

POLITICS AND ORIGIN OF THE INDIA-BANGLADESH BORDER FENCE¹

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Background

Every time Nazir Rahman Bhuiyan, a villager in Bangladesh, moves from one part of his house to another, he crosses an international border-the recently fenced India and Bangladesh border (Schendel, 2005). A spokesman for the Indian Ministry of External Affairs cited the reasons for the fence as a combination of the same & that had made the United States and Israel to build fences with Mexico and the West Bank respectively to prevent illegal migration and terrorist infiltration².

The idea of protecting the Indo-Bangladesh border with a fence is not new. Regional politicians in Assam first proposed fencing the border in the 1960s in order to isolate the population of East Pakistan. During that period, the Government of Assam under Congress Chief Minister Bimala Prasad Chaliha launched a campaign to deport immigrants who had settled in Assam since January 1951. He ignored Prime Minister Jawharlal Nehru's request to go slow on the issue (Upadyay, 2005; Hazarika, 2000). He along with his party also

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² India erecting a barrier along Bangladesh border targets terrorism, illegal migration by Jehangir Pocha. Boston Globe, 30 May 2004, Pg 20

advocated clearing up an area in sufficient depth along the border to control Pakistani infiltration which was taken up by the government in Delhi at that time but not implemented. Assamese politicians were not able to convince the Central government on illegal migration from East Pakistan but they managed to sanction 180 additional police watch posts and erect a barbed wire fence in selected places on the Assam-East Pakistan border (Jha, 1972; Schendel, 2005; Upadhyay, 2005).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s there was a violent protest and anti-Bengali program in Assam, which led to the establishment of the Assam Accord. The mainstream Indian political leaders discuss the issue and place it on the national agenda in 1985 (Ramachandran, 2002; Weiner, 1985, 1993; Hazarika, 1994). In 1986, the Indian government approved the Indo-Bangladesh Border Road and Fence project to prevent illegal (also called irregular) migration from Bangladesh. However, the progress of that project was very slow (Schendel, 2005). The project was budgeted at Rs³ 3.7 billion in 1986⁴. Progress on the fence construction on Bangladesh-Assam border was slow and irregular till 1998. Apart from fencing the border, the All Assam Student Union (AASU) and the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) demanded the enactment of the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act (IMDT Act), which came into force in 1983. A number of criticisms were made of the Act with a demand for its amendment and abolition throughout late 80s and 90s by AASU, AGP and section of Assamese print media (Karlekar, 2005). In response to that the Supreme Court of India set aside the Act in a judgement in July 2005 and ordered the State Government of Assam to constitute a sufficient number of tribunals under the Foreigners Act to deal with illegal Bangladeshi migrants in Assam⁵.

In December 2002, an estimation made by the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) in 2004 claimed that Assam had a total of 26,490 foreigners staying illegally. Earlier, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) Government had claimed that there were 1.20 million illegal migrants living in Assam⁶ and around 20 million Bangladeshis living in other parts of India including big cities like Kolkata, Delhi and

³ The Indian currency is the Rupee

⁴ 'Centre to complete border fencing by 2007'. The Assam Tribune. 20 August 1999, Phase I of Rs. 1335 crore (1 crore is 10 million) Indo-Bangladesh border fence to begin soon: Shenoy'. The Sentinel. 19 October, 2001

⁵ Also see 'IMDT Act is the biggest barrier to deportation, says Supreme Court' The Hindu, 14 July, 2005

⁶ 'Assam has only 26,490 foreigners : Centre'. The Assam Tribune, 7 July 2004

Mumbai. The number of Bangladeshis varies with each media or official report. The issue of Bangladesh migrants residing in India (apart from North-east) became a concern of the Indian media when it became a political agenda of the Hindu nationalist mainstream political party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 1980s and 1990s. The next section will discuss the response of the Indian right wing political parties on the issue of Bangladeshi migrants in India.

