

‘Bangladesh should stay alert and observe Assam situation’

Dr Imtiaz Ahmed, a professor of international relations and director, Centre for Genocide Studies at the University of Dhaka, talks to Badiuzzaman Bay of The Daily Star about the ongoing crisis in Assam following the publication of the final National Register of Citizens (NRC) and its repercussions for Bangladesh.

The final NRC in India’s Assam was published on August 31, leaving out 19.6 lakh people. This followed years of chaos, protests and political wrangling over the issue of “illegal migrants” from Bangladesh—and is now expected to result in a protracted legal battle before any resolution of the issue. How do you view this development?

First of all, this demonstrates the extent to which politicians can go to exploit an issue and the devastating effect that it may have. After the release of the final NRC in Assam, the number of the excluded came down to 1.9 million (an earlier list had excluded about 4 million). Out of these people, some 11 lakhs are supposedly Hindus and the remaining eight are Muslims. While the list itself remains highly debatable, it is a fact that BJP has time and again pointed out that it would grant citizenship to any Hindus coming from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh. So that leaves us, hypothetically speaking, with eight lakh unresolved cases. In the final headcount, that number is likely to further come down. This downward trend in numbers is quite embarrassing for right-wing parties like the BJP that wanted to score political points by creating fear among ordinary Indians about the illegal migrants and, by extension, the Muslims. But they can’t—or won’t—change their rhetoric, however. So you hear them now saying that they want to “weed out” illegal immigrants not just from Assam but the entire India.

Secondly, we need to understand how the NRC issue came in the first place. Assam is a state in India’s northeast, a region that is relatively underdeveloped, which makes the migrants or “outsiders” easy targets of popular anger. This anger is often stoked or justified by politicians saying, incorrectly, that migrants will crowd out local residents and eat into their livelihood opportunities. We have seen similar situations even in developed countries like the US and the UK. You can win an election by using this anti-immigration, anti-development rhetoric but eventually its fault lines are going to get exposed.

Despite repeated warnings from BJP leaders including its president Amit Shah about “illegal migrants” from Bangladesh, the country seems to be in a denial mode about the possible outcome of this vitriol-filled campaign for Bangladesh—calling it India’s

