

# 10 FAQs about India's citizenship law



Altaf Parvez  
is a researcher of history.

ALTAF PARVEZ

**Any law and its implementing guidelines are a country's internal matter. So why is Bangladesh concerned about India's initiative to amend its 1955 citizenship law?**

Any kind of law or policy formulation is absolutely a country's internal matter. However, Bangladesh is mentioned in India's Citizen (Amendment) Act, 2019 (also known as CAA-19). Therefore, when the announcement to put the act into effect came recently, discussions erupted in Bangladesh. Afghanistan and Pakistan are also mentioned, so it's clear that the law is not bound by the borders of India. Further evidence of this is the fact that Sri Lanka and Tibet have also been brought up in discussions about the law. As a result, this has become a legal-political issue for the whole of South Asia and will become more so in the future. But it is particularly significant for Bangladesh.

**What is Bangladesh's area of concern?**

There are, in fact, many concerns. This law can create issues that are of concern for Bangladesh. For instance, the law and its "rules" state that, till December 2014, those (following religions other than Islam) living in India due to persecution for religious reasons in Bangladesh could apply for citizenship there. This implies that minorities are being oppressed in Bangladesh and people are going to India to escape this persecution. The term which Indian policymakers are repeatedly using in this regard are "persecuted minorities," which is definitely of concern for us.

**How is the new law contradicting India's own status as a secular country?**

India claims to be a secular state, which has a constitutional basis. But under the CAA 19, it wants to give citizenship only to non-Muslims. Under no circumstances does it intend to offer the same benefit to Muslims. This means that India has chosen religion as the basis of its citizenship law. In other words, the criterion to determine the legality or illegality of individuals in India under this law is their religious identity. That's why those who view the country as secular are opposing the amendment. Formulating a law that singles out the non-Muslims from three Muslim-majority countries, that too by choosing them selectively, is novel. It appears that millions of Rohingyas who have been expelled from Myanmar, one of India's neighbours, and are seeking refuge in different countries will not, in any way, benefit from this new law. Another significant development is that the law was announced to be implemented right before India's general election. This may cause religious polarisation during elections in various places. It also explains why BJP-opposing political parties are against this law.



Students and supporters of the Students' Federation of India (SFI) take part in a protest rally against a new citizenship law in Kochi, India on March 12, 2024.

**What is the Indian government's rationale for excluding Muslims from the benefits of the act?**

The Indian government says it has created CAA-19 in light of human rights. According to it, since Hindus and other minorities are being deprived of their human rights in Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, it is trying to give legal benefits only to non-Muslims. But interestingly, the Hindu Tamils from Sri Lanka—who came to Tamil Nadu after persecution by the Sinhalese armed forces—have not been included in the new law.

**Are minorities persecuted in Bangladesh?**

Everyone understands the insinuations of the CAA-19. Since the source of this view is another country's top brass, the Bangladesh administration is responsible for determining and disseminating the truth. If someone from Bangladesh presents information about religious persecution in the hopes of getting Indian citizenship under this law, then the Bangladeshi authorities have the opportunity to investigate the matter. And surely this will be done, since the country's image would be

on the line. In fact, if any wrong information is spread about Bangladesh abroad, that needs to be investigated.

Why December 2014 has been chosen as the cut-off point for granting citizenship can also be questioned. For the sake of argument, does this mean that religious persecution of non-Muslims in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan has not occurred after that date? Before 2014, many political parties, including

without citizenship papers will be entrapped by the NRC. Worryingly, what will India do with these potential "illegal Muslims"?

**Why is Bangladesh concerned about what India will do with its "illegal" people?**

Herein lies the problem. A person may not have valid citizenship papers for a multitude of reasons, but it's seen that, in places like West Bengal and Assam, Muslims

**claims and making Bangladesh worried?**

It's true that the present governments of Bangladesh and India have friendly ties. Based on that, it can be assumed that the Indian government will not mention the presence of "illegal Bangladeshis" within its borders. However, national and religious leaders have used the term "illegal Bangladeshi" several times during political rallies in Assam, Tripura, and West Bengal. The biggest argument is that Bangladesh has been identified as an "oppressor of minorities" under CAA during this very period of "friendship." So, it's natural to question how the Indian government really sees this friendship.

