

The geopolitics of National Register of Citizens in Assam

Disenfranchisement of the Bengali-speaking population in Assam could have severe repercussions on both sides of the Indo-Bangla border



KALAM SHAHED

INDIA is witnessing the chaotic process of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) unfold in Assam. The exercise, directed and sponsored by vested political quarters, is designed to deny benefits of citizenship to those who do not possess compelling documentation to claim Indian citizenship, even if they have lived in Assam for decades. This has rendered four million Bengali-speaking Assamese stateless and widened ethnic religious and communal fault lines which have geopolitical implications for the region.

Many consider Assam to be a tinderbox where a gruesome Rohingya-styled ethnic cleansing can be replayed. The history of resettlement of a sizeable Bengali-speaking population in northeast India, including Assam and Tripura, is fraught with contradictory narratives and ethnic and religious overtones that can be viewed through refracting prisms in different political quarters. In an orgy of rage and communal carnage, nearly 4,000 Bengalis were massacred in Assam in 1983 by the local Assamese, and the trauma continues to haunt Bengalis on both sides of the India-Bangladesh divide. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), with its right-wing Hindutva ideology having spread all over India, may have made tactical inroads into Assam politics through politicising the "Bengali settler" issue as its dominant sloganeering platform; but this is

Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina has gone out of her way to ameliorate the concerns of Hindu minorities in her country. As much as it is for social justice, it is also designed to foster goodwill towards Bangladesh's powerful neighbour. Her government hopes that this would send a favourable message to India about Bangladesh's disposition towards its neighbour, which has repeatedly voiced concerns about the treatment of Hindu minorities in Bangladesh. India appears singularly important in Bangladesh's strategic calculus. Bangladesh has opened its sea ports for transit of Indian goods, and several land routes have been opened for India's transit to the north-eastern states. Border *haats* have been opened for easy movement of some goods between the two countries. Nearly half a million Bangladeshis visit India annually for tourism, medical treatment, and shopping purposes. While both countries have adopted stringent bilateral tariffs, informal trade between the two countries through known as well as obscure routes of border transit amounts to billions of dollars. During Eid festivities, markets in Bangladesh are flooded with colourful Indian *saris* and other costly apparels, which find their way into Bangladesh through the informal border trade. At the official level, the two countries are, however, far from entering an effective bilateral trading regime. Assam has the exportable parboiled rice, but Bangladesh finds it more profitable to import rice from Thailand, located thousands of kilometres away. While Indian entrepreneurs shy away from investing in Bangladesh, China has filled in the vacuum by becoming a major

psychologically) removed from "mainland" India. Opening routes through Bangladesh has stimulated bilateral Indo-Bangladesh trade and commerce, but importantly, it has opened up fresh lifelines for the people in northeast India. The bonhomie between the Indian and Bangladeshi governments is likely to face hurdles in the face of vituperative rhetoric of BJP stalwarts. An attempt to push Bengalis into Bangladesh or West Bengal may bolster greater Bengali nationalism in the subcontinent and among the more conscious Bengali diaspora settled aboard. A disenfranchised Bengali population could, nevertheless, trigger adverse reaction in Bangladesh, West Bengal and Tripura. Bigotry and irresponsible steps have definite reverberations for regional geopolitics.

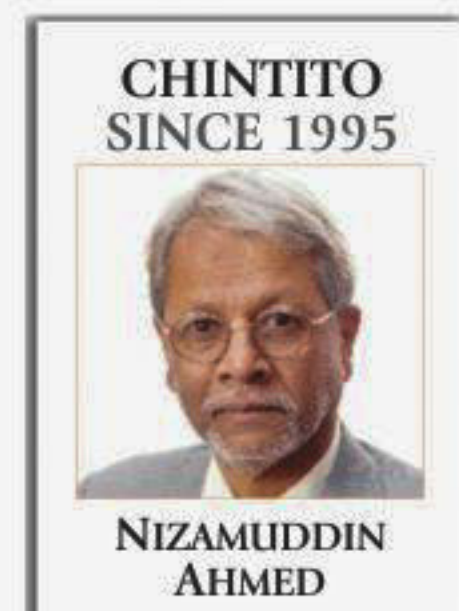
This subcontinent, post-independence, has remained conflict-ridden on several fronts, and its people do not need more issues to tear away at the historically woven communal thread. India and Bangladesh share a common history and geopolitical future. Yet, Bangladesh continues to be the object of negative sloganeering in many political quarters in India. Bengalis from both the east and west are also the object of ridicule among some Indian circles.

