

The Bangladeshi Independence in 1971 came as an enormous victory for India over its longstanding geopolitical rival, Pakistan. But this Liberation War also unfolded an unprecedented immigration crisis in North-East India, one which the government is still trying to deal with. Native Assamese people have been complaining to the government about the flood of illegal migrants for over half a century now. Having formed a majority over the local Assamese population, these "illegal" immigrants fled their villages in Bangladesh in order to find better work opportunities and to be able to raise their families in what they thought would be a democratic, safe haven. BJP's policies, however, are slowly turning Assam into a political war zone.

North-East India: A historic haven for migrants

The Bangladesh Liberation War won India the assurance of a weaker Pakistan along with greater faith in its own military and diplomatic capabilities. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, proceeded to sign the Indo-Pakistan Treaty of Friendship^[i] with Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, taking full responsibility of the migrants who had entered Indian borders during the war. Nevertheless, the Assam Agitation, which was led by different student groups against the influx of migrants from Bangladesh, led to the signing of the Assam Accord which established 25th March 1971 as the cutoff date for immigrants from Bangladesh to claim citizenship to India. Hence, any migrant crossing the border after this date would be deemed as an illegal immigrant.



Activists of the Minority Youth Federation in Assam shouting slogans against the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)/ Image: Huffpost

Bangladesh wasn't the only country that people fled from to seek refuge in North-Eastern India. Over the years, thousands of refugees from Tibet and Nepal have arduously traversed across the Himalayas to find a home in the relatively safer, Assam. All this has led to a thirty-five per cent increase^[ii] in the Assamese population since Bangladesh's independence.

These statistics might seem dire for a country that is still on the brink of economic development while fighting off an ever-increasing population crisis. In fact, the question with what to do with illegal immigrants coming in from Bangladesh has been so controversial that no comprehensive policies had been formulated under the long-term governance of the Indian National Congress (INC) party. This convenient attitude of avoidance has changed since the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), under the leadership of Amit Shah. Unfortunately, however, much like their election campaign, BJP's solution to deal with this immigration "crisis" is one that dangerously plays with communal politics.

BJP's solution to the immigration "crisis": creating a religious divide

The decision to update the [National Register of Citizenship of India \(NRC\)](#) was made in response to the constant rallying of the Assamese people who felt threatened by the increasing Muslim-majority in their state. According to this policy - ordered by the Supreme Court and officiated by BJP - all those targeted by the immigration officers in North East India are made to produce authentic identity documents that act as evidence of their Indian citizenship. The policy seems simple enough: if a family is able to evidence their citizenship or prove that they migrated to India before the aforementioned cutoff date, then they can peacefully continue residing in their homes. BJP has promised to the local Assamese community that they are going to fish out all those who are unable to produce such document and send them back to their home countries. But who exactly are these so-called "illegal immigrants"?

Most of the people targeted by this new policy are rural communities who are too poor to possess any housing, let alone any documents. They are too uneducated to navigate their way through the brutal bureaucracy of acquiring proof of citizenship. And what's more, is that most of these communities are largely Muslim. The tendency of the party's ideological leanings has become increasingly clear with the initiation of this "citizenship" policy.

Amit Shah, the President of the Bharatiya Janata Party, has denounced these immigrants from Bangladesh as "termites" or "infiltrators."[\[iii\]](#) The employment of such political rhetoric to appeal to the majority population seems to draw a parallel with the drastically inhumane treatment of illegal immigrants from Mexico by the Trump administration. But what sets India apart from America's hostility towards brown, illegal immigrants is that while America's policies are increasingly racist, India's play on the religious divide already existing in the country.

Moreover, Shah has said to provide means of acquiring naturalized citizenship to some members of the communities, but these are only Indians, Sikhs, or Christians. Muslims have no such opportunity to avail to the government. This tactic of appealing to religious sentiments is a form of communal politics that has long plagued India and brought into question the validity of its so-called secular constitution.

Tathagata Roy, the Governor of Tripura, has said, "Political parties and a section of the media are highlighting isolated incidents of wrong exclusions of Indians from NRC to whip up religious and racial hysteria."[\[iv\]](#) While the census of citizenship for any country might

have some loopholes is a fact that is often unavoidable, BJP's practice of deliberately barring the poor Muslim community is an unconstitutional act and one the party must be held accountable for.

Does India really have a migration crisis?

The ruling to update the NRC and BJP's subsequent disproportionate implementation of the same is a sort of reactionary policy that emerges from deep-seated biases toward "foreign" communities. It comes from the fear of losing control of one's culture, and this fear is not one which is endemic to India alone. It can be seen in the [Hostile Policy Act](#) in the United Kingdom, wherein conditions are made hostile for immigrants to discourage the flow of migration, especially from third-world countries. It can be seen in the contentions surrounding the dismantling of the [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals \(DACA\)](#) policy under the Trump administration.

This migration "crisis" however, isn't as much a crisis as it is a political tool that electoral politics has shaped it into. BJP's immigration policy is disproportionately targeting the Muslim community. What will happen to those Indians who have sought refuge in the Eastern borders of India and called this country a home for more than half a decade? They do not have the citizenship of Bangladesh; they are not educated enough to appeal or fight the religious segregationist laws. Where will they go when the only country they have known as a home turns them out?

[i] Nath, Hiranya & Nath, Suresh. (2011). Illegal Migration into Assam: Magnitude, Causes, and Economic Consequences. SSRN Electronic Journal. 10.2139/ssrn.1750383.

[ii] <http://statisticstimes.com/demographics/population-of-assam.php>

[iii]

<https://www.economist.com/leaders/2019/07/11/indias-hunt-for-illegal-immigrants-is-aimed-at-muslims>

[iv]

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/bangladesh-muslims-in-india-are-illegal-immigrants-tripura-governor/articleshow/65330769.cms?from=mdr>

India's New Citizenship Policy: Is BJP's Immigration 'Crisis' Solution Creating a Religious Divide?



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