



Invisible Migration in India's North-eastern Region

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Abstract

If Bangladesh continues to deny illegal migration from its territory to the North-eastern region of India, in a similar vein, India would be unable to provide evidence of any Bangladeshi nationals staying illegally in its territory as sought by the former. However, India's successive central governments and major political parties have consistently promised to detect foreign nationals who are believed to be staying illegally in different parts of the country. Surprisingly, India continues to refrain from discussing the matter with Bangladesh. However, the concerns of ethnic communities in the North-eastern region of the country of being increasingly outnumbered by the non-indigenous population in their land have led to the rise of organised resistance movements. As a result, several agreements have been concluded in which the central government promised to take measures to detect foreign nationals from the region. But, the Indian authorities are unable to identify illegal migrants so far. Meanwhile, the outcome of the exercise to update the National Register of Citizens in Assam and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, has rather upset the region's ethnic communities. They are worried and helpless at the same time. This essay intends to discuss these issues in detail.

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1. Understanding the Background

As the colonial administration extended eastward from 1826 onwards, Assam and nearby hills were brought closer to the Bengal region than ever before. The people from outside Assam were also recruited as teachers and clerks. With the subsequent introduction of tea plantation, coal mining, oil exploration, and other economic activities, Assam has become a destination for migrants in which some were encouraged to settle in the cultivable wasteland (Nag 2018; Nath 2005; Government of Assam 2012), so that wasteland could be converted into agricultural fields. Bengali was made the official language in local administration and school education in Assam from 1837 to April 1873 (Barua 1978). This period is also referred to as the “dark period” of Assamese language, literature, and culture (Baruah, 1999).

As the colonial administration set firm roots in Assam and nearby hills, the demarcation and redrawing of administrative boundaries were undertaken for administrative convenience. First and foremost, Assam was administered as a part of Bengal during 1826-1873. In 1874, Assam was separated from Bengal and became a Chief Commissioner’s province along with Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara districts of Bengal. During 1905-11, East Bengal and Assam were united to form the new province of East Bengal and Assam (with Dhaka as its capital). In 1912, East Bengal and West Bengal were reunited, and Assam again retained the status of a Chief Commissioner’s province.

At the time of the Partition of India in 1947, displaced persons from East Pakistan, which is present-day Bangladesh, came to West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura in India in large numbers. By 1951, an estimated 0.7 million people left India, while about 2.5 million people came to India. In addition, two million people came to India in the 1950s and 60s (Tumbe, 2018). Realising the seriousness of the situation, the Indian government enacted the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950, for the “expulsion” of

immigrants from Assam (see, Supreme Court of India 2012, 4). It was followed by the preparation of the National Register of Citizens, 1951, containing details of Indian citizens based on the Census of India, 1951. The said register had about 8 million Indians living in Assam alone. The purpose of the same has still not been made clear. Subsequently, the Foreigners (Tribunals) Order, 1964, was enacted for setting up several Foreigners' Tribunals in different parts of Assam, and the foreign nationals could not be identified (Singh, 2010).

Apart from the displaced persons, the migration driven exclusively by economic reasons from East Pakistan into India continued throughout the 1960s. The alleged religious persecutions and the construction of the Kaptai hydroelectric dam in Chittagong Hill Tracts of East Pakistan also forced several thousand Chakmas, a religious community group, to take refuge in India. In 1964, the Government of India settled about 35,000 of them to the then North-East Frontier Agency, now known as Arunachal Pradesh*.

In fact, during the Partition of Pakistan in 1971 that led to the formation of the independent country of Bangladesh, an estimated 10 million displaced persons from East Pakistan fled to India's states of West Bengal, Assam and Tripura (Murshid, 2011; Tumbe, 2018) to escape a crackdown by the Pakistani armed forces. The Indian government then "adopted an open-door policy on the influx of refugees on humanitarian grounds," and about 3 million people took refuge in Assam and Tripura (Tumbe, 2018, 181). A large majority of them went back within a year (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. 2000, 59).

