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Bangladeshi Migrants in West Bengal since 1971 : A Study through the Question of Migrants' Networks

Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal is a complicated topic for research, for it can be difficult, on an empirical level, to study the integration of migrants as an autonomous process, distinct from the social and political systems that characterize the whole state. Indeed, this population flow is unique because it is happening in a somewhat culturally united space, Bengal, though it involves crossing an international border. Contrary to other migrations, migrants from Bangladesh can rely on networks which are older than the border and thus better manage to get out of their isolation.

To lead my research, I have tried to meet people who have crossed the border at different moments after 1971. I have been in the colonies of Santipur, which have been created just after this date; then I have visited the colony of Kakdwip which has been growing mostly during the 90's; I have also tried to meet very recent migrants in slums, like in Rajarhat and Habra. I was thus trying to get an overview of the evolution of migrants' behavior, partly to see its correlation with the more obvious evolution of the political perception of the border and the migrants. It was also made in order to have a chronological understanding of migrants' strategy of integration. Indeed, some studies on the post-Partition refugees' movements have shown how long can be the processes, which can last for several generations^[1].

In this work, I have chosen an approach closed to the migratory theories that include the cultural features of the population flows. They have made it easier to take into account the historical evolution of migration's conditions, as well as the question of migrants' networks^[2]. This notion of network is quite central in my study, because it appears to be a useful tool to analyze migrants' strategies in developing countries and especially in India. In the following paper, network will be understood as the social groups an individual belongs to according to different sort of characteristics (which can be an ethnic group, a religion, a geographical origin, a family name, etc.) that this individual has^[3]. But he or she can pretend to endorse such a feature to enter into a network and thus get some facilities. According to this approach, we can see the migrant as an individual deprived from the networks which were related to his or her location and forced to find new ones to replace them. What I find interesting in this approach, concerning this migration in West Bengal, is that it allows to study migrants' relationships with the hosting society.

Moreover the network theory emphasizes greatly on the question of information which have become central in Economy. For poor migrants, or people forced to move, the information's deficiency is natural. Therefore they are mainly guided in their movements by their scarce networks^[4]. The migrant cannot be associated to a rational actor taking decision according to a united job market and in possession of all the information that he or she needed.

Political and Cultural Framework of the Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal

The West Bengal borderland is specific for two reasons I would like to emphasize here. First considering that the border is the more radical expression of the Nation-State and its territorially-based identity, the India-Bangladesh border bears the stamp of the Central government and its perception of the "outside"^[5]. This perception is embodied by the Border Security Forces which mostly come from other parts of India, and are then non-Bengali speaking. This is to be related to a method of ruling inspired by Machiavelli and introduced in India by the British before it was used by the Indian State, which states it is better to rule a region, to use soldiers from another place in order to avoid any emotional commitments of the forces.

Partition of Bengal has been quite different from the Western situation and the decision to divide Bengal seems to have been, to some extent, imposed by the Centre and the Congress. On a political level, it was obviously a main objective to keep West Bengal and Kolkata away from becoming a part of a Muslim nation, which would have been another threat at India's gates. The regular history books I have read before were presenting Partition as an inescapable process due to the reality of the slogan "two nations, two states" and the communal violence of the mid-forties. But as Tagore states in his speech about

Indian nationalism, India is composed of many nations gathered in a country, and the notion of nation-state, and the nationalism that comes with it, is a legacy of the particular European history which could hardly fit to the Indian subcontinent situation. It is therefore possible to see the Bengal Partition as the action of the Central State to divide the Bengali nation, who has also been for the British rulers a source of preoccupation^[6]. Furthermore, the erection of a fence can also be related to this original desire to keep Kolkata and West Bengal away from a Muslim's ruling.

