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**Securitization Of Illegal Migration  
of Bangladeshis To India**

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*With Compliments*

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## ABSTRACT

Over 10 million illegal migrants from Bangladesh live in India, according to both official and unofficial estimates. This paper examines the securitization of the issue by various actors through a century. The paper goes into the influences of political ideologies on the Indian State's response to the issue, and the impact of speech acts and other actions of securitizing actors on the issue. The study also examines if desecuritization of the issue would have any positive impact on solving the problem.

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# Securitization Of Illegal Migration of Bangladeshis To India

## Introduction

Streaming into India for almost a century, the illegal migrants from Bangladesh are the focal point of an intense debate and several policy initiatives that showcase a general consensus within the Indian establishment for strong security measures to stop the flow. But there is a newly noticeable pool of opinion even among some very senior officials to desecuritize the issue, as the securitization over the last few decades have failed to provide any dividends.

This paper analyses the entire issue, particularly placing it in the context of the theory of securitization and desecuritization. In fact some of the officials of the federal government support a move to desecuritize the issue, highlighting the economic disparities between the two countries and the hunger in India for cheap labour that suck in most of these illegal migrants.<sup>1</sup>

Factors for Bangladeshis migrating into India in the thousands every year are socio-political strife, national calamities, occasional flare up of religious riots, an abysmal economic growth and resultant unemployment.

On this side of the border in India, the response has been a slow build up of anti-Bangladeshi feelings, the metamorphosis of disenchanted noises into a powerful organized movement against the illegal migrants, and brutal massacres of hundreds of these migrants. These factors have all contributed over a time to the securitization of the issue. The right wing politics that has simultaneously gained strength and influence in India has provided further impetus to urgent national measures against the illegal flow.

The issue has officially passed through the hands of a series of securitizing actors – if the early administrators could be called so – starting with the British elite that ruled the

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<sup>1</sup> Based on interviews by the author.

region prior to 1947, reluctant Congress and Communist rulers and a stringent right wing federal government, corrupt police forces etc. Today, with Hindu fundamentalism searching out issues, the securitization of the issue of Bangladeshi refugees seems to have been firmed up, with several extraordinary measures in place, though with no visible impact on ground.

Perception of illegal migrants as a national threat is almost irreversible within the Indian intelligence agencies, which claim that this population is shelter for subversive activities by Pakistan and its intelligence agency, Inter Service Intelligence. In a country fighting its daily battles against terrorism and blaming it all on Pakistan's machinations, there are hardly any questions asked about intelligence claims that are often exaggerated.

Their total numbers vary, but definitely over 10 million Bangladeshis are illegally residing in India. Over the past century they have spread thickly across the northeast of India and thinly into cities such as Delhi and Mumbai. In the cities Bangladeshis satisfy the boundless hunger for cheap labour, while in northeast, where they have been settling down for almost a century, they are now landowners and businessmen.

The paper examines the issue of illegal migrants from Bangladesh and the securitization of the issue through bureaucratic concerns, bloodshed, rising right wing influence in Indian politics, and the recent claims that the illegal residents are tools for subversive activities against India.

The paper concludes that despite the mammoth nature of the problem and ethnic, religious and linguistic sensitivities about it, the rhetoric of securitization has not been matched with 'practical solutions' on ground. A series of legislation and emergency measures have failed to fight the menace. If anything their population is only growing. Securitization, the author believes, is no assurance of an end to the issue but could be a powerful tool in the hands of security agencies and those in power. The response of the Indian state over the years also reflects the failure of young South Asia nations to face up to their challenges, reluctance of its political leaders to strategize long term solutions and

the failure of the combined political leadership of the region to formulate common strategies to secure their future.

The paper also shows that the theory of securitization and desecuritization has its limitations when applied into the complexities of South Asia, though it helps in identifying various aspects of the issue. The issue under consideration here shows that speech acts are often not immediately followed by extra-ordinary measures. Professor Barry Buzan, during the IDSS-Ford Workshop on Non-Traditional Security in Asia, September 9-10, 2003 at Singapore said if a speech act has not led to immediate emergency measures by the state, then it cannot be counted as part of the process of a securitization act.

In a larger sense the issue fits into the Copenhagen School's broader concepts of securitization as articulated in *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. The authors explain that security is "about survival. It is when an issue is presented as posing an existential threat to a designated referent object."<sup>2</sup> The authors have broadly defined five topics under which the concept is applicable: military, environmental, economic, societal and political security. The issue under discussion began as a societal concern, then gradually economic concerns crept, and now a military dimension is building into the debate.

In the issue discussed here the securitizing actors are government officials, political leaders, security personnel, intelligence agencies etc. But the most important securitizing actors were the socio-political movements that picked momentum in late 70s in the northeast of India. In fact these pressure groups forced a lenient political class to treat the issue as an existential threat and initiate steps that gave official shape and authority to social demands and political promises for securitization of the issue. Several massacres and a violent agitation by the socio-political movements against the migrants forced the hands of the government and brought in a rethinking in the country. In fact it was the

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<sup>2</sup> Barry Buzan, Ole Weaver and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998, p. 21.

socio-political movements outside the government that actually resulted in the full securitization of the issue.

