

Original Article

Challenges and Impacts of Transborder Migration on the Economy of West Bengal

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Received Date: 20 August 2024 Revised Date: 30 August 2024 Accepted Date: 13 September 2024 Published Date: 23 September 2024

Abstract: *This study has attempted to examine the challenges and impacts of transborder migration on the Economy of West Bengal. Census data from different years was used in the study. The study found that the forced migration from the undivided Bengal began in the early 19th century. However, the endless flow of migration towards West Bengal was triggered by the partition of the country as well as the communal violence in the subsequent period in East Pakistan. Many people have settled in the nearest districts of West Bengal for the survival of their lives. The analysis also reveals that such huge migration has led to population growth in those districts which share the border with Bangladesh. This immigration had adversely affected the economy of these districts quite broadly. As a consequence, West Dinajpur (now Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur), Malda and Murshidabad have remained backwards with low literacy, low worker population rate and high labour force participation rates.*

Keywords: *Growth, Immigration, Labour force participation rate, Population, Unemployment rate.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In today's world, migration is an integral part of human life. The movement was started when people initiated their journey towards civilisation. From ancient times, people have moved in search of food, sometimes shelter, or in recent days, they have migrated to get better livelihoods and higher earnings. Consequently, people have migrated to get a better education, to access better opportunities, or for socio-political reasons. Similarly, it is also observed that people have never hesitated to cross the border to defeat hunger, poverty and unemployment. As a consequence, illegal or undocumented migration has created an enormous crisis throughout the world.

In India, the undocumented migration began after the partition of the country, when the bulk of Hindus migrated towards the state of West Bengal (Das & Anisujjaman, 2023). This partition has forced millions of people to leave their country (Ranjan, 2016). Many researchers postulate that almost 4.7 million people were moved towards Bengal from 1947 onwards (Datta, 2004). However, the flow of such migration has increased significantly during the formation of Bangladesh. Many researchers reveal that almost 10 million people migrated due to the military action of East Pakistan in 1971 (Samaddar, 1999). Many returned to their country after the formation of the Bangladesh Government, while a certain number of them stayed in India with the mainstream population. Therefore, the partition of the country has stimulated an endless flow of migration towards India. This type of migration is politically motivated and creates various obstacles in the development of the destination country by raising poverty and unemployment and finally imposing a burden on the existing infrastructural facilities as well as services (Ansary & Das, 2016). Additionally, undocumented migration poses big challenges to the security of the nation, social harmony, and economic well-being, and it also creates social tension between neighbouring countries (Nath, 2003; Mayilvaganan, 2019).

However, many studies deal with the historical background of the movement and the socio-economic status of the refugees. In contrast, most of the studies have ignored the impact of such migration on the socio-economic conditions of the destinations. Therefore, the present study has attempted to explore the historical aspect of migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal. In a similar context, the study also tries to explain the recent trends of immigration from Bangladesh towards West Bengal. Finally, the study has considered the impact of such an influx on the economy of West Bengal.

Thus, the study is divided into three sections: the first section explains the history behind such a large influx in West Bengal, the second section explores the recent trends of migration, and the last section tries to identify the impact of migration on the economy of West Bengal.

II. METHODOLOGY

The present study has used quantitative methods to analyse the impact of immigration on the economy of West Bengal. The study has defined the historical aspect of immigration through historical methods. Contrariwise, to explain the impact on the economy of West Bengal, the study has used various census data (1951 to 2011) on population and migration. The total number of Bangladeshi immigrants is calculated to show the pattern of immigration towards the state of West Bengal. Furthermore, the



annual growth of the population has been calculated from the period of 1951-61 to 2001-11 to examine the impact of such filtration on the growth of the population. In this context, the compound growth formula has been applied in the analysis, i.e.,

$$CAGP = \left(\frac{\text{Population in current period}}{\text{Population in previous periods}} \right)^{1/t} - 1$$

Where CAGP indicates the compound annual growth rate of the population, on the other hand, various employment indicators such as worker population rate (WPR)[20], labour force participation rate (LFPR)[21] and unemployment rate (UR)[22] have been calculated during the post-reform period to discuss the pattern of employment witnessed by the districts of the state despite such huge immigration.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A) *Historical aspect of migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal*

History reveals that the migration in Bengal is very old. The forced migration started in the early 19th century when British rulers of India sent a large number of labourers to Assam for tea cultivation (Bates, 2000). Various researchers argue that the partition of Bengal in 1905 was the first initiative in the context of forced migration of People (Kumar, 2009). Later, many people migrated to the nearest areas of Bengal for the survival of their lives during famine in 1943 (Ranjan, 2016). However, the most striking and endless flow of migration in the Indian territory, in general and West Bengal in particular, was started in 1947. Undoubtedly, this flow of migration has been triggered by the partition of the country, and the people who mostly belong to the Hindu religion have been forced to migrate to India (Datta, 2003). Therefore, it is a big question whether they are called refugees or bona fide citizens of the country. The United Nations Convention on Refugees in 1951 revealed that “a person is called refugee only when if he resides outside of his home country and is unable and/or unwilling to return due to fear of persecution on account of race, religion or nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such a fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (Shacknove, 2017). However, there is no doubt that refugees are acknowledged as second-class citizens of the country.

