European Journal of Sustainable Development (2017), **6**, 4, 425-434 ISSN: 2239-5938
Doi: 10.14207/ejsd.2017.v6n4p425

Environment, Nationalism and Sustainability: Racial minorities of Ganges Delta

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Abstract
Ganges Delta region of South Asia fosters a harmonious construct of deceptively similar primordial identity markers shared by the people of India and Bangladesh. The unique cultural syncretism is a product of common history shared by the two. 1947 partition of India led to territorial demarcation broadly on religious lines and created West-Pakistan (Present day Pakistan) and East-Pakistan (Present day Bangladesh). In 1971 people of East Pakistan re-affirmed their allegiance to Bengali culture, language and intelligentsia and became independent nation. However Environmental calamities such as high tides, storm surges, rise in sea level altogether hampered Bangladesh's growth. Bangladeshi migrants in search of better prospects, and taking advantage of deceptively similar identity markers and porous borders, entered India. This led to Assam Movement of 1971 voicing apprehension of Assamese that gradual alteration of demographic complexion of State of Assam and rise in Bangladeshi settlers might severe Assam region from rest of India. Considering climate change induced migration, population growth and Nationalism in South Asia this paper seeks to devise sustainable government policies which transcend precincts of national territories and appreciate need of present generation without jeopardizing interest of future generation.

Keywords: Climate change, National Identity, Illegal Migration, sustainable government policy

1. Introduction

Ganges Delta region of South Asia harbors a collection of deceptively similarprimordial identity markers shared by the people of West Bengal and Bangladesh primarily because of the historical roots shared by the two. The geographical construct of Bangladesh is of a low-lying river basin of Ganges, Brahmputra and Meghna (GBM) and a long coast line exposed to The Bay of Bengal. Bangladesh's surface area is small, but has a population of around 160 million, making it densely populated. The area is highly disaster prone and receives recurrent storm surges, high tides, cyclones, floods etc. causing great damage to property and life. The floodplains, which confer means of livelihood, inundate due to seasonal and damaging floods. The cumulative effect of insurmountable odds forces people to migrate to safer places. Corresponding population induced poverty induces many to adopt permanent measures. Therefore in search of better prospects great number of Bangladeshis cross India's porous borders. The deceptively similar Bengali identity markers facilitate Bangladeshi migrants in mixing with Indian population. A substantial percentage of Bangladeshis settled in state of Assam[1] which threatened India's national identity and demographic complexion of State of Assam. However the future will see increasing influx of migrants from Bangladesh. The

[1] Observations by Supreme Court of India in *SarbanandaSonowal vs Union of India (UOI)*, Writ Petition (W.P.) 131 of 2000

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rising sea level and geographical construct of Bangladesh puts it at a very vulnerable spot, a slight rise in sea level can submerge significant area of the low lying river basin of Bangladesh and trigger massive displacement of human population. The paper is framed around the ensuing threat of huge influx of climate change induced human displacement from Bangladesh and their quest to seek refuge in India. In this discourse the title of the paper refers to them in a neutral term as *Racial Minorities of Ganges Delta*. The objective is to reduce the heightened stigma attached to them as illegal Bangladeshi migrants.

2. Significance of the Study

Population growth can easily overpower the rate at which earth can produce means of subsistence. The means of subsistence not only include food and natural resources but also surface area to live peacefully. Therefore unbridled population growth will invariably lead to conflict for land, water and air. The significance of this study is to bring forth the ensuing threats from rising population, rising sea level and huge influx of climate change refugees crossing India's border. The paper will also magnify India's stance towards Bangladeshi migrants. The study will help regulate population growth, adopt a climate change migration policy and coastal management projects; it will help in sustaining the future of Ganges Delta and its magnificent plant and animal species.

3. Framework of Paper

The paper begins with an explanatory approach, starting with theories explaining dynamics of population growth and means of subsistence, then moving on to positive correlation between climate change and corresponding human displacement. Part II analyzes Bangladesh's geographical, demographical and cultural construct and its relations with India. The objective is to bring out the factors which induce people to migrate from Bangladesh and the challenges they face as a minority class in India. Part III details the current position as to measures adopted to regulate population growth, to regulate climate change induced human displacement and coastal management projects to protect mangroves and suggests policies which could be adopted to further strengthen Bangladesh's efforts to reverse the effects of climate change.