This has been especially brought to my mind after my visit at the NGO Banglar Manabadhikar Suraksha Mancha (MASUM). According to the member of the association I have met, the central State's action on the border is driven by a high cast, Hindi speaking and nationalist mindset. Moreover, as the India-Bangladesh border is a very populated area and considering the importance of the crossborder trafficking, the BSF is also ruling a part of the India population, which is then deprived of some fundamental rights. This exceptional situation is brought by several Acts, like the Border Security Forces Act and its Amendment of 2011, or the use of the 144 Section of the Criminal Penal Code (that was also used during the violent events in Tehatta in November, 2012) to provide the police extended powers and restrict the population's rights in some circumstances^[7]. "Since January 2007, MASUM has documented 61 cases of alleged killings of Indian nationals by the BSF in West Bengal" one can read in the Amnesty International report Trigger Happy. When a state comes to allow the killing of its own citizens, this is clearly a case where State's and nation's interests are in conflict.

The second specific feature of the area is its high population density and the restless crossborder flows of population and goods. Thus, in the everyday life, the affirmation of the Nation State is challenged and the border is fouled^[8]. But this population, as it has been said, is under a special rule, from the Central government which is staying far from them. In the border districts, according to the facts reported by MASUM on its website for the last four years^[9], BSF makes no distinction between Indian and Bangladeshi people. Thus, one could say that this specific area which cannot fit the official expectations in terms of distinction between the inside and the outside is more or less outlaw. According that the majority of the population of the border district is relying on smuggling or any other crossborder traffic to live, people there are all illegal migrants and treated this way.

There, migrant's statute is experienced by the population as an everyday reality. The international border that have been imposed on these pre-Partition interactions have greatly affected the networks, marginalized the actors, and endangered many activities. The connections with the local police and forces (more than with politics), are quite different from those I have seen in Santipur or Kakdwip. The greater political tension and the distance between BSF and the population force the later to constantly renegotiate their rights and capabilities, which stick them in a day-to-day struggle and a restless uncertainty.

Thus migration denies every day the reality of the border. But, in another hand, migrants and their growing fear to be pushed back, as well as the bribing of the BSF, actualize the same borderland. It is therefore interesting to analyze the impacts of this international limit and its political treatment over the migrants' networks. For example, the relentless growing security along the border since the India-Pakistan War of 1962, has considerably endangered the crossborder activities. The transnational channels that carry humans and goods from one side to another have then changed to more organized and more infiltrated structures, in the aim of reducing the risks. But the borderland has naturally affected every migrant, concerning the way to send remittances or the information costs. Now, information is mostly detained by these criminal networks which are present on both side of the border and it has become more and more costly over the year (nevertheless, the increasing of the price is also partly due to the growing prices asked by the police and BSF because of the awareness of the corruption of the area)^[10].

Migration Produces a Network Deficiency

What can be seen as a specific landmark to study this population flow are the discontinuities induced by migration in their life story. This is often embodied in the processes of self- organization of the migrants, from the formation of colonies to the change of their names through their enrollment on voter list, which imply a reconstruction of their identity and a long, even often life lasting, dialectic work in order to complete their integration^[11].

Indeed, migration forces people to renegotiate their place in society. This is obvious in the creation of colonies in West Bengal. A woman I have met in Santipur told me how her family left her village after selling the house for a very low price. They took a train, and then crossed the border on a river. There, they bribed the Border Security Force and came in Santipur where they stayed in their relatives' house. Then they rented a house until some spontaneous leaders among the refugees who have come within the same time lead them to a wasteland owned by the state, that they shared equally between the households. It is noteworthy that old dwellers from the village join the refugees as they settled down in the colony and then became refugees themselves in a way (This point shows that the "refugee" identity is imposed from above according to predefined criteria; nevertheless, the migrants were distinct from these dwellers by their fear of being pushed back to Bangladesh). They clear the place from the bushes and help each other to build their houses. In the colony, many people who used to be carpenters started their former occupation again. It took more than two decades for the refugees to get *dalil* for their property and the Indian citizenship that comes with it. In this woman's story, it is hard to see any prepared strategy of integration from the migrants who seem to act in a day-to-day struggle. Deprived from the capabilities they could enjoy in their former residence, they have no security nets outside of the colony. This explains the "sense of unity" expressed by the refugees about this period through the lack of the usual social supports^[12].

