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Borders, Bread, and Belonging: Three Centuries of Migration in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This study examines patterns and drivers of human migration in Bangladesh from 1747 to 2025, situating mobility within long-term political, economic, and environmental transformations. Using a historical–qualitative methodology and drawing on political economy, migration systems theory, and vulnerability frameworks, the paper traces how migration has evolved from colonial labour extraction and agrarian restructuring to contemporary labour export regimes and climate-induced displacement. The analysis demonstrates that migration in Bangladesh is not an episodic response to crisis but a structurally embedded livelihood strategy shaped by surplus labour production, weak social protection, and persistent environmental stress. Internal rural–urban migration, international labour mobility, and refugee displacement are shown to be interconnected components of a broader mobility system influenced by state policy, market forces, and regional geopolitics. The findings further reveal that migration functions as an informal social protection mechanism for households, substituting for limited welfare provision while reinforcing dependence on volatile external labour markets. Gendered transformations of migration have expanded women's economic participation but also intensified exposure to precarious labour conditions. The study concludes that migration governance in Bangladesh must be integrated with employment-centred development, climate adaptation planning, urban inclusion, and migrant rights protection. Without structural transformation, migration will remain central to household survival and national economic stability, perpetuating cycles of vulnerability despite its contribution to poverty reduction through remittances.

Keywords: Bangladesh migration history; labour mobility; climate displacement; political economy of migration; remittances; refugee governance.

1. Introduction

Migration has been a persistent and defining feature of the Bengal delta, shaped by shifting political borders, ecological instability, and economic restructuring across centuries. Present-day Bangladesh, situated at the confluence of major river systems and embedded within South Asian and global labour markets, has experienced continuous population movement long before the emergence of the modern nation-state. Yet, migration from Bangladesh is often discussed primarily in contemporary terms—particularly in relation to overseas labour, remittances, or climate displacement—without sufficient attention to the long historical processes that produced such mobility. This article argues that migration in Bangladesh must be understood as a historically structured phenomenon rooted in colonial political economy, postcolonial state formation, and global capitalist integration.

From the decline of Mughal authority in the mid-eighteenth century through British colonial rule, partition, war of independence, and post-1971 development policies, successive regimes have reorganised land relations, labour markets, and governance systems in ways that generated both voluntary and involuntary migration. The Bengal delta's ecological volatility—marked by floods, cyclones, river erosion, and salinity intrusion—has further intensified displacement and livelihood insecurity, reinforcing cyclical mobility patterns (Zaman, 1991; Adger, 2003). Migration, therefore, has not merely been a response to isolated crises but an adaptive strategy embedded in everyday survival.

The concept of migration in this study is not limited to permanent relocation. Instead, it encompasses seasonal labour mobility, circular rural–urban movement, cross-border displacement, refugee flows, and long-term overseas labour migration. Such diversity reflects what scholars describe as a migration continuum, where economic necessity, environmental pressure, and political coercion overlap rather than operate independently (Bakewell, 2010). In the Bangladeshi context, rural households frequently combine subsistence agriculture with temporary wage labour in cities or abroad, creating hybrid livelihood systems that blur distinctions between internal and international migration (Afsar, 2003).

Political economy perspectives offer crucial insight into why migration became structurally embedded in Bangladeshi society. Colonial commercialisation of agriculture transformed Bengal into a raw-material supplier for imperial industries, generating surplus labour and dependency on volatile global markets (Islam, 1978). Postcolonial development strategies failed to generate sufficient industrial employment, while population growth intensified competition for land. Consequently, labour export became an informal development policy, particularly after the 1970s, when Middle Eastern oil economies demanded foreign workers (Siddiqui, 2003). Remittances now constitute a major component of national income, but migration remains socially costly and legally precarious for many workers.

Borders constitute another critical dimension of migration history in Bangladesh. The drawing of national boundaries during Partition in 1947 and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 transformed internal mobility into international displacement. Millions were rendered refugees by political decisions beyond their control (Chatterji, 2007; Talbot & Singh, 2009). More recently, Bangladesh has become a major host country for Rohingya refugees fleeing violence in Myanmar, illustrating how regional geopolitics continues to shape population movement (Mannan, 2017).

Beyond economic and political drivers, migration has reshaped identity and belonging. Urbanisation has produced new class formations, informal settlements, and gendered labour roles, while overseas migration has altered family structures and community hierarchies (Gardner, 1995; Dannecker, 2005). Migrants frequently negotiate dual attachments—to village homes and urban or foreign workplaces—creating layered identities that challenge static notions of citizenship and nationhood.

Despite this complexity, historical scholarship on Bangladesh has often treated migration episodically, focusing on discrete crises such as famines, partition, or refugee movements. There remains limited integrative research that traces migration across political regimes using a long-term historical lens. This article seeks to fill that gap by examining migration as a structural feature of socio-economic transformation over nearly three centuries.

Research Questions: This study is guided by the following research questions:

- How did successive political regimes from the late Mughal period to contemporary Bangladesh reshape patterns of internal and international migration?
- In what ways did economic restructuring, environmental vulnerability, and state policies interact to produce persistent population mobility?
- How did migration influence social identities, urbanisation, and livelihood strategies across different historical periods?

