

The Plight of Environmental Refugees: *Reinventing Bangladesh Security*

Environmental hazards and *refugee flow* continue to dominate the state of Bangladesh-India relations. On the one hand, Bangladesh blames India for the lack of water arising from the upstream diversion of the Ganges water and the construction of the Farakka Barrage,¹ while, on the other hand, India blames Bangladesh for allowing its people to easily cross the border and settle in different parts of India.² Both sides, however, fail to see that the two are inextricably inter-linked, albeit from the standpoint of *developmentality* (i.e., a mentality where ‘development’ is primarily geared towards the needs and aspirations of the ‘majority community’); the latter, in effect, organising and reproducing the dismal state of relations between Bangladesh and India. Let me explain this further.

In a recent paper on South Asia, with particular reference to the state of Bangladesh-India relations,³ I made the following remark:

In the case of the Farakka Barrage and Kaptai Dam...the citizens of both India and Bangladesh, when tutored about the merits of their respective Barrage/Dam, find themselves being fed with strong scientific and technological reasoning, including the very reasoning of progress and modern development. But such reasoning ends at their respective borders, for the governments of both India and Bangladesh take a moral position, and this time thoroughly devoid of any scientific and technological reasoning, when referring to the consequences brought about by the Barrage/Dam of the *other*. Bangladeshis, having to live with an alarmingly low level of water in the rivers during winter seasons, are time and again reminded of the ill-effect of the Farakka Barrage, while the Indians, having to share the burden of settling more than 50,000 Chakma refugees in Arunachal Pradesh, blame the Kaptai Dam for the refugee flow. None, however, dare blame the development of Barrage/Dam within their respective borders!

Put differently, any reflection on the problem of rivers and refugees requires a precise understanding of the organisation of *modern development*, particularly its impact on the environment and the insecurity it brings to the people.

Keeping this perspective in mind, the paper is divided into three sections. The first section attempts to conceptualise 'environmental refugees,' highlighting essentially the intrinsic relationship between modern development, environmental insecurity and the construction of environmental refugees. In the second section, the impact of environmental insecurity on the people of Bangladesh is dealt with in some detail, including its impact on Bangladesh-India relations. The third and concluding section then outlines an agenda for overcoming the dismal state of relations between Bangladesh and India.

I

Conceptualising Environmental Refugees: Modern Development and Environmental Insecurity

Concepts are always contentious. One way to understand them is to situate their meanings within the fold of two critical theoretical assertions.⁴ One, there is an intrinsic relationship between *concept and theory*; and two, there is an intrinsic relationship between *theory and practice*. Put differently, no concept in a theory is neutral in its mode of conceptualisation, nor no theory related to a social reality is neutral in terms of practice. In conceptualising environmental refugees, both these assertions will be taken into account. Let us first conceptualise the word, 'refugee.'

The term itself is very innocent. Derived from the Latin *refugium*, the word originally meant "shelter, security, a haven."⁵ But from the moment it has been used in the text or in a legal document, the meaning of the term began to reflect the time and space of those using it. As a result, the word has become history cum society-bound, often meeting the demands and expectations of changing social realities. A brief exposition will make this clear.

A classical definition of refugee is found in the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees. Set in the background of World War II and the need for Europe to tackle some of its

consequences, the Convention, which was later extended by the 1967 Protocol, defined a refugee as:

Any person who owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his formal habitual residence, is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.⁶

Three critical features are central to this definition. First is the fear of persecution on political grounds (race, religion and nationality included) which makes individuals flee their original place of habitat, and for the same reason, making them unwilling to return. Second is the presence of a national frontier that needs to be crossed for the individual to become a refugee. And third is the painful reality of the individual losing protection of her/his national government.

These features essentially refer to the intrusion of modernity, upholding at best the latter's tendency to *nationalise* the concept of refugee. In the modern nation-state system of today, there is some obvious merit in this position. Yet, it must be acknowledged that such a position is fast losing its skill to comprehend and analyse some of the more recent variations of refugees.

What is at stake here is the question of fear from political persecution that does not seem to be the only reason lately for people to flee their original place of habitat. In fact, more recently, the developing countries, including Bangladesh, are faced with a situation where people are crossing international boundaries and fast losing the protection of their government not for the reason of political persecution alone but for reasons that are more economic and environmental in nature.⁷ In this context, reference may be made to subsequent General Assembly resolutions that were adopted to extend the mandate of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and, by implication, the meaning of a refugee.

In addition to the criteria upheld by the 1967 Protocol, the UNHCR definition of a refugee now included:

- * Displaced persons who are outside their country of former habitual residence. They may not necessarily qualify as refugees within the terms of the Statute but are, nevertheless, in refugee-like situations.
- * Former refugees and displaced persons repatriated to their country of origin.
- * In specific cases persons displaced as a result of man-made disasters within their own country.⁸

If anything, it allowed for the notion of *security* to be broadened, stressing more on the ability of the person to reside peacefully, without being subject to either political or non-political stresses in her/his original place of habitat. Indeed, one of the most critical elements in the making of a refugee is the breakdown of security. But then, under changing social realities, it must be kept in mind that the meaning of security can no longer be limited to things that are merely political or military in nature, that is, the ones that are critically related to the organisation and reproduction of national security. In fact, the kind of insecurity that individuals face today stems more from *modern (mal)development*, resulting mainly from the disastrous impact of the latter on the environment. This does not at all undermine the political grounds of insecurity, however. Let me explain this further.

The organisation of modern development is full of complex features, and this is more so in an ‘uneven,’ less prosperous, economy where it gradually begins to alienate not only the members of the minority community but also those of the majority community. Two critical things need to be stressed here. The first one relates to the intrinsic relationship between modern development and the issue of majoritarianism. Indeed, in the backdrop of the state being reproduced on the basis of majoritarian rule, catering to the power of the majority community, it is quite natural given the communal binding that such a state would tend to work for the economic development of the majority community. Few, indeed, would take the risk of petitioning developmental works (both public and private) for the minorities, particularly in a state where hegemony is reproduced by fulfilling the hopes and aspirations of the majority community.⁹ Modern development, therefore, by the very art and practice of the (modern) mode of governance, gets

fizzled out when it comes to the minorities. But this is only one side of the matter.

In fostering alienation, equally important is the factor of organising 'development' in the image of the modern 'Western' state.¹⁰ Apart from modern development being highly elitist and capital-intensive, which readily puts the general 'unskilled' masses (coming from both majority and minority communities) in an odd, pitiful situation, the organisation of modern development has other, more critical, prejudices, which are often detrimental to the environment. The latter includes things from building dams and highways to the extensive use of fertilisers and pesticides in the agriculture. Often such developments have taken place at the expense of the lives and the habitat of the minority community or the poorer section of the majority community.

The issue of environment, however, goes beyond the organisation of modern development. Floods, famines and large families combine and create an environment not conducive for the sound and sustainable habitability of the population. But the gap between such direct ecological factors (save, of course, of the issue of large families) and the consequences of modern development is not that great. There is a growing literature that suggests that much of the environmental problems that we are now facing have resulted from *man-made structures*.¹¹ Even in the case of divine's wrath, like floods and droughts, often the dire consequences are the results of crude human exploitation of the nature. As Vandana Shiva points out:

The drying up of India, like that of Africa, is a man-made rather than a natural disaster.... The manufacture of drought and desertification is an outcome of reductionist knowledge and modes of development which violates cycles of life in rivers, in the soil, in mountains. Rivers are drying up because their catchments have been mined, deforested or over-cultivated to generate revenue and profits. Groundwater is drying up because it has been over-exploited to feed cash crops.¹²

What we have here is a situation where modern (*mal*)development leads to the collapse of environmental security. The victims here are from both majority and minority communities, although it must be added quickly

that, given the organisation of majoritarianism, often the victims are first from the minority community, only to be followed by the members of the majority community. But then, what happens to all these victims? What do they do to confront the collapse of environmental security? This obviously brings us to the issue of *making* refugees or, more precisely, environmental refugees.