This example shows how the self-organization processes of the refugees are spontaneous and strongly related to the social and political framework. Even if the migrants have an obvious lack of networks outside the colony, it is wrong to assert that their perspectives end with its boundaries. Thus, during my visit of the illegal migrants' settlements in Rajarhat's suburbs, which look like an extreme case of migrants' marginalization and isolation, inhabitants of the colonies were enjoying networks beyond their community. It could be the religious network, embodied by the mosque which the migrants visit for festivals as well as networks brought by their profession like housemaid in the nearby buildings.

The Self-Organized Networks of Migrants

It is clear that in Bengal, migration was a slow process. During my research, most of the people I have met had taken the decision to leave considering several factors and successive events, rather than one decisive point. Nevertheless, often the decision has been made after a precise fact that can be told by the migrants as the turning point which made him or her leave (as a quarrel with Muslim neighbors over the share of fishing rights in an irrigation channel, or a long decrease in *bidi* selling on which the family is relying). But it is clear that this is more about a subjective limit of people beyond which they consider it is not any longer worthy to stay and protect their capabilities implied in their situation. And this limit is all but a predefined set of conditions. It must be considered as an evolution in the subjective perception of the situation, which is also fed by the collective discussions over the issue, and the evolution of the political framework. Indeed, through official statistics and different discussion, it is clear that the increases in population flows from Bangladesh can often be related to the deterioration of the communal relationship in the country. But even concerning this more objective point, the Bangladeshi political framework, one can find many differences in people's perception of State's behavior toward them.

Thus, migrants chose at one point to give up their social and spatial situations, in terms of outcomes and networks, to move on the other side of the border, which can be attractive as it is not seen as a real foreign country. This migration doesn't plan to ever come back and aspires to reach a similar condition from its previous one (this is actually partly true and as we will see, mostly depends on a religious bias; thus, many Muslims who cross the border plan to come back after an undefined time of staying; they are therefore not looking for the same facilities and the same degree of integration than the migrants I am presently talking about). Indeed, the migrants have tried to use their skills and to find themselves in an environment where they can reproduce, in some part, their former networks and social behaviors. This is clearly embodied in the gathering of migrants according to their place of origins or their caste as long as it was possible to them^[13].

I have seen an example of migratory niche in Kakdwip, South 24 Parganas. The city has been growing very fast over the last decades, due to a large inflow of migrants from Bangladesh. This is no secret there. Most of the migrants are involved in job related to fishing, and many of the names one can read on the shops' boards are titles from the *jalia* caste, and more especially from the sub-caste of the *jalia-Kaibartya*. There, I have talked to the headmaster of one of the colony's school, which indicated that the government, through its help for the building of the school, has recognized these illegal migrants. He explained to me that when a new and young migrant is coming, an old migrant who already has got

voter card from the local administration, presents himself as the father or the mother of the newcomer. With the help of a local political leader, the migrant is given a new name according to his new parent's and enrolls on the voter list by the same token. Thus, the homogeneity of the migrants' community is strengthened by this process of regularization and solidarity. There, the migrants have an opportunity to realize themselves according to their skill and their former situation in Bangladesh, which can highly contribute to their identity resilience. This is interesting to notice the role of the names in this process. The new name given to the migrant legitimizes him for the government, but also in order to find work and maybe to socialize in his new place of living, the migrant has to endorse a new identity.

The importance of belonging to such a community to be recognized by the Indian government clearly appeared to me as I met a boat-maker in Debnagore, South 24 Parganas, who has left Bangladesh in 1987. This man has not changed his name as he crossed the border and after some time, he went to this area where he could live from his skills in boat-making (as the *jalia* of Kakdwip are gradually coming South to find an environment similar to their place of origin and where they can realize themselves in their former occupation). Therefore he is the only one in the area to have his title and it has till today made impossible for him to get any official Scheduled Caste certificate from the State and the facilities that come with it. Nevertheless, as he has found a place to sell the boat he is making himself in his house, he is able to develop his abilities and his family's perspectives.