The partition of India has triggered a large cross-border migration towards Punjab and West Bengal. However, the migration towards Punjab almost ended in 1949, while West Bengal still faces severe migration from Bangladesh (Das & Ansary, 2018). From time immemorial, Calcutta, now Kolkata, was the recipient of migrants from East Pakistan. The incidents of communal riots in Khulna and Barishal in 1949-50 compelled many Hindus to move towards West Bengal (Nandy, 2017). This flow of migration towards West Bengal was increased when the Pakistani government implemented the Islamic constitution in 1956. Again, in 1964, millions of people left the country of East Pakistan due to the incident of communal violence that happened after the Hazratbal incident (Sarkar & Kasemi, 2019). Thus, the politically motivated migration towards India in general and West Bengal in particular has accelerated during the post-independence period. Many researchers reveal that such politically motivated migration took place in such a situation that the people were not in a position to settle their properties. In 1971, when the liberation war was started against the ruling government, millions of people, irrespective of religion, left East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, for the survival of their lives. During this time, the Pakistani Army killed many people and unleashed violence on civilians, especially women. As a consequence, people have been compelled to cross the border to protect their lives. However, many researchers have revealed that most of these people have not returned to Bangladesh after the completion of the liberation War in 1971 (Datta, 2004).

The formation of Bangladesh under the leadership of Sheikh Muzibur Rahman changed the situation, and independence in Bangladesh was established on the basis of secularism. However, after the assassination of Sheikh Muzibur Rahman, the military regime brought about a feeling of insecurity among the minority Hindu religion. As a consequence, many Hindus have started to move towards India in general and West Bengal in particular (Datta et al., 2008).

Thus, the partition of Bengal and the communal violence in the subsequent periods in East Pakistan compelled millions of Hindu people to migrate towards West Bengal. The ties of language, religion, culture, and environment are probably the main reasons people migrate to West Bengal. As a consequence, the Hindu population gradually declined in Bangladesh after the partition of the country. At the time of the partition of the country, almost 31 per cent of Hindus lived in East Pakistan, but nowadays, only 7.95 per cent of Hindus have remained there. Contrariwise, the Bangladeshi Muslim people have started to move towards West Bengal for better employment opportunities and higher living. Therefore, the nature of migration from Bangladesh has converted gradually to economic reasons, and the Hindus are replaced by Muslim migrants (Chattoraj, 2018).

B) *Recent trends of immigration towards West Bengal*

Undocumented migration from neighbouring Bangladesh is a burning issue in both countries. The movement of refugees from Bangladesh brought about huge distress and hardship to the people who left their homeland with tearful eyes. Interestingly, a large part of immigration has still occurred towards India from Bangladesh. Table 1 reflects that almost 3.0725 million moved

to West Bengal in 1991 out of 3.1450 million immigrants, and this continued during 2001 when 3.0311 million Bangladeshis migrated to West Bengal out of 3.0904 million immigrants. Table 1 also shows that during the first decade of the twenty-first century, the flow of Bangladeshi migration has reduced to 0.1190 million out of 0.1236 immigrants in 2011. However, the question is why the people of Bangladesh have preferred to move to West Bengal. It might be a fact that the geographical location between the two countries made West Bengal the most favourable destination for immigrants. Actually, India shares the longest border with Bangladesh, of which 2,217 K.M. are situated in West Bengal. The ten districts of the state such as Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Coach Behar, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur, Malda, Murshidabad, Uttar 24 Pargana, Dakshin 24 Pargana and Kolkata share a border with Bangladesh. Although the border between the countries is extremely vulnerable, in many places, the border is without a fence or protection from the military forces of these countries. The immigrants are keen to take advantage and move quite easily to Indian territory. Despite deploying the armed forces on the border of both countries, they are incapable of stopping such undocumented migration due to the vulnerabilities of the border.