The referent objects, defined by the Copenhagen School as "things that are seen to be existentially threatened and that have a legitimate claim to survival"<sup>3</sup>, have undergone progressive changes here. The authors have said the referent objects could be the state, national sovereignty, national economies, collective identities, and environmental habitats. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the referent objects were the ethnic residents of states bordering Bangladesh – East Bengal till Indian Independence in 1947 and later East Pakistan till 1971 when Bangladesh was created. From the collective identities of residents of India's northeast, the referent object has grown today to national sovereignty and its economy.

The multi-sectoral approach of the Copenhagen School provides space to discuss the issue in its entirety, as the analysis is not limited by the traditional military factor. The speech act in securitization and articulating the existential threat is visible as we go through the issue of the illegal migrants. And the act of securitization is clearly successful because of the ability shown by the securitizing actors to convince the state of the existential threat posed by the inflow. However it is questionable if the act of securitization and the extraordinary steps taken to face the threat have been effective.

## **Securitizing Actors and Speech**

### *1. British officers*

The first set of securitizing actors was the British officers who were responsible for administration of India prior to its independence in 1947. Then Bangladesh was part of the larger British Empire and the boundary between northeast India and Bangladesh was within the empire. But the tribal population of the northeast was in every aspect of culture and ethnicity different from Bangladeshis, most of who are Muslims.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 36.

The process of securitization began with a speech act by British officials posted in Assam, largest of the Northeastern states of India and one of the biggest victims of the illegal migration. In the initial years the speech act was never rhetoric, but measured statements based on realistic assessments. The British officers had not much stake in the entire affair, and by 1947 they left a chaotically divided Indian sub-continent that continues to grapple with the challenges intensified by the Partition, among them the migration issue. Taking over from the mostly poker-faced British officers, other securitizing actors changed and intensified their acts as they went along. Their speech act articulated the existential threat — first to the local population of Northeast and now to Indian sovereignty.

The first British officer to record the migration and its impact was CS Mullen, then Census Commissioner of Assam. In the early 1920s he said the massive migration of Bangladeshis looked like a “marvel of administrative organization on the part of Government but it is nothing of the kind; the only thing I can compare it to is the mass movement of a large body of ants.” It was the beginning of the illegal migration. The first wave of migrants from Bangladesh was noticed in 1920s in Goalpara, close to the present day border between India and Bangladesh. In the next 10 years their population grew to half a million. By 1936, the immigrants were in possession of 37.7 per cent of land in Nowgong district of Assam. The number of settlers in Nowgong alone rose from 300,000 to half a million between 1921 and 1931. “The immigrant army has almost completed the conquest of Nowgong,” Mullen pointed out in the 1931 Census of Assam. The Census of 1931, in fact, was the first recorded detailed speech act in the slow, but progressive, act of securitization of the issue.

Mullen in fact has been the first noticeable securitizing actors with emphatic speech act, but the colonial government at best treated it as a political issue. Almost 50 years after his warnings, India paid for the negligence of administrators through blood of several thousands, as the local movements against the migration turned into armed, violent movements challenging the very sovereignty of the nation.

Mullen said in 1931 that "hungry Bengali immigrants, mostly Muslims from the districts of Eastern Bengal and in particular Mymensingh" have invaded "vast horde of land" in Assam. He warned that the invasion would destroy the "whole structure of Assamese culture and civilisation." Mullen's speech Act in the census of 1931 only aided the Assam nationalists who too had began appearing on the scene when the immigrant flow started in early 20s.

## *2. Indian politicians and government*

Despite the growing local resistance against migration, the government response at best was muted in early years. There was an utter lack of urgency on the part of the Assam government dominated by Muslim League in 1937-1946, and that further aggravated the local resistance groups. In 1937 the Muslim League, which demanded and created Pakistan for Muslims, became part of the ruling dispensation of Assam and its leader, Saiyid Mohammad Saadulla, headed five different ministries for most of the period 1937-1946. The elections had been held to Indian provinces after the British relented and gave Provincial Autonomy. In 1941 the ruling Muslim League introduced Land Settlement Policy, which allowed migrants to settle down in government land anywhere in Assam.

The agitation of locals opposed to the migration was further intensified by claims of Saadulla during World War II that his policy of allowing migrants into Assam was part of an effort of the Muslim League to help the British in its World War II efforts. The Muslim League, which supported the British war efforts, claimed the immigrants would help in cultivating more food for the war period.

One doesn't know where the Muslim League fits into the theory of securitization. Maybe they are the decisive de-securitizing actors who in fact further aggravated the situation and strengthened voices opposed to migration.

"Politicians of different parties bear contributory responsibility for initiating and sustaining migratory flows from erstwhile East Bengal and present Bangladesh," says SN Nageswara Rao in "India and Bangladesh: The Intractable Problem of Illegal Migrants."<sup>4</sup>

Sanjoy Hazarika, a leading commentator on the issue in his book, *Rites of Passage*, quotes a letter written by Mohammad Saadulla, the Muslim League chief minister of Assam, in 1945 to Liaquat Ali Khan, a close associate of Mohammad Ali Jinnah and a later day premier of Pakistan. In the "lower districts of Assam Valley, these Bengali immigrant Muslims have quadrupled the Muslim population during the last 20 years," he said.<sup>5</sup> The boastful letter was among a series of political initiatives by political leaders, mostly from the Muslim League and later the Congress, that finally strengthened the hands of an array of securitizing actors who were ranked opposite these political dispensations conscious of the Muslim vote bank.