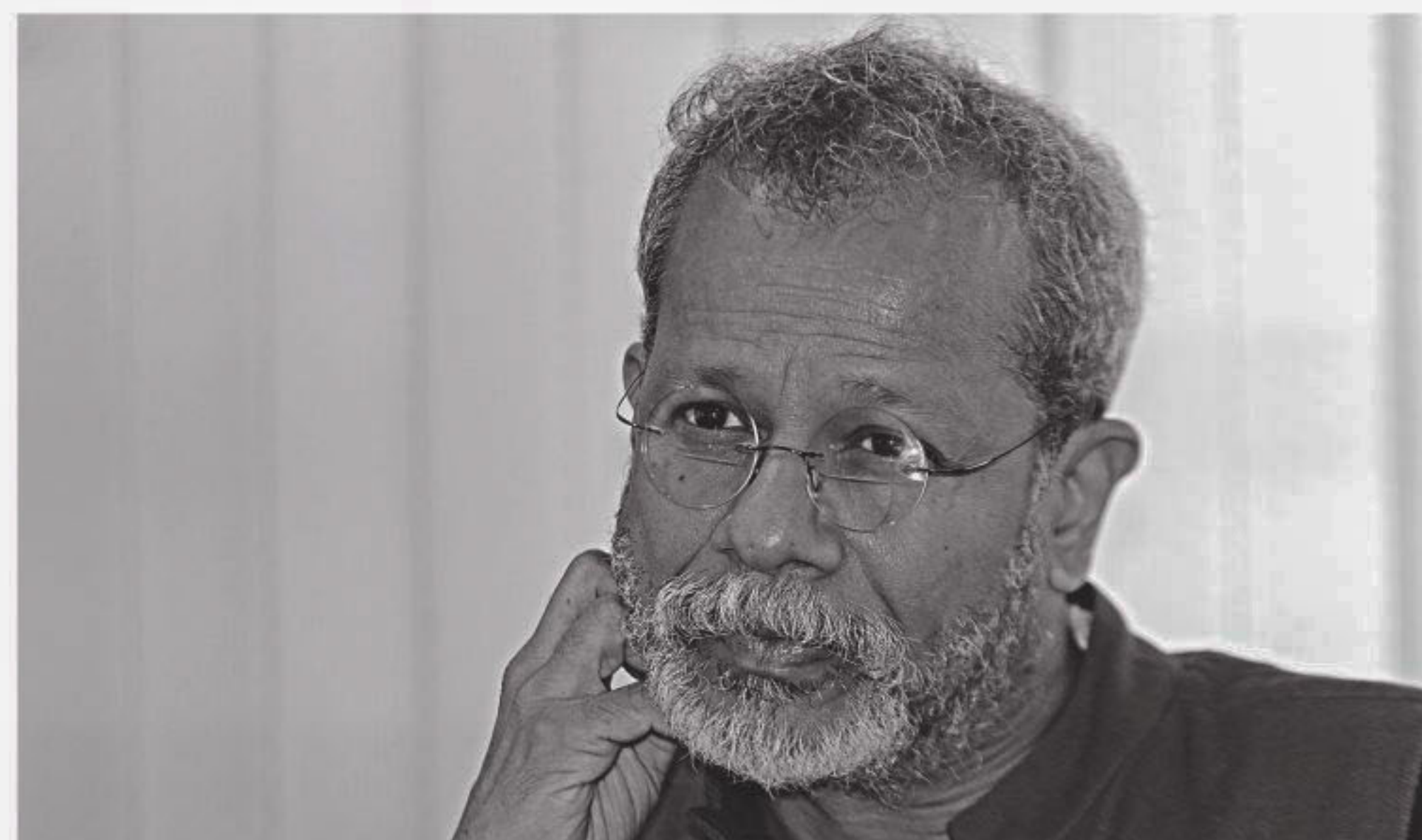
“internal affair”. Are we failing to see the bigger picture?

As tempting as it is to look at it that way, I think we should take a step back and assess the situation based on facts. First of all, Amit Shah is a politician and what he said reflects more the policy of his party than that of the Indian government. Now compare his comment, if you will, with the comment of India’s Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, who had reportedly told his Bangladeshi counterpart that the NRC is India’s internal affair and that Bangladesh has nothing to worry about. Jaishankar is a diplomat, not a politician. What he said comes across as a more accurate reflection of the reality, and for good reasons. For one, the NRC issue has never come up in any Bangladesh-India official meeting at any level. I think Bangladesh would have taken it up with India, like it readily does in case of other strategically important issues, had there been a real danger.

We need to understand that the NRC is not as straightforward a case as it seems. It has emerged as a polarising factor in India and is facing pushback from various quarters. West Bengal remains a persistent opponent. The fact is, there are Bengalis spread across India. You throw away the Bengalis from one part of India, you are—as West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has put it—inviting a civil war in other parts of it. In Assam, contrary to what BJP and other right-wing parties are saying, a big part of the movement of population or the concentration of Bengalis was actually the result of internal migration to Assam from West Bengal, not from Bangladesh.

With its Hindutva ideology and its fixation on the illegal-Bangladeshi-Muslim-immigrant narrative, it appears the BJP is following the two-nation theory based on religion, first advocated by the Scottish historian James Mill. One may recall that the theory was taken up by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, BJP’s ideological parent, even 17 years before Jinnah. Bangladesh broke out of this theory’s influence in 1971 but India under BJP seems to be returning to the fold. The very idea of Hindutva is in essence an extension of the two-nation theory that Hindus and Muslims are different nations and, therefore, incompatible. I sincerely hope the Indian society will reject it.