In a separate paper I have pointed out that it is short step from the alienation of sub-nationalities to the making of refugees.¹³ In fact, once such 'sub-nationalities' are formed, they soon begin pressing for a distinctive and separate socio-political agenda from that of the majority community. In a situation like this, the majority community, in the name of preserving 'national security,' comes down upon the minority communities in varied but all possible manner, socially, politically, and eventually, militarily. This leaves the victims with no other choice but to flee the land of their parents and become refugees elsewhere.

In the case of the collapse of environmental security, however, in view of the very nature of the problem, the victims are less communalised. In fact, there are three, albeit inter-related, variations of the collapse of environmental security, making the bulk of environmental refugees.

The first is the lack of 'water security,' or more precisely, the lack of having fresh water, which, as indicated earlier, results from the drying up of rivers and waterbeds. Often the lack of water security leads to conflicts or, as one author recently noted, 'water wars.'¹⁴ In this sense, rivers without water play a vital role in the organisation and reproduction of insecurity.

Again, it is important to understand that swelling population, deforestation, overgrazing, developmental economies or inversely, unsustainable farming practices, all are responsible for the water scarcity that is now being witnessed in different regions of the world, including South Asia. Take the case of chemical fertilisers, for instance, which not only requires a good deal of water to make them work but also contaminates water in return, making water even more scarce. Put differently, the use of chemical fertilisers, which has now become a norm in the growth of

crops, particularly the High-Yielding Varieties, creates conditions of water insecurity.

The second variation is 'land security,' related directly to the degradation of soil and the incapacity of the population to harvest any further. In this connection, it may be pointed out that the farmers are totally at lost in confronting the dilemma that they have lately been put into regarding the use of fertilisers: *Without chemical fertilisers, no HYV crops. With chemical fertilisers, no sustainable land for long to grow crops!* In fact, land security is threatened by the continued use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. One researcher has shown that in the past about 30,000 rice varieties were cultivated by the farmers in South Asia, whereas today, thanks to modern techniques and the desire for uniformity, only 15 varieties are cultivated.¹⁵ In the long run, this could only result in the insecurity of the farmers, which they could choose to transform only by changing their original place of habitat. If the country is small in size, the situation becomes even more precarious because the victims cannot move to other parts of the country.¹⁶ Consequently, they end up becoming refugees in neighbouring states.

The last variation is the lack of 'food security,' arising partly from a combination of water and land insecurities and partly from the excessive growth of population.¹⁷ It may be pointed out here that food insecurity may grow with an overflow of water in the rivers (the flood factor) as well as with the drying up of the rivers (the drought factor). All of these variations of environmental insecurities soon lead to a situation where a sizeable section of the people, irrespective of their communal affiliations, become refugees.

Environmental insecurity, therefore, is critical in the making of environmental refugees. Indeed, it is in this context that the latter differs from the so-called 'economic refugees,' as Norman Myers pointed out:

It is often difficult...to differentiate between refugees driven by environmental factors and those impelled by economic problems. In certain instances, and especially as concerns cross-border refugees, people with moderate though tolerable economic circumstances at home feel drawn by opportunity for a better economic life elsewhere. They are not so much

pushed by environmental destitution as pulled by economic promise.... But those people who migrate because they suffer outright poverty are frequently driven by root factors of environmental degradation. Indeed it is their environmental plight as much as any other factor that makes them impoverished.¹⁸

That is, in contradistinction to the circumstances responsible for reproducing environmental refugees, economic refugees are essentially driven by 'economic promise' or, more precisely, sheer pecuniary motives.

Environmental refugees also differ from migrants and migratory trends normally found in history.¹⁹ UNHCR, in its report, *The State of the World's Refugees 1993*, subscribed to the distinction as well:

Millions of people have been forced to leave their homes because the land on which they live has become uninhabitable or is no longer able to support them....

The terminology for describing environmentally induced migration is controversial. For many observers, 'migration' does not convey the fact that the people affected are *forcibly* uprooted. To call them refugees seems to convey more accurately that they left their homes involuntarily, for reasons not of their own choosing.²⁰

While it is true that there are substantial differences between environmental refugees and economic refugees/migrants, such differences should not blind us from the fact that there exist certain similarities between different types of refugees.

Indeed, in one important respect, an environmental refugee carries the burden that is so markedly implied in the word 'refugee.' In fact, once the victims, whether arising from political persecution or environmental insecurity, become refugees there is no way to distinguish the actual experience that they go through. All of them in reality *live a life of a refugee*, that is, in constant fear, uncertainty and immense poverty. Moreover, if the victims are compelled to leave their place of habitat for reasons of land or food insecurities, it becomes almost impossible for them to return to their native land unless effective measures are taken to ensure their survivability. In such a situation, 'compulsions to

flee' and/or 'fear to return' are no less strong than in cases of political persecution.

What is, however, more worrisome (and a clear case of similarity between different types of refugees) is the fact that environmental refugees contribute equally to the state of conflict and violence that often follows the birth and reproduction of refugees, that is, both in the land of their origin and the place where they have taken shelter. Norman Myers is quite explicit about this:

If a nation's environmental foundations are depleted...its economy may well decline, its social fabric may deteriorate, and its political structure may become destabilised. The outcome, all too likely is conflict, whether in the form of disorder and insurrection within the nation or tension and hostilities with other nations.²¹

Even UNHCR recognised this openly:

There are...clear links between environmental degradation and refugee flows. The deterioration of the natural resource base, coupled with demographic pressure and chronic poverty, can lead to or exacerbate political, ethnic, social and economic tensions which in turn result in conflicts that force people to flee.... It is no coincidence that those parts of the (African) continent that are most affected by soil erosion, drought and other environmental problems are also the main theatres of armed conflicts, recurrent famine and consequent refugee movements.²²

This is not something that is very difficult to understand. For one thing, persons displaced from environmental stress could easily create havoc and civil unrest by massing together in the urban centres of the producing nation or by flooding the labour market of the receiving nation. Moreover, the refugees (the bulk of who are illiterate, at least in South Asia) are easily exploited by the various factions of the ruling elite to serve their own narrow interests. In fact, the arrival of the refugees often leads to serious politicking on the part of the host elite. Given the pluralist nature of our society, such politicking gradually slides back to a communal or ethnic representation of things. It is a short step from here to social unrest and violence, in which case the refugees end up

becoming victims for the second time. And this time, quite ironically, in their host, but alien country!

It is against this background that we will take up the discussion of the plight of environmental refugees, particularly with reference to the cross-border flow of Bangladeshis to India, in some detail.

II

Modern Bangladesh, Environmental Insecurity and the Reproduction of Refugees

The first well-known case of refugees arising out of the collapse of environmental security in Bangladesh pre-dates its modern independent existence, although its legacy still haunts the victims and is still an issue that has simply refused to die out with time.²³ I am, indeed, referring here to the construction of the Kaptai hydroelectric project (1957-1962) over the Karnaphuli river in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) during the Pakistan period. It has been estimated that in the process of building a huge lake for the project about 100,000 Hill people lost their lands, 40% of their arable lands were inundated, and above all, 40,000 of them crossed the border, only to be settled in Arunachal Pradesh in India.²⁴ Interestingly, the flow of refugees at that time did not create much tension or even conflict between the two countries nor the refugees thought much of coming back to the CHT. Some measure of conflicts, however, were visible in the state of Tripura where politicians and people debated for some time whether to settle the refugees in Tripura or send them to Bihar or Arunachal Pradesh.²⁵ The refugees preferred Arunachal Pradesh, but that did not solve their problems. In fact, even after 30 years they languish as pariahs in Arunachal Pradesh, where alien-bashing campaigns have increased in the recent times, directed particularly at the refugees from pre-Bangladesh CHT.