Table 1: Flow of immigration from Bangladesh to West Bengal (in million)

	Birthplace	Total	Rural	Urban
1991	Born Abroad	3.1450	1.6772	1.4678
	Bangladesh	3.0725	1.6391	1.4335
2001	Born Abroad	3.0904	1.6066	1.4838
	Bangladesh	3.0311	1.5781	1.4530
2011	Born Abroad	0.1236	0.1030	0.0222
	Bangladesh	0.1190	0.1020	0.0220

Source: Census of India, 1991, 2001 and 2011

However, many researchers postulate that many factors stimulate the Bangladeshi people to move towards West Bengal despite having such a vulnerable border between the two countries as well as socio-political instability. It has been indicated by various researchers that both push and pull factors attract Bangladeshi people to migration. Economic prosperity, better employment opportunities, higher earnings, and easy access to various West Bengal services have pulled the people to migrate. Considerably, the socio-political instability, poverty, economic depression, social insecurity, unemployment, agricultural distress, natural calamities and lack of industrialisation forced the people to migrate to West Bengal.

C) Impact of migration on the economy of West Bengal

In order to understand the impact of undocumented migration on the economy of West Bengal, it is customary to identify the migrants' choice of destinations. Historically, elite migrants from Bangladesh used to migrate to Calcutta, now Kolkata, with the expectation of getting suitable jobs or professional opportunities. Their social networks and higher educational qualifications might enable them to migrate towards West Bengal for higher employment opportunities. Additionally, the districts that shared the border with Bangladesh have been equally affected by the exodus. Several researchers have revealed that the refuge from the central and eastern parts of East Pakistan was settled to undivided 24 Pargana and Calcutta, whereas the displaced people of the Northern part of East Pakistan have moved to Coach Behar, Jalpaiguri, undivided Dinajpur, Malda and Murshidabad. It is believed that people have preferred to move to a destination where they can perform their usual activities. Table 2 illustrates the annual population growth of the districts of West Bengal to understand the effect of the flow of huge influx in the state.

Table 2 shows that all the districts of the state experienced higher population growth during the period of 1951-61 to 1981-91. The higher influx of refugees has affected the population growth of the state, particularly in those districts which share the border. These districts may face significant challenges in their development. Even after 1981-91, districts like Darjeeling, Malda, Murshidabad, 24 Pargana and West Dinajpur continued to experience higher population growth compared to other districts of the state. The interesting feature is that both of these districts are the zones of refuge where a large number of people have migrated earlier. The conditions of the border in these regions are volatile; therefore, the immigrants have easily moved towards West Bengal. The higher population growth of these districts affects the demographic factors exclusively. Still, all these districts are now counted as underdeveloped districts, while Murshidabad, Malda, and Dinajpur are counted as the backward districts of the state. Further, these districts lagged behind many districts in literacy, fertility and mortality. The literacy rate is comparatively low in these districts, which tends to cause labourers to participate in low-paying jobs in the state.

Additionally, the higher fertility rate has an adverse effect on the health of women and children, which ultimately affects the productivity of the district. A higher mortality rate indicates inadequate access to health facilities for the people in these districts. Thus, it is quite evident that a higher influx of people has adverse effects on the state's economy which also poses a burden on the available infrastructure of the economy.

Table 2: District-wise annual Growth of population in West Bengal (in percentage)

State and districts	1951-61	1961-71	1971-81	1981-91	1991-01	2001-11
District-Darjiling	3.12	2.27	2.74	2.41	2.16	1.39

District-Jalpaiguri	4.02	2.56	2.38	2.37	1.96	1.31
District-Koch Bihar	4.31	3.32	2.28	2.05	1.34	1.29
District-West Dinajpur	3.09	3.46	2.60	2.66	2.35	1.73
District-Maldah	2.68	2.81	2.34	2.64	2.24	1.94
District-Murshidabad	2.93	2.53	2.32	2.52	2.15	1.93
District-Birbhum	3.09	2.08	1.67	2.00	1.67	1.51
District-Barddhaman	3.47	2.42	2.13	2.27	1.32	1.13
District-Nadia	4.12	2.67	2.89	2.65	1.80	1.16
District-24 Parganas	3.48	3.01	1.61	2.74	2.00	1.38
District-Hugli	3.35	2.56	2.16	2.04	1.47	0.91
District-Bankura	2.35	2.01	1.58	1.68	1.30	1.20
District-Puruliya	1.52	1.66	1.47	1.84	1.32	1.45
District-Medinipur	2.60	2.41	2.04	2.14	1.44	1.37
District-Haora	2.38	1.72	2.07	2.31	1.37	1.27
District-Calcutta	0.82	0.73	2.74	0.64	0.39	-0.17
State-West Bengal	2.87	2.41	2.11	2.23	1.65	1.31

Source: Various census data of population from 1951 to 2011

Table 3 demonstrates the district-wise employment indicators of West Bengal during the post-liberalisation era. The study found that districts with higher population growth witnessed lower worker population rates and higher labour force participation rates in the state. Interestingly, the unemployment rate is comparatively lower in these districts. This can be attributed to the fact that many poor refugees preferred to take up jobs that were easily accessible to them. As a result, they ended up in low-paying agricultural activities due to their limited skills, leading to overcrowding in the agricultural sector. In addition, the agricultural distress, along with the mechanisation of agricultural productivity in the post-liberalisation era, have further increased unemployment and underemployment in these areas. Consequently, it is evident that refugees not only struggled to access opportunities but also impacted the opportunities available to the mainstream population of the country. As most of them are poor, unemployment and underemployment are common issues for them.