By addressing these questions, the article aims to demonstrate that migration in Bangladesh is not an exceptional response to crisis but a historically produced condition linked to uneven development and geopolitical restructuring.

2. Historical Periodisation of Migration in Bangladesh

Understanding migration in Bangladesh requires a periodized approach that situates population movement within changing political economies. This section outlines five major historical phases: late Mughal and early Company rule, high colonialism, partition and Pakistan period, early post-independence nation-building, and globalisation and labour export.

2.1 Late Mughal Decline and Early Company Rule (c. 1747–1857)

During the late Mughal period, Bengal remained agriculturally productive and commercially active, with river-based trade networks connecting rural producers to regional markets (Eaton, 1993). Seasonal migration was common among agricultural labourers, artisans, and boatmen, reflecting livelihood diversification rather than permanent displacement.

Following the East India Company's acquisition of revenue rights in 1765, land relations were transformed through intensified taxation and commercialisation. The Permanent Settlement of 1793 institutionalised zamindari landlordism, prioritising revenue stability over peasant welfare (Islam, 1978). Rising rents, indebtedness, and land loss forced many rural households into wage labour.

Colonial labour recruitment expanded migration to indigo plantations, tea gardens in Assam, and port cities. Recruiters often used deceptive contracts and debt obligations, producing conditions resembling coercive labour migration (Behal, 2014). Thus, early colonial migration was closely tied to imperial production needs rather than autonomous labour choice.

2.2 High Colonialism and Structural Displacement (1857–1947)

The consolidation of British rule after the 1857 rebellion intensified Bengal's integration into global markets. Jute cultivation expanded dramatically, linking eastern Bengal farmers to industrial mills in Calcutta and overseas demand (van Schendel, 2009). While cash cropping increased incomes for some, it also heightened vulnerability to market fluctuations.

Railway expansion facilitated long-distance migration to industrial centres, tea plantations, and military labour sites (Kerr, 2007). Urbanisation accelerated, yet employment remained largely informal and insecure.

Colonial famine management failures culminated in repeated food crises, most tragically during the Bengal Famine of 1943. Sen (1981) demonstrated that famine mortality resulted not from food scarcity alone but from entitlement collapse, where purchasing power eroded despite food availability. Mass displacement into cities and relief camps followed, permanently altering demographic patterns.

Late colonial communal politics further politicised population movement. Migration became entangled with anxieties over religious demographics, setting the stage for partition-era displacement (Talbot & Singh, 2009).

2.3 Partition and the Pakistan Period (1947–1971)

Partition transformed mobility into forced displacement on an unprecedented scale. Eastern Bengal witnessed prolonged population exchange as Hindus migrated to India and Muslims moved into East Pakistan (Chatterji, 2007). Unlike Punjab's rapid violence-driven displacement, Bengal

experienced a gradual but sustained refugee movement.

Refugee rehabilitation placed enormous strain on land resources and urban infrastructure. Squatter settlements expanded around Dhaka and other towns, institutionalising informal housing patterns that persist today (Farhana & Mannan, 2024).

Politically, East Pakistan suffered economic neglect and administrative marginalisation. Industrial investment remained concentrated in West Pakistan, while agricultural productivity stagnated (Jahan, 1972). Internal migration increased, but employment absorption remained limited.

The 1971 Liberation War produced massive refugee flows into India and internal displacement within East Pakistan. Post-war repatriation occurred amid destroyed infrastructure and economic collapse, embedding migration further into post-independence reconstruction dynamics (Bass, 2013).

2.4 Post-Independence Nation-Building and Internal Migration (1971–1990)

After independence, Bangladesh faced extreme poverty, food shortages, and rapid population growth. Development policies prioritised agricultural modernisation and flood control, but these interventions often disrupted local livelihoods (Adnan, 1992).

Rural-to-urban migration accelerated as people sought employment in construction, transport, and petty trade. Dhaka's population expanded exponentially, producing large informal settlements characterised by insecure tenure and limited services (Afsar, 2003).

Environmental displacement intensified due to river erosion and cyclones. Riverbank erosion alone displaced tens of thousands annually, creating mobile populations with little access to compensation or resettlement (Zaman, 1991). Thus, internal migration during this period was shaped by intersecting economic scarcity, ecological vulnerability, and development-induced displacement.

2.5 Globalisation and Labour Export (1990–2025)

From the late 1970s onward, Bangladesh increasingly adopted overseas labour migration as an economic strategy. Middle Eastern oil economies created demand for construction and service workers, while Southeast Asia later absorbed industrial labour (Siddiqui, 2003).

By the 2000s, remittances became a critical component of national income, stabilising foreign exchange reserves and supporting rural consumption (World Bank, 2023). However, recruitment systems often involve high fees, contract substitution, and legal vulnerability, exposing migrants to exploitation.

Gendered migration expanded as women entered domestic and garment-sector employment abroad, reshaping household power relations while increasing risks of abuse (Dannecker, 2005).

Simultaneously, Bangladesh became a major refugee-hosting country due to the Rohingya crisis, underscoring its dual role as both labour exporter and displacement recipient

(Mannan, 2017). Climate change has further intensified displacement through salinity intrusion, cyclones, and flooding, reinforcing migration as an adaptation strategy (Adger, 2003).