In the post-Bangladesh CHT, the Kaptai Dam still fuels alienation and anger. Apart from the fact that the 'developmental feat' continues to exist with little concern to the land and the living that it had helped submerge, much of the compensations that had been promised to the victims never materialised. Moreover, the fact that Kaptai still brings

electricity to the plains while keeping the greater section of the CHT in the dark is something of an irony that the Hill people is increasingly finding difficult to live with. In fact, the Kaptai Dam in a way has now become a symbol of alien domination, representing the development and modernisation of the Bangalees at the expense of the land and the resources of the Hill people. Not surprisingly, it led one Hill critic to label the 'developmental feat' as a 'colonialist barrier' to national integration.²⁶

The Kaptai Dam is, indeed, a classical case where the environment and the minorities merge to reproduce a sub-national identity in contradistinction to the political agenda of a modern 'majoritarian' state. But, as I have mentioned earlier, if the members of the 'tiniest' minority (having less than 1% of Bangladesh's population) were the first victims of the collapse of environmental security, it was not long before when other, albeit much larger, minorities as well as members of the majority community fell victims to the collapse of environmental security; the latter resulting, however, from other, more varied sources. It is this we will now take up in some detail.

Bangladesh's precarious situation, conditioned greatly by natural calamities and underdevelopment syndrome, is well known. Floods, famines and large families have driven people from one place to another, not only within the country but also across international frontiers.²⁷ In fact, one finds the number of people crossing over to India increasing during periods of environmental disasters. In 1974-1975, for instance, when Bangladesh was devastated by a combination of flood and famine, one witnessed heavy illegal flow of people to India. According to estimates provided by the Indian census, the number of people who had crossed the border illegally from Bangladesh to India totalled 1,729,310 in 1961-1971 and 559,006 in 1971-1981.²⁸ The latter figure, however, excludes Assam, which according to one semi-official estimate is around 600,000 in 1971-1981 period.²⁹ This figure probably is too high, but then even if we add them, the total illegal flow of people does not exceed that of 1961-1971.

Although the post-independence refugee flow to India is not high, particularly compared to 1961-1971 period and also

in the context of the 2000km border between Bangladesh and India, it has already caused great alarm amongst the Indians, particularly in the political and intellectual circles. In this connection, Sanjoy Hazarika pointed out:

Out-migration from Bangladesh over the years has had a severe impact on the ethnic, linguistic, religious, economic and ecological fabric of northeast India and West Bengal, regions that share a common frontier with Bangladesh.

...India views the migrants as a potential security risk, whatever their reasons for migrating. Intelligence reports indicate that illegal migrants are pliable and easy to use in smuggling, in trans-border gangs, and in information-gathering for extremist groups....³⁰

This has further been complicated by the suggestion that the post-independence flow of people is the result of religious persecution, directed mainly against the Hindus. In support of this contention, Amalendu De pointed out that the Muslim population in Bangladesh had increased from 76.9% to 88.3% in 1951-1991 period, whereas Hindu population during that period had dropped from 22.0% to 10.5%.³¹ This suggested that the Hindus in bulk, suffering from insecurity, had left Bangladesh for India.

But a closer exposition of the refugee flow reveals something else. Table A, for instance, shows that a high percentage of people leave Bangladesh for environmental insecurity, which includes, amongst others, poverty, lack of accommodation, direct ecological factors, and lack of descent livelihood.

Table A
Reasons for Leaving Bangladesh
 (Multiple response)

Response	Khulna-Sathkhira	Rajshahi	Dinajpur	Nilphamari	Total %
LACK OF ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY:					67.0
*Poverty	19	29	12	33	23.25
*For Better Accommodation	16	23	15	19	18.25
*Ecological	7	8	4	5	6.0
*Livelihood	42	10	2	24	19.5
MINORITY INSECURITY	0	11	19	0	7.5
SOCIAL (Property-related Violence; marriage; Prostitution; etc.)	16	11	16	14	14.25
SMUGGLING	0	8	0	0	2.0
BETTER EDUCATION	0	0	8	5	3.25
JOIN RELATIVES	0	0	24	0	6.0

Source: Author's Survey, 1997

Looking at the high percentage of the refugee flow from the Khulna-Sathkhira and Rajshahi regions, one is led to believe that water insecurity is mainly responsible for producing refugees. In this context, the case of the Ganges water dispute, particularly the Farakka Barrage and how it has led to the drying up of Bangladesh in the winter season, is well known.³² Ashok Swain's position on this is worth quoting:

It is true that the Ganges water dispute is an excellent case study of an inter-state conflict where two state-actors are striving to acquire scarce water resource by rationally calculating their interest in a zero-sum situation. However, the resulting environmental destruction in a vast region of Bangladesh has added another important dimension to it. The loss of

agriculture, closure of industries and navigation facilities, drop in fish catching, dying of valuable forest resources, disappearance of land due to river bank erosion and devastating floods, have no doubt, resulted in the loss of source of living of a large number of populace in Khulna and some parts of Rajshahi region of Bangladesh, which seem to necessitate their migration from the homeland in the pursuit of their survival.³³

While Swain's contention can hardly be brushed aside, it would be a folly to think that Farakka alone is responsible for the flow of environmental refugees and that there is no such movement of people from other areas of Bangladesh. Table B provides a clear indication that the matter is not that simple:

Table B
Original Home of the Victims (Actual Refugees)

District	% of Total
Faridpur	19
Rajshahi	17
Dhaka	13
Khulna	10
Thakurgaon	10
Pabna	8
Jessore	6
Gopalganj	5
Magura	5
Panchagram	4
Dinajpur	2
Barisal	1
Total	100

Source: Collected from a survey conducted by Ranabir Samaddar of Maulana Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Calcutta, 1996.

Dhaka, Thakurgaon and Faridpur also have high flow of environmental refugees but none of these areas are directly affected by the withdrawal of water at Farakka.

Again, one must not have the impression that the flow of environmental refugees is linear, that is, simply from Bangladesh to India. In fact, a sample survey of the squatting

population, numbering around 180, in the City of Dhaka showed that 1.11% of the squatters came from regions other than Bangladesh, mainly from Myanmar and India.³⁴

It is important to keep the complex combination of insecurities in mind lest one starts believing that the resolution of the Ganges water dispute would stop the (illegal) flow of people across the border. Anyone familiar with the situation, particularly the areas concern, knows very well that such a thing is not going to happen. There are other, and equally critical, environmental factors operating here as well.

Unfortunately, there are critics and ‘refugee experts’ who have *generalised* and *itemised*, and consecutively, *numbered* and *communalised*, the flow of refugees in this part of the world, indeed, almost in the manner of smuggled goods! Juxtaposing Tables C and D would surely provide insights to the point made above:

Table C
Data on Bangladesh-India Smuggling
(Taka)

Year	Seized Illegal Goods Entering Bangladesh	Seized Illegal Goods Entering India
1972	5,767,001	3,399,595
1974	14,049,568	5,664,756
1976	8,306,184	4,161,001
1980	19,916,160	62,399,773
1984	90,743,363	46,607,145
1988	363,541,629	136,734,630
1990	420,498,212	96,969,842
1992	621,652,045	171,414,109

Source: Collected from Newspapers, BDR and Police Files by the Author.

