Trouble on the Friendship Express?

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The Maitreyi (Friendship) Express, the rail service between India and Bangladesh that was restarted recently evoked nostalgia and hopes for stronger ties between the two nations. However, it will take more than a rail link to deal with fears of infiltration by Bangladeshi Muslims that is being used in aggressive political rhetoric.

On April 14, this year the Bengali new year was ushered in with the reopening of a train link between India and Bangladesh after a gap of nearly four decades. As the Maitreyi (Friendship) Express chugged out of the Kolkata railway station in Chitpur bound for the Dhaka Cantonment, there were those who argued that it would strengthen bilateral relations between the two neighbours. The biweekly train that has the capacity to carry over 350 passengers and takes about 12 hours (including the time taken at the border), parallels the Samjhauta Express that runs between Lahore and Delhi.[1]

The train link between Dhaka and Kolkata is not the first train between the two regions. Prior to 1965 there were three trains – the East Bengal Mail, East Bengal Express, and the Barishal Express that serviced the two halves of the region. These were stopped following the 1965 war. Freight services were resumed in 1972 but were later discontinued. A bus service between Kolkata and Dhaka began in 1999 and there are daily flights between New Delhi and Kolkata and Dhaka and Chittagong. But it was the opening of this train link that had many waxing nostalgic about a time when the two Bengals were not separated by manmade borders[2]. A refugee from East Pakistan, Janatosh Pal spoke of how he was six when he left for India but that Kalindi, the village he was born in Bangladesh, "remained my motherland".[3] Such sentiment though was not echoed by all. A group calling itself the Nikhil Banga Nagarik Sangha (All Bengal Citizens' Committee) opposed the opening up of a train link with a country they accuse of persecuting Hindus.

Deep Insecurities

What then does this new train symbolise? Does it mark a metaphorical coming together of people separated by borders they did not create, or is the reality far more complicated? A closer look at the negotiations and controversies demonstrates that bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India will take more than just a train link to heal. Given the sensitive nature of discourse regarding any movement of human beings across this fractured border, it is unlikely that the train will heal deeper prejudices and insecurities.

When negotiations about the train first opened there was friction between the two countries when Bangladesh refused to accept India's proposal for a 800-metre fence from the border on either side. India wanted a box like fence from the border crossing point to Gede in the Nadia district. Bangladesh objected to both the construction of the fence as well as the terming of any such "fortification" as a "fence".[4] India's demand for a fence was a reflection of the fear that the train could be used by illegal infiltrators including terrorists.[5]

The entire discourse about illegal infiltration from Bangladesh has several connotations. On the one hand, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has protested in the past that vast numbers of Bangladeshis are "flooding" the Indian mainland particularly along the eastern border and changing India's demographic structure. In April 1992 the BJP national executive passed a resolution blaming the Congress Party for not taking action against illegal infiltration. There was a call for a rally in Calcutta in April 1993 and the BJP issued a direct threat that they were willing to target and expel Bangladeshi workers. This rhetoric became particularly strident and violent in Mumbai with the Shiv Sena picking on a non-Marathi, non-Hindu "other", in this case Muslim Bengalis whom they accused of being "infiltrators" from Bangladesh. In April 1995 they threatened a large-scale deportation of such illegals and carried out another attempt to do so in April 1998 which provoked international tension between Bangladesh and India.[6]

'Infiltrators' and 'Refugees'

This is not to say that there has not been illegal migration from across the border, particularly of a labour force that does not accept the sanctity of the international boundary. India has in the past repeatedly expressed concern about the presence of illegal immigrants and the porous border

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between the two countries.[7] However what is striking about this political discourse is that only Muslims who cross the border illegally are "infiltrators" and deserve to be sent back, whereas Hindus, who cross the border, more often than not, illegally, are "refugees" who deserve the sympathy and protection of the Indian nation. Such a belief mirrors the two-nation theory that saw east and west Pakistan as a homeland for the Muslims, and assumes that India then would be a similar homeland for Hindus.