The illegal immigrant issue forms part of



Dr Imtiaz Ahmed

the BJP’s national security plank and has figured in the party’s manifesto since 1996. I mention this because in its second term in office, the BJP has shown a proclivity to make good on its controversial electoral pledges with the help of its absolute majority in parliament, which became evident after its decision to scrap the special status for Jammu and Kashmir. Do you see a pattern here that could affect the course of the NRC development?

Well, these are all politically saleable issues. With Jammu and Kashmir, all political parties in India had played politics, including the Congress. What happened in Kashmir is that the BJP only made “de jure” what had always been “de facto”. Let’s face it: there was no autonomy in Kashmir even before the abrogation of its special status. It had always been under Delhi’s control. There were 600,000 troops in Kashmir. So legally, you had article 370 but in practice, there was no autonomy and no special status. But they went ahead with the abrogation decision as a practical measure because the situation in Kashmir was going out of hand. Anyone who follows Kashmir knows that in the last 10 years, militancy was more homegrown than exported from Pakistan. How many troops are you going to put there to combat it?

Kashmir as a region already had the highest concentration of troops in the world.

Coming back to your question about a pattern, no, I don’t think there’s any, because there is a big difference between playing politics with Kashmir and playing politics with NRC. In Kashmir, it’s the Muslims versus the rest of India. But in case of the NRC, there is no such political consensus. Bengalis include both Hindus and Muslims. Don’t forget, Bengali Muslims in West Bengal are also a big vote bank for Mamata. So the two issues are similar only in the sense that they are both politically saleable, but this time the BJP will have to tread very carefully because the stakes here are really high.

Some have compared the NRC to the Rohingya crisis, both being stark examples of states stripping a minority of their citizenship. In fact, like Assam, Myanmar also accuses the Rohingyas of being migrants from Bangladesh and refers to them as “Bengalis” in order to reinforce that narrative. What’s your take on this?

I think the comparison is a little far-fetched. The Rohingya crisis is a totally different issue. The Rohingyas as a community had to face a slow genocide, one might say, since as far back as 1962. Myanmar wanted to destroy this community first by not recognising them as an

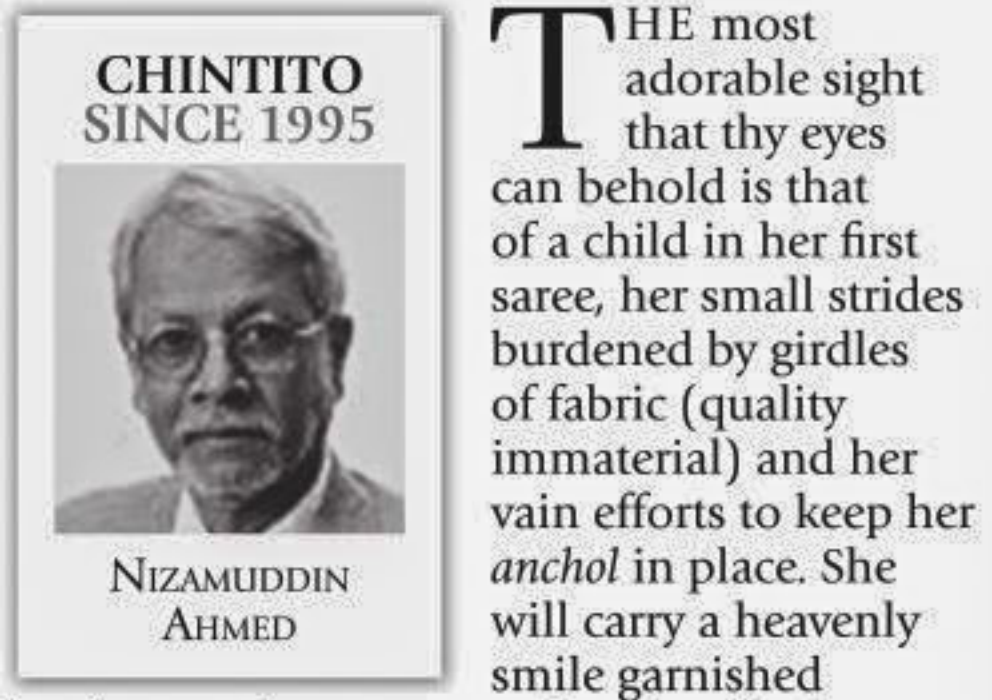
ethnic community, then slowly by imposing other restrictive and discriminatory measures. This whole “genocide” issue is missing in case of the NRC. Also, India has a secular constitution and a strong civil society and there is already resistance to the NRC from within the country. So I wouldn’t compare the Rohingya crisis to the NRC, which is a different ball game altogether.