Table D
**Interception of Illegal Immigration:
 Bangladesh to West Bengal
 (State Police/Mobile Task Force/BSF)**

Year	Total Hindu	Total Muslim	Total Others	% Hindu	% Muslim
1977	1504	2372	422	34.99	55.19
1978	5270	2212	410	66.78	28.03
1979	4543	6970	681	37.26	57.16
1980	3522	6645	366	33.44	63.09
1981	3887	8541	193	30.87	67.60
1982	3263	10296	374	23.42	73.90
1983	4434	18549	281	19.06	79.73
1984	4554	19537	68	18.85	80.87
1985	6982	20031	62	25.79	73.98
1986	9387	27381	-	25.53	74.47
1987	11997	35083	462	25.23	73.79
1988	12490	33887	200	26.82	72.75
1989	11437	32496	104	25.97	73.79
1990	17901	38611	68	31.64	68.24
1991	18304	55237	79	24.86	75.04

Source: Gautam Gupta, Debash Chakrabarty and Sabari Bandyopadhyay, "Migration from Bangladesh to India during 1971-91: Its Magnitude and Causes," paper presented at the International Symposium on *South Asian Politics and Development: Bangladesh and India*, organized by the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Calcutta (India), 1-3 March 1994, p.17.

Like the contents of Table C, Table D has been *generalised* and *itemised*, allowing self-seekers to *number* and *communalise* the thing.³⁵ Little consideration is given to the complexity of the situation.

In fact, the figures of Table D reveal that, compared to Hindus, more Muslims (including Biharis³⁶) are attempting to migrate to India. Although it is true that out of Bangladesh's

total population of 115 million (with about 10 million Hindus) a higher proportion of Hindus are attempting to cross the border (in 1991 about 0.183%, compared to Muslim's 0.052%), the fact remains that the illegal flow of people is not limited to a particular religious group. The saddest part here is that those who subscribe to such communal representation of refugees fail to understand that refugees are refugees, whether Hindus or Muslims! If anything that is beneath the surface here, it is crude politics catered more towards domestic consumption. I will have more to say about this later.

The critical question then becomes, what is making all these people, Hindus as well as Muslims, *choose* (!) the life of a refugee? There are several things involved here, one related to the other. Let me explain this by relating it to the issue of water insecurity, which is quite apparent, still less understood for its complexity in Bangladesh.

Let us take the case of the 1998 deluge, for instance. A serious concern throughout the 1998 flood period has been the lack of work for the many of the affected, particularly of the able-bodied people. This is indeed an irony, for while there is so much of work to do in the affected areas, many of the affected are practically without work for months! At one point of time, there was lack of work in almost all of the affected areas, from Kurigram to Kishoreganj, Comilla to Chapai-Nawabganj, Gaibandha to Gopalganj. And this continued to be so as late as November (that is, 4-5 months after the flood first began), although the extent of the no-work syndrome was greater in the most affected areas that mostly border the banks of the mighty Brahmaputra and Jamuna.

At the time of flood, however, the testimony of having no work on a massive scale, somewhat ironically, lies in the low price of essential goods. The price of rice in Kurigram, for instance, came around Taka 14 per kg, markedly lower than the price of rice in Dhaka or even in Benapole (around Taka 20 and 24 per kg respectively). While in normal circumstances this would have been a cause for celebration for the Kurigramites, it was actually the result of the no-work syndrome or the lack of purchasing power that had prevailed for many months in those areas.

But why is there no work to be found? I guess the part of the answer lies in the governmental introduction, albeit under pressure from international donors and the modernist scientific community, new cropping pattern in the country, which effectively replaced the age-old method practised in Bangladesh. As Nazrul Islam noted,

The cropping pattern [in Bangladesh] was intricately adjusted to the deltaic conditions. Through a process of natural selection, the people of Bangladesh developed the amazing varieties of *bona aman*, which can grow twenty feet tall or even higher to withstand deep flooding. These miraculous paddy stalks just float in water and can grow up to a foot in twenty four hours just to keep pace with the fast rising level of flood water. These capabilities of *bona aman* are yet to be matched by anything produced by modern plant breeding. Bangladeshi farmers also developed *ropa aman* to adjust to the brief time period that is usually available between *aus* harvest and arrival of floodwater.³⁷

With the introduction of the High Yielding Variety (HYV),³⁸ the flood centric varieties, like *bona aman* and *ropa aman*, became less attractive and financially rewarding to the farmers. The HYV, given its dependence on fertilisers and controlled irrigation, can hardly survive in the midst of big floods. Since many of the affected, under active governmental support, left the former cropping pattern for the latter, it is not surprising that they are left without work and consequently with meagre purchasing power once the flood comes in and drowns their HYV crops. In a situation like this, they can do one or two of the following things.

Firstly, they could start using their savings. The governmental machinery is absolutely inefficient in this respect, particularly when it comes to the issue of savings of and for the poor. In Bangladesh, this task has been performed with some success by the NGOs. In fact, this is precisely what the major NGOs, including the Grameen Bank, opted for, providing the long-time borrower the full access to her/his past savings. But then again, this has an obvious limitation, for the volume of such savings for each individual or household is not that great.

Secondly, they could take up distress selling. In a nation-wide field survey on 15, 467 villages carried out by members of *Nagarik Durjog Mokabila Udyog* (a civil response body formed during the flood), it was found that the incidence of distress selling was considerably high at the time of the flood. Table E provides a good account of the thing:

Table E
Incidence of Distress Selling
(Percentage of villages)

	Whether Distress Selling Increased Compared to the Normal Period					
	Land		Domestic Animal		Other Assets	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Severe	59.0	41.0	87.1	12.9	73.8	26.2
Moderate	59.8	40.2	87.9	12.1	71.8	28.2
Normal/ No Affect	44.2	55.8	73.5	26.5	56.3	43.7

Source: Binayak Sen, Syed M Hashemi and Imtiaz Ahmed, “Impact of Flood on Rural Economy: Results from a Large-Scale Rapid Survey.” Paper presented at the National Seminar on *The Deluge of 1998*, organized by *Nagarik Durjog Mokabila Udyog*, CIRDAP auditorium, 31 December 1998.

Since there is no governmental plan to offset such selling or even regulations for receiving fair price by the distressed seller, often a severe flood comes as a boon to the moneylender and those in the position to buy such things. At times, the highly governmentalised banking system (both public and private, with the possible exception of the trustee-managed Grameen Bank) accelerates this process by demanding collateral from the affected persons.

Finally, they could migrate. This could be of two types, internal as well as external. In the month of October, a random survey conducted by a non-governmental organisation found that 9 percent of the village households in the flood-affected areas are totally looked after by women,

implying that their husbands had left the villages in search of work.³⁹ In fact, Hossain Zillur Rahman carried out a survey on the floating population of Dhaka and found out that 20 percent of them were recent migrants. Of the in-migrants, fifty-two percent indicated 'lack of work,' while eight percent mentioned 'prevailing hunger situation' as reasons for coming to Dhaka.⁴⁰ But this is only one side of the migration.

This time with unprecedented floods in both Bangladesh and India (particularly in West Bengal and Assam), migration (I suspect) criss-crossed both ways. Given the prompt availability of international relief in Bangladesh, one should not be surprised if some distressed people from Malda and Murshidabad, the two hard-hit areas of West Bengal, were found crossing over to Bangladesh. And the case no doubt was the opposite where relief failed to reach the flood-affected border areas of Bangladesh timely and substantially. Moreover, it is not unlikely that population pressures this side of the border and well-established networks on the other side of the border would lead to more Bangladeshis settling down in India than the other way round.

