

Assam citizenship row: Will Bangladesh be affected?



TASLIMA YASMIN

National Register of Citizens (NRC), a process meant to identify and delist those who are "illegal migrants" living in this northeastern state of India. Although there was no official assertion during the process of updating the draft NRC that the excluded people are in fact those who had supposedly migrated from Bangladesh, the debates and discourses surrounding citizenship in Assam had always linked Bangladesh to the controversial issue of illegal migration.

The so-called infiltration by foreigners had long been a cause of tension in Assam. It had been argued that the open-border policy, allegedly maintained by the ruling political parties for a surge in their vote bank, had allowed the influx of foreigners from across the borders of Bangladesh into Assam with forged documents. This fear had in fact led to a six-year-long agitation in Assam spearheaded by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) that ended in 1985 with the signing of the Assam Accord between the Indian government and the leaders of the movement. The Assam Accord prescribed a cut-off date of March 24, 1971 after which an entry into the state would be considered illegal. In the context of the Accord, the Indian

Citizenship Act of 1955 was amended to include section 6A which reaffirmed the Accord's cut-off date in order to declare any person as "foreigner".

In 2012, a writ petition was filed in the Indian Supreme Court challenging the legality of section 6A of the 1955 Act as being discriminatory. In 2014, in deciding the case, the Supreme Court Bench comprising two judges, one of whom incidentally hailed from Assam, referred the questions of legality of section 6A to be placed before an appropriate, larger judicial bench, but laid down a roadmap requiring the government to publish a time-bound updated NRC for Assam. The 2014 Supreme Court directive also placed the court itself in a supervisory role to monitor the process of updating the NRC. Hence, although the drive for expulsion of the illegal migrants from Assam has always had some political dimensions attached to it, it is because of the 2014 judgment that the current process of delisting more than four million people was vigorously defended by the BJP government as a "non-political" process and done under the supervision of the Supreme Court.

During the 2014 elections campaign, Narendra Modi had been quoted as saying that he would "send these Bangladeshis beyond the border bag and baggage." Interestingly, in the 2014 judgment, the Indian Supreme Court had also referred to illegal migrants in Assam as "Bangladeshis" and cited a number of state documents, official reports and previous decisions which had similarly referred to the illegal migrants as Bangladeshis. The 2014

judgment also discussed at length as to how the Indo-Bangladesh border could be better protected to control illegal migration from Bangladesh. Even now, after the publication of the NRC draft, many BJP leaders, activists, as well as a section of the Indian media are frequently referring to "Bangladeshis" as "illegal infiltrators" that the draft register had been aiming to detect.

On the other hand, critiques in India have also talked about the deliberate refraining of the Indian government from bringing up this so-called illegal migration issue in any official meeting with Bangladesh. However, Bangladesh's position, as has been clarified by government officials in a number of informal media exchanges, is that there has been no unauthorised migration from Bangladesh to Assam after its 1971 independence, emphasising that amongst the many bilateral issues between India and Bangladesh, illegal migration in Assam had never been brought up by the Indian government.

Given that India had never officially conveyed any concern on the matter, it seems prudent that Bangladesh has also refrained from conveying any formal reaction or concern. However, considering how Bangladeshis were time and again labelled "illegal migrants" at various official platforms in India including its apex court, the government of Bangladesh may reconsider its position. The message to India should perhaps be that: in resolving its own political issues created over the possible exclusion of four million people from citizenship, India should ensure that this does not put a strain on the international cooperation and



PHOTO: REUTERS

The issue of illegal migration from Bangladesh has always been an emotional and politically charged one in Assam.

security in the region. In addition to being labelled illegal migrants, what is worrying for Bangladesh is that in search of an answer as to what would be the fate of these potential stateless individuals, the possibility of deportation to Bangladesh had been mentioned at various forums. In December 2017, Assam minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, who is also in charge of the citizenship register, had been quoted by several media outlets as saying that identifying "illegal Bangladeshis residing in Assam" was the main purpose of updating the NRC—and that "all those whose names do not figure in the NRC will have to be deported." This had raised concerns also at the international

level; the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reportedly wrote to the Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj in June 2018, seeking a clarification about the fate of the individuals to be excluded from the updated NRC—mentioning specifically the above comment by Himanta Biswa Sarma. Moreover, the 2014 Supreme Court directive itself had asked the government of India to "enter into necessary discussions with the Government of Bangladesh to streamline the procedure of deportation." There is, however, also an argument that it is unlikely that the issue of deportation would ever be formally raised by the Indian government considering its delicate

diplomatic relationship with Bangladesh. Yet, considering how the debates surrounding the updated NRC in Assam link Bangladesh, such a possibility cannot be altogether ignored. Lastly, considering how India had positively approached issues of humanitarian crisis and protection of the minorities in the past, it can only be expected that the Indian government would show its political foresight in resolving this issue through a humane approach, keeping in mind the sensitive regional dynamics attached to it. Taslima Yasmin is an assistant professor at the Department of Law, University of Dhaka. Email: taslima47@yahoo.com

How social media breeds social movements



SHAFIQ RAHMAN

OBSERVERS in Bangladesh are still grappling to figure out the sudden and powerful student movement that paralysed the capital city over a demand for safe roads. The movement began when a minister grinned on camera, apparently dismissing the deaths of two college students who were killed by a speeding bus. A video clip of the minister's response went viral in social media and led to a movement the likes of which Bangladesh has never experienced before. It bears a resemblance to all the social media-driven movements that we have seen in other parts of the world in recent years.

