

Citizenship Bill aims to give dignity denied to Partition victims in east

Swapan Das Gupta, 6 October 2019

Times of India - <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/right-and-wrong/citizenship-bill-aims-to-give-dignity-denied-to-partition-victims-in-east/>

There are countless families all over northern and western India who were once categorised as refugees from what is now Pakistan. Lakhs of individuals left their ancestral homes and made a new beginning in independent India. Their histories have been documented, and there is even a museum in Amritsar that commemorates the migration.

Over the decades, these erstwhile refugees have not only been seamlessly integrated but many have risen spectacularly. One former refugee — Dr Manmohan Singh — rose to become Prime Minister of India and another — L K Advani — became Deputy Prime Minister. What distinguishes the refugees from the rest today are family memories and the occasional sense of loss.

If today, someone was to tell a Punjabi or Sindhi descendant of a refugee family that there is a likelihood of them being deported to Pakistan, they would be laughed out of court. Apart from the sheer absurdity of being forcibly transported to a Pakistan that has changed unrecognisably, the Indian-ness of yesterday's refugees from Pakistan has never been doubted.

There is, however, a detail that tends to be overlooked in the discourse over the division of India: there were two partitions, one of which was in the east. The tragedy of those who fled their homes in erstwhile East Pakistan has been marginal to the popular narrative.

The reasons for this neglect are worth restating.

Firstly, the exodus didn't happen all at once. The Hindu migration from East Pakistan began in 1947 and continued in waves right until the formation of Bangladesh in 1971. Subsequently, it has become a trickle but still continues.

Secondly, the rehabilitation programmes for refugees in northern India wasn't complemented by similar initiatives in the east. Bengali Hindu refugees suffered from official neglect so much so that a 'refugee problem' persists to this day in parts of West Bengal, Assam and Tripura.

Thirdly, thanks to the misplaced Nehru-Liaquat Pact of 1950, New Delhi lived, at least until 1972, with the delusion that the exodus was one of temporary displacement and that the refugees would soon return to their original homes. Syama Prasad Mookerjee had resigned from the Nehru Cabinet in protest against this policy of denial. In hindsight, he was right.

Finally, the problem was complicated by the organised influx of Muslim Bangladeshis into both Assam and West Bengal for both political and economic reasons.

Consequently, there arose an important distinction between Hindu 'refugees' who had escaped religious persecution and 'infiltrators' who had crossed the border either in search of livelihood or to add to vote banks.

It is in this larger context that the panic over a National Register of Citizens in West Bengal has to be viewed. Decades of neglect and political indifference to their plight, not to mention the grim struggle for survival, has made Bengali refugees jumpy and vulnerable to fear-mongering. Mamata Banerjee's clever but totally contrived campaign that Hindu refugees are in imminent danger of being deported to Bangladesh is aimed at undercutting the BJP's growing support in the state. While not based on any reality, it preys on the information deficit over the NRC exercise in Assam and the refugee sense of vulnerability. No official agency in West Bengal has ever threatened the Hindu refugees with exclusion but neither has there been anything substantial done to remove their anxieties.

Unlike the north where the experience of Partition and resettlement has been the subject of public debates, there has been a conspiracy of silence over the circumstances that led to lakhs of Bengali Hindus fleeing to India. The Bengali intelligentsia in particular has been loath to dissect the reasons, circumstances and experiences of the communal divide between the two Bengals. Neither the Great Calcutta Killings and the Noakhali riots nor the sustained persecution of religious minorities in East Pakistan and Bangladesh has been deemed worthwhile conversation subjects in a 'secular' environment. So much so that even Taslima Nasreen remains persona non grata in Kolkata for raising awkward issues. The miserable plight of refugees in makeshift camps has been explored by Bengali filmmakers but the reasons why these people became refugees have remained unaddressed. It is as if one morning in 1947, West Bengal and East Pakistan just happened.

The proposed Citizenship Amendment Bill will be the subject of a fierce debate in the coming days. But the automatic grant of citizenship to those who fled the post-Partition persecution in the east will at least end the lingering uncertainty among those who chose India to live their way of life. It will give lakhs of people the dignity and recognition denied to them for so long.

(Swapan Dasgupta is an Indian journalist and a presidential nominee to the Rajya Sabha).