



Changing contours of international migration: The South-South migration

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Abstract

The increasing salience accorded to international migration in global politics stems from the increasing volume of international migrants across the world, and its implications for the country receiving the migrants. Until the beginning of the new millennium, the dominant trend in international migration was South-North migration. However, this trend has been overtaken by South-South migration. More of international migration takes place between developing countries than from developing countries to developed countries. The underlying factors for this change in trend are economic, such as 'wage zones' or 'wage differentials', and political factors, such as wars, civil strife and repressive regimes. The remittance receipts in the home country of migrants have the potential of contributing to the economic and social development. To elaborate on the pattern of South-South migration, the trend of flow of migrants into India is also analyzed. The analysis suggests that most of the South-South migration takes place from neighboring countries. And in the context of increasing trend in South-South migration, regional and bilateral agreements across the three continents of the South have to be evolved to facilitate the process of movement of people across borders.

Keywords: international migration, south-south migration, migrants in India

Introduction

Although international migration has been a constant feature of human history, the increased salience accorded to it in global politics stems from its increasing scale, impact on international affairs, and implications for geopolitics of the states receiving international migrants. It is a complex interplay of several factors that has led to these developments. First, the number of states in the international system has substantially increased since the Second World War: from 52 states in 1945 to 196 in 2021. This has increased international boundaries and consequently the volume of international migrants. Second, the exponential increase in world's population has led to over exploitation of regional resources, particularly in the Third World, causing natural disasters and famines and the consequent population movement ^[1]. Third, rapid advances in communication and transportation technologies have made people aware of better opportunities in other parts of the world as well as making travel easier to desired destinations. Fourth, wars and civil-strife have added to the flow of migrants. Nonetheless, it is important not to exaggerate the magnitude and salience of international migration as only a very small proportion of the population moves across borders. According to International Organization for Migration, there were 84 million migrants in 1975 which doubled to 175 million in 2000. The estimated migrants in 2020 are around 250 million representing 3 per cent of the total world population ^[2]. In sum, 1 out of every 33 persons is an international migrant.

South-South Migration

With the increasing flow of migrants across the world, there has been a marked change in the charter of contemporary international migration. South-South migration is acquiring increasing salience in international migration matrix. Many

developing countries which were sending countries are increasingly becoming receiving countries for migrants. There are a substantial number of developing countries that have been receiving migrants from other developing countries with low-income. This continuing trend has been confirmed by a recent World Bank report which indicates that there is a discernable shift from North-South migration to South-South migration. Many developing countries like India, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan have now begun to appear in the list of top receivers of migrants worldwide.

According to Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) estimates, South-South migration may be higher than North-South migration. South-South migration accounts for 82 million migrants constituting thirty six percent of the total world migrants ^[3]. These estimates are suggestive of the increasing economic, social and political significance of migrants in the receiving developing countries. This share may be much higher if illegal immigrants are taken into account because illegal immigration is an important feature of South-South migration; particularly between countries that share common borders. Nonetheless, flow between countries and across regions of the South has become a salient aspect of the international migration system. Migration, legal as well as illegal, between countries with contiguous borders is the highest. For example, ninety percent of migrants into India are from the neighboring countries. In South Asia, more than fifty percent of the migrants move to either the neighboring countries or other developing countries.

The above analysis suggests that contemporary migration is global in scope as there is no part of the world that is unaffected by migration: the nature and intensity of its impact may vary from region to region, and over time. In most host countries,

particularly in liberal democracies, once migration takes place, it inevitably results in a substantial number becoming citizens of the host country and creating a cultural, linguistic and religious minority within the state. The immigrant community has the potential of affecting the political, economic and social conditions within the host country. Importantly, this community can affect the geopolitics of the host nation-state.

Conceptualization of geopolitics has changed over time; more so with the intensification of the processes of globalization. The contemporary dominant geopolitical architecture is an international system based on territorial states, exclusive jurisdiction, and national boundaries. Within this architecture, it is the intersection of territory, resources, and flows (of people, ideas, goods, and money) that acquires significance in global politics. In the contemporary world, many governments as well as citizens have been unable to appreciate the scale and significance of particular patterns of movement. There are examples from the western world as well as the Third World to drive home this particular point. In 2006, the British government admitted that it was unaware of the scale of flow of illegal immigrants to the United Kingdom. Until the late 1990s, the Indian government also had no idea of the scale of the flow of illegal immigrants from East Pakistan/ Bangladesh to India.

