

NRC back in political focus in Shah-Mamata battle

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

AFTER a brief hiatus, the issue of the NRC in Assam and "illegal migrants" from Bangladesh seems to have returned to the focus of political discourse in India.

The issue figured prominently in the speeches of political rivals Bharatiya Janata Party President Amit Shah and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee at separate events on November 15. Addressing two poll rallies in BJP-ruled Madhya Pradesh where assembly polls are due soon, Shah said his party, if voted back to power at the centre in next year's parliamentary elections, would trace and drive out "infiltrators" from Bangladesh. Shah said infiltrators were coming to India since 1971 and formed the "vote bank" of opposition parties like Congress and Trinamool Congress.

Scaling up his diatribe against opposition leaders, Shah said that after over 40 lakh people were left out in the final draft of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam, leaders like Congress president Rahul Gandhi, Mamata Banerjee, Telugu Desam Party president N Chandrababu Naidu and Samajwadi Party patriarch Mulayam Singh Yadav "whined as if their granny had died". In raking up the NRC issue, Shah has picked up from where he left till a few days ago when he, during his speeches at different functions, was quoted by Indian media reports as terming the illegal migrants as "termites" and said the BJP would detect, deport and disenfranchise illegal migrants.

Interestingly, the word "termites"



never figured in the excerpts of Shah's speech posted on the party's website. It may be recalled that the BJP had adopted a resolution at a meeting of its key decision-making forum the National Executive in New Delhi on September 8, congratulating Modi and Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal for implementing NRC in the state. The "illegal migrants" issue figured in Shah's speech to BJP workers as late as November 12.

On the same day when Shah spoke at rallies in Madhya Pradesh on November 15, Mamata alleged at a meeting close to the border with Bangladesh that "dirty politics" is going on in the name of the final draft of National Register of Citizens which left out 4.7 million people, in Assam as names of "genuine" voters have been struck off the list. While Mamata's strident criticism of the NRC was familiar, what was significant was that



SOURCE: TWITTER

she chose to air it during her visit to Thakurnagar in West Bengal's North 24 Parganas during the birth centenary celebrations of Binapani Devi Thakur, the nonagenarian matriarch of the community who is revered among the Matua Hindu sect which originally hails from what now constitutes Bangladesh and migrated to West Bengal and Assam in large number after the Partition in 1947 and afterwards. Besides conferring the West Bengal government's top award, "Bangabibhusan", on Binapani Devi, Mamata announced a number of sops to woo the Matua community including allocation of land for a proposed university to be named after the founders of the sect Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur.

A large number of people belonging to the Matua community in Assam has been left out of the NRC in Assam. Trinamool Congress legislator Mamata

Bala Thakur is a Trinamool Congress legislator in West Bengal. Mamata Banerjee made it a point to recall in her speech at Thakurnagar that Mamata Thakur, along with seven other party leaders, were not allowed to enter the Bangla-speaking majority Silchar town in Assam when they had gone there soon after the publication of the final draft of NRC.

Mamata has in the past accused the BJP of mounting a polarising narrative on the NRC issue and the Modi government of trying to make millions of people "stateless" in Assam. And she kept up the trend on Thursday too. Apparently in riposte to Shah, Mamata said in Thakurnagar that many people from erstwhile East Pakistan had come to India as refugees and that all those who came to India before 1971 are very much Indian citizens. Under the 1985 Assam peace accord, the cut-off year for deciding the issue of Indian citizenship in Assam is 1971.

Mamata, who has been highly critical of the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi since the publication of the final draft of NRC on July 30, has been making full use of the emotive issue of linguistic and ethnic fault lines that were revived in Assam by the NRC and the issue of Indian government's move to grant citizenship to "persecuted" religious minorities in Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan. As part of her efforts, she had also sent a team of her party leaders, including Mamata Bala Thakur, who met the families of five Bangla-speaking persons that were shot dead by suspected United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA-Independent faction) in

Tinsukia district of Assam.