4. Discussion

4.1 Part I: population and means of subsistence

Essay on Principle of Population, by Malthus, is an indispensible literature for those engaged in pursuit of understanding growth mechanics of *population* and *Earth's* capacity to produce *means of subsistence*. "Malthus rejected the idea of a Utopian state where everything is in equilibrium, to substantiate his claims he forwards two premises; *first* that power of population is invariably greater than the power of Earth to produce means of subsistence. Malthus illustrates his *second* premise mathematically and suggests that unbridled population growth increases in *arithmetic ratio* while means of subsistence grow in *geometric ratio* and the gap between the two gradually widens. Malthus finally predicted that unbridled population growth will eventually lead to massive scarcity of resources

leaving many without food(Malthus, 1798, pp. 4–7)".

Subsequent theories were developed by Julian Simon, in *the Economics of population growth 1977* and *The Ultimate Resource 1981* reprinted in 1998 as *The Ultimate Resource II*. "Simon's theory contends that consistent rise in standard of living is evident of the fact that humans have tendency to grow, not just quantitatively but also qualitatively, however rising population also leads to higher demands of foods and services. To this Simon proposes that rising population and corresponding rise in demands will direct human race towards advancement of technology. Therefore Simon identifies two important variables which are conducive for human development, *first* the number of brains available for inventing better technology and *second* a wealthy world capable of controlling force of nature(Simon, 1998, pp. 12–13)."

In 1993, Thomas Homer-Dixon added to the literary work of Malthus and Simon and presented a view focusing two global trends, *population growth and rise in goods and services output through advanced means*, and their impact on Environment. Homer claims that the two global trends will invariably lead to rapid environmental changes, causing scarcity of *water*, *soil* and *stable climate conditions* and predicts rising instances of conflict over scarcity of resources. Homer also apprehends that scarcity of land might force people to migrate elsewhere (Homer-Dixon, 1993, pp. 6–7)".

Myers *et al.* recognized people displaced because of environmental changes and seeking refuge elsewhere as *Environmental Refugees*. However Myers appreciated the challenge of conceptualizing and coming up with an operational definition for Environmental Refugees and bifurcating them on basis of motivating factors; therefore to be recognized as an Environmental refugee the refugee must have left his principal habitat because of environmental changes and not because of population or economic pressure(Myers, Kent, & Climate Institute (Washington, 1995, p. 18).

Beside that there is reluctance among international agencies in usage of term *Environment Refugees*. The definition of Refugees under UN Convention on Status of Refugees, 1951 and its Protocol 1967 aptly manifests agency's intention, restricting the ambit of protection only to people fleeing their country fearing persecution. Not just that scholars divide environmental refugees further into those displaced because of climate change and those displaced because of traditional environmental disasters. Brittan contends that such division is based upon eco-centric and anthropocentric approach to causes of environmental disasters(Bush, 2012). To do justice some scholars claims that only such refugees warrant protection who were displaced because of environmental changes involving higher degree of human intervention than not.

4.2 Part II: geography, demography and culture of Bangladesh and its relation with India

Bangladesh is a low-lying river basin country. Substantial part of the land is occupied by many trajectories of river Ganges, Brahmputra and Meghna (GBM) and floodplains occupy almost 3/4th of the surface area. Seasonal and damaging flash floods inundate coastal area and uproot plantations and deposit huge sediment in the fields; the coast receives recurrent storm surges, cyclones and high tides costing loss of many lives, however in past few years there is a decline in casualties with the help of cyclone shelters built around the coastline(The World Bank, 2000, pp. 15–16).

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According to available records of year 2010, surface area of Bangladesh is 130,170 sq. km(The World Bank, 2010b) of which 123,889.625 sq. km is rural and 11,125.392 sq. km is urban (Center for International Earth Science and Information Network - CIESIN - Columbia University, 2013); has a population of 160,995,642 as per 2015 records (The World Bank, 2015c), population density of 1236.8 persons per sq. km of land (The World Bank, 2015b), 65.72% of the total population lives in rural area (The World Bank, 2015d). The fertility rate of Bangladesh has decreased in comparison to what it was in 1970s which will benefit Bangladesh in future (we will discuss it in greater detail in Part III of the paper).