After independence the effect of Assam's local resistance was beginning to be felt at the Centre. The Indian Parliament officially acknowledged the problem in 1950 by passing the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act 1950. The act however was only on paper, in the ground the inflow was actually picking up yet again. The Act of 1950 distinguished between Hindus and Muslims. Hindus were considered refugees while Muslims were considered illegal aliens in the 1950 rule. By the early 1960s, a yet new wave of migration was happening despite the legislation. In fact laws have never been a hindering factor for cross-border migration of people in search of better economic security, though legislations are the most emphatic speech act by governments in their role as the securitizing actors.

In 1961, the Census of India said, "Our experience during enumeration as well as during tabulation is that people did not correctly give their place of birth and so the interpretation of the data is very limited. True migration is often artificially deflated and remigration to place of birth is masked. It appears that the people who mostly concealed

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<sup>4</sup> Nalini Kant Jha (ed.), *South Asia In 21<sup>st</sup> Century: India, Her Neighbours and the Great Powers*, New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 2003, p. 136.

<sup>5</sup> Sanjoy Hazarika, *Rites of Passage*, Delhi: Penguin India, 2000, p. 74.

their birth place are those coming from East Pakistan." The 1961 report said while Hindus readily said about them belonging to East Pakistan almost every Muslim in Assam said they were born in Assam.

In 1964 violent anti-Hindu riots were witnessed in East Pakistan that again forced thousands of Hindus to flee to India. There were retaliatory riots against Muslims in the Indian states bordering Bangladesh. The players behind the retaliatory riots have been consistent in their speech act, which in later days became more strident and gave birth to violent movements.

In 1964 the Assam state government passed the "Prevention of Infiltration from Pakistan (PIP) act which was more "secular" in its outlook than the existing law of 1950, which distinguishes between Hindus and Muslims. Hindus were considered refugees while Muslims were considered illegal aliens in the 1950 rule. The 1964 law did not make any such distinction.

The 1964 law raised a special border police force of about 2000 men and 159 towers were built along the Indo-Bangladesh border, besides six passport checking centres. This was first among a series of securitization steps initiated by the federal government, which over the years has been emphasising on these ineffective step, and later adding similarly ineffectual measures.

Internal political compulsions forced Assam's Congress government to put in cold storage the 1964 law because the party survived on the support of a significant number of elected Muslim members who were opposed to the move. By then the illegal aliens had also managed to enter the voters list of India using fraudulent documents that are still available dirt cheap from the lower level officials.

There was no consensus in the Congress over the issue. "Since Indian Independence the way was shown by former (Indian) President Fakruddin Ali Ahmad and Congress leader Moniul Haq Choudhury, In Assam, as in West Bengal, the Bangladeshi illegal immigrants had emerged as important vote banks in nearly 60 assembly constituencies.

So powerful was their vote bank that the former Chief Minister of Assam Hiteshwar Saikia (of Congress) was not only forced to retract his statement that there were 30 lakhs (3 million) illegal immigrants in Assam but was also constrained to issue a statement that there was not a single illegal immigrant in the State. Thus an orchestrated pattern of illegal migration has been encouraged in Assam, West Bengal and Tripura to ensure victory in Assembly and local elections," says SN Nageswara Rao.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1960s, however, there appeared some Indian officials who began implementing the law in letter and spirit. Armed with the law, these officials began to crack down on illegal migrants. The crackdown were mostly individual driven. KPS Gill, an Indian Police Service Officer of Assam cadre who became famous in 1980s for ending Punjab terrorism, has often spoken about how the police officers would go to the Muslim villages and explain to the older settlers that the new wave of migrants could harm their own interests. Police would take down voluntary disclosures and round up the new migrants and send them to Bangladesh border in trains. Some 100,000 East Pakistanis were sent back from his district alone and an equal number from rest of Assam in about two years when Gill was the Nowgong district superintendent of police. This was the best method to send back people, Gill claims.<sup>7</sup> This initiative, taken at a time when there was no larger national consensus or awareness on the issue, seem to be the most effective of the tools deployed by officials.

According to Gill those sent back were accepted by the East Pakistan border security guards. But they were settled close to the border, not allowed to return to their original residences. From the settlers along the border Hindus were pushed back into Assam, Tripura and West Bengal by the Bangladesh border guards. And many of the Muslims also came back over a period of time.

After the 1965 war with Pakistan, India began to view its border with East Pakistan in a stricter security perspective. And the country raised the Border Security Force (BSF) that

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<sup>6</sup> Nalini Kant Jha (ed.), *South Asia In 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, p. 137.

<sup>7</sup> Sanjoy Hazarika, *Rites of Passage*.

took over the border management along Bangladesh. Till date the BSF continues to monitor the area. In 2003 the federal government led by right wing Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian Peoples Party- BJP) has ordered the BSF to beef up the border security with additional 50,000 troops. The BSF men who are being withdrawn from Kashmir are to be posted to the Bangladesh border where in recent times there have been skirmishes between the security forces of India and Bangladesh. The BSF is being replaced by another paramilitary force, Central Industrial Security Force, in Kashmir to fight Islamic insurgency.

After the second war between the neighbours in 1965 the Pakistani guards started pushing back those refugees whom India was sending to East Pakistan. The Assam government was forced to go slow then by Muslim members of the state assembly.