3. Theoretical Framing

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework combining political economy of migration, historical institutionalism, and the forced–voluntary migration continuum to explain long-term population mobility in Bangladesh. Rather than interpreting migration as the outcome of individual decision-making alone, this framework situates mobility within structural transformations in land relations, labour markets, state policies, and regional geopolitics.

3.1 Political Economy of Migration

Political economy perspectives conceptualise migration as a product of uneven development generated by capitalist expansion, colonial extraction, and labour market segmentation (Castles et al., 2014). In colonial Bengal, commercialisation of agriculture and integration into global commodity chains—particularly jute and indigo—produced surplus rural labour while failing to generate sustainable industrial employment. Migration thus functioned as an adjustment mechanism for rural households facing declining access to land and income instability (Islam, 1978).

Postcolonial development strategies reproduced similar dynamics. Limited industrialisation, dependence on foreign aid, and population pressure sustained labour surplus, while overseas labour markets absorbed excess workers. From this perspective, international migration from Bangladesh is not merely a household strategy but an outcome of structural dependency within the global capitalist system (Siddiqui, 2003). Remittances mitigate poverty but do not fundamentally transform productive capacity, reinforcing what some scholars describe as "migration-led development" dependency (de Haas, 2010).

Political economy also highlights the role of the state in managing labour export. Government policies regulating recruitment, bilateral labour agreements, and remittance incentives institutionalise migration as part of national economic planning, effectively externalising unemployment (Gardner, 2012). Thus, migration becomes embedded within development governance rather than remaining an informal survival strategy.

3.2 Historical Institutionalism and State Formation

Historical institutionalism emphasises how institutional arrangements created during critical junctures shape long-term policy trajectories (Pierson, 2004). In Bangladesh, colonial administrative practices, land tenure systems, and disaster management regimes created persistent vulnerabilities that influenced later migration outcomes. The Permanent Settlement, for instance, entrenched landlordism and weakened peasant security, contributing to long-term land fragmentation and tenancy insecurity that continued into the twentieth century (Islam, 1978).

Partition in 1947 and the Liberation War in 1971 constituted critical junctures that reconfigured citizenship, borders, and population distribution. Refugee rehabilitation policies, urban housing practices, and development planning during these periods produced institutional path dependencies that continue to affect urban informality and land access (Chatterji, 2007). Migration patterns are therefore shaped not only by market forces but also by historically embedded governance structures.

Institutional analysis is also essential for understanding environmental migration. Flood control and embankment projects altered river dynamics and resettlement options, often producing new displacement cycles rather than reducing vulnerability (Adnan, 1992). Such interventions demonstrate how state-led development can unintentionally intensify migration pressures.

3.3 Forced–Voluntary Migration Continuum

Traditional migration theory distinguishes between voluntary economic migration and forced displacement due to conflict or disaster. However, contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasises a continuum between these categories (Bakewell, 2010). In Bangladesh, many migration decisions are shaped by intersecting pressures: declining agricultural productivity, debt, environmental hazards, and political insecurity. Even labour migrants who formally migrate voluntarily often do so under constrained livelihood choices.

This continuum framework is particularly relevant for analysing climate-related migration. While climate change rarely acts as a singular trigger, it exacerbates economic precarity and resource scarcity, indirectly driving mobility (Black et al., 2011). River erosion, salinity intrusion, and cyclone damage reduce agricultural viability, pushing households toward urban or overseas labour markets. Such movements are not legally classified as forced migration, yet they involve limited choice and high vulnerability.

Similarly, refugee movements in Bangladesh—including Rohingya displacement—are shaped by regional power relations and humanitarian governance regimes that restrict long-term integration, resulting in protracted displacement and secondary migration (Mannan, 2017). The continuum approach thus allows integration of labour migration, environmental displacement, and refugee movements within a single analytical framework.

3.4 Social Transformation and Identity

Migration theory also recognises migration as a transformative social process rather than merely a spatial shift. Urbanisation produces new class relations, informal economies, and political marginalisation, while overseas migration reshapes gender norms, household authority, and community hierarchies (Dannecker, 2005; Gardner, 1995). Migrant households often occupy ambiguous social positions—economically improved yet socially disconnected—creating tensions between material mobility and social belonging.

Belonging is further complicated by shifting national and regional identities shaped by

border changes and refugee politics. Citizenship regimes define access to rights, welfare, and employment, rendering migrants and refugees differently positioned within state structures (Castles, 2003). Thus, migration must be understood not only in economic terms but also as a process of negotiating political membership and social recognition.

Together, political economy, historical institutionalism, and the forced–voluntary continuum provide a comprehensive framework for understanding migration in Bangladesh as historically produced, structurally constrained, and socially transformative.

4. Methodology: Historical–Qualitative Approach

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a historical–qualitative research design to analyse long-term migration patterns in Bangladesh from 1747 to 2025. The objective is not to quantify migration flows but to interpret how political, economic, and environmental transformations shaped population mobility across successive historical periods. Historical qualitative research is particularly appropriate for examining social processes that unfold over extended timeframes and across multiple institutional contexts (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003).

