

Life after citizenship

It's been more than three years since the exchange of enclaves between India and Bangladesh took place in July 2015. But in Cooch Behar's erstwhile Bangladeshi enclaves and the newly established settlement camps, life hasn't become any easier for the 15,000 newly minted citizens of India, reports **Shiv Sahay Singh**

It's a Saturday morning and Jihad Husain Obama sits quietly in his one-room school, waiting for the flag-hoisting ceremony to begin. He is one of several children, from Masaldanga village in West Bengal's Cooch Behar district, whose parents had chosen to stay back in India rather than return to Bangladesh.

Ramzan Ali, 40, a local schoolteacher, keeps him company along with other children, who are crammed into a small area next to a Sishu Siksha Kendra that was started in 2011 by the erstwhile enclave dwellers. Most of the children study in bigger primary schools but have assembled at this one-room school to celebrate Republic Day. The tiny space outside the room is decorated with coloured ribbons and a national flag. The school, with tin sheets for walls, is bare except for a couple of plastic chairs.

Ali explains the significance of the occasion to the children. He makes them sing the national anthem and chant 'Vande Mataram'. Obama tells everyone that he is nine years old. But many in this erstwhile Bangladeshi enclave, now a part of India, know that he is a few months shy of nine.

The residents of Masaldanga, located about 26 km from Dinhata town, have no trouble in recalling the last few days of March 2010, the time when Obama's mother Asama Bibi, nearly lost her baby (Osama). Masaldanga was a Bangladeshi enclave in those days, and Asama Bibi, then in an advanced stage of pregnancy, was not only denied medical attention at the Dinhata Sub-divisional Hospital in Cooch Behar but also threatened with arrest for seeking services at a state-run health facility despite being a Bangladeshi. It was only after vociferous protests by the enclave dwellers that the hospital authorities yielded. Asama Bibi finally got the medical attention she needed and had a safe delivery.

The exchange

Much has changed in Masaldanga since August 2015, when the Land Boundary Agreement was implemented. Before this exchange of enclaves between India and Bangladesh, which came into effect from the midnight of July 31, 2015, there were 111 Indian enclaves in four districts of Bangladesh, and 51 Bangladeshi enclaves in West Bengal's Cooch Behar district.

There was a population of about 34,000 people in the 111 enclaves, and when the option of moving to India was given, 922 people registered their names. These people are now living in three camps in Cooch Behar — at Dinhata, Haldibari and Mekhliganj.

The 51 Bangladeshi enclaves, which were also located in Cooch Behar, became a part of India. There were 14,854 people living in these enclaves, including those of Masaldanga and Potarkuthi. But not one citizen from these enclaves has exercised the option of moving to Bangladesh. Most of them are farmers.

Not too long ago, the road leading to Masaldanga was a kutchha one. It was also a site of prolonged protests by villagers demanding citizenship rights. Now it is paved, and half-a-dozen solar-powered irrigation pumps are visible in the paddy and mustard fields nearby. There are also new anganwadi centres, primary schools, and power lines that were installed recently, ensuring electric supply to most of the tin houses in the area. Along with the rest of the village's residents, Obama is now an Indian citizen.

Soon after the flag-hoisting, candies are distributed to the children. Obama takes the newly paved road to a paddy field nearby where his mother is busy making small bundles of paddy saplings. Asama Bibi has paid ₹55,000 for a three-year lease on 1.5 bigha of land. (A bigha is a measure of land area varying locally from 1/3 to 1 acre.) She looks worried. She is concerned not just by the poor yield but also by the fact that her three children, including Obama, are yet to receive proper identity documents.

The need for fake parents

Before the exchange of enclaves, people living in the adjoining areas that were part of the Indian mainland were often presented as the parents of children from the enclaves. This helped them get admission in schools and colleges, and avail treatment in government hospitals. Sadly, even three years after getting citizenship, the people from the erstwhile enclaves are still finding it difficult to get their identity documents corrected. Says Asama Bibi, "My son Obama, who is in Class III, wants to become a doctor. But in the school they are asking for his birth certificate. His older sister, Sapla, is in Class VIII. In her case, a couple from the mainland had presented themselves as her parents so that she could continue with her studies."

Ali believes that the formal conferment of citizenship is yet to ease the economic and bureaucratic hardships faced by the people. "Their lives have essentially remained the same," he says. Chhabir Sekh, 40, a resident of Masaldanga, had been working as a construction worker in Noida, Uttar Pradesh, for almost a decade before the exchange of enclaves took place. He received a new voter identification card after August 2015. But his sense of insecurity is such that he still carries his fake photo identification card, for which he had paid ₹4,000. He says, "Life remains the same. There are no jobs here, so I still go to work in Noida. All that we've got are a few documents." His 17-year-old son, Ajhar, dropped out of school some years ago and now works with him in Noida.



