



Will millions of people have no home to stay?

PHOTO: AFP

# Millions will be made stateless, and we're silent



The day after this article is published, three million Bengalis will have become stateless in India.

On July 30, the northeast Indian state of Assam updated its National Register of Citizens (NRC). Persons who could not prove that they or their families were present in Assam on March 24, 1971 or prior were deregistered as citizens. An estimated 4,007,707 people, identified as 'infiltrators', are supposedly to be deported to Bangladesh.

The deadline for challenging the decision is December 15. As of writing this, just about seven lakhs of the 40 lakhs people affected have filed a case, scrambling to find paperwork that proves the existence of some long-lost relative in Assam before 25/3/1971. One can imagine their situation—how many of us keep track of our family documents? How many of us consider the possibility of proving our right to remain in the country we've called home all our lives?

And for at least some—maybe even the majority—the reason they haven't filed an appeal is that they *can't*. Because they or their family weren't in Assam before Bangladesh's independence. Because they really are migrants, possibly even irregular ones—not difficult at all, as anyone who's been to that border can attest, despite the Border Security Force using us for target practice.

Assuming all their appeals go through and that there is an upsurge of last-minute challengers, it seems greatly generous to say that a million people will have their citizenship restored. A million, I may remind, is roughly the number of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Thrice that number are likely to be in the same situation in Assam by the time you get around to actually reading this.

The Rohingya are an ominous



Residents hold documents as they stand in line to check their names on the National Register of Citizens in a village in India's Morigaon district in Assam

PHOTO: AFP

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comparison. The parallels are equally foreboding.

The Rohingya population are accused of being Bengali migrants and not true Myanmarese. The long history of cross-pollination across the modern border should, by rights, make definite ethnic lines hard to draw.

However, the Rohingya population was supposedly boosted by the influx of Muslim Bengalis to modern Myanmar during the British administration, to work the land and provide a strong tax base. Cue 1982, the Myanmar government strips these 'outsiders' of their citizenship, and begins to expel them in small waves—until 2017.

Now, to Assam. Similarly, where does

one actually draw the line between Assamese, Sylheti and plains Bengali? That region has a long history of ethnic tensions, between the Assamese and indigenous tribes, and populations such as the Gorkhas (also left out of the NRC). Colonial era influxes of Bengalis exacerbated these tensions. While Bengalis as a whole faced opposition in Assam, unlike in Myanmar there is a distinction drawn between Bengali and Bangladeshi. Much of this is predicated on the divergent resentment against the two classes of Bengalis the British imported—the Hindu clerks and colonial administrators, and the Muslim farmers whose rents would make the valleys profitable.

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