Illegal Bangladeshis and BJP-Shiv Sena Government

Since the late 1980s, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Shiv Sena have been the main political parties instrumental in the revival of Hindu nationalism. The 1980s and 1990s saw a time of growing fear on the part of the majority Hindu population that the Muslim minority was increasing its presence in India, challenging Indian sovereignty and controlling the politics of the country (Nanadur, 2006). The right wing political parties feared that demographic change and an increase in the Muslim population as well as the rise of Islamic fundamental groups would make the Hindus of India vulnerable. Combined with the growth of Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan, the increased violence of the Kashmir insurgency and the displacement of Kashmiris instigated the perception in India that the number of Muslims was growing and they posed a threat to Hindus in India. These factors made it easier for the BJP to enter the political sphere and work with the Sangh Parivar⁷ in using the media to play on Hindu insecurity. Further, the BJP successfully characterized the Indian National Congress government as ‘pandering’ to Muslims and undertook key symbolic mobilizations as a means of fortifying a Hindu identity (Nanadur, 2006). This played a part in the rapid rise of the BJP in the 1990s followed by an electoral victory in 1998.

The Sangh Parivar, the force of Hindi chauvinism, has characterised the undocumented migration from Bangladesh in recent decades as ‘infiltration’ - Muslim migrants as ‘infiltrators’ as opposed to ‘refugees’ for Hindu migrants (Bidwai, 2003; Gellan, 2005, Ramachandran, 2004). The issue of illegal migrants from Bangladesh as infiltrators was also raised by the BJP and Sangh Parivar in the 1980s and 90s (Dalwai and Engineer,

⁷ Sangh Parivar refers to the family of Hindu organisations built around the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) which also include Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Bajrang Dal. The latter two are known for their orthodox communal Hindu ideology

1995; Gillan, 2002; Ramachandran, 2002; Schendel, 2005). In the 1980s, the BJP and associated Hindu nationalist organizations such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) repeatedly drew attention to the cross border movements of Bangladeshis to India.

Ramachandran (1999: 236) documented that on 6 May 1997, former Union Home Minister Indrajit Gupta announced in the Indian Parliament that there were nearly 10 million undocumented immigrants, largely from Bangladesh, residing in India⁸ (Times of India, 1997). This was the first official statement by the Government of India regarding the extent of Bangladeshis' migration into the country. In response to that statement, Uma Bharati, a member of the Sangh Parivar, told the House that the 'Indian government had failed to take effective steps to check the entry of Bangladeshi citizens. She sounded the alarm by warning that the undocumented Bangladeshi immigrants would soon demand a separate state from India⁹ (The Hindu, 1997 and Ramachandran 1999, p: 236).

The BJP is widely known for Hindutva -a religion-centric and chauvinistic political ideology that seeks to bring all Hindus under one umbrella through out the 1980s and 1990s. At that time, the party's national leadership was searching for an alternative issue instead of the campaign to construct a Ram temple (a Hindu deity) at Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in order to provoke its supporters. In April 1992, the BJP National Executive passed a resolution claiming that over 15 million Bangladeshis had illegally entered India. The resolution said that, 'the influx constitutes a serious strain on the national economy, a severe stress on the national society and withal a serious threat to the stability and security of the country. And yet the Congress takes no action to stem this flood or push back illegal immigrants, because it views them as its vote bank' (BJP, 1992 in Gillan, 2002, p: 77). The BJP aimed to use this migrant issue as one of the main campaign agendas to get support and widen its political base in West Bengal and Northeast Assam in 1992 and 1993 (Gillan, 2002; Ramachandran 1999) where it had low standing and support as the politics of these two states were dominated by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Indian National Congress respectively.