The research design integrates chronological narrative with thematic analysis, allowing for both period-specific examination and cross-period comparison. This approach facilitates the identification of structural continuities, policy shifts, and critical ruptures influencing migration trajectories.

4.2 Data Sources

The study relies primarily on secondary sources, including:

- **Historical scholarship** on Bengal's political economy, colonial administration, and social change.
- **Migration studies literature** addressing labour migration, refugee movements, and urbanisation in Bangladesh.
- **Policy reports** from international organisations documenting remittance trends and displacement patterns.
- **Demographic and environmental studies** on disaster-induced displacement and climate vulnerability.

Although no original archival research was conducted, the analysis synthesises interpretations derived from colonial records, census materials, and refugee rehabilitation reports as presented in existing historical studies. This strategy is common in macro-historical research where primary data are dispersed and unevenly available across centuries (Tilly, 2001).

4.3 Periodisation Strategy

Periodisation constitutes a central methodological tool in this study. Rather than treating migration as a uniform phenomenon, the analysis divides history into analytically distinct phases reflecting changes in governance structures, economic systems,

and border regimes. The five periods—late Mughal/early Company rule, high colonialism, partition and Pakistan period, post-independence nation-building, and globalisation—are defined based on major institutional transitions that restructured labour markets and citizenship regimes.

Periodisation enables assessment of how similar migration outcomes—such as rural displacement or labour mobility—emerged from different structural conditions over time. It also prevents anachronistic interpretations that project contemporary migration dynamics onto earlier historical contexts.

4.4 Analytical Framework and Thematic Coding

Within each historical period, thematic analysis is applied to identify recurring drivers of migration: land dispossession, labour demand, environmental disruption, political conflict, and development interventions. Themes were derived inductively from the literature and aligned with the theoretical framework.

Thematic synthesis allows comparison across periods to determine which drivers persisted and which emerged under specific political regimes. For instance, while environmental vulnerability remains constant, its interaction with development infrastructure and climate change differs across periods.

4.5 Validity and Triangulation

To enhance analytical validity, the study triangulates across multiple disciplinary literatures, including history, sociology, development studies, and environmental research. Triangulation reduces reliance on single-author interpretations and strengthens causal inferences regarding migration drivers (Denzin, 2012).

Comparative references to other South Asian migration contexts are also used selectively to contextualise Bangladesh's experience within broader regional trends, particularly regarding colonial labour systems and partition displacement.

4.6 Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, reliance on secondary sources restricts the ability to capture subaltern voices and everyday migrant experiences, which are often underrepresented in official historical records. Second, historical demographic data for pre-colonial and early colonial periods are limited, requiring cautious interpretation of migration scale and direction.

Third, the broad temporal scope necessitates selective emphasis, meaning that some micro-level dynamics—such as village-specific migration cultures or gendered household negotiations—are discussed primarily through representative studies rather than exhaustive documentation.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

Although this research does not involve human subjects, ethical considerations arise in the representation of displaced and vulnerable populations. The study avoids framing migrants solely as victims and recognises agency within structural constraints. It also avoids sensationalising disaster or conflict-driven displacement, focusing instead on systemic causes.

5. Findings

This section presents the key findings derived from the historical qualitative analysis of migration in Bangladesh from 1747 to 2025. The findings are organised thematically rather than strictly chronologically, reflecting structural continuities across political regimes. Five major patterns emerge: structural production of surplus labour, environmental displacement as a chronic condition, migration as informal social protection, gendered restructuring of mobility, and institutionalisation of labour export and humanitarian containment.

5.1 Structural Production of Surplus Labour and Persistent Mobility

One of the most consistent findings across historical periods is that migration in Bangladesh has been structurally produced by political and economic systems that generate surplus labour while limiting productive absorption. From colonial commercialisation of agriculture to postcolonial development constraints, economic transformation has repeatedly failed to create sufficient stable employment.

During colonial rule, land revenue systems and commercialisation displaced peasants from subsistence security and compelled participation in wage labour markets linked to plantations, railways, and urban industries (Islam, 1978; Behal, 2014). Migration functioned as a labour supply adjustment within imperial extraction economies. Importantly, such mobility was not necessarily permanent but cyclical, with migrants retaining ties to villages while participating in distant labour markets.

Post-independence development strategies similarly failed to industrialise at scale. While the garment sector expanded significantly after the 1980s, it did not absorb all surplus labour, particularly from disaster-prone rural areas (Kabeer, 2000). As a result, migration remained essential for livelihood diversification. Overseas labour markets increasingly absorbed workers who could not find adequate domestic employment.

This pattern supports political economy arguments that migration in Bangladesh reflects systemic underemployment rather than individual aspiration for upward mobility (Castles et al., 2014). Labour export thus operates as an external labour absorption mechanism compensating for structural development deficits.

5.2 Environmental Displacement as Chronic and Cumulative

A second major finding is that environmental displacement is not episodic but continuous and cumulative. River erosion, cyclones, floods, and salinity intrusion have repeatedly displaced populations, particularly in coastal and riverine regions (Zaman, 1991; Adger, 2003).

Unlike disaster-induced displacement models that emphasise sudden shocks, the Bangladeshi case demonstrates slow-onset environmental stress as a major migration driver. Households often experience repeated displacement, gradually exhausting adaptive capacity and ultimately relocating to urban slums or labour migration corridors.

