

Village Indians can enter only with BSF nod

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Although Prime Minister Narendra Modi had recently said the Congress and "urban Naxals" were spreading rumours about detention centres, 10 such centres — for foreign nationals — are operational in the country, six of them in Assam.

The Centre has approved the construction of three other such centres in Assam, Punjab and Karnataka, adding to the fear among people, especially Muslims, over what would happen to those who fail to make it to the citizens' register.

The fear is palpable in Milik Sultanpur.

"We can't leave our village before 6am and have to return by 6pm. We have to register at the check post each time we go out or come in. Depositing the notebook while going out for shopping is mandatory. Our relatives can visit us only if the BSF gives permission. We cannot even take our bicycles or motorbikes inside the village," said Alam Sheikh, a quack.

"School-going students have to register when they go to school. We have to tell the BSF how much money we are carrying with us."

That the village is a no-go zone became clear when these two correspondents were denied entry beyond the check post till a higher official intervened.

Movement inside the village is restricted too, as the journey had to end 200 metres short of the gate along a barbed fence, 150 yards inside the international border, also referred to as the zero point.

"We are aware that there are some restrictions in those villages because of security concerns," he said. "But we are well within the barbed fencing.... Then, why are we facing this discrimination?"

At the border outpost of the BSF, barely 100 metres from the village, the men in uniform didn't want to comment on why the villagers had to face such tough measures.

Some BSF sources blamed the villagers for the tough measures, but spoke on condition of anonymity.

"The entire area beyond the village is not fenced.... If we take both land and water, around 3km is unfenced. People from Bangladesh regularly come and go illegally. Besides, most of the villagers are engaged in cross-border smuggling. These measures are to prevent these illegal activities," one source said.

District police and intelligence sources said smuggling was rampant and both infiltra-



The drop-gate, viewed from the village, that is maintained by the BSF for monitoring village entry and exit. Picture by Soumya De Sarkar

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Soumya De Sarkar

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Standing near the check post, Sheikh pointed at rows of cycles — some of them carrying the Sabuj Sathi logo — and motorbikes kept along the road that connects the village with the Mahadipur-Chanpainaabaganj international border between India and Bangladesh.

"It's as if we have been put in detention centres even before the NRC is carried out," he said, voicing the concerns of hundreds of villagers who have been spending sleepless nights trying to figure out how to prove their Indian citizenship.

When these correspondents visited the village, which comes under Akandaberiya gram panchayat and Kaliachak police station, hundreds of villagers came out of their homes to explain how they felt their freedom had been curbed.

"We are Indian citizens, but we can't move freely within India," said Rabiul Sheikh, a youth who works with a Delhi-headquartered NGO.

Even a few years ago, he said, they could move freely. "But increasingly, the rules are getting stricter and stifling," Sheikh said, adding the strict measures were coming in the way of marriage proposals for prospective grooms and brides of Milik Sultanpur.

Sheikh unrolled a map of the village to point out that unlike some other villages in the area — such as Shasa Ni, Chari Anantapur and Suknagar — that lie between the international border and the barbed-wire fence, Milik Sultanpur was at least "one-and-a-half kilometre inside" the international border.

tion and ex-filtration were common, but some of them agreed that the problems the villagers faced were genuine.

Asked about smuggling and illegal cross-border movement, the villagers said some of them were involved in illegal trade, but blamed lax monitoring by the BSF.

"They let off the criminals after arresting them. We want to know why?" Kamal Uddin, a member of the Trinamul-run panchayat, said.

He said the BSF and the Central Public Works Department should complete the fencing beyond the village without any delay, intensify vigil along the fence and offer freedom of movement that the Indian constitution promises all its citizens.

"We have been demanding fencing of the village, but instead of doing it 150 yards inside the international border, they are proposing a fence that would be more than 1km inside the border. If that happens, our livelihood will be severely affected as large tracts of land would fall on the other side of the fence and we would be deprived of agricultural income," said Afzal Hossain, a former Congress panchayat member from the village.

The matter of where to erect the fence has already reached courtrooms.

Although the villagers are divided along political lines, all the parties are together in their demand for freedom of movement. Recently, the villagers had got together and submitted a memorandum to Malda district magistrate Rajarshi Mitra seeking his help in resolving the problem.

"I am aware of the problem and we are taking up the matter with the BSF," Mitra said.

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