

# The Securitization of Migration: An Indian Stance on the Securitization of Migration

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Migration is an intrinsic part of human life. People often move, because of wars, territorial conflicts, or socio-political suffering, compelled to sacrifice lives, family, relationships, accommodation, language, and community to pursue a better life. The connection between people's mobility and insecurity is not a recent phenomenon. But the inclusion of forced migration in the securitization of migration is relatively a new phenomenon. In the twentieth century, the influx of large-scale immigration from Bangladesh to India, especially in Assam, has become a significant problem. And it had substantial socio-political implications that led the country to contemplate the issue of securitization of migration. The influx of large-scale immigration from Bangladesh to India was an outcome of communal riots, religious strife, socio-political discord, and the British policy of divide and rule after, and before, India's independence. The securitization of migration and the politics of security reinforce the idea of the divisions between 'us' and 'them,' depicting 'others' as a tool for enhancing the community's bond. This essay explicitly examines the link between security and forced migration, taking an example of '*illegal immigrants*' from Bangladesh to India. Does the securitization of migration have helped to solve the problem of '*illegal migration*' in India? This paper attempts to answer that question.

*Keywords: security, forced migration, refugees, securitization*

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## **Security and Forced Migration: The Securitization of Migration**

The perception of displacement in the security's frame or the "systematic inclusion of refugees and forced migrants" (Hammerstad, 2014, 264) in the securitization perspective is a recent phenomenon. Other than the well-known issue of the connection between people's mobility and insecurity. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, the concern of moving individuals contributed to the notion of '*security*' as the building of urban walls and the development of passports to regulate movements (Torpey, 1999, 22-23; cited by Watson, 2009, 15). The international political concern for refugees and forced migration first appeared in the aftermath of the First World War when mass migration from Russia and the Balkan states increased inter-state exertions and challenged Europe's stability. Refugees and forced migrants are considered part of the "global struggle between the east and west" (Loescher & Milner, 2004, 5).

The security studies mostly neglected refugees and security's concatenation during the Cold War, proposed in the early, tumultuous years of the post-cold war period (Weaver, Buzan, Kelstrup, &

Lemaitre, 1993; cited by Hammerstad, 2014). However, introducing a relatively new phenomenon of forced migration in security studies attracts various intellectuals' attention. At the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, the inclusion of forced displacement as a matter of protection or security was part of the intellectual discussions between realist theorists and their criticism on the essential dilemma of "what is security" (Hammerstad, 2014, 266).

However, there are three effective approaches to understand the security dimensions of forced migration; the speech act approach of Copenhagen School, the sociological approach inspired by Foucault, and the inclusive security approach focused on human and common security. The securitization approach was developed by the Copenhagen School in the 1990s as articulated in "Security: A New Framework for Analysis" (see Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, 1998). This school has portrayed a robust approach that "security is about survival. It is when an issue is presented as posing an existential threat to a designated referent object" (Buzan, Wæver, and DeWilde 1998, 21). The Foucauldian approach (sociological approach) on securitization focused more on the notion of biopolitics. The notion of biopolitics focuses on the role of power relations, bureaucratic politics, and institutional interest in determining who and what becomes securitized. On the other hand, some scholars perceived security in a protective, inclusive, and collaborative way that belongs to the critical security theory (Booth, 1991; cited by Hammerstad, 2014). Major intellectual theorists of security such as Booth (1991), Wyn Jones (1999) perceived '*security is emancipation*' (cited in Hammerstad, 2014, 273), and others such as Beck (1999), Trombetta (2008), and Paris (2001) stated that forced migration is human security and common security problems. Their main concern regarding forced migration is to convince governments to tackle refugees' issues and forced migration proactively with the root causes of flight and find durable and permanent solutions to the problem. Consequently, the critical security studies thoroughly focused on the inclusive securitization of human security and the notion of protecting the vulnerable. The mentioned approaches are representing the divisive, exclusive, and conflict-prone nature of security discourses and practices.

Using the speech act approach, foremost among the constructivist approaches to security, of the Copenhagen School, this essay explicitly examines the concept of securitization of migration, taking an instance of illegal immigrants\* in India. The securitization process broadens and reinforces the idea of the divisions between '*us*' and '*them*,' depicting '*others*' as a tool for enhancing the community's bond; in other words, to consolidate and reinforce power in the hands of the current rulers and expand the extent of state influence over the population.

