



Sanjoy Hazarika
International director,
Commonwealth Human
Rights Initiative

Between A Rock & A Hard Place

The choices before India after the NRC process are few and challenging. Central and state governments must show a high degree of wisdom and statesmanship

There has been illegal or informal migration from Bangladesh into India – or for that matter to other countries of the region and elsewhere in the world. That’s not disputed, at least in this country. During research for an earlier book, *Rites of Passage*, I travelled in Kurigram district in Bangladesh and met Assamese-speaking village youth who had crossed over into Assam for temporary jobs but had gone back.

So, once the furor has calmed and logic prevails, there is one key question to ask: what is the actual number? The scale of immigration, its quantification and analysis is at the heart of the issue. On this, the estimates have long varied – depending on the political perception of the observer, commentator, speaker or analyst.

The National Registrar of Citizens (NRC) was viewed by many when it started years

the supervision of two Supreme Court judges, including Justice Ranjan Gogoi from Assam. Many say that it goes beyond incompetence or the submission of incorrect documents. There are, for example, simple spelling mismatches in the original names of progenitors in the family tree (the anchor of the NRC process) and the way these have been spelt now. Spokesmen for the Assam government have been insisting on the NRC’s efficacy and lack of prejudice. Quite so – for the mess cuts across political, religious and ethnic divides.

Both the Government of India and the Assam Government have been quick to say that this is still a provisional list and those with complaints will have legal redress. Yet to insist that corrections be done in the next two months is to burden a creaky system with an impossible task. It will take years to be done properly. That shows up in the fact that for-

ing the insurgency of 1966.

There are few options, each controversial: one is to deny voting rights to those listed as foreigners (once the latter process has been exhausted) but allow them to stay on where they are with work permits and other rights intact. But how stable or sustainable is such a proposal? The second is to negotiate with Bangladesh for their return, a near-impossible task, providing details of village and residence of origin. A third is to take the Ronald Reagan approach where the then US President declared an amnesty for millions of illegal immigrants.

The governments at the Centre and the state are faced with unenviable, critical choices and need to show a high degree of wisdom and statesmanship. All of this is happening a few months before the 2019 general elections. Indeed, the eyes of the world are on us and governments must uphold their constitutional mandates.

We are faced with a difficult situation, fraught with foreboding. ■



AAP activists raise protest against Assam’s National Register of Citizen draft, in front

back as a chance to resolve this conundrum. It could end, it was felt, an unhappy chapter in Assam’s history, which had taken many lives and damaged its economic and social fabric. However, as information came dribbling out, first with the first list and now with the second, the process has instead aggravated confusion, suspicion and anger.

The figure of four million who have been left out of the list does not reflect the number of illegal Bangladeshis in Assam. The excluded include relatives of a former President of the country, prominent cultural figures, freedom fighters, retired and serving police officers and of the armed forces. There are relatives of mine as well as friends who haven’t made the cut. The list goes on.

For the NRC, to paraphrase Shakespeare in *Macbeth*, “If it were to be done, were it to be done correctly”.

The margin of error should have been minimal but appears unacceptably high, creating a climate of confusion. A surely well-intentioned process has been thrown into question although the effort was under-

eigners tribunals have been able to find a bare 5,000 foreigners in 35 years, instead of the lakhs and crores estimated.

The vexed problem of migration did not start in 1979, with the anti-alien movement in Assam by the All Assam Students Union, but predated it to the pre-independence era. Out-migration from Bangladesh to India was extensive in the 1970s and 1980s pushed by environment disasters such as the 1974 famine. This outflow has fallen with improved economic and development indices in our eastern neighbor. In addition, there actually is a 10-foot high barbed wire fence barrier along about 75 percent of the 4,096 km-long border.

As the process of revising the NRC continues, we need to look at future scenarios. First of all, deportation can’t happen because there is no such agreement with Bangladesh. Secondly, the option of the “detention camps” should be closed. Our limited experience of detention camps has been terrible: whether it was for Indian civilians of Chinese origin in 1962 or for the Mizos dur-