But the above mainly pertains to the issue of water insecurity arising from massive flood. The 'drought factor' is no less precarious. Take again the case of HYV and the need for pesticides and controlled irrigation. Much of the success related to HYV production, as Peter Rogers pointed out, rested on the 'shift from dependence on high-risk monsoon crops to reliance on low-risk irrigated crops grown in the dry season from November to May.'⁴¹ But this shift could be made possible mainly by combining HYV cultivation with expanded irrigation using groundwater and shallow tubewells (STWs).

Excessive pumping of groundwater, particularly in dry season and that again if it continues for two consecutive seasons could bring disaster by emptying the aquifers and making the groundwater table to fall. Critics believe that the fall of the groundwater table is the main cause for the recent dramatic increase of *arsenic* in water.⁴² It is not difficult to see that HYV cultivation could lead to land degradation not only for the use of fertilisers but also, and at times more importantly, for having a bad luck of not being accompanied by sufficient river-inundation for replenishing the

underground aquifers. The consequence is quite predictable and that is, once land becomes degradable the farmers react almost in the manner of facing an excessive flood.

The scenario outlined above is otherwise a representation of the complex combination of water, land and food insecurities, to which the immediate victims often respond by leaving his/her original habitat and becoming either a displaced person at home or a refugee across the border. The victims in this case are both Muslims and Hindus.

While this may answer why we have both Hindus and Muslims environmental refugees, it still does not say much about the higher proportion of Hindus crossing the border. It is here, I believe, that one needs to take into account the critical role of *networks* (i.e. links forged through acquaintance, kinship, and work experience) in the movement of people in modern times.⁴³ Indeed, relatives and friends, who have migrated before and are now somewhat settled, are a great *pulling* factor and a *source of security* for the would-be refugees. In this connection, it may not be out of place to point out that given the fact that many Muslim environmental refugees from Bangladesh are now living in India for quite sometime the number of such environmental refugees would further increase from the newer networks. It is this situation that allows crude politics to communalise things. Moreover, the situation has been further complicated by the fact that 95% of the post-1971 Hindu refugees are *Namasudras* (members of the lowest caste), a fact that is markedly different from the pre-1971 refugee flow, which consisted mainly of upper caste *Bhadrasantans*.⁴⁴ The combination of Muslim and *Namasudra* refugee flow allows pro-Hindu political parties, like the Bharatiya Janata Party, to make the thing a national issue and organise anti-refugee cum anti-Bangladeshi sentiments amongst the caste-conscious 'Hindu majority.' The strategic folly here, however, is that such political parties fail to understand that the more the refugees are threatened the more they would tend to activate and solidify the networks. Put differently, a threatening situation or fear forces the victims to increase their numbers and stick to their age-old identities, undermining further whatever 'state security' the political parties in question are trying to secure.

The communalisation, or more precisely, the politicisation, of environmental refugees, however, is not restricted to 'communalised' political parties alone. While the Bangladesh government, out of sheer embarrassment for its failure to ensure environmental security, is too shy to accept the reality and do something concrete about it, the Indian government, knowing well that it is also partly responsible for some of the environmental hazards in Bangladesh (the upstream diversion of the Ganges water for one) continues to join ranks with the communal forces for sheer domestic consumption and shy away from all responsibilities. Both the sides, however, are thoroughly engaged in transforming the activities surrounding the issue of illegal movement of people into a 'state security' thing, allowing thereby the security forces on both sides of the border to profit from it. It is otherwise not difficult to see that India's *pushback* policy or, inversely, Bangladesh's *push-in* problem, while strengthening the security forces, helps reproduce hegemony and the power of the majority communities on both sides of the border. In the meantime, the people continue to suffer.

III

Conclusion: *What is to be done?*

I will limit my suggestions to three broad areas of activities. Such activities, however, must not be pursued separately, rather they ought to be undertaken simultaneously if we intend to change things rapidly and in our own lifetime:

1. Rethinking Development. In view of the collapse of environmental security, it is quite clear that the politically constructed modern majoritarian state has lost its will to support and nurture the material aspirations not only of the minority community but also of a sizeable section of the majority community. Indeed, threatened by water, land and food insecurities, the members of both majority and minority communities are willing to risk the life of a refugee than live a life of an imbecile in the land in which they grew up as citizens. This is, indeed, a great tragedy. In this context, it is high time for the public and the politicians alike to rethink development, to find ways to ensure a living condition that is

free from man-made disasters and ruthless exploitation of the nature.

I will admit, however, that it is difficult to give a precise plan in the area of rethinking development. The best I could do is to point out the things required to be nurtured here. In order to make the upliftment of people more indigenous, for instance, there ought to be more creative efforts in combining water and people, the two resources that Bangladesh have in plenty.⁴⁵ One such effort, indeed, could be in the area of *mud-housing*, where creative intervention could resolve not only the housing problem in a more environment-friendly manner, but also lead to the proper dredging of the river beds which could greatly reduce the possibility of floods during the rainy season. But this is only one aspect of the problem related to development. Serious imaginative interventions are required in the field of industry, transportation, military and other modern sectors if the rethinking development agenda is to be materialised.

Immediate and imaginative interventions are also required in the border areas. In fact, the refugee flow will continue if one side of the border remains weak and poor, while the other side remains relatively better off. It is important, therefore, that identical socio-economic, environmental, and even educational projects are undertaken on both sides of the border to meet the immediate demands of the people residing there. On this matter, non-governmental organisations on both sides of the border must participate freely, for the chances of their success are more than the highly structured governmental interventions.

I also think that it is high time to look for alternatives for resolving water insecurity, for example, building 'water catchment' for conserving water when the latter is plenty (i.e., during rainy season, floods, etc.). If this can be made viable, and there is no reason why it should not, given the level of technological development on water catchment, it would surely take away much of the dependency syndrome that Bangladesh so acutely suffers from when dealing with the issue of water sharing with India. It may not be out of place to point out that the Ganges as a whole is fast drying up for reasons of modern development and increasing population pressure. I do not foresee a time in the recent future when the

Ganges will have plenty of water to share around. I do see a politics, however, on the question of sharing the Ganges, which, I believe, is more catered towards reproducing a pro-majoritarian hegemony in both India and Bangladesh. In this context, water catchment could bring an end to such politics, making development more centre to the demands and livelihood of the people.

Moreover, there is a need for revitalising the culture of living with floods. I guess with the frequency of big floods coming down to a decade there is an urgent need to reorient our present mode of living into something that is more flood or water centric. Ajaya Dixit, Ashis Nandy and I have tried to highlight this need for reorienting our life and living, while working together on a *South Asian Manifesto on the Politics and Knowledge of Water*. As we collectively maintained,

Till now, the approach to water management and water development has been fragmentary. Not only has it dealt with sea, river and groundwater separately, it has been “land-centric.” Water management, we believe, should centre around water; it must be based on the recognition of the wholeness of water and its intrinsic function in nature. A comprehensive view also demands critical interventions in the curricula at all levels of education. The principal challenge is, therefore, to integrate the global and the local, to alter the structure and nature of current decision-making models, and the educational context within which they are generated, not only to accommodate a plurality of views, but also to generate options that would reflect the larger reality of water in nature and human society.⁴⁶

The range of activities that can be expected from such reorientation of things is immense. Not only will it provide a space for including a more sensible and topographically relevant cropping system, something that we have discussed earlier, but also a mode of settlement based on the long lost principle of ‘dig-elevate-dwell.’ The latter refers to a practice in Bengal going back over thousands of years where people in order to construct houses first dug ditches and then used the excavated earth to elevate the land. Houses were then constructed on this elevated land.⁴⁷ In the process, they also succeeded in making new ponds and dredging the silted canals, particularly during the dry season, which must have

worked to their benefit at the time of flood. It is high time that we make use of this age-old wisdom, albeit with proper innovations to meet the current state of living.