Can Bengalis come together and reach a new level of ethnic and national consciousness, promote Bengali language and culture regionally, and collective interests worldwide? We see hopeful signs of social engagement among the Bengali youth connected through the social media. The two Bengals are beginning to collaborate closely in the film and music industry, and other



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Politics of posters



CHINTITO SINCE 1995

serious matter on which hinges the welfare and wellbeing of the people. Secondly, good sports fields are never level. There is always a gradient, even if ever so slight, for the purpose of drainage; in politics for the four components to roll off. Whereas the members would sit indoors in the plenary chamber of the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban, what the relevance is to "field" is not clear. But, then politics has remained obscure to the so-called source of its power—the people.

In the just concluded national elections, there were insinuations that foul was played with posters. Before the elections, some people were concerned that they had not seen a single poster of the opposition, and so the field was topsy-turvy. That's an exaggeration in terms of numbers. I did see several "sheaf of paddy" posters in Dhanmondi as well as many more of *haatpankha*, but the numbers were embarrassingly outnumbered by "boat". There were thousands of black-and-white *nouka* posters lining the streets soon after the Election Commission allotted symbols to the participating parties, but very few or none at all of the others.

In a country where conspiracy theories are readily accepted as the truth, the reason for the disproportionate number of party-wise posters could be many. The truth could be far from what is apparent.

In the mid-1970s, a politician from Sylhet revealed candidly the myth behind *chika* (wall writing) that is credited to the *elakabashi*. In the depth of the night, he explained, shrouded in a shawl for anonymity, tar and brush in hand, he and a handful of trusted lackeys moved surreptitiously from wall to wall inking on someone else's property that "his character was indeed as pure as a flower" (read *phuler moto pobitro, omuk bhaiyer chitro*).

On freshly-painted walls that said "stick no bills" or disfiguring one was a *dandoniyo* offence, our "flower" would occasionally write a few good words about his rivals to aggravate the owner of the wall and other conscientious neighbours. Whether the praise put his opponent in trouble with the landlord or helped his cause is for the election observers to unearth.

In search of the truth, it was natural that there would be contrasting views. Awami League supporters claimed that the opposition camp was out to reap controversy in the run-up to the polls and so did not bother to launch a serious campaign. Those supporting the Kamal Hossain led alliance, spearheaded by BNP's sheaf of paddy, were adamant that there was no congenial situation to either print or display posters.

Do posters or the number of posters really matter for that matter? We dwell at a time where television rules, and I must commend that every channel (save perhaps BTv) did their part to give all parties, heroes and villains alike, a fair share of coverage. Newspapers also played the neutral card. Flaws in governance of the incumbent were

even overlaid in the dissemination and broadcast of some media networks.

The insistence of BNP and those who, in mid-October, formed the Jatiya Oikyafront that election under a political government will not be free and fair, had been well publicised. Albeit reluctant late starters in the election fray, there could not have been more effective a poster to make credible their claim than the publicity and sympathy they got by not having any posters. If it was a deliberate plan, those opposed to the ruling party had been incredibly successful.

Again, going by their claim of oppression by the party in power, we may presume that all those presses were guarded by police. So, where was their will to contest the election and change the government?

Those in the Awami League camp who believe in the conspiracy theory are of the belief that those opposing the government may not have printed enough posters to embarrass the government and the Election Commission. In fact, their interpretation is that anti-Awami League elements may have printed thousands of posters of the incumbent government party, that is *nouka*,

It is important for television to reach every home, when pro, anti and those on the fence will be able to speak directly to the people. Street posters will then become redundant. In the US, UK and EU, politicians hand out flyers with a smile when they move door to door, shop to shop. The rest they see on TV.



PHOTO: PTI

People check their names on the final draft of Assam's National Register of Citizens after it was released, at a NRC Seva Kendra in Nagaon, July 30, 2018.

not without long-term strategic costs for India.

Some questions remain on the NRC, notably its role in disrupting age-old societal bonds among Assamese communities. The NRC engenders communal hatred, foments violence and triggers a process of real or perceived disenfranchising of a sizeable section of Assamese society. Interestingly, this could also spur and stimulate Bengali nationalism as it faces opposition from cohabiting ethnic communities. The fallout from the NRC could snowball into unprecedented developments.

The socio-political spectrum on both sides of the Bengal divide is, however, changing. There appears to be more tolerance of Bengali Muslims in West Bengal and the progressive leader, Mamata Banerjee, has voiced opposition to BJP's contentious sectarian policies, including the banning of cow slaughter and Bengali disenfranchisement through the NRC.

player in Bangladesh's infrastructure and defence sectors.