To give you a little perspective on this, let me share a personal experience. In September 2004, I had visited Guwahati in Assam which, I was told, was full of Bangladeshis. I heard that there were slums and neighbourhoods inhabited by them. So along with two of my students, I went there to document their stories. Surprisingly, we didn’t find a single Bangladeshi in Guwahati at that time. Not a single one! When confronted, my sources then claimed that the Bangladeshis lived in the border areas. So, you see, I am not at all surprised by the increasingly thinning list of NRC left-outs. Speaking of borders, border areas have been historically fluid. Even on this side of the border, there are areas in some haors where you will see that people know the Assamese language.

So how would you assess the Assam situation from Bangladesh’s perspective? What should we do going forward?

Not much at this stage. But we should remain alert and closely observe the situation. For its part, India needs to find a way out of this quagmire and I hope it will sooner than later. There are some legal theories as to what should be done with those declared “foreigners,” but none involves a deportation to Bangladesh. While I am convinced that there is no real danger for Bangladesh, it’s imperative that Indian politicians discontinue their ongoing anti-Bangladesh rhetoric: firstly, because it will embolden the communal and anti-Indian elements in Bangladesh—a prospect that should worry both countries—and secondly, because Bangladesh is not Pakistan. Bangladesh is India’s closest ally in the region, and it is unreasonable why Delhi would want to jeopardise that. Bangladesh is also extremely important for the security of India’s north-east of which Assam is a part. In addition, India needs to think about the minorities living in Bangladesh and the sizeable Indian expat community who might be affected by any hostile tactic on its part.

#Saree



CHINTITO SINCE 1995

NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

by shyness, innocence and pride of being Mommy, at last.

Two small occasions are etched big in memory because of the loving sentiment they manifest. Abba’s university mate, Nuruddin Ahmed Chacha (an anti-British activist with Bangabandhu) presented my daughter Eeman her first saree, red of course. The other is of me buying from the footpath at Asad Gate the first one, again red, for Mysara, my granddaughter. Their joy and exhilaration 20 years apart were indistinguishable.

Eeman now wears a saree stylishly yet most gracefully, well usually for some wedding or a major *dawat*. All grown up, and a mother to my grandson, even draped in a saree she remains the baby I held at Sheffield’s Northern General Hospital during her first hour on planet Earth over three decades ago.

When we were BUET students in the mid-70s, Dipti one day arrived in a saree instead of her usual top and trousers, raising my eyebrows. Unknown to her my mind was doing a rotary blade trying to figure out whether I had forgotten any occasion; at



that stage in a relationship that would have been suicidal. “All my regular clothes are at the laundry, this is all I had,” she beamed. It’s been 45 years, but saree can imprint that much of a lasting impression for its elegance.

My Amma died in a saree. She was of the jovial sort. 10 minutes before she breathed her last, she was merrily watching television, her funny side still alive. As she lay draped in white for her Janaza prayers, and me offering my supplication to Allah (swt), I could swear she looked as angelic as she appeared all her life in six yards of drapery. Her body was surrounded by aunts and sisters, colleagues

and friends, almost all wearing the saree and reciting verses from the Holy Quran.

