

## **Situating Northeast India amidst the Rejuvenation of Bangladesh**

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In their recent interviews, the Assamese Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma and Tripura CM Manik Saha expressed their fear of the implications of the violent protests in Bangladesh and the overthrow of the Sheikh Hasina government in their respective states in the North Eastern Region (NER). Such fear is valid in the context of a shared history of the inter-affecting political environments since the British colonial times. The formation of the present-day northeastern part of India as the Assam commissionership, the reorganisations leading up to the creation of the East Bengal and Assam province in 1905, and the eventual partition and creation of the Assam province in 1912 are significant events in this shared history of the region in a British colonial India. The self-alignment of these groups with their (religious) identities in a shared space under the British, especially with the acceptance of the Simon Commission by the Assamese middle-class intellectuals eventually created a sense of fundamentalism over religious splits in an erstwhile comparatively harmonic era. The Indian Independence in 1947, with the two-nation approach, drew borders dividing the region creating a neighbour beside India's northeastern frontier in the form of East Pakistan and later in 1971, Bangladesh. The historical free movement of people across the Brahmaputra, Barak and Surma valleys until 1947 along with the developmental deficit and unstable internal political environment have had serious implications on this northeastern frontier of India.

Firstly, in the presence of unfavourable conditions at home, migration of people is inevitable, especially when it comes to a very artificial sense of borders with an erstwhile sense of continuity. However, in the present nation-state system and its economy restricted within its boundaries, free movement of people harms the local population. Apart from the obvious economic effects, such immigrants also encounter the local identity of the place they are migrating. The influx of a sizeable Bangladesh (or East Pakistan) after 1947 has affected the demographic status quo of the region. Apart from the over-competitive aspiration for limited resources, the reactions of the local population on the Indian side are also evidence of the insecurity of losing their culture, language and symbols that legitimise their identities. The contradictory motivations of either side have made it difficult to assess whether a decision should be based on inclusivity and humanitarian morality or to protect national integrity and indigenous identity. This leads to the second implication – a sense of urgency has arisen regarding the decision on the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019. Since the issue of immigration from Bangladesh is a common problem for a diverse north-east, there is a general distrust amongst the people. CAA becomes more than just an issue of religion - something that usually captures the national popular discourse. The issue of CAA for a few states in the northeast also comes with a demand for establishing the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system and thus, to be protected from immigration. Unrest in Bangladesh and the reports of immigrants caught at the border regions by the Indian Border Security Forces (BSF) have consolidated the legitimacy of such distrust and demands in the minds of the population.

Such demands have a way of transforming into violent struggles, as the history of the region bear witness. The insurgent groups such as the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA),

National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) have seen their foundations built on the immigrant question. The episodes of ethnic violence, kidnappings and extortion were targeted at the Bengali Muslims irrespective of their time of entry into India. Coupled with that insecurity, the growing relevance of fundamentalist organisations in Bangladesh such as the Jamaat-e-Islami, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Ansarul Islam further complicates the situation of threat for the Indian central government and concerned State governments. The immigration of Bangladeshi people is often reported as infiltration sponsored by such organisations to disrupt India's internal security. While such a matter requires more investigation, the mere presence of insurgent groups running their operations in Bangladesh has been a matter of concern. Groups such as the ULFA, NDFB, NLFT and Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) were functional in those areas and the region acted as a safe haven for the insurgent leaders. This only stopped with the Awami League coming to power against the BNP and the signing of the Indo-Bangladesh Extradition Treaty of 2013 after which the arrest and deportation of insurgents such as Anup Chetia of ULFA and Ranjan Daimary of NDFB took place. Such implications are highly probable, especially amidst the question of citizenship.

The issues of conflict are not just limited to the identity and movement of people but also over natural resources, specifically water. The Joint Rivers Commission (JRC) of India and Bangladesh discusses and develops water-sharing agreements between the two nations for several important rivers such as the Ganges, Teesta and Koshiyara. The internal political situation in Bangladesh also influences such bilateral agreements, considering the river water disputes between the two countries. Only recently, the Adviser for Environment, Forest and Climate Change of Bangladesh, Syeda Rizwana Hasan spoke on the nation's commitment to addressing the Teesta River dispute. This is perhaps the most important bone of contention between the two nations, given its high hydropower potential only in the upstream regions. These regions are on the Indian side, spread across Sikkim and West Bengal until the river flows down to the plains in Bangladesh, catering to large chunks of the population along the way. Such implications on the existing (dis)agreements are inevitable and entirely depend on the nature of the governments in Delhi and Dhaka.

The apparent sense of 'ours' and 'theirs' in 'our language', 'our culture' and 'our water' is an apt example of reclamation of their unique history against the reality of a shared past of interconnectedness - at distrust, violence, governance and basic needs. Perhaps an attempt at understanding and addressing the fault lines in current events from the perspectives of either nation could be a stepping stone to mitigating these implications without conflict and violence.