Every day life now: "Since 2015, the only discernible change in the camp are the e-rickshaws parked outside every other house. Also known as totos, they are a primary source of income for the residents." The Mekhliganj enclave settlement camp in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal. ■ RITU RAJ KONWAR



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About 80 km from Masaldanga is the Haldibari Enclave Settlement Camp, home to 96 families that moved here in November 2015 from Indian enclaves located in Bangladesh. These are the families that made a conscious choice to shift to India even though they had the option of staying back where they had lived all their lives.

Spread over several acres, the camp is a row of tin sheds with alpha-numeric lettering on every house. Sanjay Pandit, the Block Development Officer (BDO) of Haldibari, is the chief guest for the Republic Day ceremony here. Pandit explains the importance of Republic Day to the audience, dwelling in particular on freedom of speech. The children of the settlement, dressed in school uniforms of different colours, some in shoes and others in slippers, do a march-past in front of the BDO.

Since November 2015, the only discernible change in the camp are the e-rickshaws parked outside every other house. These e-rickshaws, or totos, as they are locally called, run on chargeable batteries and are a primary source of income for the residents. More than 30 families have bought these e-rickshaws using the money they got by selling their land and property in Bangladesh. Annaprasad Ray, a class XII student, often misses his classes at the nearby Haldibari College as he has to supplement the family income by driving a toto.

Ray is not the only youngster who

faces such a situation. His friend, Kalyan, is a second year BA student, and neighbours, Gobind, Niranjana, Sadhan Chandra Roy and Phuleswar, are all graduates. But all of them depend on driving totos and doing odd jobs to provide for their families.

Says Sadhan Chandra Roy, who has enrolled for a Masters degree in political science, "We had our schooling in Bangladesh, but the certificates are not accepted when we apply for jobs. We came to India with a lot of dreams, but our lives remain in darkness." Occasionally, the youngsters speak to their friends on the other side of the border. The conversations leave them convinced that those in Bangladesh have better opportunities.

From camps to flats

The Cooch Behar district administration has a separate enclave cell (or department) for the erstwhile Bangladeshi enclaves that have become Indian territory as well as for the three settlement camps (at Haldibari, Mekhliganj and Dinhata). Every family in the camps gets 30 kg of rice, five kg of pulses, five litres of cooking oil, and one kg of salt a month. The administration is also building three residential complexes where an apartment will be given to each of these families.

Rabindranath Ghosh, Minister-in-charge, North Bengal Development Department, and an MLA from Cooch Behar, is convinced that the problems of the erstwhile enclave dwellers have been resolved. He points out that the Mamata Banerjee government in West Bengal has passed an amendment in the

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JOYNAL ABE DIN,
Activist,
Masaldanga



'Citizen' Prema: A Koach Rajbangsi tribal girl, all of seven months old, born at the Dinhata settlement camp ■ RITU RAJ KONWAR

State Assembly to give land rights to the people of the 51 erstwhile Bangladeshi enclaves that are now a part of India. He adds that land documents have been provided to 12,560 beneficiaries.

Says Ghosh, "Only 30 km from Cooch Behar is Assam, where the National Register of Citizens (NRC) has left lakhs of people struggling for nationality. Here in West Bengal we have provided every assistance to the enclaves." According to him, India's newest citizens have got everything that they were promised, and soon those living in camps will be shifted to the apartments that the government is constructing.

It was on January 3, this year that Mansur Ali, 80, of Poatarkuthi, an erstwhile Bangladeshi enclave, got land documents in his name. Mansur says that for him, the day he got his land documents is as important as July 31, 2015, the day the exchange of enclaves made him an Indian citizen. He has carefully preserved a newspaper report in a local Bengali daily which has a photograph of him accepting the land papers from the Minister. Says Mansur, "We have received legal ownership of our land after 82 years. My grandfather, Kalu Sheikh, had these land records in his name in 1936, and now, after so many years, we have managed to get them in our name." Mansur has been a witness to several chapters of India's recent history, from the British Raj to Indian independence, the creation of Bangladesh, and now the exchange of enclaves. Today he is a happy man willing to overlook the mistakes that are still present in his land document.

Often referred as Monsur Dhani (Rich Monsur), Mansur has generously donated more than 2 bighas of his land for an anganwadi centre and a community hall. Painted in blue and white, the official colours of the ruling Trinamool Congress government, these buildings are ready but not yet functional, owing to a controversy over staff recruitment.

