

Climate change, Bangladesh and CAA

■ Pradip Bhuyan

Bangladesh is one of the largest deltas in the world with a land area of 1,47,570 sq km, though not even twice the size of Assam, but has a population of nearly 17 crores in 2019. One-fourth of its total population live in the coastal areas and with the rise of sea level up to only one meter, Bangladesh will lose up to 15% of its land area under the sea water and around 30 million people living in the coastal areas of Bangladesh will become refugees.

The number of these climate refugees in Bangladesh is expected to rise dramatically in the coming decades. Around 2 crore people are predicted to lose their homes by 2050 because of the effect of the climate change and they will have no place to stay in Bangladesh. The people of Bangladesh are already feeling the consequences of the climate change in dramatic ways. Bangladesh is prone to cyclones, but on November 15, 2007 the mega cyclone Sidr swept the Bangladeshi coastline with wind of about 155 mile per hour and tidal waves as high as 16 feet, affecting 30 lakh people and destroying tens of thousands of homes.

The recent example of Australia in which the unprecedented bush fire devoured an area of 1,86,000 sq km, nearly two-and-a-half times the size of Assam, where millions of species perished, is a testimony of the fury of the climate change. In 2019 Australia had the hottest and driest year on record all over Australia. These effects were predicted by the scientists through climate change models, as early as 2008.

Climate change is a reality now and it is without a shadow of doubt that Bangladesh will have huge number of climate refugees, 2 crores or so by 2050 as predicted by scientists.

The scientists predict that at least 2 crores people will be displaced by the rising level of the sea and other climate change effects by 2050, in Bangladesh. Assam and the rest of India will be the natural and only destination of these homeless Bangladeshis. Assam is always a favoured destination of Bangladeshi migrants. In the last seven decades, since 1951, one crore people from Bangladesh have entered Assam but in the next three decades, the rate of infiltration will be much faster due to rapid climate change. A large number from this 2 crore climate refugees will certainly enter Assam and the Northeast.

The Hindus of Bangladeshis know that they can always manage to enter Assam and to the rest of India over the next decades as persecuted minorities and try to get Indian citizenship as per the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), as and when the law is in place, even though there is an arbitrary cut-off date now of 2014 which can be deleted or extended by the government on humanitarian or political grounds.

Over time, the Bangladeshi Hindus will be pushed out by the Bangladeshi Muslims to create room for themselves and subsequently the Muslim Bangladeshis will also move

out to Assam and India when the living space will run out completely in Bangladesh.

We are taking a very myopic view now when we are quibbling about how many Hindu Bangladeshis may be given Indian citizenship in Assam through CAA, if implemented – 3 to 15 lakhs being talked about – but the final number, whatever it may be, will pale into insignificance by the huge number of climate refugees who will flood Assam in the next three decades. Three decades are only a dot in historic perspec-

it is only logical and imperative that Assam is kept out of CAA and if it happens, then the illegal post-1971 Hindu Bangladeshis will have the incentive and drive to relocate in other parts of our vast country as refugees citizens as per CAA, as they will not otherwise have any status in Assam. They will not be eligible for state benefits, jobs, voting rights, etc.

tive of a nation or community.

The CAA is now before the Supreme Court where 144 petitions of various individuals and organizations including AASU has been filed and the SC will only decide on the validity of the Act. The court may uphold the Act as it is or with some modification or may merely reject the Act as unconstitutional. The people have registered their protest against CAA

but the validity of the Act will be decided by the Supreme Court on legal, constitutional issues only.

Basically there are three possibilities that Assam will face from the CAA based on the judgment of the Supreme Court:

If the Supreme Court rejects the CAA on legal, constitutional grounds, we will be back to where we were before CAA was introduced. Status quo will be maintained and the Assam Accord 1985 will not be violated. However, some of the climate refugees out of 2 crores or so will certainly enter Assam as illegal migrants, but majority will possibly prefer to enter West Bengal and the rest of India to avoid the post-1971 Bangladeshi tag in Assam.

If the Supreme Court upholds the CAA as valid as the Act stands now, or with some modifications and Assam is part of it, then the majority of the 1.5 crores or so Bangladeshi Hindus will enter Assam and will seek Indian citizenship as persecuted refugees within the next three decades or so.

The climate refugees of tomorrow will be the poorest of the poor – they will have no place to stay in Bangladesh and, nothing, no fence will stop them from entering Assam and India as refugees.

But if the Supreme Court upholds the CAA as valid as it is, or with some modifications and keeps Assam out of its purview, it will be an invisible all powerful barrier to keep away the large stream of Hindu Bangladeshis from the 2 crores or so cli-

mate refugees within 2050, who will shun Assam and will enter West Bengal and other parts of India and apply to become Indian citizens as per CAA. This is a saviour situation for Assam for the coming decades and the fabric of the indigenous identity of the State will be preserved.

While introducing the CAB, the Central Government completely ignored the status of Assam regarding Bangladeshi infiltrators, that it has already taken the burden of the 1951-71 stream of infiltrators and is currently groaning under the weight 70 lakh or so post-1971 Bangladeshis. Yet the Government did not take any special provision to keep Assam out of the CAA.

In the above context, it is only logical and imperative that Assam is kept out of CAA and if it happens, then the illegal post-1971 Hindu Bangladeshis will have the incentive and drive to relocate in other parts of our vast country as refugees citizens as per CAA, as they will not otherwise have any status in Assam. They will not be eligible for state benefits, jobs, voting rights, etc.

Also if Assam is out of the CAA, it will ensure that the Assam Accord will not be violated as it is Assam-specific only.

In these contexts, it is necessary to press for keeping Assam out of the CAA as it has very legitimate grounds for its exclusion. Other States of the Northeast will not escape the onslaught of the climate refugees, if Assam is not kept out of the CAA. These climate refugees would not be stopped by ILP or by any other means; they will spill over from Assam to other Northeast States over the decades, changing the fragile demographic structure of the region.