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**Illegal Immigration: A Cause of Deep Concern in India-Bangladesh**  
**Bilateral Relations**

**By**

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India in its quest to stimulate its Look-East Policy has developed cooperative ties with the South-East Asian as well as South Asian nations and has subsequently undertaken multifarious initiatives for this enterprising venture. In this significant endeavour, India's relation with the South Asian neighbour- Bangladesh deserves special focus. History reveals instances of both cooperation and differences between India and Bangladesh and there was a time when their bilateral relations used to revolve around manifold disparities. Though India made several attempts to augment and stabilize its bilateral ties with Bangladesh, the latter is blamed for not reciprocating in the same manner rather it is alleged of indulging in hostile activities threatening India's security and territorial integrity. But the 2010 visit of Bangladesh Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina to India greatly altered the contours of bilateral relations which may be expected to bear positive ramifications on the future of bilateral ties. In order to bolster their mutual bonding and assure the international community of each others commitment towards mutual cooperation, both India and Bangladesh need to accord a proactive direction to their thoughts and endeavours.

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To be precise, India's deep-seated anxiety about Bangladesh revolves around mainly three cardinal aspects-

- Illegal immigration jeopardizing the demographic profile of the country.
- Sprouting of terrorist camps on Bangladeshi soil as well as Indian militants.
- Last, but not the least, insurgents of North-East Region finding secure niche in Bangladesh.

An analysis of India-Bangladesh bilateral relations will not be feasible without the issue of illegal immigration being taken into account. Illegal immigration is a genuinely troublesome issue in this bilateral dynamic, which is also negatively affecting the demographic composition of India's North-East Region. It is alleged that smuggling, human trafficking, illegal movements and other displeasing occurrences often torment the border forces and Bangladesh's military camps are mainly cited as being responsible for carrying out disruptive activities thwarting the peace and security of India's North-East Region. India-Bangladesh border management is an antagonistic concern that demands a lasting amicable solution. In 2002, India began fencing off parts of the 4,090-km border to stop illegal migrants and suspected militants, though infiltration of Bangladeshis still continues. The security aspect in the remote hilly areas of Dhalai district is a matter of grave concern as the long porous border and the absence of effective barbed wire fencing enable the militants to pursue their activities. Moreover, innocent civilians continue to be killed while trying to cross the border, creating tension in the border areas and resulting in frequent BDR-BSF clashes.<sup>i</sup>

India and Bangladesh are neighbours sharing a significant land border. This geographical fact has rendered India's North-East Region more vulnerable to be the safe refuge of a number of illegal immigrants and a hub of booming illegal trade and services. Illegal immigrants have settled in various Indian states, including West Bengal, Assam, Bihar (in the northeastern districts of Katihar, Sahebganj, Kishanganj and Purnia), Tripura and even in Delhi. For the North East, the menacing issue is the uninterrupted illegal headway of Bangladeshis into Indian territory transfiguring the demographic composition of the

regions, thereby leading to social tensions and confrontations over certain diverse aspects.

The illegal infiltration of Bangladeshi migrants not only leads to considerable economic burden for India but also endangers national security in a severely threatened global atmosphere of terrorism. It is alleged that the terrorist outfits are accomplishing alarming activities to destabilize the region and the government needs to be proactive in identifying their agents and funding sources and prevent them from executing such hostile acts. The presence of 15 to 20 million illegal migrants (12 to 15 per cent of Bangladesh's population) has significantly eroded our national sovereignty in that we have lost control over who comes and who stays in India. And the resultant demographic changes have forced native Hindus to shift to interior towns from the border belts. In the early nineties, some pseudo-Leftist Bangladeshi intellectuals demanded a living space for the country's excess population in the Indian North-East.<sup>ii</sup> Though the Indo –Bangladesh bilateral relations are in a much smoother phase now the key problem according to India, is that Bangladesh seems to be ignorant about the magnitude of the problem of illegal migration. The consequences and the depth of the problem need to be gauged thoroughly before hunting for the ways to tackle it. Given that India played a crucial role in the independence of Bangladesh and sheltered over 10 million refugees, coupled with the fact that currently some 20 million illegal Bangladeshis live in India, there is greater need for a close relationship between the two countries. India has always stood by Bangladesh in times of crises. It provided aid worth US \$37 million to help Bangladesh cope with natural disasters and floods in 2007-08 and is co-operating with it to rehabilitate 10 cyclone-affected villages in the southern part of its territory. And when food prices rose during 2008, India also announced that it would export 500,000 tons of rice at a reduced price to Bangladesh, despite a ban on rice exports.<sup>iii</sup>