Economic Dimension of South-South Migration

South-South migration takes place primarily because of three reasons. First, the wage differentials between countries, and the possibilities of employment opportunities, can have a major impact on migration between countries. Middle-income countries tend to attract a substantial number of immigrants from nearby low-income countries. Migration also takes place between low-income countries with only a slight differential in income. Here, there are examples from across the three continents of the South. In South America, Argentina, Chile and Venezuela attract migrants from Bolivia, Paraguay, and Peru. In Asia, Malaysia receives migrants from Indonesia, and India from Bangladesh and Nepal.

As for Africa, South Africa attracts immigrants from Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, and Zimbabwe ^[4].

Second, irrespective of the income differentials, there is also seasonal migration to take advantage of weather patterns as this helps in the diversification of income sources and reduction of risks. Thousands of Nepalese farmers migrate to northeast India during the harvesting season. Similarly, seasonal variations in agricultural production accounts for main cross border mobility in West Africa. Although seasonal migration also takes place between North-South, but the South-South migration is on a much higher scale because agriculture is the main stay of the economy in the countries of the South and the borders are more porous.

Third, South-South migration also takes place because of small trade. People travel across the border to pursue small trade. The bilateral agreement of 1950 between India and Nepal permits free passage and trade between the two countries. In fact, the two countries have open borders for all practical purposes. Similarly, Dominican Republic allows, twice a week, small traders from Haiti without the immigration formalities.

According to the World Bank, the remittances from South-South migration account for 9-30 percent of the developing countries remittance receipts. This is an important economic dimension as

it may contribute to the socio-economic development of the developing countries sending immigrants ^[5].

Political Dimension of South-South Migration

In this category, there are three main causes of migration: wars, civil wars, and repressive regimes. In cases of war, conflicts and repression, people migrate to neighboring developing countries as asylum seekers. In the 1970s, a worldwide refugee crisis developed but the countries in the South were worst affected. Hundreds of thousands of people migrated from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos to escape repression and civil war. The already existing Palestinian refugee problem in Middle East was made worse by the conflicts in Lebanon. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, led millions of Afghani people to flee to Pakistan and Iran. In Africa, conflicts in Sudan, Uganda, South Africa and Zaire led to yet another refugee crisis. In Latin America, repressive military dictatorships in Chile and Argentina led to refugee crisis. According to the report of United Nations High Commission (UNHCR), there were three and a half times more refugees in developing countries compared to the ones in developed countries. Asia received 5 million refugees, Africa accommodated 6.8 million refugees, and only 2.6 million people found refuge in Europe, North America and Oceania ^[6]. Civil wars have been an important factor for migration in Latin America. The highest number of interregional migrants in Latin America are from Colombia. According to the UNHCR report, the number of international migrants increased during the 1980s due to civil wars and then declined during the 1990s as peace returned and migrants returned to their home countries ^[7]. In recent years, ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka and Rwanda have led to a sizeable number of refugees.

Reference to Migrants in India

Most of the migrants living in India are from the neighbouring South Asian countries. According to the 2001 census, 6 million residents in India were migrants and out of this number almost 5.7 million were from the neighbouring countries of Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Burma. Although India is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, traditionally the refugees have been treated alright in India. As long back as 1959 when Dalai Lama fled Tibet, India permitted Dalai Lama to set up a government-in-exile in Dharamsala. It is estimated that about 110,000 Tibetans live in India and most of them (80,000) came during the first wave in the 1950s and 1960s. They received resident permits and were offered low-paying public works jobs by the Indian government. However, the situation has changed and more recent Tibetan refugees have not been as welcome and denied resident permits.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 led to an estimated 60,000 refugees flee to India. Many more refugees entered India when Taliban took power in 1992. According to UNHCR estimates of 2007, more than 9,200 Afghani refugees were living in India. Of this number, 92 percent were Hindu or Sikhs. The Indian government has agreed to naturalize many of these Hindu and Sikhs who have lived in India since 1979. Also, UNHCR has reported that about 4,000 asylum seekers from Afghanistan and Myanmar (Burma) are in the process of refugee certification.

India has an open border with Nepal. The bilateral friendship treaty signed in 1950 between India and Nepal stipulates that the people of both the countries are to be treated as native citizens,

and therefore can travel and work freely across the border. The historical context to the treaty goes back to the ninetieth century when many Nepalis migrated to Punjab to join the British army in India. Some Nepalis also migrated to India during the period to work in tea plantations in Assam and Darjeeling. According to an estimate (Nepal Living Standard Survey), there are currently 1 million Nepalis working in India. Most of them live in Northern India and are unskilled permanent or seasonal workers.

Myanmar has been experiencing frequent civil strife and ethnic conflicts for a long time. It is estimated that 40,000 Rohingya have over the years fled to India^[8]. The military coup in February, 2021 has compounded the problem. According to the UNHCR^[9] (May, 2021), 4,000 – 6,000 Rohingya refugees entered India for safety as a direct consequence of the military coup.