Environmental displacement also interacts with development interventions. Flood

control embankments, while intended to protect agriculture, frequently alter sediment flows and intensify erosion elsewhere, producing new displacement zones (Adnan, 1992). Thus, environmental migration cannot be understood independently of state infrastructure policies.

Importantly, environmentally displaced populations are rarely formally recognised as internally displaced persons (IDPs), limiting access to resettlement or compensation. Migration, therefore, becomes the primary adaptation mechanism, reinforcing urban informalization and overseas labour dependence.

5.3 Migration as an Informal Social Protection System

A third key finding is that migration functions as an informal social protection mechanism in contexts where formal welfare systems are weak or exclusionary. Households rely on migration to manage income volatility, disaster recovery, health expenses, and education costs (Siddiqui, 2003).

Remittances from internal and international migrants serve as private safety nets, compensating for limited public service provision. This reliance on private transfers effectively shifts responsibility for social reproduction from the state to migrant households, reinforcing neoliberal development trajectories (de Haas, 2010).

Historically, similar dynamics existed during colonial famines, when displaced populations relied on kin networks and migration rather than institutional relief (Sen, 1981). Contemporary disaster recovery similarly depends on household mobility strategies rather than comprehensive state resettlement programs.

Thus, migration operates not merely as an economic choice but as a structural necessity embedded in survival strategies.

5.4 Gendered Restructuring of Mobility and Household Power

Migration has also significantly transformed gender relations and household structures. Historically, migration was male-dominated, particularly in plantation and overseas labour markets. However, since the 1990s, female migration has expanded substantially, especially into domestic work and manufacturing sectors abroad (Dannecker, 2005).

This feminisation of migration has produced contradictory outcomes. On one hand, women's earnings increase household bargaining power and challenge patriarchal dependency structures (Kabeer, 2000). On the other hand, female migrants face higher risks of abuse, contract substitution, and social stigma, particularly in domestic service sectors with weak labour protections.

Internally, garment factory employment has drawn millions of rural women into urban industrial labour, altering marriage patterns, fertility rates, and gender norms (Afsar, 2003). Yet such employment remains precarious, reinforcing cycles of job insecurity and residential instability.

Thus, migration reshapes gender relations but does not necessarily eliminate structural vulnerability, instead redistributing risk within households.

5.5 Institutionalisation of Labour Export and Migration Governance

A fifth major finding is the progressive institutionalisation of labour export as state policy. Since the late 1970s, overseas employment has been actively promoted through recruitment agencies, training programs, and bilateral agreements (Siddiqui, 2003).

Migration governance increasingly frames workers as economic resources contributing to foreign exchange reserves rather than as rights-bearing citizens. Regulatory systems often prioritise recruitment volumes over worker protection, facilitating exploitative recruitment practices and debt-financed migration (Gardner, 2012).

While remittances contribute significantly to GDP and rural development, they also create dependency on volatile external labour markets. Economic shocks, such as oil price fluctuations or pandemic-related shutdowns, immediately affect household livelihoods in Bangladesh.

Thus, state-led migration governance reinforces vulnerability rather than reducing it, institutionalising migration as an economic necessity.

5.6 Refugees, Protracted Displacement, and Containment Regimes

Another important finding concerns refugee hosting and containment practices. Bangladesh has repeatedly absorbed displaced populations, including partition refugees, war refugees in 1971, and most recently, Rohingya refugees from Myanmar (Mannan, 2017).

While humanitarian assistance addresses immediate survival needs, long-term integration policies remain limited. Refugees are often restricted from formal employment and education, creating dependency on aid and informal labour markets.

Protracted displacement thus generates secondary migration, including urban informal settlement and cross-border labour movement. Refugee containment policies, therefore, contribute indirectly to broader migration circuits. This finding highlights how border politics and humanitarian governance shape mobility patterns beyond national migration policy.

5.7 Urbanisation, Informality, and Political Marginalisation

Internal migration has driven rapid urbanisation without corresponding industrial capacity, resulting in extensive informal settlements. Migrants provide essential urban labour yet remain politically marginalised due to insecure tenure and service exclusion (Afsar, 2003).

Informal housing markets reproduce vulnerability to eviction, flooding, and fire hazards. Migrants, therefore, experience multiple layers of insecurity even after relocation.

Urban informalization also affects political participation, as slum residents often lack formal representation and access to social protection programs, reinforcing cycles of poverty-driven mobility. Thus, migration does not necessarily produce stable

settlement but may entrench spatial and political marginality.

5.8 Intergenerational Continuity of Migration

Finally, the findings reveal strong intergenerational continuity in migration behaviour. Children of migrants are more likely to migrate, both internally and internationally, reflecting normalised migration cultures in certain regions (Gardner, 1995).

Migration becomes embedded within social expectations, shaping education choices, marriage arrangements, and investment strategies. Villages increasingly integrate migration into local economies through remittance-funded construction and consumption. This social normalisation reinforces dependence on migration pathways, making structural transformation more difficult even when alternative employment opportunities emerge.

