**Is India creating its own Rohingyas?**

[Mohammad Zaman](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/mohammad-zaman/" \o "More Articles by Mohammad Zaman)

January 14, 2020

In recent weeks, [India](https://dailytimes.com.pk/537026/indias-sc-declares-held-kashmir-indefinite-internet-shutdown-illegal/) was rocked by massive protests and violence against the divisive citizenship law, which potentially may result in deporting 1.9 million Bengali-speaking Muslims from the north-eastern state of Assam. These Assamese Muslims, who forever have been treated as “foreigners”-are now disenfranchised, abandoned and stateless – and worst of all, considered “illegal” Bangladeshis from former East Bengal. However, as per historical accounts, a very large majority of these immigrants indeed had entered Assam decades ago from Mymensingh, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri without violating any law for work and prospects of a better life by opening up new agricultural frontiers in the riverine and heartland of Assam.

The developments surrounding the current crisis in Assam – for example, brutal violence, mass killings, and open hostility against the Bengali-speaking Assamese Muslims triggering widespread fear and panic, and the National Registry of Citizens (NRC) exercise in Assam, and finally, the citizenship row eerily parallels a Rohingya-like refugee crisis in the making of Hindu India. The long history of repression and violence against Bengali settlers can be traced back to the BangalKhedao campaign in the 1940s to the Assamese student-led “anti-foreigners” movement of the 1980s and the infamous 1983 Nellie Massacre in which 2,000 Muslims of Bengali-speaking were slaughtered by the ethnic Assamese. The rise of Assamese nationalism in the 1980s was built on the apprehension of indigenous Assamese of being “swamped” by the growing numbers of both Hindu and Muslims Bengali immigrants.

**Migration and the Colonial Legacy**

Historical evidence clearly indicates migration of Bengali farmers inundivided British India to Assamand Burma (now Myanmar) in large numbers. East Bengal, now Bangladesh, shares several hundred miles of border with Assam and Burma. The British brought many unskilled migrant workers from East Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh to work in the growing tea plantations in Assam. In fact, the tea plantation industry was built upon waves of migration after the British annexed Assam in 1826. There are accounts of many more migrants moving back and forth as traders, merchants, and workers between Bengal, Assam and Burma. The British deliberately promoted migration to “divide and rule” and also as a source of cheap labor – for example, the Irrawaddy Delta was developed as a leading rice exporterduring the British Raj largely by labor brought in from India.

During the colonial period, a large number of Bengali Muslims from Chittagong settled in the Arakan region.There are also records of occasional waves of large-scale migrations – for instance from Arakan (now Rakhine state) to Chittagong due to dynastic upheavals leading to the foundation of Cox’s Bazar as a town in 1869. Captain Hiram Cox, an officer of the British East India Company, was given the task to rehabilitate and resettle the Arakanese refugees in the area. Similarly, under British patronage large-scale migration of Bengalis took place between 1872 and 1947 from East Bengalto various parts of Assam, including the Brahmaputra Valley. Both Muslims and non-Muslims settled down in Assam in increasing numbers until 1941 as per the Indian census reports. The waves of migration continued across borders even after the 1947 Partition due to Hindu-Muslim riots and then during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971.Therefore, regional migrations were typically common in British India in areas that today constitute post-colonial modern nation states of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Burma.

**Assam and Rakhine – No Place for Muslims**

The contemporary ethnic conflicts in Assam and Rakhine state are rooted in the colonial past of India and Burma. The “free” movement within and beyond Assam and Rakhine came to an end with the partition of India. However, the long colonial rule in undivided India and Burma and its aftermath created pockets of Bengali Muslims diaspora both in Assam and Rakhine state due to movements of people without borders. At the time of the 1947 Partition, some leaders of northern Rakhine, which was already a Muslim majority area, wanted to join then East Pakistan, which was not endorsed by the British. However, Sylhet (formerly of Assam) joined East Pakistan after a referendum in 1947. Even after the partition, migration between Sylhet and Assam continued; likewise, Bengalis from West Bengal were also moving to Assam due to new economic opportunities, raising alarm for the Assamese, which ultimately led to the establishment of the first NRC in 1951.

The government of Bangladesh should raise concerns bilaterally about the crisis in Assam without waiting for information from Delhi. Bangladesh can’t afford another Rohingya-like refugee crisis when it is struggling with 1.2 million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh

The Assamese ethno-nationalist movement of 1980s heightened once more the drive against the Bengali-origin Muslims culminating in the 2019 NRC and the new Citizenship Law of India (2019) barring Muslims, particularly those moved and settled in Assam after 1971 from citizenship, making 1.9 million settlers in Assam stateless, who are now “illegal” and subject to detention and/or deportation as Myanmar did to the Rohingya Muslims through the 1982 Citizenship Law. The Bengali-speaking settlers are now viewed by the Assamese as a threat to their linguistic and cultural identity.

**Rohingya-like Refugee Crisis**

The situations in Assam have dangerous parallels to what happened to the Rohingyas in Myanmar. There are reported cases of 57 suicides among both Bengali Hindu and Muslim settlers who have been de-listed due to lack of records of residence prior to 1971. By now, over 1,000 so-called “foreigners” have already been thrown into jails and detention centres, and more new detention centres are now being built in Assam where these “stateless” people may be locked up indefinitely. Since they are now de-listed, the “illegal” settlers for now, as the Indian government says, may be allowed to stay perhaps as a second class citizen without any rights. However, at some point in the future, these “illegal” people will likely be “pushed back” across the border to Bangladesh. As of now, there is, however, no mechanism in place for deportation.

The anti-Muslim rhetoric of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the ban on Muslim citizenship as a public policy by the Narendra Modi government represent blatant racism and xenophobia in the otherwise democratic, secular and pluralist traditions of India. One commentator termed this as the “second partition” of India; another said, “The very idea of India [as a secular and democratic state] is at stake.”The action against the allegedly “illegal” Bangladeshis, foregrounded by BJP as “infiltrators” and a threat to India’s security,is viewed by many as a well thought out political devise to strengthen Hindu nationalism. At this writing, protests against the citizenship law continues leaving 22 dead following days of deadly violence in all over India.

A repeat of the Rohingya-like crisis in Assam is real and likely to happen unless a more humane approach is undertaken in the light of the United Nations (UN) campaign to end statelessness by 2024.India, which has given shelter to 5.2 million migrants and refugees, is now moving, according to UN Secretary General, in the opposite direction. In the case of Assam, a more compassionate approach would be necessary to end the propaganda of illegality and abuse and to put pathways for naturalization processes that offer citizenship without discrimination on religion and other grounds. Both Assam and India should work together to achieve this within the long established ideology of democracy and secularism.

**BangladeshiIllegals? “Push back” and Responses**

Bangladesh government initially maintained silence or at best wait-and-see attitude over the NRCcrisis in Assam; it was deemed is an “internal” matter of India that”won’t affect” Bangladesh. By now, the perception is perhaps slowly changing, first with the cancellation of trips to India by the Foreign and Home Ministers in view of the Assam crisis, and second, Dhaka asking Delhi for information on any “illegal” Bangladeshis staying in India. Bangladesh also denied any “push back” of any illegal Bangladeshis from India. There is no clue about what lies ahead. The government of Bangladesh should raise concerns bilaterally about the crisis in Assam without waiting for information from Delhi. Bangladesh can’t afford another Rohingya-like refugee crisis when it is struggling with 1.2 million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh for over two years without any immediate hope for repatriation to Myanmar.

*The writer is an international development/resettlement specialist and Advisory Professor, NRCR/Hohai University, Nanjing, China*