Apart from the influx of displaced persons during the Partition of India and that of Pakistan, the thinly populated North-eastern region used to be a destination for migration driven exclusively for economic reasons from the densely populated areas of India, such as West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Odisha, and also from Bangladesh. The focus of this paper is the analysis of the migration from Bangladesh to India's North-eastern region. Let us recall the statement made by an Indian minister, Mr. Kiren Rijiju, in the upper house of the Parliament (Rajya Sabha) on January 3, 2018,

Despite the erection of border fences in various stretches, the Indo-Bangladesh border continues to remain vulnerable to illegal infiltration by Bangladesh nationals through unfenced stretches/gaps. Infiltrators generally cross over to India clandestinely and mingle with adjoining population, taking advantages of physical, linguistic and cultural similarities (Ministry of Home Affairs 2018, 1).

2. Broken Promises

The issue of illegal migration continues to capture the attention of academics, journalists, politicians and many others. Most of these writers view illegal immigration into the region as “silent demographic invasion”, “main problem”, “cultural threat,” and “security threat” (Sinha, 1998; Manoharan, 2012; Singha, 2018; Bhattacharyya, 2001; Singh, 2009). During the anti-foreigner agitation in Assam, the Indian Parliament enacted the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983, applicable to Assam only with effect from October 15, 1983, for the establishment of Foreigners’ Tribunals for detecting illegal migrants who migrated into India across the borders of the eastern and North-eastern regions of the country on and after the 25th March 1971. But, it could not detect illegal migrants. In 2005, the Supreme Court of India declared it *ultra vires* of the constitution, citing its inability to detect illegal migrants.

The groups that spearheaded the anti-foreigner agitation in Assam, such as the All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), boycotted the elections for the 126 assembly seats and 12 parliamentary seats in 1983 “on the ground that a settlement of the problem must precede any elections” (Economic and Political Weekly 1983a, 125-126). Political parties such as the Janata Party, Lok Dal and Bharatiya Janata Party(BJP) did not take part in the elections. The elections recorded a sharp decline in voters’ turnout of 32.74 percent. But, in the 15 assembly seats of Cachar district in the southern part of the state (now tri-furcated into Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi districts), the election boycott did not receive popular support (Economic and Political Weekly, 1983b, 136-137).

In August 1985, the central government concluded a Memorandum of Settlement (an agreement) with the agitating leaders, popularly known as the Assam Accord, for “detection and deletion of foreigners” who came to Assam on or after March 25, 1971. The settlement also promised “constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards ... to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people” (see, Memorandum of Settlement 1985). As it was anticipated beforehand, the foreigners' issue failed to be implemented. From 1986 onwards, India started construction of border fences along the India-Bangladesh border.

In Manipur, student groups such as the All Manipur Students' Union (AMSU) and the All Manipur Students' Coordinating Committee (AMSCC) launched an anti-foreigner agitation in 1980, demanding the removal of the name of “foreign nationals” from the electoral rolls and their deportation. They also demanded the introduction of the *inner line permit* under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873, through which any person who is not indigenous or permanent resident of Manipur and wishes to enter it shall obtain a permit to enter the state. They mobilized the public through the distribution of leaflets, pamphlets and public meetings and also boycotted classes and examinations. Even the government offices were also picketed. As expected, an agreement between the state government and agitating leaders concluded in August 1980; however, “the implementation part did not come as expected” (Arun, 2001, 54). Similar agitation, which broke out in 1994, also ended with another agreement (United Committee Manipur, 2005).

Likewise, in Assam, the Partition brought a large number of displaced persons from East Pakistan to Tripura and was subsequently granted Indian citizenship (Debbarma, 1996). As a result, the numerically smaller Tripura natives have already been outnumbered by the non-indigenous population constituting about two-thirds of the state's population (Government of Tripura, 2007). An insurgency movement of the Tripura natives seeking to achieve an independent country with full sovereignty began in the 1980s. Thus, the hill portion of Tripura (7,132 sq.km.) predominantly inhabited by the Tripura natives has been given limited district level autonomy under the Sixth Schedule provision of the

Constitution of India to preserve and promote their “distinctiveness”. Over the period, at least three separate agreements were concluded between the government and the insurgent groups promising to take measures to prevent “infiltration” from across the border and restoration of alienated land to the tribals[†]. However, like the aforementioned agreements, the promises offered are yet to be delivered.