1971 was a significant year in the build up of the illegal aliens in India. That year, India intervened militarily in East Pakistan after the Pakistani military, dominated by personnel from West Pakistan, unleashed a brutal regime on political activists demanding separate nationhood for Bangladesh. Bangladesh then had a population of about 75 million. Almost 10 million refugees fled the brutalities of the Pakistani military regime into the Indian states bordering Bangladesh. One million stayed back in India permanently.

"Preceding and consequent to that tragic chapter (1971) in the life of the subcontinent, the movement of people for economic and environmental reasons was (and continues to be) a factor in the Brahmaputra, and Barak valleys, in tiny Tripura, not to speak of West Bengal and even across India. Visibly reshaping and transforming the demographic, ethnic, linguistic and religious profile of large parts of the population in these areas, it stirred a potent brew of hatred suspicion and fear," Sanjoy Hazarika points out.<sup>8</sup>

"The economic implications of the number of refugees, which now stands at 10 million, and the generated economic pressure on India can be discerned from the fact that our Finance Minister has made two additional provisions of nearly 330 crores of rupees, or

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

approximately \$500 million, in our annual budget for the year 1971-72, which ends on 31 March 1972. A smaller State would have collapsed in the face of such an influx," India's external affairs minister Swaran Singh told UN on December 12, 1971.

"Social friction, the fear of epidemics and the possibilities of communal and other tensions had to be countered. The refugees became an incalculable hindrance to our economic development for years to come. Their continuing exodus, without any hopes of their return, was a destructive obstacle to the very socio-political fabric of India," Swaran Singh said in the same speech.

The concern expressed by Congress leader Swaran Singh at the UN was in fact shared by his party colleagues in Assam too. But often vote bank realities forced them to change stance overnight. Hiteswar Saikia, a prominent Congress leader who became the chief minister of Assam in a few years, in an article in 1979 pointed out that the Centre was alarmed at the 34.93 per cent growth in Assam's population between 1951 and 1961. He was to disown all that once he became Assam chief minister in early 1980s thanks to the dependence of Congress on Muslim vote bank.

In 1983, the Nalli massacre shook the government. Hundreds of Muslims were butchered in one night of barbaric response to the migration. A panicky Federal government within months passed the Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunal Act (IMDT). The law was passed by Indira Gandhi to pre-empt the students' agitation in Assam. The law, applicable only to the state of Assam, is widely seen as skewed. Under the IMDT act there is a complicated procedure involving police, judiciary etc to establish that a person is a foreigner. Analysts such as Sanjoy Hazarika say it must be withdrawn at the earliest. "An instrument of discrimination, the IMDT needs to be removed without delay or compunction," Hazarika argues.<sup>9</sup>

India has the Foreigners Act of 1946, which allows the police to deport a person if he is found to be foreigner. The onus is on the accused to prove that he is innocent, where as in

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

the IMDT act the accuser has to prove his charges against an accused. Under the act tribunals at district level were to look into complaints regarding illegal migrants and deport them. But according to Hazarika, who conducted extensive field study, between 1983 and 2000 the 16 tribunals in Assam located about 10,000 illegals and deported just 1400 of them.<sup>10</sup>

Indira Gandhi also mooted the idea of building fence along the border as students' agitation began to build up. According to government figures, there is about 220 kilometers of fencing along the border of over 4000 kilometers. The senior Indian diplomat who spoke to the author said the fencing was carried out on Indian land and "India just gave away so much of land by deciding to build the fence within its own territory." Reflecting the collective lack of trust in the fencing, he said, "it is practically impossible" to fence the border that consists of ravines, thick jungles, farm lands and other rough patches.

There has always been a very palpable political opposition to strong-arm tactics against illegals. Among those who opposed were a political front called United Minorities Front, comprising Hindus and Muslims of Bengali ilk, and the Communist parties and Congress.

### *3. Socio-political Movements*

Around the same time as Mullen, the Assam nationalists, who would later turn out to be most important securitizing actors, appeared in the scene. Under their pressure, and with factual substantiation from Mullen and other British officials, the Empire introduced a system called the Line System. The System allowed migration to certain areas marked by a British Line. And in 1928 the British introduced a Colonisation Scheme, again an attempt to limit the impact of the cross-border migration to the border areas.<sup>11</sup> All that did not satisfy the Assam nationalists whose speech act has grown aggressive through decades.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> JN Dixit, *Liberation and Beyond: Indo-Bangladesh Relations*, New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1999, p. 252.

With a present day population of 25 million, Assam is a state dominated by several tribes speaking Bodo and its dialects Ahom, Tiwa, Rabha and Mishing. Assam has a minority Assamese speaking Muslims who are looked up on with sympathy by the locals, reflecting the traditional tolerance that the original inhabitants of the state had. Such tribal affinities and bonding are visible across the northeast of India. The Bengali speaking Muslims, migrating from East Bengal, are usually at the receiving end of the distrust and easily identifiable due to their dress, language and every other aspect of daily life.

There is yet another historic reason for the extreme sensitivity of Assamese vis-à-vis Bengalis. In 1905, Assam was clubbed with East Bengal and was partitioned from West Bengal by Lord Curzon, the then British Governor General who wanted to create an East Bengal for the Muslims. The partition led to instant furore and was annulled in 1911, when Assam became a separate province once again. This and the imposition of Bengali as the official language over Assamese during the period deeply anguished the Assamese people. Bengali was withdrawn later on the insistence of the Christian Missionaries who have played significant role in the northeast of India.