The floodplains of Bangladesh provide means of subsistence through farming and fishing. Farmlands mainly produce rice and wheat and over the centuries farmers have inculcated the virtuous knowledge of growing more than 1000 different verities of rice adaptable to seasonal flooding and changing water depth of rice farms, however damaging floods, which uproot plantations and deposit huge sediment in the rice farms (Brammer, 1990, pp. 15–17), leave the labor engaged in agriculture sector unemployed (Brouwer, Akter, Brander, &Haque, 2007, p. 316). Therefore the falling graph of percentage of labor employed in agriculture, from 58.8% in 1984 to 47.5 % in 2010, suggests a paradigm shift in labor sector of Bangladesh (The World Bank, 2010a). But still by and large it remains an agriculture country.

The present cultural syncretism of India and Bangladesh in Ganges Delta is of recent origin, resulting from twice massive religious bifurcation and exchange of population between India-Bangladesh, first in 1947 Partition of India, then again in 1971 Bangladesh war against Pakistan. The people of Bengal Delta although divided by an imaginary line draw their lineage to Bengali language and culture, therefore we may say that they have a common identity to which they associate irrespective of their nationality.

The 1947 partition of India demarcated Bengal Delta into State of West Bengal (India) and Bangladesh (Erstwhile East-Pakistan) in a strange fashion. The imaginary border line ran through middle of houses and farmlands, separating families from their landholding and source of livelihood. The partition also divided the people on religious lines. Therefore the differences which were inconspicuous started manifesting more prominently.

The plight of *Racial Minorities of Ganges Delta* could be gauged from the severe riots and protest movements initiated during 1970s by people of State of Assam (India) voicing deportation of Bangladeshi migrants apprehending that the alteration in the demographic complexion of Assam might severe it from rest of India. In response the Government of India enacted *Illegal migrants (determination by tribunal) Act, 1983 (IMDT)*. Later the Supreme Court of India in 2005[2] decided that huge influx of Bangladeshi migrants in State of Assam amounts to External Aggression. The court also repealed IMDT Act after finding that it was not doing justice to its objective. Later in 2014 Supreme Court passed orders[3]directing the Gauhati High Court to expedite the process of detecting illegal immigrants in Assam and furnish a report by 2016 in collaboration with National Register of citizenship. Similarly racial minorities in Bangladesh, i.e. *Hindu Bangladeshi,*

[2]SarbanandaSonowal vs Union Of India (UOI), Writ Petition (W.P.) 131 of 2000, Supreme Court of India

[3] Assam SanmilitaMahasanga vs. UOI, W.P. No. 5620 of 2012, Supreme Court of India

who chose to remain in Bangladesh even after 1947 partition, are also finding it difficult to adjust[4] and the falling graph of Hindu minorities in Bangladesh[5] speaks for itself.

4.3 Part III: current position

4.3.1 Population control

Malthus proposed that humans have no control over their sexual desires and only means of regulating population growth are delayed marriage and self-control, but he failed to appreciate contraceptive measures to control population growth. He also failed to appreciate that advanced technology will help in increased production to satisfy increasing demands. And research findings show decline in fertility rate where contraceptive measures have been inculcated. The Family Planning-Health Services Project *Matlab*, Bangladesh initiated in 1977 resulted into increasing usage of contraceptives(Phillips, Stinson, Bhatia, Rahman, & Chakraborty, 1982, pp. 131–134), available records also suggest the same; in 1976 only 7.7% of women population (or their partners) of 15-49 ages was using contraceptive measures which increased to 62.4% in 2014(The World Bank, 2014a) and the falling fertility rate of Bangladesh from 6.92 births per woman in 1972 to 2.17 in 2014 is evident of the fact(The World Bank, 2014b).

4.3.2 Climate change refugee

A lacuna in international law manifested in a case before the Immigration and Protection Tribunal**,** New Zealand. The applicant prayed for extension of stay permit in New Zealand for his Island nation, *Kiribati* had become uninhabitable because of rising sea level and environmental calamities. The application was rejected and dismissed. Against which a Leave to appeal[6] was filed in the Supreme Court of New Zealand, which was also rejected. The Supreme Court reasoned, while dismissing the appeal, to be conferred upon a status of refugee the rules laid down under Immigration Act 2009 of New Zealand needs to be satisfied. The prayer for status of refugee was also denied since the definition of refugee under the refugee convention, 1951 and its protocol 1967 does not recognize a climate change refugee.