The reorientation of things will also allow us to reinvent and rebuild the much-required water-based communication system, flood-free housing structures, flood-time schooling, and many more. Only a timely investment on the culture of *living with floods* will allow us to transform the current curse that so frequently accompanies the floods and make our life more liveable in the midst of the not-so-natural floods. Since the government, as it currently stands, is ill equipped to carry out such an investment, the onus of carrying out this immense task lies with all those concerned and the affected millions.

2. Remaking Education. The modernist mind has become uncooperative and conflictual, what we need is an education that can produce 'co-operative minds' in large numbers. Set to reproduce the power of nations and nationalities, modern education tends to reproduce violence and conflicts, even considering them acceptable so long they are directed against *alien* cultures, nations or countries. Much of the problem, apart from illiteracy, lies with the kind of education that we have been providing to our children in schools, colleges and universities. In fact, the children of both Bangladesh and India are literally brought up as 'nationalists,' *tutored* to fall in love only with the nation that they have come to share more as a result of parental blessing.

Making the people literate is, of course, the first step. But literacy alone will not guarantee the production of 'co-operative minds.' Modern but 'fragmented' Sri Lanka, with high literacy rate, is a good example. What are required are a thorough and an innovative remaking of our education. This must take place at both national and regional levels. Nationally, the organisation and reproduction of 'national curriculum' must be abandoned and in its place a curriculum of the people must be so designed as to perform the newer task of cooperation. This is a tedious job and requires attention even to the minutest of the details. Let me give you an example. I will limit my case to Bangladesh's education, particularly the study of history.

Few will deny the fact that the history of Bangladesh today glorifies the history of Bangalee or Bangladeshi nation. There is no space for the Hill people of CHT in this history. This creates a sense of alienation among them for they cannot identify themselves with the history of the state of which they are a part. This necessarily leads them to search for their 'own history.' A re-evaluation of the etymology of history is, therefore, required - it must narrate the history of people: it must create a space where people of all kinds will find their worth as human beings, and not be evaluated by the (Western) abstraction of nation and nationalities.

Moreover, keeping the fate of disempowered women in mind, particularly women refugees, I also think that it is high time for us to shun *his-story* and start writing *her-story*. After all, history will remain distorted, not to mention highly masculine, if we do not include the nearly 50 per cent of the women of our land. Of course, to include the 'body and soul' and the 'skill and vision' of the disempowered women tremendous innovation would be required. But I believe, if we can start working on this, it would transform radically, *how we - as men and women - look at history?*, disallowing thereby the reproduction of masculine consciousness and patriarchy, which has been particularly detrimental to the women of our land.⁴⁸ If this is what is required for the study of history in Bangladesh, it also remains a task for India. But this is only one aspect of the matter.

It is also important to keep in mind here that in attempting to establish a national (majoritarian) education, both India and Bangladesh have created an education devoid of democratic norms: tolerance, non-violence, and the like, particularly when dealing with minority communities at home. Consequently, refugee-producing Bangladesh, for instance, shuns refugees produced by it from its national curriculum, while refugee-receiving India shuns those refugees found suffering in the wake of policing them from its national curriculum. In the process, the *living experiences* of the refugees are shunned from all education. An urgent task is to rectify this, both regionally and nationally.

For reproducing democracy, or more precisely, democratic minds at the national level, what we need is not only an education that champions democracy but also a

democratic education (with spirits of tolerance and non-violence ingrained in it). This is, of course, no simple task. Problematising the majoritarian elements in the education and seeking their replacements could be a good starting point.

With respect to education, particularly refugee-related education, there also ought to be an active role of the audio and visual media. The cry of a refugee is much less meaningful when it is *read* than when it is *heard* or *seen*! This is particularly important in the context of Bangladesh and India where the majority of the people cannot read or write. Government media, given its role in the policing of refugees, will not do. What is required instead is a proliferation of more and more private or non-governmental radio and TV stations, equipped with the freedom to disseminate information.

At the regional level, a South Asian University, with issue-oriented faculties spread throughout the region, is proposed.⁴⁹ The idea is to create a South Asian mind, which would look into the business of organising co-operation in diverse fields within South Asia, and that again, not from the standpoint of nations and states but from the standpoint of people. The students and researchers here will be people more of South Asia, their fields of research free from the limitations imposed by the structures of modern nation-states. The issue-oriented faculties, like Water-Management, Peace Research, Human Rights & Duties, Gender Politics, Communication, and still others, will be spread throughout South Asia, one in Nepal, two in Pakistan, two in India, one in Bangladesh, and so on, where the students and researchers would look into the issues from a South Asian perspective, indeed, over and beyond the modern state to which they all belong. If such an university, along with the changes in the curriculum nationally, could be introduced and sustained for some years to come, it would, without question, go a long way in freeing our minds from the conflict-prone nationalist and communalist discourses and in investing ourselves in the task of making 'co-operative minds' throughout South Asia.

3. *Reinventing Human Rights.* The call for constituting a South Asian Charter of Human Rights has already come up.⁵⁰ The idea is to have legal codes which will guarantee

freedom to the people, both within and outside their state boundaries, so that problems arising from social and communal fragmentation across South Asia could be dealt with in a more humane manner. While such an effort is commendable, it remains largely informed by Western categories and principles. In fact, it has already come under serious attack from non-Western intellectuals precisely for being overly 'Western,' that is, the concept carries with it the Western-inspired notion of individual liberty and rights without having anything to do with *duties and responsibilities*.⁵¹

The tension between the Western and non-Western thinking on the issue of rights and duties is an old one, a classical representation of which is found in Gandhi's cable to H.G. Wells sometime in April 1940 (Wells was then drafting the International Charter of Human Rights):

Received your cable. Have carefully read your five articles. You will permit me to say you are on the wrong track. I feel sure that I can draw up a better charter of Rights than you have drawn up. But of what good will it be? Who will become its guardian? If you mean propaganda or popular education you have begun at the wrong end. I suggest the right way. Begin with a Charter of Duties of Man (both D and M Capitals) and I promise the Rights will follow as spring follows winter. I write from experience. As a young man I began life by seeking to assert my Rights and I soon discovered I had none not even over my wife. So I began by discovering and performing my Duty to my wife, my children, friends, companions, and society, and I find today that I have greater Rights, perhaps than any living man I know. If this is too tall a claim then I say I do not know anyone who possesses greater Rights than I.⁵²

It may be pointed out here that some attempts were made to incorporate Duties following the end of World War II. In fact, in 1948, concurrent with its establishment of the Organisation of American States (OAS), the Ninth Pan-American Conference adopted the American Declaration on the Rights and Duties of Man. But this did not last long, within a decade the OAS made reference only to 'Rights.'⁵³ Also the Universal Declaration of the United Nations, which was adopted barely seven months after the Pan-American

Conference, made no reference to 'Duties.' The task of combining Rights and Duties, not to mention with particular reference to South Asia, still remains a challenge to be accomplished. A faculty of Human Rights and Duties, under the proposed South Asian University, could well be a starting point. Indeed, if such activities are ever accomplished, they are sure to provide newer and innovative grounds for resolving problems between India and Bangladesh, including those arising from environmental hazards and refugee flows.

Finally, there is an urgent need to humanise the life and living of the environmental refugees and not leave the matter to the more dreadful state of being nothing but an 'illegal migrant.' In this content, a South Asian Charter for Illegal Immigrants, guaranteeing some basic rights to life, liberty and property, may be codified and brought to bear upon the governments of all South Asian states who would be expected to follow without discriminating anyone. It is quite understandable that not all of the above can be achieved overnight. Indeed, the strength of the agenda lies in creating a space as well as a context towards resolving the plight of environmental refugees. Let us keep our dreams alive!