3. Concerns of the Small Ethnic Communities

Apart from migration during the colonial period and the influx of displaced persons during the Partition, the North-east region has attracted a significant number of migrants from the mainland of India, East Pakistan and Bangladesh. As a result, the region’s ethnic communities have long expressed apprehension of being eventually outnumbered by the non-indigenous population. They are aware of the importance of migration, but they are against unabated migration into the region. Thus it is important to see how migration into the region is seen as a potential threat to their existence.

Fear of being outnumbered by non-indigenous population: Migration is commonly believed to be the main cause of the high growth of population in the Northeast region (Government of Assam, 2012; Sahni, 2002; Singh, 2016). The non-indigenous population constitutes mostly members of numerically larger groups who trace their roots to the densely populated areas of India and Bangladesh. Since the ethnic communities of this region are numerically small and are marked by distinct relative backwardness, they are concerned about the threat to their cultural identity. The fear of being increasingly outnumbered by “others” in their land should not be taken as xenophobia. We have seen in Tripura where the numerically small indigenous population has been outnumbered by the numerically larger non-indigenous population. Members of the non-indigenous population who came at the time of Partition are now the majority population in Tripura (Sahni, 2002, 39-112). Indeed, the concern of the small indigenous population should be acknowledged by the numerically larger and yet, politically influential communities. Their fear is not only from Bangladesh but also from the mainland of the country.

Since the North-east region is predominantly inhabited by the numerically smaller indigenous population, the continuous influx of people belonging to the numerically larger communities is considered a threat by them. The Assamese, the region's largest native, has about 14.81 million native speakers in India; others such as Manipuri have just 1.76 million speakers, Bodo (1.45 million), Khasi (1.03 million), Kokbarak (0.91 million), and Dimasa (0.13 million). Compared to them, the Bengali in India has 96.2 million native speakers and Bhojpuri (50.6 million speakers) (Census of India, 2011). In addition, Bangla, the state language of Bangladesh, has more than 140 million native speakers in Bangladesh alone.

Non-indigenous population has a stronghold on trade and commerce: The relatively backward North-east natives are unfamiliar with working for livelihood far away from their homelands. We hardly know any Khasi person from Meghalaya doing daily wage work in Nagaland and vice versa. They aren't keen on taking up certain occupations such as menial and low-paid jobs. Since they are unsuitable for such jobs, the employers, including local contractors, have to give jobs to migrant workers only. On the other hand, you will notice a large number of migrant workers who are engaged in different occupational categories. The migrant communities virtually control trade and commerce in almost all the major towns of the region, from Guwahati, Jorhat, Shillong, Itanagar, Imphal and Gangtok to Aizawl. For instance, a survey of 13,380 establishments/shops conducted in Kohima, Dimapur and Mokokchung towns in Nagaland in 2007 found that the total number of the migrant workforce in the three towns was 45,815. Dimapur reported the largest migrant workforce with 32,700 persons, followed by Kohima with 10,900 persons and Mokokchung with 2,215 persons. The establishments enumerated were in 78 trades ranging from agriculture, trading and manufacturing to the service sector. The construction sector reported the highest migrant workforce, with 4,099 persons engaged. It was followed by the loading and unloading sector with 4,012 persons. Not a single native worker was found in loading and unloading activities, while a few native workers were found in construction activity in Dimapur only. The third-largest workforce of the migrants was in trading and entrepreneurial activity (Government of Nagaland, 2007).

Fear of possible influx of displaced persons from neighbouring countries: India used to be a natural choice for displaced persons from neighbouring countries. The North-east region has already seen the settlement of displaced persons who came from East Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar in the past. The people of the region are still worried if the central government decides to rehabilitate such displaced persons, including the Rohingyas, on humanitarian grounds in the near future.

