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The clamour for compilation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Tripura reflects a real problem but also exposes deep demographic fault lines in the north-eastern State bordering Bangladesh. An NRC exercise in Tripura may open a Pandora's box as India is still undecided on determination of citizenship status of lakhs of refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan.

The Supreme Court has tagged a petition filed by the Tripura People's Front seeking updating of the NRC in Tripura, along with the Assam NRC case, and issued a notice to the Centre. The petitioners have sought July 19, 1948 as the cut-off date in accordance with Article 6 of the Constitution. Tripura was a princely state prior to its merger with India on October 15, 1949. The Dasarath Deb-led Left Front government in Tripura signed an accord with the erstwhile militant outfit All Tripura Tribal Force (ATTF) in 1993 to send back all Bangladeshi nationals who came to the State after March 25, 1971 and were not in possession of valid documents.

Successive Census Reports and official records show how large-scale migration of people from erstwhile East Bengal and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) changed the demography of Tripura, stoking fears among various ethnic communities, the original inhabitants, about their survival. They were apprehensive that their identity, language, culture and traditions were at stake. Prior to the 1951 Census, ethnic communities enlisted as Scheduled Tribes constituted the majority population in Tripura, and accounted for 52.89% of the total population of 1.73 lakh in 1901. However, the percentage declined to 50.09 in 1941, 36.89 in 1951, to 28.95 in 1971 and 28.44 in 1981. It was 31.78% of the total population of 36.74 lakh recorded in the 2011 Census.

A booklet titled, "Special Information Relating to the Influx of Refugees from East Bengal into India till 30th September, 1971", brought out by the Department of Rehabilitation, Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation, Government of India on October 15, 1971 states that there was influx of an estimated 5.17 lakh refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan into Tripura between 1947 and February 1971. Of them 3.74 lakh migrated between August 15, 1947 and March 31, 1958 following Partition and 1.43 lakh migrated between January 1, 1964 and March 24, 1971 due to communal riots in East Pakistan. Subsequently, Tripura recorded influx of 13.50 lakh refugees from March 25, 1971 to September 30, 1971 following the civil war and Pakistan Army atrocities in East Pakistan during the Bangladesh liberation war. About 8.52 lakh were sheltered in 230 refugee camps, while 4.98 lakh took shelter outside the camps. The population of Tripura in 1971 was about 15.57 lakh, of whom 11.42 lakh were born in India and 3.95 lakh were born in erstwhile East Pakistan. The cut-off date for the NRC exercise will be critical to determination of citizenship of the East Pakistan refugees besides ensuring that the demographic fault lines do not give fresh ground for insurgency and a fresh conflict between ethnic communities and the migrants. Tripura has left behind a bitter past to move ahead.

In Assam, the NRC has been updated by taking midnight of March 24, 1971 as the cut-off date in accordance with the Assam Accord, but the Supreme Court is also hearing a petition seeking 1951 as the cut-off year for identification of foreigners in the State. Of the 3.29 crore applicants in Assam, about 40 lakh were excluded from the complete draft of the updated NRC prepared under the Supreme Court-monitored exercise.

Article 6 of the Constitution implies that a migrant from erstwhile East Pakistan is deemed to be an Indian citizen if either of his or her parents or any of his or her grandparents were born in India and in the case where such a person has migrated on or after July 19, 1948, and has been

resident in the territory of India since the date of his migration. The migrant can also be deemed a citizen if such a person migrated on or after July 19, 1948 but has been registered as a citizen of India by an officer appointed by the Government of India. Many of those excluded in the NRC draft in Assam are post-Partition refugees and came to Assam prior to March 25, 1971 but reportedly do not have the required documents to prove their residency in India.

Before any concrete plan on the NRC exercise is firmed up, the BJP-led governments at the Centre and in Tripura may push the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016 to woo the post-Partition Bengali refugees by playing upon the perceived fear among them of being reduced to non-citizens if July 19, 1948 is taken as the cut-off date. The bill seeks to grant citizenship to six non-Muslim minority communities in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan — Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, Jains and Parsis. The BJP National Executive and its Assam State unit have been pushing the Bill, notwithstanding strong opposition in Assam and other northeastern States. With both the Centre and the Tripura government remaining non-committal on the NRC in Tripura, it indicates such a possibility.

The deep demographic fault lines and the history of a bitter insurgency-ravaged past should, however, remind both New Delhi and Agartala that mishandling of the citizenship issue may push Tripura into a protracted conflict situation that will be difficult to resolve.

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