Collectively, the findings demonstrate that migration in Bangladesh is not an episodic response to crisis but a historically entrenched adaptation to structural inequality, environmental vulnerability, and limited state capacity. Economic restructuring, political conflict, and climate stress intersect to produce persistent mobility across centuries.

Migration functions simultaneously as a survival mechanism, development strategy, and governance tool. While remittances alleviate poverty, migration also externalises labour risks and social reproduction costs to households, reinforcing dependence on external labour markets.

Thus, migration should be understood as a constitutive feature of the Bangladeshi political economy rather than a temporary or exceptional condition.

6. Discussion: Linking Findings with Theory and Literature

This section interprets the empirical and historical findings through the theoretical lenses outlined earlier, situating Bangladesh's migration experience within broader debates on political economy, environmental displacement, labour export regimes, and social transformation. The discussion demonstrates that migration in Bangladesh is best understood not as an episodic crisis response but as a structurally embedded outcome of uneven development, ecological vulnerability, and institutionalised governance strategies.

6.1 Migration as Structurally Produced Mobility

The finding that surplus labour generation persists across historical regimes strongly supports political economy theories of migration. Classical push–pull models, which attribute migration primarily to wage differentials and individual choice, are insufficient to explain why mobility remains pervasive even when economic growth occurs (Castles et al., 2014). Instead, Bangladesh's experience aligns with dependency and world-systems perspectives, which argue that peripheral economies are structurally integrated into global capitalism

as labour suppliers and raw material producers (Wallerstein, 2004).

Colonial commercialisation transformed Bengal into an export-oriented agrarian economy without corresponding industrialisation, creating structural underemployment (Islam, 1978). Postcolonial development did not fundamentally alter this pattern; industrial expansion remained limited, and capital-intensive sectors absorbed relatively few workers. As a result, labour surplus was externalised through migration. This finding supports de Haas's (2010) argument that migration often increases during early development stages rather than declining, as households acquire resources necessary for mobility.

Thus, migration in Bangladesh reflects systemic economic positioning rather than merely individual rational calculation. Labour export functions as an extension of development policy, substituting for domestic employment creation, which aligns with critiques of "migration-led development" strategies that rely on remittances while neglecting structural transformation (Delgado Wise et al., 2013).

6.2 Environmental Stress, Development, and the Migration Continuum

The findings regarding chronic environmental displacement align closely with the forced–voluntary migration continuum framework. Environmental migration in Bangladesh rarely takes the form of immediate mass exodus; instead, it unfolds through repeated livelihood erosion that gradually compels relocation (Black et al., 2011). This supports arguments that environmental change acts as a threat multiplier rather than a singular migration trigger.

Furthermore, the interaction between development infrastructure and environmental vulnerability reinforces political ecology perspectives. Embankments and irrigation schemes, while intended to stabilise agriculture, have often redistributed flood risks and intensified riverbank erosion elsewhere (Adnan, 1992). Such unintended consequences demonstrate how development interventions can reproduce displacement rather than reduce it.

This dynamic challenges policy narratives that treat environmental migration as an external shock requiring emergency humanitarian response. Instead, migration emerges as a rational adaptation strategy within contexts of chronic ecological insecurity and limited state resettlement capacity (Adger, 2003). The Bangladeshi case thus supports calls for integrating migration into climate adaptation planning rather than treating it as a policy failure (Black et al., 2011).

6.3 Migration as Informal Welfare and Social Reproduction

A particularly significant finding is the role of migration as informal social protection. In the absence of comprehensive welfare systems, households rely on migrant income to manage health crises, education expenses, and disaster recovery. This confirms broader findings in migration studies that remittances

often substitute for public social services in low-income countries (de Haas, 2010).

From a political economy perspective, this represents a privatisation of social reproduction, where households bear responsibility for managing risks generated by structural inequality. Migration thus becomes part of everyday survival governance, reducing pressure on the state to expand welfare provision (Castles et al., 2014).

This finding resonates with feminist political economy literature emphasising that migration redistributes care and financial responsibilities within families, often intensifying burdens on women who remain behind or migrate under precarious conditions (Kabeer, 2000). Migration does not eliminate vulnerability but rearranges who absorbs risk and cost.

Thus, while remittances may reduce poverty at the household level, they simultaneously legitimise development models that underinvest in social infrastructure, reinforcing long-term dependence on labour export.

6.4 Gender, Mobility, and Contradictory Empowerment

The feminisation of migration presents complex social outcomes. Findings indicating increased female labour migration support arguments that economic necessity can disrupt traditional gender norms and increase women's bargaining power (Dannecker, 2005). Participation in factory or overseas employment often delays marriage, increases financial autonomy, and reshapes household authority structures.

However, the risks associated with female migration—exposure to abuse, lack of legal protection, and social stigma—highlight structural constraints embedded in global labour markets. Domestic work sectors remain poorly regulated internationally, placing women migrants in legally ambiguous and socially isolated positions (Piper, 2005).

This contradiction aligns with feminist migration theory, which emphasises that migration can simultaneously empower and exploit women, depending on labour regimes and migration governance (Kofman et al., 2000). In Bangladesh, women's economic participation expands, yet patriarchal vulnerabilities persist in both sending and receiving contexts.

Therefore, migration-driven gender transformation should not be romanticised as unambiguously emancipatory but understood as uneven and contingent upon institutional protections.