Fear of losing more land to non-indigenous population: Rapid population growth will increase the demand for land. Access to and control over land has been driving conflict in the region. The settlement of migrants on cultivable wastelands started as a colonial policy. Although the displaced persons were given shelter on a humanitarian ground, the government had failed to prevent the subsequent transfer of land belonging to the small and backward ethnic communities to the non-indigenous population. In Assam, the migrants who initially settled in *Char* areas of the Brahmaputra riverbed subsequently encroached upon government land and the land owned by others (Assam Institute of Research for Tribal and Scheduled Castes, 1999). Frequent floods in *Char* areas also helped them to get rehabilitated elsewhere with proper official documents (Fernandes, 2017). In Tripura, the land initially reserved for the tribal natives during the reign of Maharaja Bir Bikram Manikya was subsequently used for settling displaced persons (Ghoshal, 2017; Bhattacharya, 2009).

In addition to the above-mentioned factors, there is difficulty in identifying Bangladeshi migrants from the domestic migrants since the people of the Indian subcontinent have physical, cultural, and historical similarities and a common colonial legacy. As a result, the native North-east Indians will not be able to distinguish Bangladeshi migrants from domestic migrants. This can be further compounded due to the prevalence of corrupt practices in obtaining public services cards such as ration cards, birth certificates, driving licence, voter's identity card, and Aadhaar. It is well-known that the migrants can also bribe officials to obtain public services cards fraudulently.

Moreover, the prescribed cut-off date for detecting illegal migrants has also changed over the years. First and foremost, the Immigrants

(Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950 authorised the central government the power to order the expulsion of "certain immigrants" w.e.f 1st March 1950. Secondly, the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983 defines illegal migrants as those who migrated into India on and after 25th March 1971. The signing of a bilateral Treaty of Peace and friendship between Bangladesh and India on 19th of March 1972 "redefined the status of illegal immigrants in India as it declared that all those who had come before 1971 were declared non-Bangladeshis" (Ahmad, 2012). Thereafter, the Assam Accord of 1985 divided illegal migrants from Bangladesh into (a) those who came to Assam before 1st of January 1966; (b) those who came between 1st of January 1966 and 24th March 1971; and (c) foreigners who came to Assam on or after 25th March 1971. The first group shall be regularized and accorded Indian citizenship. The second group has to be taken off the electoral rolls and regularised after ten years. The third category shall continue to be detected, deleted, and expelled from Assam as per law (see, Memorandum of Settlement, 1985).

In the wake of the passing of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, any person belonging to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi or Christian community from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, who entered into India on or before 31st of December 2014, due to religious persecution in those countries, shall not be treated as "illegal migrant" in India. Since there is no fixed cut-off date for determining illegal migrant status, naturally, there is an acute sense of anger among members of small ethnic communities in the North-east region. They are hesitant to accept the prescribed cut-off date fixed by the government.

At the same time, we cannot ignore the positive impact of migration at the destination place. The migrants provide cheap labour as they work at small wages and also skilled labour. On the other hand, they can send money back home to support their families. They also learn new ideas and skills at the destination place. Nonetheless, it is rare to come across any country which does not report some kind of illegal migration. It has been a concern in many countries, including India. In reality, illegal migration has become an inherent aspect of global migration. There are also no

accurate records on such migration (International Organization for Migration, 2008).

4. Exercise to update the National Register of Citizens

The National Register of Citizens, 1951 is a document that contains names of every person enumerated during the population census of 1951 in respect of each village of the country. It was prepared under the directive of the Indian ministry of home affairs. However, its actual purpose was altogether unclear.

Because of the concern over illegal migration from Bangladesh, the North-eastern states have long been demanding to update the citizens' register. But, the successive governments were not inclined to do so. However, in response to various petitions filed by concerned citizens and community-based organizations, the Supreme Court of India, in 2014, directed the central government to take note of the progress of the implementation and to conform to a schedule. Thereafter, the central government entrusted the task of updating the citizens' register to the Assam government.

The upgradation of the citizens' register means the process of enlisting the names of those persons (or their descendants) whose names appear in the original register of 1951 or any electoral rolls up to the midnight of March 24, 1971, or any other related documents issued up to midnight of March 24, 1971, which would prove their presence in Assam or any part of India on or before March 24, 1971[‡].