Not that the entire political spectrum of India was ignorant of the growing resistance, and oblivious to the speech act of the Assam nationalists. In 1946, with the blessings of Mahatma Gandhi, the local Congress tapped onto the local sentiments and resisted a British move to club the fate of Assam to that of Muslim-majority Bengal. The Muslim majority East Bengal became part of Pakistan subsequently, creating a national boundary between Assam and East Bengal, which in course of time became Bangladesh.

Sometime in 1979 the All Assam Students Union (AASU) began a political movement in Brahmaputra Valley of Assam against the alleged marginalisation of the original inhabitants of Assam by the illegal migrants from Bangladesh. They accused politicians, mainly the Congress party, of supporting the migration and supporting them within Assam. The students demanded Detection, Deletion and Deportation of the refugees.

They said with the political patronage the Bangladeshi refugees were taking the reins of socio-economic-political developments of state and to buttress their arguments the students group cited several inflated figures. The social situation was soon deteriorated.

The students said there were four million such refugees who came to Assam after 1951 and all of them must be deported. This cut off mark of 1951 had been diluted over the years by the AASU first to 1961 and later to 1971, when Bangladesh was created out of Pakistan through India intervention and supported by local fighters under the banner of Mukti Bahini.

As the state and Federal governments fumbled amidst the agitation that brought life to a halt every second day and crippled economic activities in Assam, the Centre government under Mrs Indira Gandhi offered to deport all refugees who came after 1971. The federal government said it was ready to review the electoral rolls and census data and deport those who came in illegally after 1971.

Students had initially set 1951 as the cut off date and later scaled it down to 1961. However, the federal government had a major problem with this demand. In the decade running to the creation of Bangladesh of the one million refugees who crossed over 900,000 were Bengali Hindus. These Hindus had to flee the cruelties targeted against them mostly by the Army, which was the strong arm of Pakistan and its military junta.

The agitated students had not allowed any popular and convincing elections through boycotts and strife in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In 1983, Indira Gandhi called for elections in Assam to the 126 State assembly seats and 14 seats of Lok Sabha, the Lower House of the Indian Parliament. The decision was oddly timed, reflecting an utter lack of sensitivity towards the brewing discontentment in Assam.

On February 18, 1983, members of Tiwa community swept down on Nalli, a region outside Guwahati, capital of Assam, where Bengali Muslim immigrants had settled. Official records said 1753 were killed in that brutal night. The immediate provocation

was said to be the rumours of abduction and rape of four young Tiwa women by Bengali speaking Muslims immigrants. The Bengali settlers who were targeted for massacre were mostly aliens from the old Mymensingh district of former East Pakistan called Miyahs. They were rapidly taking over the Tiwa land. Officially non-tribals could not hold that land, but the migrants who started as farm workers acquired the land from the Tiwas setting off economic imbalance and deep-rooted hatred. All that resulted in the Nallie Massacre that shook the nation and international community.

Tripura, the tiny northeastern state that borders Bangladesh too has taken the brunt of the exodus into India because of socio-political upheavals.

Tribes following Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity dominated Tripura till about 1960s when a wave of Bangladeshi refugees entered Tripura. When India was becoming independent, the tribes were a slim majority. But by the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century Tribes were just 28 per cent of the population and Bengali, the language of the migrants, was adopted as the official language ignoring Kokborok, the main tribal language. Between 1947, India's independence, and 1971, over 600,000 immigrants moved into little Tripura.

The Kokborok language, that was to be recognised in the Roman script, is now coming back in Tripura in Bengali script of the refugees. In 1980, various tribal groups (Tripura Upajati Jamatia Samaj the moderate and Tripura National Volunteer Force, the armed group) started an anti-migrants movement by serving Quit Notices on them. The movement turned violent and several were killed in it, most of them Bengali migrants. In Mandai Bazar, one such massacre site, over 350 were killed in one attack by tribals on Bengalis. The massacre of Nallie in Assam followed three years later.

In 1988 the Tripura National Volunteer Force and federal government signed a peace agreement under which the militants were to disarm, accept Indian Constitution, and government agreed to review the problems of tribes, create development centres and generate jobs for the tribes.

But the agreement was badly implemented, as Tripura continues to live the nightmares on a daily basis. The TNVF has now split into All Tripura Tigers' Force and National Liberation Front of Tripura, both armed and underground. The issues on which the tribal movement started has now disintegrated, and the militant tribal groups are now even accused of attacking tribals. In fact Tripura has some 14 more militant groups, according to Indian intelligence agencies, which are primarily private armies on hire.

In 1988 the Tripura Tribal Autonomous Council was set up and was later boosted in 1993 with some degree of self-governance. This Council area covers more than two-thirds of Tripura's total area and the Indigenous Peoples Front of Tripura, the political arm of the National Liberation Front of Tripura, won the elections to the council in February 2000.

As attacks on Bengalis continue, there are noises of Bengali unity audible in Tripura. Recent newspaper reports speak of an Amra Bangla (We are Bengalis) and an armed Bengali Tiger Force. Though both are ineffective now, the latter with proper weapons could further complicate the already bloody situation in Tripura and Northeast of India.