In Sri Lanka, the civil war that erupted in 1983 between the government and the Tamil Tigers led to a large number of ethnic South Indian Tamils flee to India. Until 1995, the Indian government and the UNHCR had repatriated 100,000 Tamil Sri Lankans to Sri Lanka. However, the renewed fighting between the government and Tamil Tigers in 2006 led to about another 22,000 Sri Lankans fleeing to India. Currently, nearly 73,000 thousand refugees are living in camps mainly in Tamil Nadu^[10]. It is indeed difficult to have accurate and reliable estimates of the Bangladeshi migrants in India. A study based on Indian Census data estimated that there were 3.1 to 3.7 million Bangladeshis in 2001. However, the Government of India estimated that in 2004 there were 12 million Bangladeshis residing illegally in the country. There appears to be a general agreement among analysts of varying ideological inclinations on the current estimates of Bangladeshi migrants in India: 20 million in 2020. However, the most disconcerting fact appears to be the revelation by a World Bank study which contends that, in terms of flow, the Indo-Bangladesh corridor is one of the most active globally, and is a close second to flows across the US-Mexican border.

The migrants from Bangladesh are increasingly perceived as a threat to national well-being and security. This particular point was underscored in April 2008 by the declaration of the Parliamentary Standing Committee that ‘a large presence of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants poses a grave threat to the internal security [of India] and it should be viewed strongly.’

The continuing migration of Bangladeshis into India has become a politically and socially sensitive issue. The north-eastern states of India have received the largest inflows of migrants due to their proximity to Bangladesh. Historically, a substantial number of refugees migrated to these states during the partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947 and subsequent formation of an independent nation-state of Bangladesh in 1971. The largest inflow of these migrants has been in the state of Assam. This has led to demographic and cultural changes within the state and provoked anti-Bengalis movements. In the late 1940s, the Bengal Kheda (drive away Bengalis) movement started in Assam. And in the 1960s, a substantial number of Bengali Hindus fled to the neighboring states of West Bengal and Tripura. The All-Assam Students Union (AASU) led an anti-foreigners movement during 1979-84. The movement opposed the entry of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, and demanded the expulsion of all Bengalis who had entered Assam since 1951. The violence that engulfed the movement led to killing of thousands of people; majority of these were Bengali-speaking Muslim immigrants.

Analysts have argued that in these insurgent-prone north-eastern states characterized by social and political instability, the unabated flow of Bangladeshi illegal immigrants has fuelled divisive and aggressive tendencies.

The motivating force underlying these movements has been a serious threat to cultural/linguistic identities of the people in the north-eastern states. The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) party leader in an interview to the BBC in 2005 articulated the sentiments by stating that ‘The illegal immigrants from Bangladesh are a major threat to our identity. We will become foreigners in our own land unless we keep these people out of Assam.’ This view was reinforced by the Supreme Court in its judgement which stated that ‘The presence of such large number of migrants from Bangladesh, which run into millions, is in fact an aggression on the state of Assam and has also contributed significantly in causing serious internal disturbances in the shape of insurgency of alarming proportions.’

The growing concern about terrorism has raised the profile of the issue of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh in public discourse. In the perception of analysts, policy makers, journalists, and the ordinary people, it is a serious issue and requires effective solution. According to a leading journalist, ‘There are as many as 20 million Bangladeshis scattered across India. Some are genuine refugees, men and women fleeing persecution. But many are seeking to make a quick buck at the Indians’ expense. More worrying, an increasing number are criminals allied to terrorists.’ The Indian policy makers need to address the issue with short-term measures as well as a long-term solution because it has the potential of getting enmeshed with the issues of threat to internal security, identity, communalism, human rights, and social and political instability. The on-going diplomatic process between India and Bangladesh of finding a viable solution to illegal migration of Bangladeshis in India has the potential of mitigating the problem as both sides appear to be serious in resolving the issue. However, to deal with the existing illegal Bangladeshi immigrants with an appropriate response would remain a challenge for the policy makers in India.

Conclusion

Despite the increasing South-South migration, the regional and bilateral agreements to facilitate the migration process have been slow to come by. Latin America has made progress as citizens of MERCOSUR (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela) have access to legal residence in any of the member states. Similarly, visa free movement of people is permitted under the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Also, the common East African passport facilitates free movement of people across Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya. Although free movement has been permitted, it does not provide guarantee of legal residence or the right to work. However, encouraging developments are taking place to evolve regional/bilateral agreements across the three continents of the South to facilitate the process of migration. The emphasis of these development is more on bilateral agreements rather than regional/subregional arrangements to facilitate migration^[11].

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