Indian law does not recognise "refugees" as a distinct legal category. All who cross a border into India are either citizens and thereby have a valid right to do so, or "aliens" who fall under the 1946 Foreigner's Act. Any non-citizen who enters the country without a visa is technically an "illegal infiltrator".[8] But in both popular and political discourse the term "infiltrator" has come to signify Muslims from Bangladesh who cross the border into Bengal and Assam, usually in search of employment. This then has two implications. First, it assumes, that all Hindus across the world (and particularly those from Bangladesh) deserve refuge in India as legal residents whether or not they cross the border legally. Second, it marks out the Muslim who crosses illegally both as an illegal migrant and as a Muslim infiltrator – he is marked both by his legal and communal status. It implies that the influx of Muslims infiltrates and infects the body politic that would otherwise be "pure" and free of such contamination.

The fear that the Maitreyi Express would become a conduit for terror and illegal workers meant that there had to be extensive checks at the border areas leading to significant delays. Almost five of the 12 hours of the journey is spent by passengers at the border waiting for immigration checks to be completed. These delays are perhaps a result of bureaucratic incompetence but they also reflect a certain official and popular unease about a border that can be seen as a "central space where the relationships between state and citizenship, between nation and territory, were and are being constantly tested and negotiated".[9] Post-Partition the eastern frontier was not a closed defined space. The government of India in 1947, as in 2008, remained uneasy about the people who were crossing this frontier. Jawaharlal Nehru and the Congress high command did not think that conditions in east Bengal were particularly grave and that the flight of the Hindu refugees was a product of baseless and imaginary fears, which meant that the human flow could be halted, perhaps even reversed.[10] The Nehru-Liaqat Pact of April 8, 1950 provided for the return of migrants on both sides to their original homelands.[11]

The first part of the pact was concerned with ensuring equal citizenship rights for minorities in both countries while the second part attempted to ensure that such migrants had freedom of movement along with protection in transit and if they decided to return to their homes by December 31, 1950, they would be entitled to the restoration of their immovable property, house or land.[12] Those refugees who came from East Pakistan/Bengal between October 1946 and March 1958 were termed "old migrants" (a total of 41.17 lakhs) and were eligible for aid but those crossing the border between April 1958 and December 1963 were not eligible for assistance. In 1952 a passport system was introduced and the fear that the border would be permanently closed pushed up migration. In 1956 the Indian authorities tried to install a barrier of permits and migration certificates and finally they tried to deter people by not recognising them as refugees and refusing them rehabilitation.[13] Following riots in 1964, refugees who crossed the border between January 1964 and March 1971 were termed "new migrants" (a total of 11.14 lakhs) and relief was to be given only to those who agreed to settle outside West Bengal. The 6.1 lakhs in West Bengal were not eligible for relief and rehabilitation benefits.[14] The bureaucratisation of the border area and the classification of refugees however masked the reality that the border was an interstitial space that many navigated by evading officialdom without needing passports and visas.

Much has been written about how the treatment of refugees on the eastern frontier was markedly different from those in the east – how refugees in the east were not seen as "true refugees", as opposed to the "deserving poor", the hardworking Punjabis, and how the state functioned as a benevolent despot deciding what was best for the refugee.[15] Haimanti Roy has argued that these refugees were forced to claim and proclaim their victimhood before they could claim their nationality.[16] What this particular line of argument demonstrates is that in the post-Partition period, the concern about the movement of people was not a communal question since the bulk of the refugees were Hindu. By the time of the refugee crisis of 1971 though, the public and official tone had changed somewhat. The government of India keen to emphasise that those who crossed in 1971 were not going to be considered for rehabilitation, that they were "foreigners" and would be treated as such.[17] A series of semantic strategies in naming and labelling the refugees ensured that this was emphasised. However, in popular discourse as the number of refugees multiplied, there were increasing concerns about the communal nature of the problem. The concern was no longer about the relief and rehabilitation that had not been provided for East Bengali refugees but about the changing communal configurations.

