

Bangladesh And India: An Issue Of Discord

Bangladesh and India share similar geographic situations, natural resources, cultural and ethnic belongings, and a common borderland. The only unnatural issue disturbing their relations is the development of asymmetric bilateralism, where India tries to impose a big brotherly attitude on Bangladesh. This peculiar attitude has been a deterrent in the development of sustainable diplomatic relations between the two states.

Northeastern India has many things in common with Bangladesh including social, cultural, and economic commonalities. The region throughout history had been open for mobility, travel, and resettlements.

Since time immemorial, both Bengal and Assam share natural, ethnic, socioeconomic, geo-cultural, and geopolitical commonalities. It was the partition of Bengal and Assam in 1947 which imposed a political border transforming these commonalities and shared geography into bilateral discord. (Sufian, 2020)

After the partition of 1947, the historical region of Bengal was distributed in many parts by the Boundary Commission of British imperialists. It was only during the colonial period that the situation was forced to change through demarcation and territory categorization by the colonial power for the purpose of expansion. People in this region had continuously traveled to resettle on both sides of Bengal. This resettlement had always been beneficial for the economy of the region. A typical example of such migration occurred in the early years of British rule when the Muslim Nawab in East India was defeated in 1757, which caused them to flee to Northeastern India to escape persecution by the British. These Muslims then began their manufacturing businesses and initiated economic growth in the region.

The migration of wealthy Muslims and their investment into the Assamese economy had created thousands of job opportunities in small manufacturing, forest, timber, and agricultural sectors. Thus, thousands of job seekers, mostly unemployed from the south, moved to Assam and settled there. (Ranjan, 2018)

Several historical studies reveal the facts of Bengalis living in their ancestral homeland; not as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. It is simply an irony that the Bengali population living in Assam are the children of the land and have been living there from time immemorial. During the 1971 India-Pakistan war, a huge number of people got displaced and forced people to migrate to safer places on both sides of the border. Most of these people returned after the creation of Bangladesh.

The issue of immigrants got a huge momentum only in 1979 when the All Assam Students Union started demonstrating against foreigners, causing the death of more than 5000 Muslims of Bengali origin. A series of bloody incidents took place in the region estimating thousands of killings. Later, Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) played the Hindu card and illegal Bangladeshi migrant card to win the elections in the region. It also used the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) as a card to allure the Hindu vote and started discriminating against minority Muslims in the region. BJP successfully changed this migration question into a Hindu-Muslim dispute targeting the Muslim minority. This direct targeting of Muslims may cause a serious setback to India-Bangladesh relations. The current BJP regime is planning to convert India into a Hindu Rashtra or a Hindu state, which speaks volumes about the CAA, legislation to persecute Muslims in India.

CAA Impact on Bangladesh-India Relation

The Bangladesh-India relations have Assam at its pivotal place. It has implications for ethnic and religious politics as well as the issue of illegal migration. The CAA has overshadowed the cooperative relations between Bangladesh and India. The Muslim population in Assam has been accused to have become suitable proxies for illegal migrants from Bangladesh. This is not a mere accusation, but rather an issue discussed frequently in public debates, media reports, and academic discourses. The fact-finding commission appointed by the Supreme Court of India in 2015 headed by Upamanyu Hazarika submitted a report on illegal migrations from Bangladesh to Assam, which suggested that illegal migrants from Bangladesh are a threat to Assam's indigenous population. The Supreme Court of India in its judgment on

the issue recognized that illegal migrants have serious implications for Assam and its electoral politics (Sharma, 2019).

In Assam, identity and migration have dominated the political discourse. The 'illegal Bengali migrants' and 'illegal Bangladeshi migrants' are perceived to be imminent and potential threats to local culture and power politics. The right-wing forces of India want to use this situation in their favor and have targeted the 'illegal Bangladeshi Muslim migrants' to get electoral support in Assam. BJP wants to play the religious card and divide the community into religious lines. Bangladesh fears that it will be set as a geography target for the deportation of 'illegal Bangladeshi Muslim migrants' as was done in Myanmar. Myanmar in 1982 passed the National Registration Card (NRC) and Citizenship Law, which became the basis for deporting of Rohingya Muslims from the country; as the result, a large number of immigrants were forced to take shelter in Bangladesh. Bangladesh perceives that the BJP government is not interested to improve its relations with Bangladesh, hence is unwilling to solve the disputed problems like illegal immigration. Present geopolitics may not allow the bilateral relations between these two states to be resilient for a longer time.

The Bangladeshi government has been continuously rejecting the accusations of its nationals living in India. The government of Bangladesh has rejected all the people who were declared foreigners and pushed back towards Bangladesh. There is no deportation agreement between the two states, and Bangladesh predominantly denies any kind of illegal immigration of its citizens to India. Many people have suggested India provide work permits to suspected immigrants since there is no deportation agreement between the two states.

The implementation of the CAA in Northeastern states will push the Muslim community towards Bangladesh. Many researchers and academics in Bangladesh argue that the issue of the CAA is no more an internal matter of India. They fear that the CAA pushing the Muslims to the wall will create a crisis in Bangladesh causing a serious humanitarian crisis. There is also the fear that this Act will give rise to anti-India and anti-Hindu sentiment within the social and political circles of Bangladesh. This scenario could lead to a negative impact on the large (the world's 3rd large) Hindu community residing in Bangladesh (Sufian, 2020).

India's current policy is not only harmful to the bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India, but it will also badly affect the Hindu and Muslim minorities living in both countries.

Sources

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