Incidentally, it should also be mentioned that there is a change in the propaganda and administrative strategies within India regarding the alleged illegal Muslims. Now, they are being called "illegal Rohingyas" instead of "illegal Bangladeshis."

**If India calls them "illegal Rohingyas," why would it be a problem for Bangladesh?**

India is not a signatory to the International Refugee Convention. When someone is referred to as "Rohingya" in the country, that person is not granted refugee status; the administration deals with such individuals using the Foreigners Act. India also says that the so-called Rohingyas are a "security threat." As a result, the state's treatment of these "security threats" will definitely be very strict. The question is: will these "security threat illegal foreigners-Rohingyas" be jailed? Or will those "illegal Rohingyas" of India want to go somewhere else under administrative, legal, and social pressures? Since the main refugee camps of the Rohingyas are in Bangladesh, whether the country will become involved in this discussion is a pertinent question.

Sections 3 and 5 of India's Foreigners Act empower the government to detain such people. After the NRC, there is fear of a humanitarian disaster involving people who do not have citizenship documents.

Many experts in India say that if the NRC is implemented after the CAA, many Hindus may also face problems regarding citizenship. Due to various personal and social reasons, many Hindus would not be able to show their citizenship papers. A recent example of this is a Hindu youth taking his life in fear of being deemed illegal, after failing to find his documents. This shows that the fear has also spread among Hindus in India. Where will they go? Where will they take refuge?

**Isn't it up to India to decide what it will do with its illegal citizens and whom it will grant "refugee" status?**

What's strange, however, is that India grants refugee status to Tibetans and Sri Lankan Tamils within its territory, but has decided to not bestow the same benefit to Muslims, by labelling them "Rohingyas." The reason may be that people are being seen through the lens of religion and politics. Ironically, the world is also seeing it through the same lens. Even in Bangladesh, people are concerned about the CAA because of its perceived impact on the fate of Muslims.

BNP, Awami League, and Jatiya Party, were in power in Bangladesh for different periods. Will they accept the allegation that religious persecution of minorities took place during their respective tenures? It is the responsibility of the parties to answer such questions.

**Is Bangladesh's objection only because the country is being presented to the world as an "oppressor of minorities"?**

No, there are more reasons, and they are beyond the scope of this law. It is being assumed that after CAA-19 is enacted, the implementation of NRC (National Register of Citizens) will be announced in all of India, including West Bengal. This has been assumed based on the various statements of Indian policymakers who have been talking about taking a series of steps on citizenship and immigration. All this means that, at first, non-Muslims will be given citizenship, and then the NRC will be implemented. On December 10, 2019, India's union home minister said that NRC will be implemented in the entire country. Needless to say, if most of the non-Muslims get citizenship through CAA-19, then Muslims

without documents are assumed to be from Bangladesh. This means that Muslims "caught" in the NRC may be labelled as "Bangladeshi." When NRC was implemented in Assam, over 19 lakh people couldn't show their citizenship papers, and they were said to be Bangladeshi. But those so-called Bangladeshis repeatedly said they are natives of Assam and don't have documents due to different reasons. Aside from Hindus (the majority) and Muslims, many among them were Gorkhas and Rajbanshis. At that time, many Hindutva organisations were saying that "illegal" Hindus should be given citizenship before the NRC. Perhaps based on that experience, the Indian government has now taken the initiative to free Hindus from the troubles of the NRC via CAA. Since Muslims will not get benefits under CAA, if the NRC is implemented across India, Muslims without citizenship documents will be in trouble. And the fear of labelling them as Bangladeshis is always there.

**Many speculate that such a situation will not happen due to strong Bangladesh-India ties. Then why is India making such**

# Kindness gives life its biggest dividends



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Aasha Mehreen Amin  
is joint editor at The Daily Star.

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

One of the most fundamental goals of a human being is to "find happiness." And yet it seems to be the most elusive goal of our lives. That's because happiness is subjective, as well as temporary; you can't be happy every day, all the time. But feeling joy is a more durable emotion, one that takes more effort to achieve, yet gives out huge dividends in life.