4.3.3 Coastal management projects

Bangladesh has the world's largest Mangrove forests, *Sundarbans*; they provide a natural shield against tsunami and cyclones and also a carbon reserve. The greenbelt contains a total of 10.6 Mm^3 standing tree volumes which reduce the intensity of wind and storm surges. The *Sundarbans* is home of endangered Royal Bengal Tiger, provides 3,033 tons fish, 375 tons mud crab, 3,600 tons oyster shells every year, raw material for houses built on wooden pillars and roofs made from leaves, employment to woodcutters, honey collectors, fishermen etc. and also raw material for newspaper industry. However rise in sea level might inundate and shrink the mangrove forest, increase salinity of soil, and affect crop production (The World Bank, 2000, pp. 20–23). A planned project to

[4] *See*: https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa13/006/2001/en/, accessed on March 25, 2017

[5] *See*: http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/Bangladesh%E2%80%99s-Hindus-number-1.7-crore-up-by-1-p.c.-in-a-year-report/article14397035.ece, accessed on March 25, 2017

[6] SC 7/2015 (2015) NZSC 107, IoaneTeitiota v/s. the chief executives of the ministry of business, innovation and employment

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preserve the coastal resources of *Sundarbans* can benefit Bangladesh in long run and might even reverse the adverse effect of climate change. Seawalls are good defense against rise in sea level; however reports claim disappearance of sea beaches and adverse effect on migration of wetlands because of seawalls(2000, p. 63). There are researchers who observed that world mangrove forest cover has decreased to one quarter of the original cover due to heavy timber cutting, shrimp farming[7] and coastal development such as tourism(Carter, Schmidt, &Hirons, 2015, p. 75). Therefore a policy which reserves the coastal mangrove forest for its ecology (fishery and forest) and not for shrimp farming could be more beneficial in future.

The protectionist measures to preserve wetlands started with *Ramsar Convention,* signed in 1971, coming into force in 1975, which was followed by Coastal Zone Management (CZM)[8] programs adopted by nations worldwide. However complex nature of mangrove forest included fishery, forestry, coastal waters and overlapping of jurisdiction between national (coastline zone) and sector state agencies (mangroves forests) which necessitated an Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) of 20th century, integrating national government, state government and local community to work together(2015, p. 80) Australia's Ocean Policy of 1998 is a good example of ICZM. Bangladesh conservation policies in interest of Mangrove were only implemented after independence in 1979, however the integrated coastal zone management policy, although adopted in form of a national Coastal Zone Management policy of 2005, is yet to come in full spirit (2015, p. 89). Moreover Bangladesh protects mangroves under forestry program in contrast to U.S.A. and Australia which protect mangrove under wetland programs which are more conservative in comparison to forestry programs focusing on timber production and its economic gains(2015, p. 91).

4.3.4 Suggestions

The measures that Bangladesh need to adopt, in its endeavor to control population growth, reverse the effect of climate change and regulate human displacement because of climate change, can be divided into immediate measures (*regulate human displacement*) and long-term measures (*control population and reverse the effect of climate change*).

Immediate measures: To fill the lacuna in international law Biermann proposed a Climate Change Refugee protocol to United Nation Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). He also proposed to club the Global Environmental Fund (GEF) to the protocol and provide aid in relocating Climate Change refugees. Biermann citing a novice idea developed by Muller(Müller & Hepburn, 2006) forwards another funding option by levying climate change refugee tax on air travelers(Biermann & Boas, 2010, p. 80). Whereas Docherty traced support in UN convention on status of refugees, 1951 to protect climate change refugees. Docherty contends that UNFCCC deals with inter-state relationship and not state's obligation towards individuals. Moreover UNFCCC provides for preventive measures to reduce carbon emission while we require remedial measure

[7] Shrimps spend early life in their natural habitat of mangroves. To increase food production mangrove forests are cleared to make shrimp farms, the farms are filled with fertilizers and antibiotics to speed up shrimp growth. In few years the farm becomes toxic and needs to be abandoned and new farms are made.