The BJP was successful in its objectives and received increased media attention at that time. Many central level leaders regarded the migrants' campaign as a long term

⁸Times of India, 7 May, 1997

⁹ 'Ten million foreign nationals staying in India' 1997. The Hindu 7 May 1997

component of the party's electoral platform. Some even thought it might overtake the Ram temple issue as a national strategy for political mobilization (Ray, 1992; Gillan, 2005). In 1999, the BJP formed a coalition government under the name National Democratic Alliance (NDA) with support from other political parties including the Shiv Sena with 15 seats in Lok Sabha (Viczianny, 2002). The BJP and the Shiv Sena share common ground on the Hindutva issue. The Shiv Sena is widely known for its communal and chauvinistic ideological campaign which can leave the BJP behind in its anti-Muslim, anti-Pakistan and pro-Hindu rhetoric. They are commonly provocative in their campaigns, claiming that 'the Muslims in India are behaving as if they are Pakistani citizens. It is as if there are two countries within this one. Hindus, open your eyes and see what is going on. Your funeral pyres are burning' (Viczianny, 2002:44). When Mumbai was waterlogged for three days, the Mayor of Mumbai—a member of the Shiv Sena held the illegal Bangladeshi population responsible saying their (Bangladeshi migrants') filth blocked up the gutters (Schendel, 2005). The Shiv Sena's proposed solution to illegal Bangladesh migrants in India had always been to truck them out of India (Viczianny, 2002). In 1998, a project conducted in selected Delhi slums by the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) found that the workers of BJP and Shiv Sena had been active in identifying Bangladeshi Muslims immigrants in selected slums¹⁰.

In response to the Shiv Sena-BJP campaign on the security threats arising from migrants by Bangladeshis, the Centre for Study of Society and Secularism (CSSS), a non government organization in Mumbai carried out a study in 1995. In 'Immigrants in Bombay: A Fact Finding Report', the findings revealed that the BJP-Shiv Sena estimates about the number of illegal migrants was not merely an exaggeration but almost complete fabrication. The report points out that the BJP-Shiv Sena government attempted to fabricate illusionary danger and generate fear. According to the report, this issue was raised by the BJP to divert people's attention after the demolition of Babri Masjid. The report further argued that the propaganda matched the Shiv Sena's past records of arousing competition against one section of the population by another; their past targets have been Dalits (low caste Hindu) and South Indians to get the Marathi (local people from Maharashtra) vote bank in Maharashtra. The report criticized Operation Push Back¹¹ initiated by the Narashima Rao government in 1992

¹⁰ BJP, Shiv Sena listed Bangladeshi Muslims in slum. Indian Express, 23 September 1998.

<http://www.indianexpress.com/res/web/pl/e/ie/daily/19980923/26652234.html> last accessed on 8 May, 2008

¹¹ Operation push back is part of an action plan taken and implemented by Narsima Rao Congress Government in 1992 to deport illegal Bangladesh migrants. The plan had three steps namely: detection, identification and deportation. The first operation took place in September 1992. A group of 132 people were identified as illegal Bangladeshis and removed from a slum in New Delhi and taken to the West Bengal-Bangladesh border for deportation in an inhuman manner an handed over

as ‘inhuman, condemnable and unthinkable in this century’¹². It concluded that the so-called infiltrators did not pose any threat and the perception of danger was a product of Hindutva-led propaganda. The study argued that the migrants were more preoccupied with their day to day subsistence needs and hardly had any time to think about other issues. The report recommended that ‘if immigration from Bangladesh is indeed a serious issue for the Indian Government, then problem must be resolved through negotiation with Bangladesh government; deportation of poor Muslims is not the answer’ (The Indian Express, 23 September 1998: 1).

The Left Front government of West Bengal (Communist Party of India- Marxist or CPI-M) sharply criticised both the Centre and Maharashtra governments for Operation Push Back and for failing to consult the West Bengal administration before using the state border for deportation (Gillan, 2002; Ramachandran, 2002). The erstwhile Chief Minister Jyoti Basu described the action as “uncivilised” and claimed many of the arrested people were Bengali-speaking Muslims from West Bengal with legitimate claims to citizenship. The Left Front Government was held responsible for encouraging and approving Bangladeshi migration in order to capture votes and political support in key electoral constituencies. Though the West Bengal government coordinated with the Centre and announced several policies to curb the influx of Bangladeshi migrants, the state government was perceived to have adopted a comparatively sympathetic stand on the migrants themselves by the BJP (Gillan, 2002). Karlekar (2005) criticised the Chief Minister of the CPI-M government of West Bengal Buddhadeb Bhattacharya for not taking any measure to close unrecognized madrasas in the border areas that he claims become centres of anti-India propaganda. The West Bengal government was also considered to be a contributing factor for Bangladeshis to come to West Bengal for its secular values and control on local level administrative structure. (Gillan, 2002)