As the anti-foreigner agitation continued, Indira Gandhi's son Rajiv Gandhi, who became India's youngest Prime Minister after his mother was assassinated in 1984, began making efforts to find peace in northeast. He entered into the Assam Accord with the students in 1985, which said all foreigners who came to Assam after March 25, 1971 would be declared non-nationals and deported. And all those who came from outside the country into Assam between January 1, 1966 and March 24, 1971 were to be disenfranchised for 10 years after which they were to be granted Indian citizenship. And those who came to India prior to January 1, 1966 were to be granted citizenship. The election commission struck off 689,000 from the electoral rolls as a result but the rest of the work was stuck because the state police could only investigate just 15,000 cases in a year's time and only a negligible 380 were brought before the tribunals for legal action out of which only 124 were convicted.

#### *4. Right Wing and Intelligence Agencies*

Arun Shourie, senior journalist and a member of the earlier Federal government to buttress his views on the issue, has quoted extensively from a secret note of India's Home Ministry (internal securities) in his book, *A Secular Agenda*.

This note of March 1992 says, "The illegal immigration from Bangladesh into the eastern and north-eastern states and several other states in the country has become a serious problem. Immigration into border states such Assam and West Bengal was taking place prior to the formation of Bangladesh but the magnitude of the problem has assumed serious dimensions as large-scale infiltration has changed the demographic landscape of the borders, and affected Delhi, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra etc."<sup>12</sup>

The note, which became a reference point for future consultations, further said that the migration's "serious religious and cultural dimensions are being increasingly felt in the states of West Bengal, Tripura and Bihar. It is observed that more and more Muslim immigrants are settling down in the border areas." It further continues, "The simmering communal tension in some of the border areas is one of the manifestations of the effects of large scale illegal migration of Bangladeshi nationals who have slowly displaced or dispossessed the local population, particularly those belonging to the Hindu community, in these areas."<sup>13</sup>

Arun Shourie, a powerful minister of the right wing coalition in New Delhi and a key ideologue of BJP wrote his book in 1992 when a Congress government was ruling the country. He said, "For it is not that the Government, the ministers, the official machinery did not know the facts. The infiltrators could be seen in Delhi itself, in Assam etc. tracts the size of some of our states could be seen as having been taken over by them. The politicians knew, as they were smuggling them on to electoral rolls and the rest. The official machinery knew, as its personnel – for instance of the Border Security Force –

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<sup>12</sup> Arun Shourie, *A Secular Agenda*, Harper Collins, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

had made a regular trade of letting the Bangladeshis sneak in. And there were reports galore documenting the avalanche."<sup>14</sup>

Shourie's comment is the most refined intellectual thinking of India's right wing. With the right wing assuming political power by the late 90s, the securitization of the issue has further progressed. For now it seems to have gone beyond the possibility of the issue being desecuritized and brought down to normal political negotiations involving Bangladesh in the immediate future.

In 1998, the right wing Bharatiya Janata Party in its manifesto said that it would repeal the Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunal Act that was ineffective and will bring in stringent laws to strengthen immigration laws. The party also promised to create a National Register of Citizens and a multi-purpose national identify cards, which the National Democratic Alliance led by BJP began implementing. The new United Progressive Alliance government led by the Congress which came to power in 2004 summer has said it would continue with the National Register and issuance of multi-purpose identity cards to Indian citizens.

The NDA government under Atal Behari Vajpayee also amended the Passport (Entry Into India) Amendment Bill that provides for five years imprisonment in place of the existing three months for those violating entry rules.

This toughening of national posture was visible towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the later half of 1990s, Delhi's local police started a drive against the illegally staying Bangladeshis. In 1996 the Delhi police rounded up 200 Bangladeshis and put them into a train headed towards the Bangladesh border. The 200 were pushed into Bangladesh borders despite diplomatic protests from Dhaka. Several of these men were forcefully tortured by India's Border Security Force before being pushed into Bangladesh.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

## **Not Just Muslims**

There is also a small faction of the refugees from Bangladesh who were environmental refugees and whose presence too has created concern. In early 1960s some 25,000 Chakmas were displaced in Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh because of a dam being constructed in the Karnaphuli river. These are typical environmental refugees, who were first internally displaced. Refused proper compensation, they moved into India and the government settled them down in Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh State, close to the border with China.

Arunachal Pradesh government refuses to give them access to governmental facilities, schools and even proper medical facilities. Their population has swelled to over 70,000. India's Supreme Court in fact intervened to say that it was the responsibility of the State to protect all people residing in India even if they were not citizens.

In 1978, another lot of Chakmas was forced to migrate to India. The Bangladeshi Army cracked down on the Chakmas, who are Buddhists and were agitating for more rights over their forests and land, and drove out more than 25,000 into Indian state of Tripura. They returned only after India put pressure on Bangladesh and Chakma leaders. But sometime in 1988 again the Bangladeshi Army cracked down on the Chakmas and drove out some 60,000 this time.

There is a sizeable number of Hindu immigrants from Bangladesh also in India. The assassination of Sheikh Mujib in a military coup on August 15, 1975 "heightened the sense of insecurity among the Hindus. Ziaur Rahman carried out Islamisation of the policy substituting secularism, which was one of the four cardinal principles of State policy, by incorporating the Quranic invocation 'Bismillah-hi-Rahman-e-Rahim' in the Constitution. The ban on the communal parties was lifted and many leaders and cadres of these parties with records of Hindu-baiting were admitted to Zia's ruling BN Party," according to the note of India's Home (internal securities) Ministry.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

The note says the Hindu immigrants "have generally been staying in shanties in miserable conditions in visible concentration in south-West Bengal districts" while the Muslim immigrants have "fanned out to urban areas in other states most notably in Delhi, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra etc. In the metropolitan cities of Delhi and Bombay not less than 4 to 5 lakh (400,000 to 500,000) Bangladeshi Muslims have been residing."<sup>16</sup>

### **Referent Objects**

According to the Copenhagen School Referent Objects are "things that are seen to be existentially threatened and that have a legitimate claim to survival". In the early decades the referent objects were the ethnic population of Northeastern India. The locals, almost all of them from various tribes, saw the invading Bangladeshis as posing a serious threat to their culture, economy and other rights.