Table 3: District Employment indicators (in percentage)

Name of the districts and state	Census 2001			Census 2011		
	WPR	LPR	UR	WPR	LPR	UR
District-Darjeeling	33.06	47.57	30.50	32.38	50.65	36.07
District-Jalpaiguri	34.17	48.91	30.14	32.51	54.36	40.20
District-Koch Bihar	36.00	47.04	23.48	34.85	53.61	34.99
District-Uttar Dinajpur	34.99	44.73	21.78	30.38	47.12	35.53
District-Dakshin Dinajpur	36.83	49.50	25.60	34.67	55.16	37.14
District-Maldah	36.35	47.74	23.86	30.12	50.75	40.64
District-Murshidabad	32.15	41.85	23.18	31.42	49.84	36.96
District-Birbhum	33.11	45.54	27.28	29.89	52.18	42.72
District-Barddhaman	31.47	47.80	34.18	30.91	52.70	41.34
District-Nadia	33.43	43.96	23.95	32.53	51.99	37.43
District-North 24 Parganas	31.26	47.58	34.30	32.52	52.30	37.82
District-Hugli	33.89	48.72	30.45	33.77	53.77	37.20
District-Bankura	38.98	51.38	24.12	30.15	53.49	43.63
District-Puruliya	36.43	51.21	28.85	27.05	53.29	49.25
District-Medinipur	34.32	46.45	26.13	29.31	54.05	45.78
District-Haora	30.75	46.96	34.54	33.32	50.83	34.44
District-Kolkata	36.26	54.72	33.74	36.82	53.12	30.69
District-South 24 Parganas	28.43	43.47	34.59	28.06	51.45	45.45
State-West Bengal	33.29	47.11	29.35	31.41	52.29	39.94

Source: Census of India, 2001 and 2011

Another interesting fact is that West Bengal has transitioned from being an advanced industrial state to a low industrial state in the country. The affluent population of the state has moved to advanced states to access better employment opportunities and higher earnings. The decline in non-farm activities, along with the mechanisation of agricultural activities, has led many surplus labourers to seek alternative employment opportunities elsewhere. Consequently, a significant portion of the state's population has been forced to migrate in search of alternative livelihoods. It is undeniable that these trends are closely linked to the substantial migration flow. Once upon a time, the state was the destination of many people in the country, but due to a large

influx of migrants, the state lost its past glory. The decline in per capita income, poverty and unemployment are believed to be the primary reasons for the state's degradation.

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The present study has attempted to explore the impact of immigration from Bangladesh on the economy of West Bengal. To discuss the above, the study also ascertains the historical aspects of migration as well as the recent trends of migration towards West Bengal. The study reveals that forced migration from undivided Bengal began in the early 19th century. However, the partition of the country and subsequent communal violence in East Pakistan led to a continuous influx of migrants towards West Bengal. Many people sought to settle in districts near West Bengal for their survival. This mass migration significantly increased the population of the border-sharing districts, adversely affecting their economies as well. As a result, districts like West Dinajpur, Malda and Murshidabad have experienced low literacy rates, low per-capita income, high fertility, and high mortality. However, some states have successfully absorbed such an influx, while some districts of the state have remained backwards due to such immigration.

Interestingly, the first decade of the twenty-first century has witnessed a significant deterioration in the growth of the population. Hopefully, this would help the backward districts to flourish in a new direction. In this context, Government intervention might help a lot in the development of these districts. The government should incorporate such policies that can generate huge employment in these regions. Furthermore, the government should introduce a skill enhancement programme that can help the people of these regions to increase their employment choices in the country.

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- [20] Worker population rate (WPR) is calculated by the percentage of total number of employed persons to total population at the age of 15 and more.
- [21] Labour force participation rate (LFPR) is calculated by the percentage of total number of employed and unemployed persons to total population at the age of 15 and more.
- [22] Unemployment rate (UR) is calculated by the percentage of total number of unemployed persons to the sum of employed & unemployed persons at the age of 15 and more.