[8] Having its origin in 1972 CZM Act of U.S.A

for post-migration protection(Docherty &Giannini, 2009, p. 392).

The gainful insight provided by Biermann and Docherty if put together can provide us with a powerful instrument which can recognize climate change refugees and regulate their relocation. Therefore adopting the *principle of common but differentiated responsibility* provided under principle 7 of UNEP, Rio Declaration 1992, the parties to the new convention on climate change refugee could be divided into Annexed I (Developed Nations) and Annexed II (Low-lying nations threatened by rise in sea level). The annexed II countries shall provide record as to the number of climate change refugees who are in need of relocation. A *migration cap* policy could be adopted to determine the number of refugees an annexed I country will accommodate. The migration cap will be subjected to the percentage share an annexed country has in climate change and the size of the annexed I nation.

However what percentage share a country has in climate change is difficult to decide, moreover devising a new international treaty require relatively high degree of world consensus which will take too long, whereas the concerns of climate change refugees of Ganges Delta need to be addressed immediately. Therefore as a temporary measure, *Climate Change Migration*, *bilateral treaty* between India-Bangladesh would be a viable option.

To begin with we need to identify the class of people who warrant protection under the bilateral treaty. It is necessary to restrict the application of the treaty to climate change refugees only and not to those who are migrating in search of better prospects. To this end Docherty's definition of climate change refugees is worth referring. According to Docherty the migration must not be voluntary and there must be a nexus between climate change and displacement(Docherty &Giannini, 2009, p. 376).

Since sovereign India might resist rehabilitation of climate change refugee on its land, the bilateral treaty shall propose escorting of refugees back to their country once the danger ceases(Docherty &Giannini, 2009, p. 388). Therefore restricting application of bilateral treaty only to those who are climate change refugees and escorting them back to their country might help in lowering the India's threshold in agreeing such treaty.

Long-term measures: Speaking of population control *The Demographic Transition Model*, developed by Warren Thompson in 1929, suggests that a country whose economy is at inceptive stage has high birth and death rate, with birth rate having tendency to out space death rate. Therefore such developing country experiences a population boom; which could lead to population induced poverty. However once the economy develops the rate of birth and death tend to equate. Therefore we may assume that Bangladesh's birth to death ratio will soon fall on same scale since its economy has grown from 6.28 billion in 1972 to 195.07 billion in 2015(The World Bank, 2015a) and a wealthy Bangladesh will be at a better position to mitigate the loss of natural calamities.

National Coastal Zone Management program of Bangladesh need to change its focus from forestry to wetland management, thereby the state government will be more committed towards conservation of ecology of mangroves rather than reaping economic gains from timber production. Economic restraints, increasing demand for food and land-use reforms altogether affect the future of *Sundarbans*, however the new Government appears to be more stable political party and the remarkable resistance of Bangladesh in the face of so many odds is inspirational. External support from

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international agencies such as World Bank Group's (WBG) Country Partnership Framework (CPF) 2016-2020, will certainly help Bangladesh to reach middle-income group bracket.

5. Conclusion

The measures enumerated in the above sections are relative in nature and there can be other factors which are beyond the scope of this paper and might surface once the policies are put in force. Although the paper appreciates the difficulty in achieving a world consensus in respect of adopting an international treaty to recognize climate change refugees and proposes a bilateral treaty as a temporary measure, yet there is another real and apparent factor which might affect the successful implementation of such bilateral treaty. Treaties which seek to transcend the precincts of national boundaries cannot function if the stakeholders are not ready to cooperate. In case of bilateral agreement between India-Bangladesh the citizens of India, especially the residents of Assam, West Bengal and neighboring states need to be sensitized in favor of climate change refugees of Bangladesh. Similarly in case of coastal zone management program even if the government of Bangladesh changes its focus to wetland conservation, the integration at national, state and local level is required and the fate of such policies depend upon the financial position of coastal indigenous population and their resistance to altering land-use of *Sundarbans*. Bangladesh is blessed with power of self-sustainability, beside the rich resource reserve that *Sundarbans* has for offer, there are many un-tapped natural-gas resources in and around Bangladesh. Therefore if Bangladesh manages to increase its mangrove forest cover and reap its natural energy reserves, a wealthier Bangladesh will be at a better position to fight against natural forces and even reverse the adverse effects of climate change and rise in sea level.

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