Letters to the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* in late April and early May 1971, less than a month after refugee crisis had assumed serious proportions, reflected this concern. S A Basu from Nagpur wrote to express his displeasure at the growing numbers of Muslim refugees predicting that, "The hope that these refugees will return to their own homes as soon as normalcy is restored to East Bengal is rather a faint hope".[18] A month later an anonymous letter to the editor pointed out that Hindus in East Bengal had been attacked by those Muslims who had subsequently become refugees. "India is now thoughtlessly allowing those very people to come to West Bengal in their millions...Surely India is overdoing charity and imperilling (sic) the interests of her own people." Suggesting that there was an insidious plan to plant Muslim teachers in West Bengal schools in order to subvert and Islamicise the education system, the anonymous reader predicted that the "Muslim escapees"

would soon turn West Bengal into a Muslim majority area.[19]

In official discourse while the communal composition of the refugees was never publicised, it is believed that Hindus made up a bulk of the refugees.[20] The government was sensitive to any attempts to publicise and potentially exploit the communal composition of the refugees. The journal *Mother India* was prevented from publishing an editorial on the subject of Muslim refugees titled 'Refugees or Trojan Horses' that would have suggested that Muslim refugees had been sent to deliberately destabilise the country. The government of India declared that this would be "prejudicial to the maintenance of communal harmony and were likely to affect public order" and prohibited the publication of the editorial under Section 6 of the Criminal and Election Laws (Amendment) Act of 1969.[21]

Communalisation of the Border

As a result of this fluid border the fear of the "infiltrator" has now become an almost accepted part of the political discourse about relations between India and Bangladesh. This unease is a product of actual illegal infiltration, aggressive political rhetoric and what can be described as the "communalisation" of the border. On the day the train set off, a group of protestors representing the Nikhil Banga Nagarik Sangha disrupted its passage at Aranghata in the Nadia district. The police blamed the group for planting seven crude bombs on the tracks that were defused a day before the inauguration of the train. The bombs were found at Bikramtola near Dhantola by local residents who then informed the police. The bombs were not powerful enough to cause any significant damage and were seen as a political statement by the group (which denied any association with the bombs).[22] The leader of the group, Subhas Chakrabarti, described the train as a "cruel joke" and asked "Why should democratic and secular India seek to develop such intimate links with Islamic Bangladesh, where Hindus continue to suffer huge torture, intimidation and dishonour".[23] The group then has two distinct demands – first that Bangladeshi Hindus who have been tortured be rehabilitated properly in India. Next, that India take responsibility for the plight of Hindus in Bangladesh and ensure that it forms a key part of bilateral relations. Such demands demonstrate how the refugee/infiltration/migrant issue remains a thorn in the side of both countries. On the one hand, groups such as the Sangha locate themselves specifically within the Indian nation state and demand rehabilitation from it, and yet, they claim rehabilitation and assistance for those, who in the eyes of the state ought to be seen as "foreigners". Just as the discourse about the Muslim migrant becoming a terrorist infiltrator while taking away scarce jobs from Indians was a concern voiced by the Sangha, similarly the Hindu migrant was seen as a legitimate refugee worthy of the protection of the Indian state. Thus, in such a discourse, the Hindu is twice disadvantaged – first, he is being "swamped" by illegal Muslims from across the border, and second, he is denied the rights that he deserves both as a refugee, and as a victim of oppression by the Indian state.

It is patently illogical to suggest that illegal migrants attempting to sneak across a national boundary would use a train that stops for nearly four hours to check for visas. The less than stellar record of the train since its inception however suggests that this fear, however unfounded, will not come to fruition. There have been very few takers for the Friendship Express and passengers have cited the difficulty in booking tickets, the long wait at the border and lack of publicity about the train as contributing factors. Despite the yearning for the past of those like Janatosh Pal who would like to return to a homeland they left behind nearly six decades ago, such nostalgia about the movement of people across the two halves of Bengal is only one part of the story about the Maitreyi Express. In fact, the rumblings about the ill-treatment of refugees and fears about infiltration indicate that it will take more than a train to mollify the unease about the flow of humanity that has and continues to cross the Bengal border. As long as there remain disgruntled Hindu refugees in West Bengal and masses in the east seeking a better life across the border there will be more than a few hiccups along the way for the train of friendship.

NOTES

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