*The author is
Professor of International Relations
at the University of Dhaka, Dhaka.
He is also the Co-editor of SARWATCH.*

Notes and References:

¹ See, Government of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh, *White Paper On the Ganges Dispute*, Dhaka, September 1976; A. Hannan, *Impact of Reduced Flow of Major Rivers of Bangladesh*. Paper presented at the Department of Water Resources Engineering, BUET, Dhaka, 23 August 1980; B.M. Abbas, *The Ganges Water Dispute* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1982); M. Rafiqul Islam, *The Ganges Water Dispute: International Legal Aspects* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1982); Khrushida Begum, *Tension Over the Farakka Barrage: A Techno-Political Tangle in South Asia* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1987); M. Maniruzzaman Miah, *Floods in Bangladesh: A Case for Regional Cooperation*. Paper presented at the ICSAC Seminar, New Delhi, February 1989; B.G. Verghese, *Waters of Hope: Himalaya-Ganga Development and Cooperation for Billion People* (Dhaka: Academic Publishers, 1990); Ben Crow with Alan Lindquist and David Wilson, *Sharing the Ganges: The Politics and Technology of River Development* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1995).

² See, Imtiaz Ahmed, "Refugees and Security: The Experience of Bangladesh," in S.D. Muni and Lok Raj Baral (eds.), *Refugees and Security in South Asia* (New Delhi: Konarak Publishers, 1996).

³ See, Imtiaz Ahmed, "Maldevelopment, Environmental Insecurity and Militarism in South Asia," in DD Khanna, ed., *Sustainable Development: Environmental Security, Disarmament and Development Interface in South Asia* (Delhi: Macmillan, 1997).

⁴ For a closer exposition on this issue, see Imtiaz Ahmed, *State and Foreign Policy: India's Role in South Asia* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House), 1993, Chapter 2.

⁵ Ct. from Anthony J. Bevilacqua, "Who is a Refugee? Distinction between Economic and Political Determinants of Refugee Movements," in Joseph M. Kitagawa (ed.), *American Refugee Policy: Ethical and Religious Reflections* (New York: Fund for World Relief, 1983), p.37.

⁶ See, Frances D'Souza, *The Refugee Dilemma: International Recognition and Acceptance*, Report No.43, Minority Rights Group, London, 1985, p.7.

⁷ In this context, Suhrke's point is well taken that poverty or economic condition often defines a refugee. See, Astri Suhrke, "Pressure Points: Environmental Degradation, Migration and Conflict," in Occasional paper Series of the Project on *Environmental Change and Acute Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1993), p.10.

⁸ See, Stephanie Simmonds, et.al., *Refugee, Community, Health Care* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p.2.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ John Brohman, 'Universalism, Eurocentrism, and ideological bias in development studies: from modernisation to neoliberalism,' *Third World Quarterly*, Vol.16, No.1, 1995.

¹¹ See, Mary M. Kritz, 'Climate Change and Migration Adaptations,' *1990 Working Paper Series*, Population and Development Program, Cornell University, No.2.16, 1990; Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (London: Zed Books, 1989); Michael Renner, 'National Security: The Economic and Environmental Dimensions,' Washington: Worldwatch Institute, *Worldwatch Paper*, No.89, 1989; Alan B. Durning, 'Poverty and the Environment: Reversing the Downward Spiral,' *Worldwatch Paper*, Worldwatch Institute, Washington, No.92, 1989; Jodi L. Jacobson, 'Environmental Refugees: A Yardstick of Habitability,' Washington: Worldwatch Institute, *Worldwatch Paper*, No.86, 1988; Lester Brown, 'Redefining National Security,' Washington: Worldwatch Institute, *Worldwatch Paper*, No.14, 1977.

There is also a growing (counter) literature which downplays the negative impact of environment, arguing that the 'environmentalists' have deliberately blown the thing out of proportion or have put forward a worst-case scenario. See, Daniel Deudney, 'The Mirage of Eco-War: The Weak Relationship among Global Change, National Security and Interstate Violence,' in Ian H. Rowlands and Malory Greene (eds.), *Global Environmental Change and International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1992); S. Fred Singer, 'Warming Theories Need Warning Label,' *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, June, 1992; and C. Boyden Gray and David B. Rivkin, 'A "No Regrets" Environmental Policy,' *Foreign Policy*, No.83, 1991.

In confronting such views, Jeremy Leggett made an interesting observation:

In evaluating military threats throughout history, policy response has been predicated on a worst-case analysis. The standard military yardstick must also apply to environmental security.

See, Jeremy Leggett, 'Global Warming: The Worst Case,' *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, June, 1992, p.33.

¹² Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (London: Zed Books, 1989), p.179.

¹³ For a closer exposition see, Imtiaz Ahmed "Rethinking National Security: The Issue of Refugees in Bangladesh-India Relations," *Theoretical Perspectives*, Vol. 4 & 5, 1997-1998.

¹⁴ Joyce R. Starr, 'Water Wars,' *Foreign Policy*, No.82, 1991.

¹⁵ Jamal Anwar, *Bangladesh: The State of the Environment* (Dhaka: Coastal Area Resource Development and Management Association, 1993), p.55.

¹⁶ Mary M. Kritz, *op.cit.*

¹⁷ Paul R. Ehrlich, Anne H. Ehrlich, Gretchen C. Daily, 'Food security, Population, and Environment,' *Population and Development Review* 19, No.1, March 1993; and Lester Brown, *op.cit.*

¹⁸ See, Norman Myers, "Environmental Refugees: a crisis in the making," *People & the Planet*, London, Vol.3, No.4, 1994, p.7.

¹⁹ Douglas S. Massey, *et.al.*, 'An evaluation of International Migration Theory: The North American Case,' *Population and Development Review* 20, No.4, December 1994; Douglas S. Massey, *et.al.*, 'Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal,' *Population and Development Review* 19, No.3, September 1993; R.T. Appleyard, 'International Migration in Asia and the Pacific,' in R.T. Appleyard (ed.), *International Migration Today*, Vol. 1 (Paris: UNESCO, 1988); and Ronald Skledon, 'Migration in South Asia: An Overview,' in L.A. Kosinski and K.M. Elahi (ed.), *Population Redistribution and Development in South Asia* (D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1985).

Some authors use 'migrants' and 'refugees' interchangeably. See Myron Weiner, *op.cit.* There is, however, a need to maintain the distinction lest the term 'refugee' be diluted and made economic or taken to mean sheer historical patterns.

²⁰ UNHCR, *The State of the World's Refugees 1993: The Challenge of Protection* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), p.18.

²¹ See Norman Myers, *op.cit.*

²² See, UNHCR, *op.cit.*

²³ An earlier version of some of the issues treated here can be found in Imtiaz Ahmed, *op.cit.*, 1994.

²⁴ The Report of the CHT Commission, 'Life is Not Ours', *Land and Human Rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh* (Kopenhagen: IWGIA, May, 1991), p.13.

²⁵ S. P. Talukdar, *The Chakmas: Life and Struggle* (Delhi: Gian Publishing House, 1988), pp.101-104.

²⁶ Prasanta Tripura, 'Colonialist Barriers to National Integration: Modern Bangladesh and the Hill People,' in Imtiaz Ahmed and Meghna GuhaThakurta (eds.), *SAARC: Beyond State-Centric Cooperation* (Dhaka: Centre for Social Studies, 1992).

²⁷ See, Atiur Rahman, *Impact of Riverbank Erosion: Survival Strategies of Displaces* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, 1985); K. Maudood Elahi and John R. Rogge, 1990. *Riverbank Erosion, Flood and Population Displacement in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Jahangirnagar University, 1990).

