

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The chances are that the Iranian economy, already struggling after years of isolation and mismanagement, will take another downwards turn."

—THE INDEPENDENT



Vote-banks and foreigners

Congress's stand on NRC reeks of its communal and opportunistic politics

GOPAL KRISHNA AGARWAL

OPPOSITION PARTIES have sensed a chance after the release of the final draft of the NRC. Every attempt is being made to create a crisis where none exists. However, it is grossly premature to speculate on the future of those identified as illegal immigrants. Religion, region and caste have always affected politics but governance should be above such considerations.

A perfectly legitimate exercise by the Assam government, under the Assam Accord, has precipitated condemnable reaction from the Opposition parties. The Congress — and its president, Rahul Gandhi — must make its stand clear on the issue of illegal migrants from neighbouring countries. Both Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi had committed that immigrants to Assam after March 25, 1971, would be detected, identified and deported. The Congress had agreed to the NRC. But the party did nothing in this respect when it held office at the Centre or in Assam because the immigrants are mostly Muslims and the party has cultivated this community as its vote bank.

The Congress also tried to subvert the Foreigners Act 1946 through the Illegal Migrant Determination by Tribunal (IMDT) Act, 1983. The IMDT Act was stuck down by

the Supreme Court in 2005. The Court's verdict came in response to a petition filed by Assam's current Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal. The court noted that the IMDT "is the main impediment or barrier in the identification and deportation of illegal migrants".

The Congress's conduct in the affair requires close scrutiny. In an affidavit filed before the Supreme Court on August 28, 2000, the then Asom Gana Parishad (AGP)-led government pointed out that it had been asking the Centre to repeal the IMDT Act because the law was against national interest. In May 2001, the AGP was defeated in elections to the Assam Assembly and a Congress-led government assumed office. On August 8, 2001, the new government moved an application in the apex court praying that the state be permitted to withdraw the earlier affidavit and be allowed to file a new affidavit. The application stated that "the IMDT Act is constitutional and there is no question of either repeal or striking down of the Act".

The Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led NDA government at the Centre had filed an affidavit in the matter on July 18, 2000, stating that a proposal to repeal the IMDT Act was under its consideration. However, the Congress-led UPA government which assumed office at the

Centre in 2004 file another affidavit in November that year. It said that the Centre had decided to retain the IMDT Act in its present form. But the Court struck down the Act in 2005. It observed, "The dangerous consequences of large-scale illegal migration from Bangladesh, both for the people of Assam and more for the nation as a whole, need to be emphatically stressed. No misconceived and mistaken notions of secularism should be allowed to come in the way of doing so".

It would not be an exaggeration to say that at the root of all socio-political problems in the country lie the Congress's myopic politics. The party's position on several issues, including the triple talaq issue, the Supreme Court judgment on maintenance to Shah Bano, illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, Ram Temple at Ayodhya and the plight of Kashmiri Pundits, testify to its myopic vision. The party is responsible for communalising Indian politics.

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's political ambitions have grown in recent times. She sees the NRC issue as an opportunity to consolidate her Muslim vote-bank. Banerjee has dishonestly described the NRC as a restriction on the inter-state movement of Indian citizens. She is trying to turn

the NRC into a Hindu-Muslim issue. We hope she explains her stand on the issue of illegal migration from Bangladesh. It is another matter that on August 4, 2005, she had stated in the Lok Sabha: "Infiltration in Bengal has become a disaster now. You can see Bangladeshi as well as Indian names in the list. I have both the Bangladeshi and the Indian voters' list. This is a very serious matter". The silence of other political parties like the CPI, CPM, BSP, SP, RJD reeks of hypocrisy.

The illegal immigrants are not refugees. The movement under the banners of the AASU and AAGSP had emerged because the people of Assam feared the adverse social, political, cultural and economic impacts of the unabated influx of foreigners. Census figures show that the percentage of Assamese-speakers in the state declined from 58 per cent in 1991 to 48 per cent in 2001. The Muslim population of Assam increased from 25 per cent in 1951 to 34 per cent in 2011.

All political parties should express their stand on the issue of illegal immigrants in no uncertain terms. Fear-mongering and hyperventilation would not serve the interests of the nation as would keeping quiet on the issue.

The writer is national spokesperson, BJP