On the basis of the tenets of the Joint Communiqué signed in 1992 between the two countries both India and Bangladesh have now acknowledged the problem of illegal immigration and decided to cooperate with each other in order to minimize the magnitude of the problem. First and foremost, they need to realize the gravity of the existing vice and Bangladesh should no longer indulge in the illegal assault of religious and ethnic

minorities which can be cited as one of the main causes of illegal immigration. Smuggling, illegal border crossings are major hindrances to the security, territorial integrity and efficient border management of any nation. India has already adopted a number of stringent measures to protect the minority interests. India must tighten its own border security to discourage the illegal movement of people and goods into its territory. Bangladesh on its part should diligently abandon and dismantle the safe havens of all North-East insurgents taking refuge in that country.

The 14<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit of 2007 which was followed by reciprocal visits by the representatives from both sides bore positive implications for the rejuvenation of improved bilateral ties between the two neighbours and undoubtedly fostered mutual understanding. Bangladesh's assistance in securing a violence-free North-East India and non-hostile border in the east seemed to gain a positive inclination. To take bilateral relations forward, India must seize the opportunity to engage Sheikh Hasina on India's security concerns particularly on two fronts: end of violence in the North-East where infiltrators from Bangladesh are involved in terror operations, and a complete curb on terrorist organizations like Harkat-ul Jihad-al Islami (HuJI). India should also express its concerns about a new arms bazaar in the no-man's land near the Bangladesh-Myanmar border town of Naikhangchari, which has become home to Indian insurgent outfits like ULFA, NFT and NDFB. HuJI is known to be imparting training to these outfits. On cross border terrorism, India and Bangladesh have agreed to a joint fight, though much remains to be done.<sup>iv</sup>

The over-arching problem of illegal immigration leaves a deep scar on India- Bangladesh bilateral partnership that mandates immediate remedy. The remarkable triumph of the Awami League in 2008 Parliamentary elections in Bangladesh has paved the way for the democratic set-up in that country. The newly formed government is committed to tackle all odds posed by illegal immigration and solidify the edifice of the bond between India and Bangladesh. However, the solution of the problem is not an easy task. The very pertinent cause of immigration needs to be addressed separately. It is imperative that the respective governments inquire into the motive causes of these phenomena of immigration to determine whether at all it is the outcome of genuine distress. India has to

be cautious regarding the fact that the illegal immigration in no way hinders the security and territorial integrity of the country. The sufferings of people who have migrated due to economic reasons need to be seriously considered and they should be provided with adequate assistance to aid the cause of their sustenance.

The instances of people who may have migrated due to the cause of persecution need to be reconsidered by the Indian Government. However, those who have migrated for better economic opportunities should be given work permit for a certain period. After the completion of the specific tenure, the immigrants are liable to go back to their country of origin and the people gaining the facility of work permit should be mutually responsible for each other and to each other. It is not proper to judge such flows in absolute terms- the capacity to absorb an incoming population group depends partly on locally available resources and partly on how much of a local demand existing for imported labour or professionals. While this article argues about India's North East being the recipient of incessant migratory flows, the emerging plausibility of outflow from India to neighbouring countries due to multifarious causes must not be overlooked. India and Bangladesh must encourage greater political exchanges and considerable security cooperation imperative to confront common challenges. They should always be accountable in addressing the contemporary global challenges and should devote their energies towards ensuring enduring economic convergence. Closer people to people contact through cultural harmony, educational development programmes and sustainability in their respective countries as well as in their neighbourhood should be encouraged. Enhancing bilateral trade and exchange of high level visits are not enough for rejuvenation of bilateral ties. There is need for continued mutual trust and understanding, otherwise the increasing weight of suspicion and doubt will overshadow this much- needed partnership. Both India and Bangladesh need to conform to the tenets of mutual cooperation and collaboration and should adapt themselves to this perplexed world order for the purpose of exploring an apposite partnership.

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<sup>i</sup> Khan Rabb M. Shamsur, “Towards Better India-Bangladesh Relations”, accessed electronically at [www.idsa.in>Publications>IDSAComment](http://www.idsa.in/Publications/IDSAComment), on 27.07.10.

<sup>ii</sup> Nandy B. Bibhuti, “Space Invaders”, The Hindustan Times, 14<sup>th</sup> February, 2003, accessed electronically at [www.hvk.org/articles/0203/182.html](http://www.hvk.org/articles/0203/182.html) on 31.07.10.

<sup>iii</sup> Khan Rabb M. Shamsur, *op. cit*, accessed electronically at [www.idsa.in>Publications>IDSAComment](http://www.idsa.in/Publications/IDSAComment), on 27.07.10.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*