to Indian Border Security force (BSF) to push back to Bangladesh side. Operation push back was suspended in November 1992 as abruptly as it was started. This operation was highly criticised by national and international human rights, religious and non- governmental organisations.

¹² See ‘Immigrant in Bombay: A Fact Finding Report’ by Shama Dalwai and Irfan Engineer. http://www.sacw.net/i_ajj/Report.html accessed on 7 April, 2008

Migrants as a security threat to India

Many Shiv Sena-BJP politicians claim that Bangladeshi migrants are a threat to Indian security. In 2001, the Supreme Court also expressed the concern that undocumented migrants from Bangladesh might pose a threat both to the economy and the security of the country¹³. During the hearing of a Public Interest Petition filed by a lawyer O.P. Saxena representing the All India Lawyers Forum for Civil Liberties (AILFCL), the bench of the Chief Justice and two other Justices of the Supreme Court said that the ‘Bangladeshi migrants were eating into the economy of the country and had to a large extent become a security threat’. The bench also criticized the Union Government for being indifferent to resolve the issue and recommended that the government take exemplary steps to tackle the illegal migration, including deportation. In his petition, Saxena alleged that over one crore (10 million) Bangladeshi migrants had illegally crossed over to India and were causing a severe strain on the resources of West Bengal as well as poor North-eastern states. The case sought a direction from the Court to the union government to identify these Bangladeshis and deport them with the help of agencies such as National Human Rights Commission (NHRC)¹⁴. Karlekar (2005) in *Bangladesh the Next Afghanistan* claimed that there had already been a security threat from Bangladesh in 1998 when it sheltered Anup Chetia, leader of outlawed United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). Media reports claimed that the outlawed ULFA had started several lucrative income-generating projects in Bangladesh to sustain its anti-India activities. These include three hotels, a private clinic and two motor driving schools in Dhaka, a number of groceries and drug stores in Sylhet, poultry farms in Mymensingh, and two schools in Narsingdi¹⁵ but this claim has not been substantiated by any other sources.

Karlekar (2005) also mentioned that Bangladesh poses a potential threat to India for its expanding Islamic militancy. He argued that the borders were particularly risky as most militant groups were based in the Indo-Bangladesh borderlands. The Indian NDA Government also viewed the past BNP-Jamaat coalition government as pro-Pakistan and anti-Indian (Wright, 2002). Karlekar among others has claimed that the geo-strategic location of Bangladesh makes the country an ideal base for Al Qaeda, Taliban and the ISI, allowing them to coordinate activities as far as Spain and Indonesia from there. In relation to that, so runs the claim, cross border migration has created many small pockets of illegal Bangladeshis in

¹³ See ‘Court says Bangla migrants a security threat’. Times of India on 27 Feb 2001

¹⁴ See Assam Tribune, July 13, 1999

¹⁵ Also see Deccan Herald, October 25, 1998

big cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and adjacent border areas that can be used as bases to harbour terrorists to run militant activities in India and elsewhere (Karlekar, 2005; Wright, 2002).