Over a period of time the referent object expanded to become the very national sovereignty of India. And this has been vocalised by the governments in New Delhi that were forced to securitize the issue by the violent socio-political movements and intelligence agencies. Indian intelligence agencies were also key players, with their repeated speech, articulating fears that the illegal migration had a direct threat on India's national sovereignty. Their hawkish stand, due to their very nature of the job, and intensified by the post-9/11 fears, have tremendously contributed to the securitization.

### **Reasons**

The inflow of illegal migrants from Bangladesh is primarily dictated by their desire to seek better economic conditions in India. BG Varghese, veteran journalist and a commentator on India's northeast, has in his writings identified various reasons

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

contributing to the economic migration. He points out that Bangladesh is ravaged by recurrent cyclones and devastating floods and no other country anywhere faces flood problem of the nature and magnitude that Bangladesh does. More than one million people have been killed by floods since 1961. Sixty per cent of the country was submerged in 1998 by floods leaving a trail of destruction unprecedented in the country's history of calamities.

There is also a flourishing human trafficking racket that has its network inter-woven across the borders in Bangladesh-India and Pakistan. Families pay thousands of rupees to middlemen to get into India from Bangladesh, and from here to move towards border with Pakistan. The agents take them into the deserts in Rajasthan State of India and push them across the desert into Pakistan. Hundreds have perished in the desert, according to a senior BSF officer. In an interview with the author he said thousands have landed up in Karachi, "with the dream of going to the Gulf for better job and a great future."

A sizeable number of the Bangladeshi refugees end up in Delhi, Mumbai and other Indian cities where there is an intense economic and social demand for cheap labour in all aspects of life.

### **Bangladesh Response**

As India was securitizing the issue, in Bangladesh the successive governments were slowly feigning ignorance and resorting to lies to prevent any attempt by India to push back its citizens.

In fact JN Dixit, a former foreign secretary, prolific writer on national security matters and the new National Security Advisor, said that when Prime Minister Narasimha Rao took up the issue of the illegal migrants with his Bangladeshi counterpart Begum Khaleda

Zia she flatly denied the Indian claim.<sup>17</sup> Dixit was the foreign secretary under Narasimha Rao.

It is not that the entire Bangladesh has shut its eyes to the problem. Academic circles continue to study the matter with an open mind. Bangladeshi scholar Meghna Guhathakurta says "there would have been 16.5 million Hindus in Bangladesh instead of the official figure of 11.2 million in the Bangladesh census of 1991. According to our calculation, a total of 5.3 million Hindus, ie on average 200,000 per year have gone "missing" during 1964-1991."<sup>18</sup>

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on November 24, 1998 told her country's parliament that her country would not allow Indian attempt to push back people unless their identity was proved. Her statement was only a culmination of a steady strengthening of Bangladesh stand that there were no illegal migrants from that country into India. Bangladesh has all through the history protested Indian efforts to fence the border. Several Indian officials are themselves dismissive of the idea of the fencing saying that India lost much land to an idea that was not practicable all across the 4000 kilometer stretch because of the difficult terrain including ravines and numerous islands.

### **Recent Developments and Some Positive Trends**

In June 2000, the Delhi police had a different experience. When it went to round up Bangladeshis from their resettlement colonies in eastern flank of river Yamuna there were riots. The residents chased back the police, set ablaze a police jeep and surrounded a police station before police opened fire on them killing at least one.

In 1998, the western Indian state of Maharashtra, then ruled by right wing Shiv Sena-BJP combination, sent a train from Mumbai (formerly Bombay) to Bangladesh border with

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<sup>17</sup> JN Dixit, *Liberation and Beyond*, p. 252

illegal migrants. The Communist government of West Bengal state, where they were to be offloaded and send across to Bangladesh, refused entry to the train saying the illegal migrants in the train were actually Bengali speaking Indian Muslims rounded up by the right wing government because of their anti-minority bias.

West Bengal state has been receiving one of the highest number of refugees from Bangladesh, and was well aware of the socio-economic and political implications of the illegal inflow of economic refugees into its territory. The CPM government had told Indian Supreme Court that 1.2 million Bangladeshis who visited the state between 1972 and 1996 had vanished from records. In 1990 alone, BSF detained more than 56,000 Bangladeshis trying to enter West Bengal.

However, like the Congress, the communists too had a desecuritized view of the issue, largely due to their sensitivities regarding the Muslim vote bank and the accommodative nature of their ideology.

In 2000, the All Assam Students Union, that is now a meek shadow of the early 80s romantic torrent, made a fresh demand. They said state government jobs must be protected for the "indigenous Assamese", those who could establish their descent from 1951 National Register of Citizens.

Though AASU claims apolitical stature, the fact is that most of its leaders later were part of Asom Gana Parishad, the political party that ruled the state for several years. And several AASU leaders also have links to United Liberation Front of Assam, the insurgent group.

