

ENVIRONMENT

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Researchers have also noted a large number of livestock—cattle—being transported through the sandbars of Chapainawabganj during a certain time of the year. This is the very place where these birds' nest and forage. The scene imitates a movie scene, as hundreds of thousands of cows converge upon the sandbars, raising up a sand storm, engulfing the landscape in dust and the sound of hooves.

Conservationists wince, as realisation dawns that many nests and chicks have been trampled in this mad race. For now, Bangladesh Bird Club has sent a proposal to the Bangladesh Forest Department to declare some of these sandbars in Chapainawabganj and Rajshahi as protected areas.

"We have plans to start our own surveys to monitor and eventually come up with conservation actions centering the areas in and around some of the major rivers. But that is not likely to start before next year," says Jahidul Kabir, conservator



PHOTOS: SAKIB AHMED

of Forests, Wildlife and Nature Conservation Circle of the Bangladesh Forest Department.

Protecting the rivers as areas of ecological importance is something that Kabir agrees on as well.

He added that they are aware of the

Bangladesh Bird Club's proposal and work is going on centering the proposal.

However, what impact this legal framework can have is debatable, to the say the least.

Rivers are protected by our constitution. The Article 18(A) of the

Constitution states: "The State shall endeavour to protect and improve the environment and to preserve and safeguard the natural resources, biodiversity, wetlands, forests and wild life for the present and future citizens." The State has enacted a number of laws including Bangladesh Water Act 2013, National River Protection Commission Act, 2013, and The Environment Conservation Act, 1995 (upgraded in 2010) which have provisions for the protection of the environment, and control and mitigation of environmental pollution.

But to this day, the rivers of Bangladesh continue to be dealt with blow after blow.

Which is why it makes sense to declare the entirety of the landscape around the rivers and the rivers itself which have been identified as biodiversity hotspots and areas of ecological importance as protected areas instead of targeting any one particular species for protection.

That way we can protect the rivers, the wildlife and the people who make their living of these waterways.

BURN THE WATCHTOWER

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Partition, and the eventual independence of Bangladesh, has made these identity differences even more important.

In postcolonial states, there is a long history of oppression faced by communities identified with the colonial administration—especially so when the community is considered non-native, or was brought over by the imperialists to begin with. Whether explicitly tarred with the brush of the collaborator—such as the Tutsis of Rwanda, or our own Biharis—or seen as a sort of non-native parasite class—South Asians in Uganda, Chinese in Malaysia—the fate of such minorities is often exclusion and marginalisation. Whatever identifiers of difference between them and the 'host' society exist become greatly important.

politicians who hate migrants think they actually do. There aren't a lot of social support systems for irregular migrants; in Assam there aren't a lot of social support systems, full stop. There is nothing for them to leech off of, even if they were capable of leeching in the first place—education, health care, all of that tends to be a lot better at policing the identities of the people they serve than we imagine. Migrants work, when paperwork requirements don't stop them working. The charity argument is the home of the bigot and the idiot. There is no charity available.

There certainly isn't charity for people who've been born inside the country and have lived their whole adult lives in it. This last bit is critically important. India had *jus soli* citizenship (you're a citizen if you're born there) until 1986. If you're



PHOTO: AFP

Villagers wait outside the NRC to get their documents verified by government officials



PHOTO: AFP

People wait in queue to check their names on the draft list at Nagaon in Assam

In this case, it cannot be a surprise to anyone that the principal champion of the denationalisation of the Muslim so-called 'Bangladeshi infiltrators' in Assam is Amit Shah, president of the BJP. Shah has recently declared the NRC is needed, as Assam is not a *Dharamshala* for migrants.

I am unsure what exactly all these

born on or after July 1, 1987, you have to prove that one of your parents at least was an Indian citizen. This isn't at all the same as the Bangladeshi independence cutoff point for the NRC. What happens if you can't prove that your parents were in Assam before 1971, but you were born before 1987? Possibly there is some convoluted answer, but in the mass of

paperwork and litigation it'd take to show that you have the right to be an Indian, you'll be stateless in the meanwhile.

Citizenship is absolutely no joke, and is the basis of every single right. Hannah Arendt argued that human rights do not apply to people who are *only* human, and not citizens of a place. We can readily imagine what would happen to any of us if we lost citizenship, and became stateless. The introduction of greater complexity to prove you have the right to belong, to have the right to have rights, increases the chances that you will become rightsless.

Bangladesh will not be taking the denationalised Assamese back. It is not our responsibility to take care of them, just as it was not our responsibility to take care of the Rohingya (how well we're doing that is a topic in itself, but for another time). We took the Rohingya in because that's what we had to do in the face of that calamity, but this act of charity forced upon us can't be allowed to be a precedent—it can't be a message to our neighbours that they can designate whoever they want as illegal Bangladeshis, strip them of rights, and send them packing, just to earn brownie points with their voters back home. By taking them in

we will legitimise a gross violation of human rights on a mass scale.

This is why Bangladesh cannot just accept this as India's internal matter. We cannot just allow them to turn four million persons stateless in our name. The humanitarian thing to do is to step forward and challenge this decision.

Arendt, a German Jew, was a refugee during the Nazi regime. She wrote that the creation of stateless populations is a proxy through which the state can demonstrate its power over the population at large. Statelessness, which is rightslessness, allows the state to do whatever it wishes—just as the Jews of Europe were first denationalised before being sentenced to the camps.

India is constructing large detention camps in Assam. If they can't deport the victims of the NRC, there they must go, in their millions. Bangladeshis, with ambitions of promoting themselves as regional champions of human rights, can hardly stay mum.

We likely will.

Zoheb Mashiur is an artist and an MA candidate in International Migration at the University of Kent. Read more of this sort of thing in Disconnect: Collected Short Fiction.