6.5 Institutionalisation of Labour Export and Governance Failure

The institutionalisation of labour export as a national development strategy reflects broader neoliberal governance trends that prioritise market solutions over employment creation. Bangladesh's migration governance focuses heavily on recruitment facilitation and remittance inflows rather than worker rights protection (Siddiqui, 2003).

This aligns with global migration regime critiques suggesting that sending states often

accept exploitative labour conditions abroad in exchange for foreign exchange earnings and diplomatic ties (Castles, 2003). Weak regulation of recruitment agencies and high migration costs exacerbate debt-driven migration, increasing vulnerability to trafficking and forced labour.

From a historical institutionalist perspective, once labour export becomes embedded in economic planning, policy alternatives become politically costly. Migration infrastructure—training centres, remittance channels, recruitment agencies—creates vested interests that sustain outward mobility even when domestic employment options exist (Pierson, 2004).

Thus, migration governance in Bangladesh reflects path-dependent policy choices that prioritise short-term economic stabilisation over long-term labour market development.

6.6 Refugee Hosting, Containment, and Secondary Migration

The findings on refugee containment illustrate how humanitarian governance shapes migration outcomes beyond immediate displacement. Restrictions on movement, employment, and education in refugee camps contribute to prolonged dependency and secondary migration pathways (Mannan, 2017).

This supports literature on protracted refugee situations, where lack of integration options pushes refugees into informal labour markets or irregular migration (Loescher et al., 2008). Bangladesh's refugee policies, influenced by security concerns and resource constraints, thus indirectly contribute to broader regional migration flows.

Furthermore, refugee hosting intersects with domestic labour markets, as displaced populations may compete with poor citizens for informal employment, intensifying social tensions and political sensitivities. Migration policy, therefore, cannot be separated from refugee policy in contexts of chronic displacement.

6.7 Urban Informality and Political Exclusion

Urbanisation without industrialisation has produced what scholars term "urbanisation of poverty," where cities absorb migrants without providing stable employment or adequate housing (Davis, 2006). Bangladesh's slum expansion reflects this global trend.

Migrants' exclusion from formal tenure and service provision limits political participation and reinforces spatial segregation. Informality becomes institutionalised, reproducing vulnerability across generations (Afsar, 2003).

This finding aligns with rights-based urban studies arguing that migrants are essential to urban economies yet excluded from citizenship benefits, creating what Castles (2003) describes as "differential inclusion." Migration thus reshapes urban demographics without producing full social integration.

6.8 Migration, Culture and Intergenerational Reproduction

The intergenerational continuity of migration supports sociological theories of migration

culture, where social networks normalise and perpetuate mobility (Massey et al., 1993). Once migration becomes embedded in community expectations, it functions as a default livelihood strategy.

In Bangladesh, migration shapes education choices, investment patterns, and marriage negotiations, reinforcing dependence on remittance economies even when alternative opportunities emerge. This social embedding makes policy efforts to reduce migration through local employment generation less effective unless accompanied by broader structural reform. Thus, migration reproduces itself socially as well as economically.

6.9 Integrating Borders, Bread, and Belonging

The analytical triad of borders, bread, and belonging is validated by the findings. Borders—colonial, national, and regional—redefined citizenship and access to rights. Bread—livelihood survival—drove mobility across all periods. Belonging—identity and social membership—was continuously renegotiated through displacement and settlement.

Migration in Bangladesh is therefore simultaneously economic, political, and cultural. Policies addressing only one dimension are unlikely to succeed.

Overall, the findings confirm that migration in Bangladesh represents a historically produced adaptation to structural inequality, environmental instability, and limited institutional protection. Migration alleviates immediate livelihood pressures but perpetuates long-term dependency on external labour markets and informal urban economies.

The Bangladeshi case thus illustrates how migration can function both as a development safety valve and as a symptom of development failure. Without structural economic transformation, environmental adaptation, and inclusive urban governance, migration will remain central to national survival strategies.

7. Policy Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study indicate that migration in Bangladesh is not merely a labour market outcome but a structurally embedded development strategy shaped by economic inequality, environmental vulnerability, and institutional limitations. Consequently, policy interventions must move beyond narrow labour export facilitation and adopt integrated approaches addressing employment creation, social protection, climate adaptation, and migration governance.

7.1 Reorienting Development toward Employment-Centred Growth

Bangladesh's development strategy has prioritised export-oriented manufacturing and overseas labour deployment, yet both sectors absorb limited segments of the labour force relative to population growth. Public investment should therefore prioritize labor-intensive rural and small-town industries, including agro-processing, renewable energy infrastructure, and localised manufacturing

clusters (Islam, 2015). Such decentralisation can reduce excessive urban concentration while providing stable employment near climate-affected communities.

Moreover, vocational education must be aligned with domestic industrial strategies rather than solely with overseas labour markets. Skills training that supports local entrepreneurship and cooperative enterprises can reduce dependence on precarious international migration pathways (World Bank, 2019). Without internal employment expansion, migration will remain the default livelihood strategy rather than a voluntary choice.

