

UNB report

Some five lakh people in Bangladesh enclaves have been deprived of being voters for the last 24 years - meaning they have missed out on the advent of democracy in the country that followed the overthrow of the Ershad regime in the dying days of 1990.

The flagrant denial of their franchise rights is set to continue as well as it has emerged that the enclave-dwellers cannot be registered as fresh voters in the current round of the voter-list updating either.

The Election Commission (EC) has been carrying out a campaign to update the country's electoral rolls since May 15, but the enclave population has not been part of the process. This exclusion will continue till the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) between Bangladesh and India is ratified, paving the way for the exchange of 51 Bangladeshi enclaves in Indian territory and 111 Indian enclaves in Bangladesh.

Long-ratified by Dhaka, the bill for Indian ratification now sits in the Indian parliament, after being introduced by the last Congress-led UPA government in the closing stage of their term before their defeat by the incumbent BJP-led NDA coalition.

The Bangladeshi enclave population was last included in the voter list in 1990. After that no initiative was taken to register voters in the enclaves (other than inhabitants of Dahagram and Angorpota), resulting in some five lakh otherwise eligible members of the electorate being deprived of the right to exercising their franchise for the last 24 years.

Only the inhabitants of Dahagram and Angorpota -- two of the largest enclaves located in Patgram in Lalmonirhat -- are getting the chance to be voters this year after the EC started the three-phase voter list update on May 15.

Information have it that the EC on June 9 this year sent two separate letters to the Home Ministry and the Foreign Ministry, seeking their opinions over voter registrations in Bangladeshi enclaves. Neither ministry got back to them.

Election Commissioner Shah Nawaz told UNB that the uncertainty over the inclusion of inhabitants of enclaves in the voter list has arisen as the Land Boundary Agreement's ratification has been held up. "It's uncertain when the enclave inhabitants can be included in the electoral rolls."

Commissioner Shah Nawaz said they had been able to carry out voter registration in Dahagram and Angorpota enclaves in Lalmonirhat because the enclaves are connected with the mainland of Bangladesh through the 'Tin Bigha Corridor'.

"There's no complexity for enumerators and other officials engaged in the voter list update task to have access to the enclaves," the commissioner said.

Earlier in 2012, the EC also sought opinions of the Foreign and Home Ministries in this regard, during the voter list updating exercise ahead of the 10th parliamentary elections.

Back then, the ministries in response informed the EC that the exchange of the enclaves was 'under process'. The inhabitants of the areas concerned can be registered as voters after the issue of enclave exchange is resolved, the EC was informed.

During the 2012 update, District Election Officials of Lalmonirhat, Panchagarh and Kurigram were only able to send the lists of enclaves under their respective districts. They could not even provide reliable estimates on the number of people living in the enclaves.

As part of the ongoing voter list update, the EC has already registered over 10 lakh fresh voters, at a growth of 4.79 percent, from 144 upazilas (out of a total 514) till July 9.

The Bangladeshi citizens who will turn 18 on or before January 1, 2015 and the eligible Bangladeshis who missed the current roll will be included in the new voter list.

The EC estimates that some 46 lakh new voters - a five percent growth - would be added to the existing 9.20 crore voters of the country by the end of the current update, scheduled for next November 15.