Social media has connected people from almost every walk of life all over the world. According to an estimate, a whopping 3.3 billion people, about half of the total population of the world, used some form of social media in January 2018. Even though the overall penetration of social media is still low in Bangladesh, according to a report by *The Daily Star*, Dhaka boasts the second largest number of active Facebook users in the world. Users are engaged in a variety of activities, such as maintaining personal connection, getting news, looking for information, finding entertainment. But one particular use of social media—getting engaged socially and politically—needs to be looked into, because it has the potential for positive social change.

But apparently, we only see the outrage in social media. For example, Bangladeshi users reacted strongly to the graphic images of protesting students being beaten by those opposing the movement. The recent killing of

Teknaf Municipality councillor Akramul Haque created outrage in social media. A host of other incidents including the rape and murder of Tonu in Comilla also captured national attention. We observed social media's role during the trial of some war criminals of the 1971 war of independence. Social media, especially Facebook, Twitter and Youtube, often helped keep the cause for



A policeman receives flowers from a student at the Science Laboratory intersection on August 1, as part of the student movement demanding road safety. STAR FILE PHOTO

a movement/protest alive. In many cases, the mainstream media were slow to report or respond, but were prodded into action after social media users got louder and angrier. All available evidence suggest that the recent student movement demanding road safety was indeed a social media-driven event. It's similar in nature to other social media-

inspired movements. In Iceland and Spain, social media played pivotal roles in spreading anger, organising protests on the streets, and in some cases, bringing about positive outcomes. So, the question is: what makes social media such a potent force for social mobilisation? Manuel Castells, a Spanish social scientist, has been studying social networking and

personal frames, accompanied by strong, often provocative images. These stories usually go viral as users share them in their networks. Usually, tech-savvy, young urban populations take leading roles in the ensuing movements. Recent developments in the realm of information and communications technology have shifted the balance of power from government and traditional media to end-users. Social media users have become producers and can convey their messages to networked mass audiences, bypassing the scrutiny of the government and the content editors of traditional media.

In other words, the Internet and mobile technologies have greatly democratised public spheres. This democratisation has turned social media into a powerful tool for social movement. However, social media alone cannot trigger a movement. There should be what the scholars call "objective conditions" for any movement to take place. Conditions such as oppression, injustice, lack of freedom, or limited economic opportunity create a fertile ground for social movement. One of the common themes of social movements today is the general people's dignity. When people's dignity is violated and their cry for justice is ignored by the ruling elite, social movements begin to incubate from within the society. All that is needed then is a dramatic incident to trigger it.

In the case of the recent student movement, it was ignited by the video clip of the said minister's smirk and dismissive comments.

It can be noted that the Arab Spring began when a Tunisian street vender set himself on fire because he could not provide for his family and experienced repeated police abuse. The image, which was taken by a camera phone, went viral and set in motion a chain of events leading to a

historic movement that caused the collapse of some powerful regimes in the Middle East. But the question is: how do social media-driven movements survive? Castells argues that people are driven by anger but at the same time, they are also driven by fear—fear of repercussions. But they overcome that fear thinking that they are not alone; there are others in the networked community that is equally outraged. Thus, social media provides a platform for mobilisation and organisation of protests. Students involved in the recent movement in Bangladesh have reportedly used social media tools for mobilisation and orchestration of the protests. It is surprising that these types of movements can survive for weeks and even months without any formal organisation and established leadership. Another interesting feature of this type of movement is: the protesters occupy urban spaces and they use the spaces not only to protest but also to create audio-visual materials and share those in their networks. We have seen how the protesting students literally took control of Dhaka's traffic system and recorded hundreds of videos and shared them online. Thus, the occupation of urban spaces and social media creates a symbiotic relation that feeds each other and helps sustain the movements. Over the years, governments have learned how to control social media-inspired movements. Some of the techniques are crude such as shutting down the Internet, blocking certain online platforms and other measures. In some cases, governments use extreme force to suppress the movements. But the protests may always resurface in one way or another unless the underlying issues are resolved. Shafiq Rahman is a Professor of Communication at Chadron State College in Nebraska, USA.

QUOTEABLE Quote

MOHANDAS KARAMCHAND GANDHI (1869-1948)

The leader of the Indian independence movement against British rule

Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Hole in your head

6 City of 46-Across

11 Brief rest

12 Biscotti flavor

13 Building wing

14 Mumbai's nation

15 Lahr of "The Wizard of Oz"

17 Used a chair

18 Catch a wave, in a way

22 Surrounded by

23 Japanese entertainer

27 Competitor

29 Fantasy

30 Social standing

32 Store come-on

33 Atomic orbiter

35 Decline

38 Pencil part

39 Pageant crown

41 Identified

45 Improvise on stage

46 Boot-shaped nation

47 Prepared

48 Not wordy

DOWN

1 Masseur's place

2 McKellen of "X-Men"

3 Convent resident

4 Product package stamp

5 Perennial

6 Restaurant VIP

7 Tavern

8 Toppers

9 Largest continent

10 Orderly

16 Floor cover

18 Saloons

19 Leave out

20 Opera star

21 Meeting for coffee, maybe

24 Blacken

25 Ring of light

26 Prayer finish

28 Nursery tune

31 Look upon

34 "Be quiet!"

35 Flag feature

36 Staff member

37 Charity event

40 Free (of)

42 Spoil

43 Golfer Ernie

44 Fabric color

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

L	I	N	E	D	D	E	C	A	L
A	B	I	D	E	A	G	A	P	E
V	E	X	E	D	H	O	S	E	A
I	R	O	N	I	C	I	R	S	
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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

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