The Migrants' Networks in the West Bengal Political System

The issue of migration from Bangladesh has been an important social and political debate in West Bengal, as it questions the relationship between Indian and Bengali identity and the legacy of Partition. It must also be placed in the context of the newly independent state construction and the struggles to negotiate a new place in the society from its different groups. Indeed, the migrants have to fit to the national and federal conditions to claim for their regularization. There is therefore a dialectical relationship between migrants and the politics in West Bengal, to get the votes of the formers in exchange of their integration in the system. The emergence of the Left Front, which has ruled West Bengal for almost 40 years, is thus strongly correlated to the organization of the refugees' movements in the late 60's^[14]. Nevertheless, the political commitments of the refugees cannot be reduced to the Left Front or even to the official political sphere.

I have seen the stamps of this connection in a village of Nadia. There I have met the current chairman of the city, as well as the former chairman of the 70's and other politically involved people from different parties. They told me that until the late 70's, it was considered as "natural", for both the state and the population, to provide help to the new comers, on the behalf of a sense of solidarity toward other Hindus. Some of the people I have met had also come from East Bengal in the early times of Partition to be able to lead their professional activities. At that time, the political leaders used to provide ration and voter cards to the migrants in exchange of some help for their campaigns. If you have someone of your family already enrolled on the lists, it was easy to get enrolled and to produce official papers thanks to your relative. Such practices are still going on nowadays, as I have been told. To enroll new people, some political leaders don't erase dead people from the voter lists and then provide their identity to the migrants.

The very old relationships between local politics and the migrants in their integration have created networks which are now working without their conditions of birth, like the emergence of the Left Front or the official "natural sense of solidarity toward the migrants". This is also partly due to the clientelist features of the political system of West Bengal, where being a member of a party clearly increases one's capabilities. Nowadays, as the Central State position over migration from Bangladesh has deeply changed, local political leaders cannot overtly speak about their current relationships with migrants. Once I have been told that migration was not a problem in West Bengal anymore and in the same time, that it was not a good idea to lead a research on this topic, for it won't please the authorities.

The Religious Bias

It is important to me to stress the religious bias I have noticed in the study of this population flow. Though the Muslim migrants are, according to the officials, far less numerous than the Hindus, they have been crossing the border from nearly 60 years in a constantly growing flow. Moreover, Muslim migrants cannot claim for the same rights than the Hindus, as they are not raising any sense of solidarity, except the noteworthy case of the Liberation War when the population of West Bengal has provided help to the

refugees from East Pakistan (but at that time, it was clear in every mind that this migration was temporary, as I have been told several times by the then political leader I have met). I have met in Habra a man who talked for a long time about the many Muslims who were living in the area under an Hindu name, and were thus enjoying the State's facilities (especially the education system), with the help and silence of the local party. It is interesting to notice that words that are used in the official policies as well as in the informal conversations, such as refugees or illegal migrants, clearly refer to a religious based population. In spite of this, people are reluctant to overtly talk about the religious factor of the migration. Here I can refer one more time to Hannerz' work on networks. In his book, Exploring the city, Hannerz writes that the networks that one person can enter are limited by his or her characteristics, such as the ethnic group, the religion, the social class etc. But another specific feature of West Bengal political life is that people rather like to talk in terms of social classes, than in terms of castes or religions. This is mostly due to the official communication of the Left Front as it was ruling the State.^[15]

Moreover, since the eighties, the Muslim migrants have been more and more stigmatized in the official speeches. This process have been especially fed by the movements in Assam in the late 70's, the propaganda and ruling of the BJP that have led to the erection of the border fence, and the terrorist paranoia of the 21st century. Thus, it is getting harder and harder for a Muslim migrant to show clearly his religion. He cannot also raised an obvious sense of solidarity among Indian Muslims as they are facing a dilemma, according to their struggle to get more considerations in Indian policy and to avoid any suspicion about their loyalty to the State. Muslim migrants can therefore either choose to disguise themselves in Hindus (by changing their names for example), either to gather themselves in small communities in the suburbs not to raise attention and to preserve an inner solidarity.^[16]

As a multiethnic country, India's government has to manage a balance between the different groups of the nation. Through a static conception of demography, it is trying to keep a *statu quo* in the religion's share in the whole population. Muslim migrants, adding to the natural superior growth rate of the population, are then perceived as a threat to the demographic balance on which "communal harmony" and political power is constituted. We can compare this evolution with Israel's case, where such considerations are backing the refusal of the right to return for the Palestinians and encouraging the "return" of the Jewish diaspora. In India, it is also considered by the government that Hindu migrants must enjoy facilities to get citizenship. So it is possible to find new categories which, beyond the notions of legality/illegality (which only refer to the legislation of the Central State), define migration according to its impact on the demographic balance of the immigration country, and thus reveal the vision of the Indian society carried by the government.

