

# **Modi-Shah's Branding of Bengali Migrants as 'Bangladeshis' is Fraught With Dangerous Consequences**

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One may or not take what Mamata Banerjee says very seriously all the time (provided one can unscramble her choice of words), but when she declares open war on the BJP for trying to finish off the Bengali people, it is time to take note. She takes up the challenge by leading countless thousands of protesters, oblivious of monsoon showers, along the main thoroughfares of Kolkata. It would be quite contemptuously Jinnahesque to dismiss them (as he did in East Pakistan) as excited Bengali-speaking rabble.

The national media — influenced as it is by the regime — may ignore these as occasional bursts of peripheral sub-nationalism on India's fringes. We have had serious agitations in Punjab during the Suba movement and then the horrifying terrorist phase. Assam and some northeastern states were/are on the boil and Tamil Nadu has flared up periodically on Hindi and Sri Lanka issues. Even Shiv Sena's Mumbai roared with anti-South hate and then ranted against those from the Ganga valley. But West Bengal has never nursed or encouraged any Bengali chauvinist politics — never, not even when Bengalis were thrashed and killed in Assam. Kolkata is home to more than half a crore from other states, but has never had any anti-outsider riots. True, Bengalis love their language and culture, maybe a bit too much and too openly. In East Bengal, they laid down lives for their language in 1952 ((21st February is now the UN-declared observed 'International Mother Language Day') and lost several lakh lives in Pakistan's genocide of 1971 — for language and culture.

The current systematic and synchronised operation by all BJP-led governments to hound and torture illegal Bangladeshis is actually devastating all categories of Bengali migrant labourers — whether Hindu or Muslim and irrespective of the fact that most produced their identity cards as genuine Indians.

The planned hounding of all poor Bengali immigrants across India through brazenly biased and intimidatory terror reveal not just the Islamophobic gene of the Sangh parivar but is interpreted as a war on all Bengalis. This is just too dangerous. Gujarat led the way by bulldozing colonies of migrant Bengali labourers, on the backs of the Pahalgam rage. On April 26, 890 people, including 219 women and 214 children, were picked up and detained for long hours — even when most were later accepted as Indian Bengalis. While the High Court did nothing to stop bulldozers that the Supreme Court has declared as illegal, other courts in Delhi could have stopped the demolition of a Delhi slum, the Jai Hind colony. The Calcutta High Court has demanded reports from the government of Odisha on assaults on migrant Bengali labourers. Videos of police torture in Haryana are doing the rounds.

The situation is similar in other BJP ruled states and many labourers have reported that they were harassed for just speaking in Bengali. West Bengal feels gravely insulted when Bengali labourers who are indubitably Indian are beaten up as Bangladeshi Muslims — even after they produce rock-solid proof of being Indians. Many are not even Muslim. It is true that some suspected Bangladeshis are/were also arrested, but to officials in these states it does not matter which category of Bengalis. Would any other linguistic group (say, Kannada or Odiyas) tolerate such systematic depredations? Much of this hostility stems from the BJP's frustration in not being able to capture West Bengal, even after Modi and Shah campaigned there more intensely than anywhere else. Money is also flooded in. In fact, PM Modi neglected his duty to lead the nation in the war against Covid in the critical months of April and May 2021, because he was campaigning in West Bengal. But he had to face the ignominy of losing the state by a huge margin.

Modi never forgets and forgives — and Mamata Banerjee insists that this explains his aversion towards all categories of Bengalis at present. And his henchmen, like CM Biswa Sarma of Assam, go to ridiculous extents to please the master and play to the local gallery. A totally unjustified NRC (National Register of Citizens) notice was recently issued on one Uttam Kumar Brajabasi, a Rajbanshi (Hindu tribal) resident of Dinhata in West Bengal as an illegal immigrant. This blew into a major issue, leaving mud on Sarma's face.

In the process, Modi and his acolytes are handing Mamata Banerjee with a golden opportunity to overcome her embattled position and regain ground — even when there is public fury at her government’s corruption and ‘threat culture’. The rape-cum-murder of an intern in RG Kar Medical College and Hospital in August last year triggered a mass upsurge that brought out several lakhs on to the streets. Large-scale protests went on, without a break, with multiple demonstrations every day for almost 5 months at a stretch. Then came the cash-for-jobs scam relating to 26,000 school teachers who have lost their jobs because she refused to reveal the names of the ‘tainted’ ones to the highest courts — as it would reveal who paid money to her party men. Recently, the state was furious when a Trinamool student leader, a known ruffian and a racketeer, raped a girl student in South Kolkata Law College — in the presence of his gangsters and the guard. But the brainlessness of the BJP has obviously united the state behind a CM who was rapidly slipping.

The BJP governments in the states claim that they are after “illegal Bangladeshis” — which, to them, means only Muslims. But, everyone knows that there are a large number of illegal Bangladeshi Hindus in India as well. That is why Amit Shah was/is so frantic to pass and implement the amendment to the Citizenship Act — to regularise several lakh such Hindu immigrants from Bangladesh as Indian citizens. Many outside Bengal surely find it quite difficult to distinguish between Bengali Muslims — on either side of the border — or even between Bengali Hindus and Muslims. This difficulty would crop up anywhere if any linguistic and cultural ethnic group (except Punjab and Kashmir —where gashes are still raw) was split into two. It becomes difficult to differentiate, except through accent, that too, by trained ears. Besides, fish and rice are common and indispensable in Bengal, as are the other dishes — though spices and culinary styles differ according to region, not necessarily because of religion.