Group of Ministers Report and Border Management Task Force

In 1999, India fought a military battle with Pakistan over the disputed Kashmir state from May to July known as the Kargil War. India was victorious in getting its Line of Control back from Pakistani invasion. After winning the war, a review committee known as The Kargil Review Committee (KRC) was formed to assess the country's overall security situation and capacity as well as enhance security measures at the national level. The KRC Report found many deficiencies in India's security management system, particularly in the areas of intelligence, border management, and defence management. Prime Minister Vajpayee set up a Group of Ministers (GoM) cabinet to review the national security system in its entirety and consider the recommendations of the KRC report (Ministry of Defence, 2000). The members of the cabinet were LK Advani, Minister of Home Affairs, George Fernandes, Minister of Defence, Jaswant Singh, Minister of External Affairs and Yashwant Sinha, Minister of Finance. The GoM set up four task forces to assess the security situation and make further recommendations. The task forces were: 1) Task Force on Intelligence Apparatus 2) Task Force on Internal Security 3) Task Force on Border Management and 4) Task Force on Management of Defence

Dr Madhav Godbole, former Home Secretary during the demolition of Babri Mosque and the Mumbai riots in 1992-93, was appointed as the Chairperson of the Task Force on Border Management by the GoM¹⁶. The report prepared by the Group of Ministers recommended the creation of a separate department for border management within the Ministry of Home Affairs under the overall charge of the Home Secretary.

The Group of Ministers Report in 2000 said that illegal cross-border migration had been occurring over five decades and estimated that there were 15 million Bangladeshis, 2.2 million Nepalese, 70,000 Sri Lankan Tamils and 100,000 Tibetan migrants currently in India (Ministry of Defence, 2000). It claimed that illegal migration was a grave threat to Indian

¹⁶ 'Are our policies to fight terror right or wrong?' by Sheela Bhatt. Rediff News on 15 September, 2006 <http://www.rediff.com/news/2006/sep/15inter1.htm> accessed on 3 May 2008

security. However nothing regarding **fencing** the Indo-Bangladesh border was said. Some parts of the text were deleted intentionally from public view for security reasons; it is possible that fencing was part of it.

In January 2003, former Deputy Indian Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani issued a national directive to all provinces to take ‘immediate step to identify irregular Bangladeshis, locate them, and throw them out¹⁷’ (Ramachandran, 2005). A few weeks later, security forces on the Indo-Bangladesh border came dangerously close to a violent confrontation when the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) and its counterpart Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) attempted to ‘push back’ some 240 migrants across their respective territories¹⁸ (Ramachandran, 2005). During the year 2003, 18,801 Bangladeshis were deported by the Government of India and in the previous year, the number was 6,394 (Government of India, 2005).

The Indo-Bangladesh Border Fencing Project

The Government of India sanctioned the erection of fencing in two phases. The Indo-Bangladesh Border Works under Phase-I had been initiated in 1989. Fencing in 854.35 kilometres was erected and 2606.35 kilometres of road was completed as. Under Phase II, the government had approved additional fencing of 2429.5 kilometres and 797 kilometres road at an estimated cost of Rs 287.617 million¹⁹ (Government of India, 2006). This project was budgeted at Rs. 10.5 billion in 1998. It involved the construction of 900 km of border fence, 2800 km of border roads and 24 km of bridges along the India-Bangladesh border in the states of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram (Schendel, 2005). The Assamese government and media were not satisfied with the fence on the Assamese side. As a local newspaper had put it, ‘crossing the fence border remained as easy as slicing butter with a knife²⁰’.

In 2001, the Director General of the Border Road Organization calculated that 1 km of border fence cost Rs. 2.2 million and 1 km of border road Rs 4.5 million. A high BSF

¹⁷ See ‘India steps up detention of illegal Bangladeshis.’ *Hindustan Times*, 31 January, 2003.
‘Advani cracks whip on illegal migrants,’ *Hindustan Times* 8 January 2003.

Also South Asia: Immigrant issue sours Indo-Bangladesh relations by Praful Bidwai. Global Information Network, 8 February 2003

¹⁸ See ‘Border forces push back & forth,’ *Telegraph* 1 February, 2003.