Simon Sinek, a motivational speaker from the US, explains that happiness is fleeting while joy "is an underlying part of something bigger" and so much more enduring. According to him, joy can be found in one's relationships with others as well as in how we behave in our communities. Research has found that acts of kindness can bring joy, because they release the feel-good hormone, oxytocin. What is most fascinating about this phenomenon is that an act of kindness has a multiplier effect—not only does the recipient and the giver get a shot of oxytocin each, but someone witnessing this act will get the same feeling of joy and may even be inspired to show kindness to others themselves.

The history of civilisation has shown that humans survive when they are part of a community, when

there is a basic understanding that members must help each other, which provides long-term benefits to all. Yet, even such a fundamental prerequisite of existence is constantly forgotten, often with catastrophic consequences.

If we start from the smallest unit—the nuclear family, it works when everyone gives something to that unit. There is a tacit agreement that family members will come together during a crisis, share resources, make sacrifices to make sure the unit, as a whole, survives. Which is why we are so attached to our families, our parents, children, siblings, and so on. It is also why we are so negatively affected when relationships with family members turn sour and communication breaks down. No matter how much we try, it is almost impossible to just distance ourselves from that person. The family is our most valued asset and security system, and so must be preserved and protected. The same logic extends to communities, societies, nations, and the world. The more we cooperate with each other, the more we give to each other with sincerity, the kinder we are, and the more the collective benefits, both tangible and intangible. But if it's so easy to acquire the

amazing gift of joy, why are we so pathetically poor at it? This is because kindness is not dependent on how much money you have—though logically, it should make things much easier. True, there are many rich people who have donated enormous amounts of their wealth to noble causes—for scientific research to cure fatal diseases, building shelters for

No doubt, in return, these acts of generosity have given them immense joy and fulfilment. But what about others—the people worth millions of dollars? Do they give as much as they should?

In Bangladesh, the number of millionaires has increased substantially over the last few years. At the same time, income

gap between the rich and poor. You see swanky flats worth Tk 12 crore in high-rises overlooking dingy, overcrowded slums where hundreds of families live in squalid conditions. How much time do the residents of these luxurious homes take out of their privileged lives to think about their neighbours across the street or on the other side of the lake? Is

it fair to people at only Tk 1 per item from a small eatery owned by one of the friends who started this effort around 18 years ago. Each of them gives their time and whatever funds they can spare to provide food to people at the lowest price possible. Some of the friends are from different faiths, but that does not stop them from showing their compassion for others no matter what religion they follow. There are many such examples of generosity from individuals who are far from being affluent, but who give whatever they can—their time, money, or labour—simply because they feel fulfilled when they do something for others. What they don't realise is that each of them is part of something really wonderful—they are proponents of the healing process the world needs due to the continuous onslaughts of human cruelty and selfishness.

Of course, it is unrealistic to expect everyone to be as selfless as these extraordinary people. But kindness can come in small packages, as everyday acts. When you acknowledge the security guard of your office building with a smile or a simple inquiry about their welfare, when you allow the elderly woman to go before you in the long queue, get up to let someone sit in your place on a crowded train, or when you buy a meal for a homeless person, you may not be changing lives, but it gives value to that person which is something every individual has a right to, regardless of what status society has relegated them to. What you get in return is quite immeasurable—it is a sense of joy that no amount of self-indulgence can provide.



the homeless, funding scholarships and grants to universities for less privileged but meritorious students, building free schools, and clinics for those who cannot afford them. Most of these philanthropists, known or unknown, have made huge differences in the lives of others.

inequality has also widened. Innumerable newspaper reports have been published regarding the high costs of living, which have become unbearable for not only the poor but even those in the middle-income brackets. Dhaka itself seems to be a microcosm of the glaring

it enough to distribute a few low-priced shares and panjabis, or a few hundred taka to fulfil a religious obligation?

Real acts of kindness usually come from people with little means. Like the 12 friends from Daulatpur, Khulna who have been providing