The reasons for Mamata to reach out to the Matua community are two-fold: i) The community is estimated to constitute the second largest group of "namashudra" castes which form the backbone of Trinamool Congress' core support base and; ii) More importantly, it may help her efforts to counter a perception, created in certain quarters in West Bengal by the BJP's sustained campaign, of her government being soft towards "illegal migrants" from Bangladesh which, for the saffron party, is an euphemism for Muslims.

It is the sustained Hindutva narrative of the BJP that has forced the Congress party to adopt a soft Hindutva posture. With its President Rahul Gandhi beginning to visit temples since the Gujarat state assembly elections late last year, and his party promising, among other things, in its manifesto for the coming Madhya Pradesh state polls, certain steps with religious overtones like building a route taken by Lord Rama during his exile, setting up cow conservation centres, commercial production of cow urine and opening a spiritual department in the state administration. There is a recognition among the major parties in India that politics has to be based on a blend of developmental agenda and nationalism and sub-texts of nationalism in different forms.

The pitch of the political rhetoric over the NRC and the illegal migrants issues is likely to rise further as the parliamentary elections draw closer.

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What if US withdraws from WTO!



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

THE US threatened on several occasions in recent years to walk out from the World Trade Organization (WTO), an intergovernmental organisation

that regulates international trade. This is not the first time that the US threatened to withdraw from international bodies or agreements. US has already pulled out of TPP and the climate change accord, and will withdraw its membership in UNESCO, effective December 2018. Since taking office in January 2017, President Trump and various members of his cabinet have indicated their displeasure with WTO and its rules and regulations. The US has held that the dispute resolution mechanism of WTO is biased against the former and that the latter has been incapable of monitoring whether members are complying with the rules of fair trade. US, along with other countries, have voiced concerns about the inability of WTO to reform itself to keep up with changing times, and to position itself to be the arbiter of international trade in the 21st century. In response, WTO's Director-General Roberto Azevedo said in September 2018 that his organisation can change and it "wants to pursue dialogue with an increasingly critical U.S. to achieve reform in a range of areas, including its consensus-based decision-making process."

There are many grievances that Trump and his advisors, particularly Wilbur Ross, Commerce Secretary and Robert Lighthizer, US Trade Representative (USTR), have articulated and this crescendo of complaints has

only gone up since the US-China trade war began earlier this year. Trump has often repeated his argument that WTO is "treating us badly and I hope they change their ways. If they don't shape up, I would withdraw from the WTO." The White House added teeth to its rhetoric by holding up appointments to the organisation's appeals court, impairing its dispute-settlement process.

US has many reasons for its dissatisfaction with WTO, chief among them is its inability to enforce its own rules and the perceived anti-US bias of its dispute resolution mechanism. Before I address the merit of the US case, it needs to be mentioned that the 164 members of WTO have been struggling over the last few years to overhaul the organisation. Now Canada, EU and even China have joined hands to resuscitate WTO since its survival is in jeopardy. As Keegan Elmer wrote in the *South China Morning Post*, "China is seeking to work with the European Union on WTO reform," adding that China "gives priority to solving problems that threaten the survival of the WTO."

WTO has many flaws, and from the US perspective, a major one is its inability to censure nations that flout WTO's anti-dumping laws and pursue policies that subsidise domestic industries. The current US administration, once it realised that WTO is incapable of dealing with these problems, sidestepped the WTO system and applied tariffs targeting overproduction of steel and aluminium by China and others based on a US national security law which is WTO compliant.

Trump and Lighthizer have also said the WTO is incapable of policing China, according to James McBride of Council on Foreign Relation, a think-

tank in Washington. The USTR's 2018 report on China argues that China's state-led economic policy is "inimical to global free trade rules" and renders the WTO effectively irrelevant. "No amount of enforcement activities by other WTO members would be sufficient to remedy this type of behaviour," it states.

The last WTO Ministerial meeting (MC11) held in Buenos Aires has been

US also considers the dispute settlement mechanism of WTO to be slow and biased against the US. When a member country lodges a complaint with WTO, it appoints a panel to hear the case. If found guilty, the respondent country can appeal to WTO's Appellate Body (AB), a court consisting of seven persons, which then adjudicates and its decisions are final and binding. During 1995-2015, "the United States has lost

"Economic Report of the President" for 2018, "The United States has won 85.7 percent of the cases it has initiated before the WTO since 1995, compared with a global average of 84.4 percent. In contrast, China's success rate is just 66.7 percent." However, the US has been sued more often than any other country. To forestall this process, US has blocked recent appointments to the AB.

