

# HOW THE CAA AFFECTS TIES WITH AFGHANISTAN AND BANGLADESH

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It fritters away Afghan goodwill for India and the same could be said of our eastern neighbour too

Among the many flaws in the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, or CAA, that India's Parliament passed late last year is the manner in which it divides those who have suffered injustice. The former Afghan president Hamid Karzai pointed this out when he said that the victims of religious intolerance in Afghanistan are not only Sikhs or Hindus, but also Muslims themselves. In doing so, he was contradicting assertions made by some leaders of the Indian government who had spoken about the persecution of Hindus in Afghanistan, implying that others suffered less or not at all. Any failure to see that tyrants in Afghanistan spare no one shows either naïve ignorance or political expedience. It also plays to a vociferous gallery within India that seems highly uninformed, and does little to enhance India's global reputation.

The Karzai intervention is important because it calls out an Indian law that uses the lofty language of human rights to justify what is blatantly discriminatory. As it happens, the CAA also makes little strategic or diplomatic sense. Winning the hearts and minds of people in another country is more important in the long run than securing bilateral deals with its government of the day. Governments and their leaders come and go, but the people are always there. The CAA annuls the goodwill India has enjoyed among the people of Afghanistan. Given Pakistan's terrible record of interference in Afghan affairs for decades, many Afghans have historically and naturally gravitated towards India. The CAA fritters away that goodwill.

The pattern repeats in Bangladesh. That is a graver mistake, since India has historically had a relatively frictionless relationship with what was East Pakistan before 1971. Over the years, hardline nationalists in Bangladesh have accused the Awami League government of appearing to bow to Indian demands. Whether it is building a fence along the border, investing jointly in the controversial coal-fired Rampal power plant near the Sundarbans, or cooperating with New Delhi on curbing the activities of the United Liberation Front of Assam, Bangladesh under its prime minister, Sheikh Hasina Wajed, has acted in ways that align with Indian interests. However, India often appears to look upon its eastern neighbour as a kind of client state, which may explain the surprise in New Delhi each time Dhaka asserts its independence, but also reveals a profound misreading of that 49-year-old country.

While those who played no role in Bangladesh's liberation may lack a historical understanding of the country, too many politicians today seem to have a unidimensional view of Islam and a confused view of Bangladesh, seeing in it a mirror image of Pakistan. Bangladeshi nationalism is distinct from Pakistani nationalism. While Pakistan began a composite of different languages and ethnicities that tried to forge a common identity rooted in one faith and one language, namely Urdu, its Bengali wing fought for independence because it resented that monocultural imposition. Not only was it not going to accept Urdu, preferring Bengali, the rhetoric of its liberation war was to create a more inclusive nation. Its original constitution enshrined those values.

This is not to suggest that religious minorities in Bangladesh have had it easy. To be sure, among those who have expropriated Hindu-owned property in Bangladesh are politicians of all

parties, including the Awami League. And yet, Bangladeshis hold Rabindranath Tagore in the same high national esteem as does India. You won't find many Bangladeshis shunning Tagore's poetry, calling it alien, unlike those in India who have issues with Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poetry.

Before Bangladesh's independence, Pakistan attempted to relegate Tagore to obscurity, which only emboldened the Bangla language movement that ultimately led to the war in 1971. At an academic conference in New York some years ago, a Pakistani delegate asked a Bangladeshi delegate why Bangladeshis cared so much for Tagore when they had Kazi Nazrul Islam. We are lucky to have both, replied the Bangladeshi. As the Bangladeshi-American poet Tarfia Faizullah puts it in a poem, Bangladesh is Bengali and Muslim; Pakistan didn't understand that, and India, it seems, is forgetting that. Which is why Sheikh Hasina Wajed has a valid point when she asks: "We don't understand why India did it. [The CAA] wasn't necessary." Her argument is self-serving: She claims that minorities are safe in Bangladesh, which is odd, since many, not just minorities, feel unsafe there. People leave Bangladesh, as do those who leave India, for similar reasons: Some flee injustice, many flee poverty.

Bangladesh has scrapped several high-level meetings with India in recent weeks. Dhaka seems worried that if India declares many people stateless and attempts to expel them, it will impact Bangladesh, since the Bengali-speaking among them, particularly if they are Muslims, would probably be assumed to be Bangladeshi. What will India do if Bangladesh refuses to accept them? Detain them in camps? Given the imperfect process of determining nationality, what might happen if it is carried out across India? The blazing summer could make the winter of discontent seem mild.

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