Federal election commission now has an active program to provide voter's identity card, which is hoped to be a check against illegal migrants entering voters' list and later claiming that as a reason for their citizenship. However in 2000, the Delhi high court has

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<sup>18</sup> Meghna Guhathakurta, *Communal politics in South Asia and the Hindus of Bangladesh*, paper presented in New Delhi's Centre for Policy Research, 1999.

ruled that a ration card or voters' ID card is no reasons for an individual to be considered a citizen of India.

The right wing government that lost power in the general elections of 2004 has been implementing several stringent measures treating the issue at a highly securitized level. The right wing government decided to beef up the border security along the over 4000 kilometer border with Bangladesh with almost 50,000 more paramilitary personnel.

The securitization of the issue has had very drastic fallouts, visible from the stiff stand off between the border security teams of both the countries. On April 18, 2001 the two countries almost came to war after the security forces of the two nations fought along the border resulting in Indian BSF losing 16 personnel and Bangladesh losing two of its own men. The two sides are now often pushing themselves to take over each other's territories, while the illegal migration continues to cause much anger.

Even as nation continues to search for extraordinary measures to deal with the issue, there are words of caution from both within India and outside.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadako Ogata, in May 2000 during her visit to New Delhi said the migration across national borders was among the "greatest challenges confronting all of us-- including India." She said the countries must develop "clear, recognized and practical mechanisms" to separate "those fleeing from persecution or conflict, and those seeking economic betterment."

Ogata said in much of Asia region "and in South Asia in particular, the demarcation of the boundaries of newly independent nations, emerging from colonial rule, was often arbitrary." She said, "greater economic competition for limited resources is resulting in a hardening of social divisions. In many countries, this has been translated into an urge for a greater demarcation of communal or national boundaries, as each community and social group struggle to asset their access to resources and to defend their shrinking space."

Present National Security Advisor JN Dixit wrote in the Indian Express:

In the long run, we must be conscious that India has unresolved border disputes with Pakistan, China, Nepal and Bangladesh. Our endeavour should be to resolve those among them which can be managed more easily. Regardless of short-term political considerations, India should ratify the 1974 Agreement on exchange of enclaves with Bangladesh and resolve its border disputes with that country. Simultaneously, we must strengthen and intensify our border security management arrangements to counter not only the phenomenon of illegal migration, smuggling, and so on, but the impulses of anti-Indian political attitudes entertained by some political segments, encouraged and abetted by extremist religious forces and Pakistani intelligence agencies.<sup>19</sup>

A few days before he was appointed the National Security Advisor, Dixit said the issue could not be treated by mere securitization. He pointed out that India needed to show an understanding of the entire issue and look at practical steps to stem the flow and regulate those migrants already within the border. Dixit suggested a more stringent vigil along the border and coordinated verification by Indian and Bangladeshi authorities along the border. And issuance of work permits to those migrants already in India. However, the new government is yet to spell out its steps towards the issue.<sup>20</sup>

What Dixit said might be a way out for India is believed by some other officials. They admit that securitization of the issue has not helped in solving the problem. India needs to rightly fully play its role in South Asia, and needs to come to terms with the challenges posed to it by its sheer size, growing economy and the disparities with its neighbours. War mongering and outlandish charges against neighbours and a stiff attitude on illegal migration doesn't seem to have helped the situation.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Indian Express*, 3 May, 2001.

<sup>20</sup> From an informal conversation with the author.

<sup>21</sup> From an interview by the author.

## **Conclusion**

Theory of securitization and desecuritization has its limitations when applied in the complex South Asian scenario, as is evident in this case. The authors of the theory have failed to address stand-alone speech acts. In the region often speech acts, even if from important government functionaries, are not immediately followed by emergency measures. Reasons are many including political compulsions and the complex nature of decision-making. The theory needs to have a more accommodative expansion to apply it very effectively in the region's context. There is no flexibility over timeline. The theory presumes that speech acts are immediately followed by urgent measures that securitize the issue.

Though the presence of illegal Bangladeshi migrants in India has serious implications for the Indian State, securitization of the issue has not helped in solving the problem. Emergency measures in place are only tactical tools for the government and various agencies to apply selectively without any evident results.

The paper concludes that despite various negative fallouts of the migration and violent anti-migration movements and massacres, the rhetoric and urgent measures by securitizing actors have achieved very little. The flow of illegal migrants from Bangladesh into India continues. The paper suggests that failure of the securitization of the issue call for a reorientation of the Indian response, possibly desecuritization, and a national need to revisit India's security issues and state responses.

The entire issue calls for more flexibility on part of India, including possible desecuritization of the issue. More bilateral efforts, with the larger Indian state more accommodative of the Bangladeshi challenges and aspirations, are definitely required. Only an accommodative Indian state can expect to receive better Bangladeshi cooperation in checking illegal flow from its side. The present bilateral engagements, with an under flow of tension, has not been helpful at all. Recent moves towards establishment of a free trade area between India and Bangladesh and a larger free trade

area in South Asia, under the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, are two important developments that could help in improving economies of the region, especially in creating more opportunities within Bangladesh. That could ultimately help in stemming the flow, which is almost entirely in search of better economic conditions.

There is a new generation of officials and politicians in India who are eloquent about the need to desecuritize the issue. Among those liberals are some of the senior functionaries of the present government. Their liberal attitude could perhaps help the region in dealing with the entire challenge in a more coordinated manner, with a more effective result visible on the ground.

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