In defence of the Trump Administration, let it be said that it is following earlier US practices. The Obama administration ignored a series of unfavourable rulings by the AB and blocked the appointment of a WTO judge to the AB for the first time. Under Trump, the United States has continued to block appointments to the AB over concerns that it has exceeded its mandate.

To pacify Trump and to nudge WTO members to expedite reforms, Canada hosted ministers from 13 "like-minded" WTO members at the Ottawa Ministerial on WTO reform on October 24 and 25. The meeting, which included Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, the European Union, Japan, Kenya, Korea, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, Singapore, and Switzerland, worked on three areas: i) Improving efficiency and effectiveness of WTO monitoring and transparency functions; ii) Safeguarding dispute settlement; iii) Creating 21st century trade rules.

Jim Carr, Canada's Minister of International Trade Diversification, promised that the group will "come up with a consensus for reform that we will then roll out to other members of the WTO."

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PHOTO: AFP/FABRICE COFFRINI

considered a total failure even by US enemies. Since any change in its rules requires a consensus of member countries, MC11 failed to agree on anything. Another US beef with WTO is the fact that five of the six richest countries, including Qatar and Singapore, claim developing country status at the WTO, without providing any evidence, and this allows them to delay implementing WTO agreements.

89.6 percent of the 77 cases brought against it, with an even higher loss ratio of 92.7 percent on cases brought against our unfair trading practice rules. The United States has lost 100 percent of the cases brought against U.S. public interest law," according to "Public Citizen", an advocacy group, based in Washington, DC.

The merit of this argument can be questioned. According to the

QUOTABLE Quote

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE
(1821-1867)
French poet

Modernity signifies the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art of which the other half is the eternal and the immutable.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Makes like a ghost
- 7 Regarding
- 11 Burning
- 12 Harry Potter feature
- 13 Blues-based music
- 14 Wise one
- 15 Scary genre
- 17 Make finer
- 20 Put up
- 23 Neither follower
- 24 "It'll be OK"
- 26 Numerical prefix
- 27 Gene messenger
- 28 Drake's music
- 29 "So what?!"
- 31 Have debts
- 32 Unstressed vowel

DOWN

- 1 Mischievous goblin
- 2 "I'll take that as..."
- 3 Alien craft
- 4 Dark time
- 5 Macbeth's witches, e.g.
- 6 Crystal gazer
- 7 Classify
- 8 Field guard
- 9 Price place
- 10 Bauxite, e.g.
- 16 Of the kidneys
- 17 Purposely ignores
- 18 Column style
- 19 Over-the-top topper
- 21 Swimming stroke
- 22 Classes
- 24 Dismal, to poets
- 25 Out - limb
- 30 Lives
- 33 Use a soapbox
- 35 Easy win
- 36 Pitcher Hershiser
- 37 Snicker sound
- 38 Eggs, biologically
- 40 Arts-funding org.
- 41 Obtained
- 42 Hosp. sections

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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

HEY, LOOK! A BIRD TAKING A WALK!

STRANGE! HIS WINGS DON'T LOOK BROKEN

AIR TRAVEL HAS GOTTEN SO ANNOYING

5-13

GREG + MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

I GUESS THIS IS GOODBYE. STORE!

REMEMBER TO SEND PICTURES OF THE KIDS' BIRTHDAYS!

I WILL!

I'LL MISS YOU!

HAVEN'T YOU ONLY KNOWN EACH OTHER FOR A MONTH?

A GOOD GROCERY CHECKER IS LIKE FAMILY!

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

HESSE STOOL
ACORN CANDY
GHOSTWRITER
SON EEE ORE
TREAT
ALTOS MUMMY
MOON BEAU
PUTIN DENIM
CIDER
ASS GUM OTT
WITCHDOCTOR
ELIOT NOTRE
SORTS SPOOK