It may be noted here that the majority of the government-backed 'settlers' in the CHT are also environmental refugees, coming from

the *char* area. In fact, in the CHT, they are often referred to as 'refugees' by the Hill people.

²⁸ Gautum Gupta, Debash Chakrabarty and Sabari Bandyopadhyay, 1994. *Migration from Bangladesh to India during 1971-91: Its Magnitude and Causes*. Paper presented at the International Symposium on "South Asian Politics and Development: Bangladesh and India," organized by the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Calcutta (India), 1-3 March 1994, p.3.

²⁹ Marcus Franda, *Bangladesh: The First Decade* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1982), p.235.

³⁰ Sanjoy Hazarika, 'Bangladesh and Assam: Land Pressures, Migration and Ethnic Conflict,' in Occasional Paper Series of the Project on *Environmental Change and Acute Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1993), p.55.

³¹ Amalendu De, *Changing Demographic Scenario of Bangladesh and North-Eastern Parts of India: Analysis of Its Impact on the Socio-political Life of the Region*. Paper presented at the International Symposium on "South Asian Politics and Development: Bangladesh and India," organized by the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Calcutta (India), 1-3 March 1994, p.1.

³² Government of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh, *White Paper On the Ganges Dispute*, Dhaka, September 1976; A. Hannan, *Impact of Reduced Flow of Major Rivers of Bangladesh*. Paper presented at the Department of Water Resources Engineering, BUET, Dhaka, 23 August 1980; B.M. Abbas, *The Ganges Water Dispute* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1982); M. Rafiqul Islam, *The Ganges Water Dispute: International Legal Aspects* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1982); Khrushida Begum, *Tension Over the Farakka Barrage: A Techno-Political Tangle in South Asia* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1987); M. Maniruzzaman Miah, *Floods in Bangladesh: A Case for Regional Cooperation*. Paper presented at the ICSAC Seminar, New Delhi, February 1989; B.G. Verghese, *Waters of Hope: Himalaya-Ganga Development and Cooperation for Billion People* (Dhaka: Academic Publishers, 1990).

³³ Ashok Swain, 'The Farakka Barrage: A Double-Edged Sword,' *Theoretical Perspectives*, Vol.III, October 1996.

³⁴ For a closer exposition, see Dilshad Jahan, *et.al.*, "Squatter Settlements in the Dhaka City: Causes and Problems," Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, (unpublished report), April 1996, p.19

³⁵ Despite his contention to the contrary, Samaddar undertakes similar mode of explanation. See, Ranabir Samaddar, *The Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999).

³⁶ Let me reflect here briefly on the fate of the Biharis in Bangladesh, whose fate I now find increasingly being tied up with those of the environmental refugees.

With independence, the Biharis in Bangladesh, having opted for Pakistan, became, what is generally considered as, political refugees. But interestingly, when compared to the Hill people refugees of the 1960s, who were originally environmental refugees but later became political refugees, the fate of the Bihari refugees seem to have travelled the other way round, that is, a sizeable section of them, finding difficult to continue living as 'political refugees' crossed the border and joined the ranks of 'environmental refugees.' Let me explain this transformation further.

At the time of independence, the number of Biharis residing in different refugee camps in Bangladesh was 260,000. After prolonged negotiations with the government of Pakistan, the latter agreed to repatriate them. But after 15,000 Biharis were repatriated in 1974-1975 and another 17,000 in 1977, Pakistan stopped further repatriation, claiming that it had reached 'saturation point.' The last repatriation, however, took place in 1984 when about 6000 of them were repatriated. Another attempt was taken in 1992, but that had to be stopped following demonstrations by the Sindhis in Pakistan against further Bihari repatriation. Funded mainly by private international trust, with some help from the UNHCR, they now languish in different refugee camps in Bangladesh. But then, that is not all.

Two private initiatives were taken, one in 1977 and another in 1984, to count the number of Bihari refugees in Bangladesh. In 1977, the total number of Bihari refugees figured 298,000, but in 1984 it dropped to about 250,000. Even if we accept that about 30,000 were repatriated between 1977-1984, it still leaves between 18,000 to 20,000 short. Some suggests (and there are valid reasons for that) that they have crossed over to India and Nepal, where they constitute a part of the environmental refugees.

It is important to keep in mind here that in post-1971 Bangladesh the Biharis have not been subjected to any political, communal or linguistic persecutions. In fact, the post-1975 Bangladesh government offered them citizenship which the majority of them declined. But with repatriation to Pakistan becoming uncertain, particularly after 1977, coupled with the fact that they are forced to make a living in the midst of deepening environmental insecurity, many of them find it more secure to join the ranks of environmental refugees than rot in the refugee camps in Bangladesh.

³⁷ Nazrul Islam, "Flood Control in Bangladesh: Which Way Now?" in Imtiaz Ahmed, ed., *Living with Floods: An Exercise in Alternatives* (Dhaka: University Press Limited) (forthcoming).

³⁸ It may be mentioned that the area under HYVs increased from 14 percent in 1973 to 54 percent in 1993. Moreover, over 90 percent of the *boro* crop is now in HYVs.

³⁹ Oxfam, Dhaka, conducted the survey.

⁴⁰ Hossain Zillur Rahman, "Early Warning on Post-Flood Coping: Findings on In-Migration to Dhaka." Paper presented at the National Seminar on *The Deluge of 1998*, organized by Nagarik Durjog Mokabila Udyog, CIRDAP auditorium, 31 December 1998.

⁴¹ Peter Rogers, Peter Lydon, David Secler and GT Keith Pitman, *Water and Development in Bangladesh: A Retrospective on the Flood Action Plan* (Arlington: ISPAN, 1994), p.17.

⁴² Nazrul Islam, *op.cit.*

⁴³ For a closer exposition, see Charles Tilly, 'Transplanted Networks,' in Virginia Yans-McLaughlin (ed.), *Immigration Reconsidered; History, Sociology, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁴⁴ Sunanda K. Datta-Ray, 'Deceit in the East: Wishing Away Bengali Refugees,' *The Statesman* (India), 6 August 1989.

⁴⁵ For an exposition of this view, see Abdur Razzaque, *Bangladesh: State of the Nation* (Dhaka: University of Dhaka, 1981).

⁴⁶ See, Imtiaz Ahmed, Ajaya Dixit and Ashis Nandy, *Water, Power and People: A South Asian Manifesto on the Politics and Knowledge of Water* (Colombo: Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, 1997), pp.10-11.

⁴⁷ For a closer exposition, see, Nazrul Islam, *op.cit.*

⁴⁸ For a closer exposition on this issue, see Imtiaz Ahmed, "On Feminist Methodology: Can *Mohilas* Speak?" *Theoretical Perspectives*, Vol.2, No.1, 1995.

⁴⁹ The idea of a South Asian University was first placed as early as 1992. See, B.K. Jahangir and Imtiaz Ahmed, "Reformulating Culture and Thought: A Plea for a South Asian University," in Imtiaz Ahmed & Meghna Guhathakurta (eds.), *SAARC: Beyond State-Centric Cooperation* (Dhaka: Centre for Social Studies, 1992).

⁵⁰ The following discussion is based on an earlier paper of mine, written jointly with B.K. Jahangir. See, *ibid.*, pp.146-147.

⁵¹ See, Chandra Muzaffar, "Rethinking the Concept of Human Rights," *The Daily Star*, Dhaka, 21-22 September 1992.

⁵² Ct. from Raghavan Iyer (ed.), *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol.III (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p.492.

⁵³ For a closer exposition, see *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol.20 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1986), pp.714-722.