Hammerstad emphasized that the notions of security and insecurity are not something that came into existence all of a sudden, they are intersubjectively constituted and build by the community's sense of values, identity, and history, however, termed as '*social construction*' (Hammerstad, 2014, 267). The amorphous but potent discourse of unease about '*floods*' of migrants evolving in the 1990s now becomes accompanied by alarmist speech acts depicting asylum seekers and migrants as threats to the nation (Newland, Patrick, Selm, & Zard, 2002; cited by Hammerstad, 2014). The securitization of migration was exacerbated after the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001. A clear connection was identified between international terrorism and weak immigration regulation. Governments worldwide have proposed significant regulations on migration and improvement of boundaries in the context of "*homeland security*" (Hammerstad, 2014, 269).

There are many ways to connect the relations between security and migration. Watson suggested the following various approaches: contributing to violent conflict; environmental degradation;

producing a backlash in receiving states; concerns over control of borders and the absorptive capacity of receiving States (Watson, 2009). In many respects, migration has developed as a source of security instead of insecurity. Securitization theorists claim that insecurity is intersubjectively established through a process known as securitization. In this phase, the governmental and social leaders view it as an existential threat, only treated as a security problem until the public recognizes it (Buzan et al., 1998, 25; cited by Watson, 2009). However, Buzan et al. also indirectly described the "*public*" as a significant securitization audience (1998; cited by Watson, 2009). On many occasions, the "*public*," as a valid entity, was brought into question.

The securitization of migration has been presented as an '*unmitigated disaster*' (Hammerstad, 2014, 272), and security politics as a zero-sum game between '*us*' and '*them*' (migrants and refugees). The concept has more political and analytical value because Suhrke counts them as "extremely vulnerable" people. They (mainly refugees) are placed on the verge of calamity and death, whether because of natural risks or human-made threats (Suhrke, 1999, 72; cited by Hammerstad, 2014). Kaldor described displacement as a "typical feature of contemporary crisis" (Kaldor, 2007, 183; cited by Hammerstad, 2014). In chapter one of Lischer's book "Dangerous Sanctuaries: Refugee Camps, Civil Wars and the Dilemma of Humanitarian Aid" titled "refugee crises as catalysts of conflict," he discussed refugees frequently equated with risks to national and international stability; many refugee host countries have legitimate security issues, including cross-border incursion, refugee camp militarisation, and apprehension of tensions arising from neighboring countries generating refugees (Lischer, 2005). Refugee flows affect the dynamics of conflicts in various parts of the world; the exodus to less-developed countries will "shake ethnic balance and contribute to conflict or violent regime change" (Lischer, 2005, 4).

### **An Indian Stance towards Securitization of Migration**

During the twentieth century, India has experienced an unprecedented level of illegal migration from its neighbouring country Bangladesh (Saikia, 2017). There were several events, for instance; the policy of divide and rule by British officials, the partition of British India (1947), the independence of Bangladesh (1971), the socio-political strife, religious riots, and unsatisfactory economic growth in the neighbouring countries, culminated in a large-scale of the influx of immigrants, both refugees and economic migrants, who have found sanctuary in India. The illegal immigration of a precise number of undocumented immigrants from Bangladesh to India is not clear. However, the study in the last four censuses of 2011, 2001, 1991, and 1981, of population growth and demographic figures for Bangladesh and India, showed that their figure is fairly sure to surpass 15 million (Tripathi, 2016). In India's north-eastern states, it has contributed considerably to shifting the demographic trend, where the ethnic locals are outnumbered by foreigners/outsideers.

The first wave of migration of massive Bangladeshis immigrants in northeast India, especially in Assam, was recorded as the "mass movement of a large body of ants" in 1931 by Census Commissioner of Assam CS Mullen in India (Joseph, 2006; Saikia, 2019). The perspective towards the immigrants from Bangladesh depicts a societal concern that has been seen in the report titled "Report on Illegal Migration" submitted to the president of India K. R. Narayanan by Governor of Assam Lt. Gen. (Retd.) S. K. Sinha on November 8, 1998. This Report was one of the results of the social-political movements of Assam Agitation or Assam Movement (1979-1985) against illegal migration in Assam that demonstrate "demographic invasion of Assam may result in the loss of the geo-strategically vital district of Lower Assam" (Kumar 2011, 109). The movements were carried out

by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) to identify and expel illegal immigrants as well as protect and produce solidarity in indigenous Assamese people. After several skirmishes and brutal massacres (such as the Nellie massacre, February 18, 1983) of hundreds of immigrants in Assam, the Assam movement was ended by India's Government through the Assam Accord. The Assam Accord was signed on August 15, 1985, by the Central and State governments and leaders of the All Assam Students Union and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad. The Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) (IMDT) Act was implemented as a consequence of the Assam Accord in 1983. The procedures for the identification and expulsion of illegal immigrants from Assam were identified through the IMDT Act. In 1998, the manifesto of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) spoke of "stringent laws to check illegal migration" (Kumar 2011, 109), because the Act was unsuccessful in reaching its place of destination.