Mansur and other local residents have protested against the formal opening of these facilities, demanding that

the jobs in these government institutions be given to their family members and not 'outsiders'. He says, "We suffered so much for so many decades while the state turned a blind eye to our plight. Now finally when our struggle has yielded something positive, how can we let outsiders grab all the jobs in the first schools and anganwadi centres to come up in our villages?"

Joyanal Abedin of Masaldanga is a well known activist from the area. He asks: "For nearly 70 years, the people of these enclaves were denied the most basic facilities that the state must offer. How can the state now suddenly treat them on a par with other citizens? Don't these 15,000-odd people [14,854 plus the 922 who came from the Indian enclaves in Bangladesh] deserve some preference or reservation for these jobs on account of the historical injustice they've endured?" He adds that the struggle for these erstwhile enclave-dwellers is hardly over, while introducing Rahman Ali, 27, another resident of Poatarkuthi, who recently managed to get the name of his father corrected in school and college certificates.

Like thousands of other children in these former enclaves, Rahman had lied about his parents while getting admission in school. Instead of mentioning Naskar Ali of Poatarkuthi as his father, his records stated it to be Sahar Ali of Khatmari village. It took hundreds of letters as official correspondence and several visits to various government offices to get the records corrected. These days Rahman regularly fields desperate queries from people who want to know how he managed to achieve something that remains a Herculean task for most citizens of this erstwhile enclave.

'No official visits us'

The Republic Day celebrations at the Dinhata settlement camp are a low-key affair. Osman Gani, 37, one of the few Muslims who chose to come to India, says that since no politician or official ever visits the camp, they decided to unfurl the national flag by themselves. The camp, located in Dinhata town, is greener than the other camps as residents have planted papaya trees and different kinds of vines and creepers.

Gani laughs when asked about moving to the apartment which the State government is constructing for the 58 families in this camp. "What will we do with the flats? Most of our lives were spent in Bangladesh. Then we came to the live in the camps, and now we have to leave this also?"

Mrinal Barman, 39, another resident of the Dinhata camp, is more agitated by the question. He asks, "How can the government wash its hands of any responsibility by giving us apartments? Before coming to the camp, Barman was a resident of Dashiachara, a former Indian enclave in Bangladesh's Kurigram district, where he owned about 16 bighas of land. When he crossed over to India

after July 2015, Barman, along with his family members, brought with him an irrigation pump and two goats, in the expectation that the Indian government would give him a piece of land. Though one of the goats has died since then, Barman has not lost hope.

He says, "This goat that is still alive is the responsibility of the Indian government as all the formalities were completed before we crossed the border. Where will this animal go if we are asked to stay in an apartment? I will file a case if the government does not provide a place for the goat."

Barman's goat-based argument has many takers in the Dinhata camp. The settlement has nine cows and 20 goats, some distributed by Barman himself. The newest citizens of India will most definitely bring up the issue of shelter for their cattle as and when they are told to leave the camp.

At the Mekhliganj settlement camp, about 115 km from Dinhata and the smallest of the three camps, Bipul Chandra Barman has little time to speak. His father, Binay Chandra Barman, had died on January 16, this year and he is busy with religious rituals outside his house. He says that the families in this camp are from the Hathibandha and Patgram areas of Lalmonirhat district in Bangladesh.

Ripon, 21, like his brother Bipul, is also wearing a dhoti and has his head tonsured. He says that he could not apply for West Bengal's Vivekananda Merit Cum Means scholarship (a scheme for meritorious and economically backward students) as his Class X certificates from Bangladesh are not being accepted in India. Here too, driving e-rickshaws seems to be the primary occupation.

Jugal Roy, 47, a toto driver, is also against the idea of moving to one of the apartments being built by the State government, which is about 15 km from the camp. He says that the buildings are coming up in a remote area near a riverbed, an area prone to flooding during the monsoon, and that there is not even a bridge to ensure connectivity when the water rises.

Not surprisingly, the very mention of another 'displacement' — though only to an apartment — angers the residents of Mekhliganj. Says Swapna Rani Barman, one of the camp residents, "We want to stay here at this very camp. But despite several protests, the administration is insisting that we shift to its flats."

She also draws attention to something unusual. This January was the first time in the past three years that these 47 families, who had left their homes in the erstwhile Indian enclaves of Bangladesh to come and live here as Indian citizens, did not hoist the national flag and observe Republic Day.

"Earlier officials and politicians would visit us on Republic Day. This year we heard from no one," Roy says. "It appears that they do not care about us any more."