BJP President Amit Shah has, in an unabashed, derogatory manner, called the alleged Bengali migrants to India "termites". This has not gone unnoticed by conscious Bengalis on both sides of the border. Migration into and within India is not a recent phenomenon. Historically, segments of population had moved around in droves, from one part of India to another due to natural disasters and compelling political economic reasons. By politicising migration, BJP may be playing a dangerous game. India shares one of the largest borders with Bangladesh, which has a length of 4,096km running along West Bengal and several other states in the northeast. Divisive regional geopolitics, involving evocation of communalism, can have a profoundly debilitating impact on the region. The people of north-eastern India continue to suffer isolation, as they are physically (and even

cultural domains.

Hopefully, the two Bengals and, possibly, Tripura and Assam will eventually create a soft border, allowing for greater economic and cultural overlap. Neither Bangladesh nor India should nourish concerns about national sovereignty as the two Bengals drift closer along ethnic and cultural trajectories. The Bengalis provide a lifeline to the northeast and working collaboratively, the Bengalis could offer a common platform to placate communal bigotry and religious fundamentalism in India as well as in the regional countries. The entire region, particularly India's northeast, would benefit from greater access and free movement of people. It is time to downplay the "we versus them" communal narratives, and work constructively towards uplifting the region socially, economically and politically.

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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

FEBRUARY 3, 1972
THE 1972 IRAN BLIZZARD

The first day of the seven-day 1972 Iran blizzard, which would kill at least 4,000 people, making it the deadliest snowstorm in history.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Diet no-no, for some
- 5 "Very, funny!"
- 9 Nunavut native
- 11 Linda of "Dynasty"
- 13 Choir member
- 14 Value
- 15 Angsty rock
- 16 Mariner's place
- 18 Like body-builders' bodies
- 20 1963 Paul Newman film
- 21 So far
- 22 Culp/Cosby series
- 23 Twisty fish
- 24 Fury
- 25 Groan inducers
- 27 Police trap
- 29 Crumb carrier
- 30 Like many resorts
- 32 Pink floyd album
- 34 Outback bird
- 35 Pay tribute to
- 36 Essential
- 38 Great, in slang
- 39 Prickly plants
- 40 Boat bottom
- 41 Garden pest

DOWN

- 1 Refers to
- 2 Lack of vitality
- 3 Grammatical
- 4 Book jacket bit
- 5 Chopped down
- 6 Stratford river
- 7 Life, perhaps
- 8 Pay to play
- 10 Masson's tool
- 12 Disreputable
- 17 Sulky state
- 19 Peepers
- 22 Crocus cousin
- 24 Stressed type
- 25 Maze choices
- 26 Loosen, as abra
- 27 Costa del--
- 28 Ovum, e.g.
- 30 Yule, song
- 31 Sensational
- 33 Came to
- 37 Slangy denial

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

S O H O C L A S S
O M E N S M O V I E
B E R E T O P I N E
E G O R A N S A C K
R A N D O M T E E
A K I N E R R
B O N E A P S E
Y A P E S A M E
E V E R A N C H O
R A N S O M S H O P
T R I A D T R A L L
L I N G O T A S E L
E A G E R M E S S

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Position(s)	Key Responsibilities	Required Education & Experience
Engineer Production	Responsible to ensure production yield as per production schedule and highlight issues for resolutions. Supervise production process at various production channels at unit, ensure smooth floor operations, reduce operational and process breakdown & minimize miss rolls generation.	Potential candidate has to be graduate in Mechanical / Materials & Metallurgical Engineering from any reputed public or foreign university having minimum 02 years of working experience in relevant field.
Engineer Mechanical	Responsible to accomplish mechanical maintenance (Preventive/Predictive schedule) as per checklist. Resolve issues and escalations pertaining to maintenance of equipment's & Manpower. Maintenance of EAM activities in Oracle ERP & Auto CAD drafting as per requirement.	Potential candidate has to be graduate in Mechanical Engineering from any reputed public or foreign university having minimum 02 years of working experience in relevant field.
Engineer Electrical	Responsible to accomplish Preventive/Predictive maintenance Plan/Schedule of electrical equipment in the plant. Support resolution of any power sub-station and HT Line related issues. Ensure handling of relevant software, programs and data for PLC Drives, HMI, OWS, Fda etc	Potential candidate has to be graduate in Electrical Engineering from any reputed public or foreign university having minimum 02 years of working experience in relevant field.

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