of both countries on cross-border migration issues helped thriving sub-agents and intermediaries at the cost of migrants’ welfare and state revenue.

nations and groups involved. International bodies e.g. International Organisation for Migration (IOM), International labour organisation (ILO) may be involved to implement an international migration regime with adequate legislations in both countries and effective mechanisms for sanctions so that potential illegal migrants feel they have a fair chance of immigrating through the legal system.

Following Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation's (APEC's) initiative of economic growth by reducing barriers to the free flow of trade, South Asia Free Trade Area (SAFTA) must be implemented with such schemes as APEC Business Travel Card to provide for flexible travel arrangements for business and reduce the time and costs for applying entry visas and permits for participating countries. It is not simply a matter of trade liberalisation and free movement of traders but the need for India to focus more on administrative reforms and efficiency, improved infrastructure and minimising border delays for realising benefits from free trade agreement with Bangladesh. Obviously it calls for greater investment in infrastructure along with good governance and change of attitude and culture. SAARC can be used for implementing an integrated labour market strategy. Institutions and policies must be so designed as to ensure transparency in migration and for creating level-playing grounds that are likely to ensure more efficiency and harness greater benefits from migration while minimizing the risks of illegal migration and negative externalities.

As a part of partial implementation of SAFTA, the seven Indian land-locked states bordering Bangladesh from western side must be given permission to hold free-trade with India. In essence it means that the Sylhet border should be opened up for trade links and communication channels for Bangladesh and Indian North-Eastern states. This bold step can bring win-win options for both Bangladesh and India. Whilst Bangladesh is likely to get an opportunity to make-up for the unfavourable trade balance with India, and on the other hand, it would help India to facilitate development in that part of the country which may in turn help reduce the separatist movements.

It is important to realise that illegal migration is essentially a human problem caused by arbitrariness of the Radcliffe border and aggravated by poverty, limited employment opportunities at home and environmental hazards e.g. recurrent floods, cyclones and other disasters. Therefore, the policy makers need to come out from the traditional security paradigm and make what Castles said (2003: 22) a "conceptual leap" to recognise the long-term significance of migration and settlement in the

region. While respecting due rights of its own citizens, as the biggest and mighty neighbour India must also offer humanitarian assistance to stateless people, available to them through a range of international regimes. Government and elites of Bangladesh have also failed to cultivate time-tested friends in India and the civil society too has limited success.

Whilst SAARC University is a good effort to strengthen regional cooperation, the need for collaborative research on cross-border migration is paramount. Civil society groups, particularly researchers and professionals must undertake scholarly research in collaboration with Indian researchers to generate understandings on the complexities involved in the process of transnational migration between India and Bangladesh to counter stereotypes about migrants, biases toward migration process and its outcomes for both countries. Both countries must come to an agreement for commonly accepted data generation of the different types of movements across border including return migration.

In the end, remarks made by a Bangladeshi fisherman, who had been travelling back and forth crossing the India-Bangladesh border at the eastern side on how cross-border migration could be stopped may be worth quoting:

Can the river stop flowing? Can you block the rains? People who talk about such things do not know what they are saying. The Assamese (Indian) need us, we (Bangladeshi) need them (Hazarika, 2000: 194).

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