We may recall that before Partition, Bengali speakers in the subcontinent were very large, just second after the original Hindi speaking population. But, after 1947, Bengal was split between two nations, and Hindi increased its share in India from 23 percent to 43 percent by “subsuming” 17 “similar” tongues —

many of which have been demanding that they be recognised as independent languages, not as dialects of Hindi. Be that as it may, as of now, almost 29.5 crore — maybe 30 crore people — speak Bengali, across this subcontinent. In the absence of recent census operations one went by trawling data-intensive information through AI engines, like Grok 3.

Of West Bengal's estimated population of 10.5 crore, a little more than half a crore do not speak Bengali. Among the remaining 10 crore Bengalis, almost 3 crores are Muslims — the Indian Bengali Muslims, who are now targeted with vengeance by the BJP — as they never vote for them. In fact, the 2011 census revealed that almost 20 percent of Bengali speakers in India reside outside West Bengal, which vies with Bihar as India's most densely populated State. This implies that there are some 12.5 crore Bengalis in India.

Well, of the 2.5 crore outside West Bengal, sensitive Assam has at least 1.4 crore Bengalis (mostly Muslim) in its total count of 3.6 crore. Most people do not even know that Assam was part of the "Bengal Province" for centuries and later, East Bengal was cut off and merged with Assam into one single province. Which accounts for the large number of Bengalis and the quite-understandable Assamese anxiety of being outnumbered — unless harsh measures are taken. Then, there are Bengalis in Tripura and Andaman-Nicobar. The rest are scattered — as permanent residents or in temporary postings or as migrant labour. With industrialisation tottering in West Bengal, for 60 years since it voted 'red', and the BJP stopping rural development (especially NREGA) funds altogether for several years, seasonally unemployed labourers have to seek employment elsewhere. Many of the poorest Bengali migrant workers are Muslims — who are now branded as Bangladeshis and hammered black and blue.

In fact, if we add 17 crore Bengali speakers of Bangladesh (of which approximately 15 crores are Muslims) and Indian Bengalis of 12.5 crore (about 2.5 to 3 crore Muslims), we come to a total of 29.5 crore Bengali speaking people. That's quite a lot and, interestingly, two thirds of the Bengali-speakers are Muslims. This accounted for the Partition, which was not half as bloody or effective as in Punjab. Thus, seepage continues across the border — with both

Hindus and Muslims infiltrating. While divisive memories and religion-centred hatred are generally not as gruesome as between the two Punjabs., there is an overwhelming pride in the language, landscape, Tagore, Nazrul Islam and much more. The 'common Bengali identity' unites and softens inter-religious differences — though fierce communalism on both sides and riot-victims do stir up occasional phases of intolerance.

The Hindu Right's present orchestrated strategy of stamping every migrant Indian Bengali labourer as Bangladeshi is actually win win for the BJP. First it provides its heated-up supporters with ready-to-hit Muslim punching bags — ones that they were looking for, ever since it was drilled into them relentlessly for decades that these "Bangladeshi termites" would destroy India. Incidentally, this reprehensible term was coined by the Home Minister Amit Shah to conjure rage as revenge for repeated defeats in Bengal. American statistics reveal that his state alone accounted for half of America's illegal immigrants in 2024 and one wonders what name he has for them. The BJP's narrative that Bengal is so full of illegal Bangladeshi Muslims that it just cannot save it from the evil clutches of the Trinamool Congress is widely accepted by its supporters everywhere and (sadly) by a large section of the media — without asking for evidence.

With pan-Indian ravages In the last month or so, India has 'pushed back' just 1500 (others claim 4000) 'illegal immigrants' into Bangladesh. In some cases, their families in India complained to CM of West Bengal— who made this an issue — and some had to be brought back to India. An international organisation, Human Rights Watch has been reporting on the painful human and legal issues involved, but the national media is not as concerned.

No one denies that there has been illegal immigration for several decades— through a porous artificial border. But we have never really tried to size up the problem. The Home Ministry has either not accepted or not replied to recent questions on the numbers involved — including several that I filed, as MP. In November 2016, Government informed the Rajya Sabha that around 2 crore Bangladeshi immigrants were staying illegally in India — without explaining how it surmised. This is quite a jump over the earlier claim in 2004 of

1.2 crore illegal Bangladeshi migrants. Neutral and all-encompassing AI data says “It seems likely that the actual number is significantly lower than the commonly cited 20 million, with ongoing trends of more migrants leaving than entering supporting this view”. Even if we accept half the 2 crore figure, cannot India not devise a transparent and peaceful process of deciding a Bengali’s identity in doubtful cases? Even if (say) one crore is hidden somewhere within India’s 145 crore — which is far less than what the BJP has claimed all along — can there be no neutral systematic manner of scrutinising evidence — without resorting to public violence and political oneupmanship?

And what is most ludicrous is that the BJP is handing Mamata Banerjee an emotional and deeply disturbing issue to unite a people and bouncing back from the cornered back foot position. She has managed to express Bengal’s angst and is fighting what she has termed as “linguistic terrorism” of the BJP. This hurts the local BJP which is anyway considered to be a prop of the Hindi-belt Hindutva brigade.

Incidentally, USA’s Pew Research reported in 2021 that India accounted for the third-largest group of unauthorised immigrants, ie, 725,000 — just after Mexico and El Salvador. Most are from those states that are leading the witch-hunt against Bangladeshis. The 2024 report of the US Customs and Border Protection mentioned that of the 90,415 Indians caught at US borders, almost half were from Gujarat. Illegal immigration is a worldwide problem — a cat and mouse game. No civilised leader uses human cannon fodder for whipping up hate like Trump and Modi do. The latter is now recklessly infuriating a linguistic group that has never encouraged hatred for other states. The current trend is worrisome and Modi-Shah’s myopia has assisted Mamata Banerjee in giving a clarion call to Bengalis to retort. Modi must stop this dangerous depredation as it may lead to undesirable consequences and the situation may go out of hand.