7.2 Strengthening Social Protection and Risk Mitigation Mechanisms

The study demonstrates that households rely on migration income as informal insurance against illness, disaster, and income shocks. This underscores the urgency of strengthening formal social protection systems. Expanding universal health coverage, unemployment assistance, and disaster-responsive cash transfer programs would reduce the compulsion to migrate under distress conditions (Barrientos, 2013).

Community-based adaptation programs should integrate livelihood diversification and social insurance mechanisms in environmentally vulnerable zones. Public employment schemes during lean agricultural seasons can stabilise incomes and reduce cyclical migration (Adger et al., 2003). Strengthening local resilience reduces forced mobility and enhances adaptive capacity.

7.3 Integrating Migration into Climate Adaptation Planning

Migration should be recognised as both an adaptation strategy and a development planning variable. National climate policies must incorporate mobility planning, including relocation support, urban housing provision, and portable social benefits for migrants (Black et al., 2011). Current climate frameworks largely focus on physical infrastructure while neglecting human mobility as a socio-economic response to environmental stress.

Planned relocation programs, where necessary, must ensure livelihood continuity, land access, and social integration rather than mere physical resettlement. Without economic reintegration, relocation risks reproducing poverty in new locations (Adnan, 2015). Therefore, climate-induced mobility policies should be participatory, rights-based, and development-oriented.

7.4 Reforming Migration Governance and Labour Protection

Overseas employment will continue to play a significant role in Bangladesh's economy; however, governance must shift from recruitment facilitation toward migrant protection. Reducing recruitment fees, regulating intermediaries, and strengthening bilateral labour agreements can significantly reduce debt-bonded migration and trafficking risks (Siddiqui, 2003).

Pre-departure training should include legal literacy, contract transparency, and grievance mechanisms. At the destination level, diplomatic missions must be equipped to

provide labour dispute support and repatriation assistance. International cooperation is essential to enforce ethical recruitment standards across labour corridors (ILO, 2018).

Particular attention is required for female migrants in the domestic and care sectors, where labour protections remain weakest. Expanding safe migration pathways and destination-country monitoring can mitigate gender-based vulnerabilities (Piper, 2005).

7.5 Urban Inclusion and Migrant Citizenship

Urban policy must acknowledge migrants as permanent contributors to city economies rather than temporary occupants. Secure housing, access to education, healthcare, and legal residency documentation are essential to prevent the institutionalisation of slum poverty (Afsar, 2003).

Municipal governments should integrate migrant populations into service delivery frameworks and urban planning processes. Participatory slum upgrading and rental housing schemes can improve living conditions while reducing forced eviction cycles. Inclusive urban citizenship strengthens social cohesion and political accountability.

7.6 Refugee Integration and Regional Cooperation

The prolonged displacement of refugee populations necessitates policy frameworks that balance humanitarian protection with economic participation. Restrictions on movement and employment perpetuate dependency and increase risks of secondary irregular migration (Loescher et al., 2008). Allowing controlled access to labour markets and education can enhance self-reliance while benefiting host economies.

Regional cooperation mechanisms are also required to address cross-border displacement driven by conflict and climate stress. Multilateral agreements on burden-sharing, resettlement, and development financing can reduce unilateral pressures on host countries such as Bangladesh (Mannan, 2017).

7.7 Institutional Coordination and Data Systems

Migration governance remains fragmented across multiple ministries and agencies. Establishing centralised migration coordination authorities can improve policy coherence across labour, urban development, climate adaptation, and social welfare sectors (Castles et al., 2014).

Robust data systems tracking internal and international mobility patterns are critical for evidence-based planning. Longitudinal household surveys and urban migrant registries can improve targeting of services and disaster preparedness strategies.

8. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that migration in Bangladesh is a historically embedded, structurally produced phenomenon shaped by political economy, environmental vulnerability, and institutional governance. From colonial agrarian restructuring to contemporary labour export regimes, mobility has functioned as a survival

mechanism within systems of uneven development and limited social protection.

The findings reveal that migration operates simultaneously as an adaptation, welfare substitute, and development strategy. While remittances alleviate household poverty and finance education and housing, they also sustain national dependence on external labour markets and reduce pressure for domestic employment expansion. Environmental stress further intensifies mobility by eroding rural livelihoods and displacing vulnerable populations into informal urban economies or overseas labour corridors.

Importantly, migration reshapes social relations, gender norms, and urban demographics, producing both empowerment opportunities and new forms of precarity. Female migration illustrates this duality, as economic participation expands alongside exposure to exploitation in weakly regulated labour sectors. Refugee displacement similarly intersects with domestic migration systems, complicating labour markets and social integration.

The study concludes that migration cannot be addressed solely through border management or labour deployment policies. Instead, effective migration governance must be embedded within broader development strategies emphasising employment generation, climate resilience, social protection, and inclusive urbanisation. Without structural transformation, migration will remain central to household survival and national economic stability, perpetuating cycles of vulnerability and dependency.

Ultimately, migration in Bangladesh should be recognised not as a policy failure, but as a rational response to systemic constraints. However, reliance on migration as a development substitute is neither sustainable nor socially equitable. Long-term solutions require re-centring development on human security, dignity of work, and territorial equity. Only through integrated, rights-based, and employment-centred policies can migration become a genuine choice rather than an economic necessity.

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