Assam is the only state in India where the upgradation of the citizens' registrar is taking place, with March 24, 1971, as the cut-off date to include names of genuine citizens. In the revised list of 2019, altogether, 19,06,657 applicants have been excluded[§]. The revision work is yet to be completed. Those excluded from the register can take up the matter before the Foreigners Tribunals and get their names included. If they are unsatisfied with the decision, they can approach the higher courts. The exercise is only targeted at the proper recording of the name of genuine Indian citizens in Assam. It is not designed to deport any person. However, the exercise puts a substantial burden on many people, especially the poor and the illiterate.

The number of illegal migrants in Assam will be known after the final citizens' register is prepared. Once completed, the updated citizens' register is expected to be an "important legal document" to prove a person's Indian citizenship. However, its legal status is still vague, although it is considered necessary to update the register to identify genuine Indian citizens. Thus, the citizens of India in Assam need to enroll their names in the register.

When the partly updated National Register of Citizens was published after enormous hard work and anxiety, no one came forward to claim credit for the development. The outcome has disappointed many, including the BJP and the AASU, as the number of people expected to be excluded is negligible. The AASU refused to accept the partly updated citizens' register and wanted the exercise to be re-examined. The BJP also wanted a re-examination of 20 percent names included in border districts and 10 percent names in other districts. On the other hand, the Congress party termed the exercise a "careless implementation" and not free and fair. But the party never attempted to elaborate.

Officials closely involved with the preparation of partly updated register have already admitted to the inclusion of "ineligible persons" such as doubtful voters, declared foreigners, descendants of doubtful voters and those with cases pending in the Foreigners' Tribunals. The state government also maintained that "several serious, fundamental and substantial errors" have crept into the process of updating the register. It has even filed a petition in the Supreme Court of India, seeking the court to pass appropriate directions for a "complete, comprehensive and time-bound re-verification". The demand for re-verification could make the issue of illegal migration alive again in Assam and the neighbouring states.

The exercise to update the National Register of Citizens is yet to be completed, and this is expected to take time. No one knows how many people have not applied for inclusion of their names, and there is no mechanism to know this. We do not know how many ineligible persons have been fraudulently enrolled in the said register, just like many were alleged to have enrolled on the electoral rolls.

Since the National Register of Citizens is supposed to be an important legal document, it is necessary to define its legal status. Moreover, there is a concern about the safety of the database. If the register can maintain a high level of administrative efficiency free from corruption and nepotism, it would certainly serve as a base document to determine future claims, as rightly pointed out by Justice Ranjan Gogoi, former Chief Justice of India. In doing so, this path-breaking exercise would certainly deter the influx of illegal migration into the North-east region. The exercise is an extensive and complex project. Since the National Register of Citizens is being updated on account of the influx of illegal migrants into Assam, it should be linked with the state's electoral roll. The option of making it mandatory for availing public services in Assam must also be explored. The National Register of Citizens must be a mandatory document for availing government employment, welfare schemes, land transaction, income certificate and so on.

5. Bangladesh's denial and India's difficulties

Bangladesh maintained that no illegal migration takes place from its territory to India. It even advised India to revisit the perception. Otherwise, it wanted India to provide evidence of the presence of its nationals there. The reported presence of its nationals in India is sometimes referred to as a myth**.

But, Bangladesh cannot deny that there are a large number of people in India's North-east region who trace their roots to Bangladesh. Many of them came as economic migrants over different periods. In addition, many displaced persons who came during 1947-1971, mainly during the Partition of India and of Pakistan, have permanently settled down in India. The people of the region wanted those who came as displaced persons to go back. Though this is the sentiment expressed in several quarters, in principle, people have accepted those who came to the North-east region before 1971.

It is surprising how Bangladesh is undermining the concern of India's North-east region. If there were no illegal migration from Bangladesh into this region, as claimed by Bangladesh, why did several agitations take place in the region? If Bangladesh denies

illegal migration taking place from its territory, why is it concerned about the reported killings of its citizens for illegally entering India at the border? Despite the denial, the illegal migration issue has been extensively debated in Bangladesh. A report estimated more than two million Muslims in Assam trace their roots to Bangladesh^{††}. Bangladesh used to keep a close watch on the work of upgradation of the National Register of Citizens^{††}, which the Bangladeshi media even termed as an attempt to exclude the Muslim community^{§§} and to detect and deport illegal migrants^{***}. It is also seen as BJP's plan to make India the Hindu Rashtra^{†††}. The party is even accused of making the same old issue of illegal migration as an election issue to reap political benefits^{†††}.