¹⁹ 2876.17 lacks. 1 lack=100,000

²⁰ Indo-Bangla border in Karimganj only in name, *The Assam Tribune* (31 August 1999);Bangladeshi cut open border fence to sneak into Assam, *The Sentinel* (21 May, 2000)

official admitted that 80 percent of the 4000 km border was unfenced, while the Indian External Affairs Minister claimed in a statement to Parliament that the border would completely be fenced in 2006-07. In 2001, BSF and BDR exchanged gunfire leading to the killing of BSF personnel which obviously had a negative impact on India-Bangladesh relations²¹. Former Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina resolved the dispute jointly with Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee²². Work on erecting barbed wire fences along the Indo-Bangladesh border was again resumed by the NDA government headed by Vajpayee in 2002 (Karlekar, 2005). The Indian government tripled its budget for border security in 2003. The work had been in actual progress from early 2004, when tenders were called and closed. Various public sector institutions of India undertook activities to fence different parts of the border, such as Indian Railways Construction Corporation (NBCC), Borders Road Organization (BRO), the Central Public Works Department (CPWD), and the state Public Works Departments in Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya and West Bengal. In May 2004, the Central government of India changed and BJP-led National Democratic Alliance handed over power to the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) led by the Indian National Congress. After the newly formed government assumed power and formed their coalition government in 2004, the construction of fence was put on hold for review in June (Karlekar, 2005). According to Karlekar (2005), one of the main reasons was the strong opposition of the Bangladesh government that argued that the fence violated the India-Bangladesh Agreement in 1974 which prohibited the construction of any defence structure within 150 yard of the border and the fence was a defensive structure. National level talks were held between the Home Secretaries of Bangladesh and India in Dhaka in September 2004 to cover security issues, implementation of the 1974 Land Boundary Agreement, cooperation in combating the problems of drugs and narcotics, border patrolling by security forces, cross border movements, visa regime and extradition treaty and agreements on mutual legal assistance in criminal matters (Government of India, 2005). Construction resumed after a meeting on 14 October 2004 in Delhi where the Cabinet Committee on Security decided to continue fencing the border. The UPA government allocated funds for border fencing, road and maintenance as well as for boats and aircraft for the BSF. India's seriousness about the fence was demonstrated by the fact that they spent Rs 2404.7 million for fencing the Bangladesh border

²¹ See 'Bangladesh blames BSF, seeks end to border row', Times of India, 27 April, 2001 internet edition accessed on 12 June 2008. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/39543311.cms#write>

²² See 'The Divine Line' by Naunidhi Kaur. Frontline, Volume 18, Issue 10 May 12-25, 2001

during 2004-5. This was stated in the Indian Lok Sabha by the State Minister for Home Affairs Mr S. Raghupathy²³.

According to the Annual Report 2005-2006 of Indian Ministry of Home Affairs, fencing was necessary in order to prevent illegal infiltration and other anti-national activities from across the border. By the year 2004-2005, 1502 kilometers had been fenced. Similarly, work was completed on 2670 kilometers out of 3663 kilometers of roads to be constructed (Government of India, 2006). To date, a total of 2535.80 kilometres fencing has been completed in Phase I and II out of 4096.7 km long Indo-Bangladesh border. For border roads 3250.60 kilometres has been completed in Phase I and II²⁴ (Government of India, 2007-08).

In 2007, India decided to replace the entire 861 km. of fence constructed under Phase-I in West Bengal, Assam and Meghalaya, as most of this fence have been damaged by adverse climatic conditions and repeated submergence. The replacement work has already commenced in the States of Assam and West Bengal. 193.70 km. of fencing has been replaced so far (Ministry of Home Affairs, Annual Report 2007-08, p: 30)

Illegal Migration and the Census of India 2001

According to the Census 2001 report released in 2005, the number of Bangladeshi migrants during the decade 1991-2001 was about 280,000, which was a decrease of 53% from almost 600,000 migrants between 1981 and 1991²⁵. In the 2001 Census, about 5.1 million persons were reported as migrant by last residence from across the international border from India's neighbour countries mainly Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. About 97% of these migrants by last residence were from eight neighbouring countries including Afghanistan. Of these migrants, 3 million were from Bangladesh, 0.9 million from Pakistan, 0.5 million from Nepal and 0.1 million from Sri Lanka. About 65.2% of these migrants from neighbouring countries had migrated to India at