As mentioned above, the securitization of migration justified through the speech act articulated the existential threat to a designated referent object. However, the referent objects could be ethnic residents or local population, national sovereignty, state, collective identity, national economies, and environmental habitats (Joseph, 2006). In violent agitations and several brutal massacres by socio-political movements of India's northeast bordering states, the referent object begins to move from the insecurity of collective identity of ethnic residents to Indian sovereignty. The question starts with a social problem and then eventually creeps economic concerns and transforms into security dimensions. In other words, first, the issue of illegal migration is treated as a societal issue and then it shifts towards the economic subject, ending up as the security concerns. The Indian perspective towards the illegal immigrants (especially Bangladeshi immigrants) pointing them out as a '*threat to internal security*' (Kumar, 2011) by the authorities and residents worsens northeast India's situation.

The securitization of migration against Bangladeshi immigrants has several securitizing actors: British officers, Indian politicians and government, socio-political movements, security personnel, right-wing, and intelligence agencies (Joseph, 2006). After the speech act recognition of Bangladeshi mass movement by Muller in the 1920s in northeast states, especially Assam, it confronted a slowly amplifying build-up of anti-Bangladeshi sentiment in the societies. This anti-Bangladeshi feelings by various groups and local residents gradually transform into disenchantment commotion through socio-political movements "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 the securitization of the issue" (Joseph, 2006, 3).



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Some academic intellectual scholars claimed the securitization of migration based on the idea of cultural gaps that contributed to societal disintegration as an expression of "new racism" (Ibrahim, 2005, 164; Gate, 2004, 323; cited by Watson, 2009, 5). While perceptions of cultural differences have played a part in a restrictive change, it does not only concern the securitization of migration. The Indian government took action to securitize the migration bypassing the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950, to respond to Assam's situation. The Act gives the state "power to order the expulsion of certain immigrants" under Section 2 of the Act; if any person or class of persons (who are not a citizen of India) stays and is harmful to the people of India or any other section of Scheduled Tribe in Assam (Legal India, 2009). Consequently, the Act culminated discriminatory in nature as it considers Hindus as refugees and Muslims as illegal aliens (Joseph, 2006). The Act remained on paper as it didn't succeed in reality, and the number of illegal immigrants' inflows continues to grow over time. Due to stringent and violent skirmishes, the Assam state government passed another Act called *Prevention of Infiltration from Pakistan (PIP) Act* in 1964 to "raised special border police force of about 2000 men, and 159 towers were built along the Indo-Bangladesh border, besides six passport checking centers" (Joseph 2006, 8). Securitization of migration also focused on ethnicity, race, class, and gender considerations (Tesfahuney et al., 1998; cited by Watson, 2009, 6). Nevertheless, Watson is implicitly arguing the dual nature of humanitarian migrants. He believes that humanitarian migrants identified both as threatened by the State and alternatively as a threat to the State. It is not merely a question of humanitarian considerations or the national security that refugees, displaced people, and the unauthorized entry of asylum seekers concerned; it also reveals the complexities and contradistinctions of the modern nation-state and demonstrates the conflicting political, economic, and humanitarian principles related to handling international migration. The critical question in the contemporary world is how humanitarian migration is constructed as a

security threat to receiving states and how the securitized view of migrations has made the use of more restrictive policies both acceptable and necessary.

### Conclusion

The illegal immigrants/migrants' presence has severe implications for the Indian state. The securitization of migration of Bangladeshis intrinsically failed to resolve northeast India's problem as the securitization measures were unsuccessful in stopping the influx of illegal immigrants. Illegal migration from Bangladesh to India continues unabated, which includes refugees as well as economic migrants. After several decades due to not being able to resolve the problem of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants and illegal migration from Bangladesh to India, many new generation politicians and officials call for more flexible policies than stringent laws and policies as in the IMDT Act (1983). It is eloquent to desecuritize the securitization of migration and revisit the reasonable national need for India's national security issue and state responses in the country.

### Note

\*Illegal immigrant/migrant is a foreigner who enters India illegally, i.e., without a valid travel document like a visa and passport or enters India legally but stays beyond the period permitted in their travel documents.

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