It is important to discuss the reasons that led to migration from Bangladesh into India. The cause of migration can be understood from the combination of several push and pull factors. We are aware that Bangladesh is a small and densely populated country, with about 1,240 persons per sq. km. (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2020). It is also highly vulnerable to natural disasters such as flash floods, riverbank erosion, and landslide (Agrawala et al., 2003). As a result, the country is sometimes referred to as the "land of natural disasters" (Karim, 1995). During the Partition of India as well as of Pakistan, more people came towards India than those who went from India. Therefore, there are a large number of people in India who trace their roots to East Pakistan and Bangladesh. Indian home minister, Mr. Amit Shah, has also rightly pointed to the lack of development in the border regions of Bangladesh as one of the reasons for migration from Bangladesh to India.

On the other hand, India is over 22-times (3,287,240 sq. km.) bigger than Bangladesh (144,000 sq. km.), and the North-eastern states are the least densely populated. The states of the region are thinly populated with just 17 persons per sq. km. in Arunachal Pradesh to 398 persons in Assam as compared to 1,028 persons in West Bengal, 1,106 persons in Bihar (Census of India, 2011). Bangladesh has a density of population of about 1,240 persons per sq. km. and also shares a common land border with India in the north, east and west (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2020). As a result, the migrants are also attracted by the availability of land in the region.

6. Divided by the new citizenship law

Amidst the ongoing streamlining of the National Register of Citizens in Assam, the amended citizenship law, the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, has been passed but is not yet enforced owing to the outbreak of COVID-19. The importance of the National Register of Citizens is going to be compromised once this law comes into effect. The new law is intended to protect members of six identified religious minority communities who India alleged have faced persecution because of their religion, and they could not practice their religion freely without fear.

Protests broke out in different parts of the country, including the North-eastern region when the Parliament passed the law. But, several members of the Indian Parliament who represented different parliamentary constituencies of the North-eastern states voted in favour of the law when the voting took place in both houses of the Parliament. In a surprise move, the central government decided not to enforce the new law in the “tribal areas” of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura, which fall under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution as well as in states such as Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland (excludes Dimapur area) and Manipur^{sss}, where the *inner line permit* under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873 is presently enforced. This has resulted in splitting the opposition.

7. Conclusion

We always fail to acknowledge the contribution of the migrants to the development of India’s North-east region. At the same time, illegal migration from Bangladesh into India has been persistent, though in lesser numbers. Indian authorities cannot distinguish between domestic migrants and illegal migrants in its territory. Had there had been a way to classify each other, the issue would not have lingered for long. Hence, it can be called “invisible migration”.

Political parties, academics and the general public are divided on the issue, including the total migrant population. The general public is also divided between those who considered migration

into the North-east region as a threat and those who do not. In such a situation, the roles of the political parties have been crucial. The BJP always accused the Congress Party, the party which ruled India and most North-eastern states over the last several decades, of indulging in appeasement policy towards certain communities and for encouraging illegal migration to expand its vote bank. On the other hand, the Congress Party accused the BJP of indulging in communal politics and for making only promises to detect illegal migrants. The BJP insisted that it does not appease any particular group. Both have promised to take measures to detect foreign nationals who are said to be illegally staying in the region.

Migration is in itself a good thing as long as the cultural identity of the ethnic communities is not endangered. Many ethnic communities in the North-east are perturbed and feel helpless because of demographic changes caused by the continuous influx of migrants as well as displaced persons. We have witnessed organised resistance movements in the region. In response, the Indian state has concluded agreements with the agitating leaders. But, these agreements have not made any difference or improvement on the ground. They also know that the detection of illegal migrants is not going to happen.