²³ See Bangladesh-India relations: Need to move forward by Muhammad Zamir <http://www.thedailystar.net/2005/05/07/d50507020325.htm> last accessed on 7 May, 08

²⁴ As on December 31, 2007. Government of India, 2008. Annual Report 2007-2008. Ministry of Home Affairs (annex IV, page 160)

²⁵ Sharp fall in migration from Bangladesh. Times of India. 24 Sep 2005. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/1241203.cms> accessed on 6 Feb, 2008

least 20 years ago perhaps many of them during the time of partition and later during the Bangladesh liberation war in 1971.²⁶

The total number of migrants by last residence from neighbouring countries by duration of residence is 3.08 million from Bangladesh -all residents living in India for more than 20 years. The '20 years or above' category indicates migration at the time of the 1949 partition or the formation of Bangladesh in 1971. Yet the report also revealed the number of migrants who came from Bangladesh during the decade 1991-2001. In case of Bangladesh as the last place of residence, the total number of migrants with duration from 0 to 9 years is 279,878 in 2001 and 591,572 in 1991. Another notable figure in the report was the flow of migrants from another neighbouring country Nepal- 175,195 in 1991 and 261,451 in the 2001 census which is close to the total number of Bangladeshi migrants. The decadal variation during 1991 –2001 has been negative -a reduction of 52.7% for Bangladesh and an increase for Nepal by 49.2%. It can be assumed that most of the migrants coming from Nepal were Hindu. According to the census 2001 in Nepal, 80.6% of the population is Hindu, 10.7% is Buddhist, 4.2% of the population is Muslim and 3.6% of the population follows the indigenous Kirant Mundum religion. Christianity is practiced by less than 0.5% of the population²⁷. It is very significant that the Shiv Sena-BJP government never complained about the migrants from Nepal, though statistics indicate the number of migrants was larger. They kept quiet on illegal Nepalese migrants as far as the literature and media are concerned. It can be interpreted that they did not take Hindu illegal migrants from Nepal as an economic or security threat to India. Another interesting feature of their campaign on detection and deportation of illegal Bangladeshi migrants is that, BJP appeared to be sympathetic towards Hindu migrants from Bangladesh. So this was not about jobs or security ;it is really an anti-Muslim campaign.

Conclusion

Given the fence currently surrounds the Indo-Bangladesh border, it remains to be seen what impact it will have on cross-border migration. An Indian journalist said, 'no number of barbed wires, fences or machine guns, it is clear, can stop the movement of the desperately

²⁶ Census of India 2001. Data Highlights: Migration Tables. Pg 4
http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Data_Products/Data_Highlights/Data_Highlights_link/data_highlights_D1D2D3.pdf last accessed on 4 May 2008

²⁷ Central Bureau of Statistics, Ramshah Path, Kathmandu, Nepal: Statistical Pocket Book Nepal, 2002

poor to where they think they may find food and shelter'²⁸. During the six years of Hindu nationalist BJP and its Hindutva allies ruled India, it turned both barriers into powerful symbols of the party's promise to protect India's Hindus from what it termed Islamic aggression²⁹. The BJP-Shiv Sena's claim that there are fifteen to twenty-one million illegal Bangladeshis in India is nothing but an overstatement. In Mumbai where these parties alleged there were 300,000 illegal Bangladeshi migrants, not even 10,000 Bangladeshis were detected and deported when the BJP-Shiv Sena government was in power during 1998-2004 which means the former government could not even deport 3% of the total number of migrants which it claimed a national crisis. Neither did they try to find out why Bangladeshi migrants come to India and what impact they have on India's economy. If migrants go to India and survive there for the long-term, there must be some real demand for them. The government of India spent billions to make the Indo-Bangladesh border fence; the question here is 'was that really worth it'?

²⁸ 'On a dangerous journey,' by Swami, Praveen. Frontline, 5 March, 2003.

²⁹ India erecting a barrier along Bangladesh border targets terrorism, illegal migration by Jehangir Pocha. Boston Globe, 30 May 2004, Pg 20

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