

CLEFT STICK

India, Bangladesh and Myanmar face an identity crisis

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HEN AUNG SAN SUU KYI won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, two years after the Dalai Lama and two years before Nelson Mandela, she was hailed as “Burma’s Modern Symbol of Freedom” for her non-violent campaign against the ruling military junta.

At that time Suu Kyi was under house arrest in Yangon and her son Alexander, accepting the prize on his mother’s behalf in Oslo, said though she was described as a political dissident, “her quest is basically spiritual”.

That was then. For months now, Suu Kyi has been criticised for not bringing peace to Rakhine state, home to the Muslim Rohingya minority. In April, when the BBC asked her if she was an amalgam of Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa, she said: “I’m just a politician...I’m no Mother Teresa... Mahatma Gandhi actually was a very astute politician.” When asked if she wasn’t tempted to follow Gandhi’s example of putting his own life at risk for India’s minority Muslims, Suu Kyi said: “I don’t think that putting one’s life at risk is a particular example that I’d like to follow.”

Clearly she is caught between a rock and a hard place. Her National League for Democracy won a landslide in Myanmar’s 2015 elections, but real power still rests with the military. Her post of State Counsellor had to be specially created to circumvent the 2008 constitution, which bars her from becoming president because her sons are British citizens.

In January, NLD adviser Ko Ni, a prominent Muslim lawyer who advocated a new constitution that would reduce the military’s power, was assassinated at Yangon airport. Suu Kyi did not attend his funeral.

Buddhist-majority Myanmar makes no bones about discriminating against its minorities, most of whom are stateless. A recent official statement says holders of temporary identity certificates must surrender them in exchange for Identity Cards for National Verification (ICNV). As of December 31, 2016, 469,183 out of 759,672 holders had surrendered their certificates. Of these, only 32,016 were given ICNVs (much like India’s Aadhaar). In Rakhine state, only 6,077 people, presumably Rohingya, of

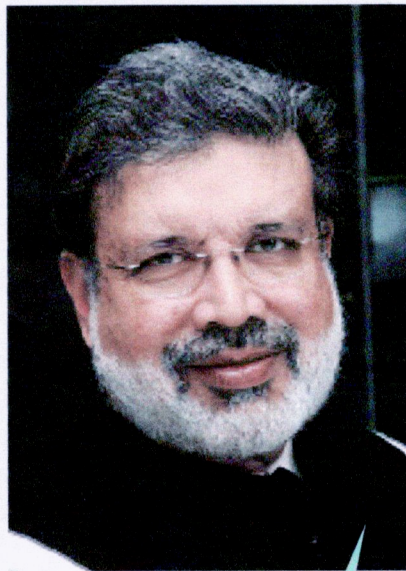
a total of 397,497 were given ICNVs. Those cards do not seem to confer full citizenship rights: the Rohingya could not vote in 2015.

Attacks by Rohingya militants on several security posts on August 25 triggered military retaliation, forcing about 400,000 refugees to flee into Bangladesh. The crackdown has been termed a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing” by the United Nations rights chief. It is important to understand India’s dilemma. On September 6, on a visit to Myanmar, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Suu Kyi issued

a joint statement in which India condemned the “recent terrorist attacks in northern Rakhine State” and pledged its support.

Bharatiya Janata Party-ruled northeastern states like Assam and Manipur have ordered border troops to push back any Rohingya trying to cross into India. About 40,000 Rohingya have found shelter in India over the past decade, and India wants to deport them to Myanmar. On September 14, a government lawyer told the Supreme Court, which is hearing a plea against deportation, that India considers the Rohingya a threat to national security.

India, too, is coming to a fork in the road. By the end of this year, Assam will complete a mammoth National Register of Citizens survey that could result in large numbers of illegal Muslim immigrants being declared stateless and facing potential deportation to Bangladesh. Is the Rohingya crisis only a precursor?



Myanmar makes no bones about discriminating against its minorities

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