Perhaps the fondest memory I have of my Dadu, mother to Abba, is of her unfolding story after story on warm, sweaty evenings in the darkness that shrouded our village Sutiakati, Pirojpur in the non-electricity era of the late 50s. It took me to have my own children to realise that she almost always manufactured those extempore tales. We lay on a *sheetol pati* spread on the high brick plinth in our *uthan*. The *Taal pankha* swaying tirelessly by her wrist giving us tranquil moments among the restless *jonaki*. I don’t

remember what she wore. But, in the times gone by, it had to be a cotton saree, and white too.

In 1952, people of from all walks came on to the street in solidarity with the demand for Bangla as a national language of the then Pakistan. In the forefront of the daring *micah* defying armed police were women, many of them students. Dressed in sombre white saree, they exuded a powerful message to the Pakistan junta in Karachi. The women were looked upon as honourable voices of a nation prepared to make the supreme sacrifice for their mother tongue.

During our War of Liberation in 1971, “Bangladesh Mukti Shangrami Shilpi Shangtha” sang patriotic songs and presented cultural performances at refugee camps and localities in liberated areas to inspire freedom fighters as well as to lift the spirit of a war-affected nation. They moved in an open truck, carrying the banner “Joy Bangla”. There were several women cultural activists among the Muktiyuddho artistes. Their faces pale from the arduous journey, but they beamed stars that brightened our sky. And, by the by, they all wore saree, colourful sarees radiating the prospect of happier days...*taara shudhu Bangalee...kadam kadam egiye choleche...*

At the Bangladesh War of Liberation Field Hospital, women freedom fighters (doctors, medical students, and volunteers) served under severe inconvenience with minimal medical supplies and dismal equipment, wearing saree. Their dignified attire symbolised graciousness, the care of a mother, and the resolve to free a country under siege. There will never be a higher

national ambition.

If not from the cradle to the grave, but surely from around six to her last breath, the saree has adorned womenfolk of the region for aeons. Its local appeal has periodically transcended national boundaries, its adoption of vernacular motifs has time and again found context elsewhere.

Symbolic of a mother’s selfless compassion, a woman in piety, a daughter’s metamorphosis to adulthood, a bride’s journey to a new family, a grandma’s magical prowess to bring down the moon as she weaves bedtime lullabies, the saree entraps acres of short stories, narratives and classics of millions of individuals over centuries. Above all, it epitomises the overall attitude of a Bangalee woman.

And yet we find the occasional child of the same ‘Ma’, her *anchol* at one time his only haven on earth, in the garb of literary practice, shaming the same saree. There is the atypical father who paints on it a stigma in exercising free prose. The out-of-character husband will spit forth rhetoric to portray sexism.

Reducing the garment to a flimsy cover of a body per se, such a chauvinist has lost the scent of his mother, forgotten the affection of his sister, and erased the tip on his forehead lured by his Dadu.

A person and an event are essential elements in any connexion, their respective attire no more than a respectable facade of their inner magnificence embodied in their personality.

Dr Nizamuddin Ahmed is a practising Architect, a Commonwealth Scholar and a Fellow, a Baden-Powell Scout Leader, and a Major Donor Rotarian.

ON THIS DAY
IN HISTORY

September 14, 1847
Mexico City captured by US forces

US General Winfield Scott's advance on Mexico City was marked by an unbroken series of victories that culminated this day in 1847, when he entered Mexico City and ended the military phase of the Mexican-American War.

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BEETLE BAILEY

2-8

BABY BLUES

GOOD GIRL, WREN!

IT'S SORT OF LIKE HAVING A DOG, BUT WITHOUT THE BUTT-SCOTTING ON THE CARPET!

YOU WEREN'T AROUND MUCH DURING POTTY-TRAINING, WERE YOU?

QUOTABLE
Quote

WILLIAM JAMES
AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER AND PSYCHOLOGIST

Most people never run far enough on their first wind to find out they've got a second.