Even the prescribed cut-of-date for detection of Illegal migrants has changed over time. But, the popular opinion stands in direct opposition to the prescribed cut-of-date decided by the government. We are also aware that India has been unable to successfully implement the measures it devised.

The successive governments in the past were reluctant to undertake the exercise of upgradation of the National Register of Citizens in Assam. Even today, the purpose of updating this register has not been fully explained and understood by the common people. The outcome of the partly updated register has disappointed many. It is unable to detect illegal migrants. Now, other states will be more cautious in asking for its upgradation in their states. I feel that the National Register of Citizens won't be able to identify illegal migrants because most of them already have the necessary documents to get enrolled in the citizens' register.

Taking advantage of India's difficulties, Bangladesh has refused to acknowledge illegal migration taking place from its territory to India and has been insisting on the latter to provide evidence. Since it is difficult to differentiate between illegal migrants and internal migrants, India is unable to provide any evidence asked by Bangladesh.

If illegal migration is a concern in the country, India has not made any attempt to discuss the matter with Bangladesh. This is surprising given the promises made by different political parties. In this context, we do not see any difference between the Congress Party and Bharatiya Janata Party. Regular high-level meetings between the two countries took place where several issues were discussed and sorted out. But the issue of illegal migration has never been discussed. Instead, Bangladesh raised concerns over the killing of its citizens for illegally crossing the India-Bangladesh border by the Indian border police. Based on the experience, it may be safely concluded that India would not take any harsh measures, including deportation, since it doesn't want to hurt its ties with Bangladesh. However, it is surprising why India does not consider it necessary to discuss the issue with Bangladesh. This shows that the concerns of the North-eastern states do not deserve any discussion with Bangladesh.

With the ongoing exercise to update the National Register of Citizens in Assam and the passing of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, the illegal migration issue is expected to continue to be an electoral issue in Assam and neighbouring states. The new citizenship law underscores a clear manifestation of the conflict between the national interest and the local interest. There is a tendency to pursue the illegal migration issue to advance the Hindu majoritarian agenda. To conclude, neither the citizens' register nor the new citizenship law are going to address the illegal migration issue. Detection of illegal migrants from North-eastern states is not likely to happen at all. At the same time, we cannot stop migration, but we must regulate it if the existing measures work more effectively. The government is fully aware of the difficulties but has not properly informed the people of their difficulties. The North-east region of India is the perfect example of how small ethnic communities feel insecure about their cultural

and political identity due to unabated immigration and the state's indifference.

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* Singh, M. Amarjeet. 2005, Arunachal's Chakma refugees, *The Statesman (Kolkata)*, February 5.

† See the Memorandum of Understanding between the government and with the Tripura National Volunteer (TNV) of 1988; and also the Memorandum of Settlement between the government and the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) of 1993.

‡ For more information, please see the official website of the Office of the State Coordinator of National Registration (NRC), Assam, Government of Assam at <http://nrcassam.nic.in/>.

§ A total of 3,30,27,66 applicants applied for inclusion in the National Register of Citizens of which 3,11,21,004 made it to the revised list.

** Mohammad Al-Masum Molla. 2019. Bangladesh should not be the dumping ground for NRC left-outs. *Daily Star*, September 2.

†† Dhaka Tribune. 2017. Citizens list targeting 'illegal Bangladeshis' creates tension in Assam. *Dhaka Tribune*, December 29.

‡‡ Daily Star. 2019. We remain alert after India released final NRC: Quade. *Daily Star*, September 1.

§§ Molla, Mohammad Al-Masum. 2019, "Bangladesh should not be the dumping ground for NRC left-outs", *Daily Star*, September 2.

*** Dhaka Tribune. 2017. Citizens list targeting 'illegal Bangladeshis' creates tension in Assam. *Dhaka Tribune*, Dec 29.

†† Riaz, Ali. 2019. Two contexts of influx from India. *Daily Star*, December 1.

†† Khan, ShahedulAnam. 2016. 20 million 'illegal Bangladeshis' in India - Really!, *Daily Star*, November 17.

§§§ The *inner line permit* under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873 was extended to Manipur in the wake of the opposition against the new citizenship law.

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