The Muslim migrants I have met are generally poorer than the Hindus and their motives are mainly economic. They seem to live in a great uncertainty expressed in their fear when I asked them. These migrants are living on small earning. The people I have met in Rajarhat are earning between 500 and 1000 Rs. a month with important irregularities in their incomes and a significant share of the women are working outside of the colony. They are spending between 200 and 400 Rs. per room to the owners of the parcel who are living in the same part of the city. They are saving very few money and their remittances are therefore quite low. Nevertheless, they are not planning to go back to Bangladesh before many years. They have paid an average of 1000 Rs. to cross the border and cannot visit their relatives on the other side. But they are regularly joined by people coming from the same area. Most of their financial networks are limited to their colony and the small grocery shop of an Indian family that is just besides it. The physical appearance of the colony is reflecting the isolation of its inhabitants as all the rooms are turned toward the inside and then looking like a fence. It is even possible to see doors at the entrance of some of the colonies. I have not been surprised when in Habra, I have been told that many Bangladeshi nationals, especially students, are pretending to be Hindus by changing their name in order to register in school or enjoy wider networks.

Conclusion

It is natural for me to try to see the diversity and the complexity of the phenomenon. It is obvious, after meeting these different actors that all the people who are crossing illegally the borderland since 1947 cannot be analyzed under the same paradigm and the same approach. Moreover, this process cannot be understood without a historical perspective that shows how the hosting conditions have gradually changer in one hand, and how the profiles of migrants have determined their strategies of integration or surviving. It is therefore necessary to clearly identify which characteristics are relevant to divide the

migrants' population into different groups, according to the networks they can mobilize and thus to the degree of free choice in the decision they are making.

During my research, it has appeared clearly that the religious factor was very important in this approach. Indeed as they cross the border, the migrants will naturally fall into one of the religious groups that form Indian society and then benefit from the facilities provided by the statute of this group in the whole society. But the geographical location of the migration is also of a great importance. Because I have not been able to lead a proper enquiry on the very border areas, I have not referred to this point as often as it would be necessary in a paper on this subject. Nevertheless, I have read and heard that the specific ruling of these areas, added to the great poverty there, has noteworthy consequences on the everyday life of the hosting and migrating populations and that they were unable to establish safe and long lasting networks to face the uncertainties. Furthermore, for many of the border inhabitants, crossborder activities and migrations are part of the routine and a necessity to survive.

Nevertheless, I have clearly seen that the first three decades of an overtly welcome policy toward the refugees from the then East Pakistan has contributed to create networks which nowadays make the migration easier and harder to find for those who represent the Central State. This situation is specific to West Bengal and cannot be broadly associated with the situation of the other North-Eastern States. The current migration is therefore a part of the broader history of post-Partition population flows.

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- [1] "Adjustment and Transition in a Bengali Refugee Settlement : 1950-1999", Dipankar Sinha in Refugees in West Bengal : The State and Contested Identities, Pradip Kumar Bose, ed., Calcutta, Calcutta Research Group - 2000
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- [3] My definition of a network here is influenced by Ulf Hannerz's in Exploring the city, U. Hannerz,

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[4] The choice of the network theory as the more relevant to analyze these population flows has been also made by Jyoti Parimal Sarkar in the article « Bangladeshi Migration to West Bengal : a cause of concern »

[5] See The Bengal Borderland, Beyond State and Nation in South Asia, Willem Von Schendel, Anthem Press - 2005

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[11] I have been inspired here by the article "Foundation of a Refugee Market : A Study in Self reliance Initiative", Dipankar Sinha in Pradip Kumar Bose - 2000

[12] Here it can be interesting to refer to some literature produce by the migrants or the refugees before them to understand the mindset of these people. See Alamer Niier Bari (Alam's Own House) by Dibyendu Palit

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