

Numbing numbers: on draft NRC

At upwards of four million, the number of [those excluded from the second draft of the National Register of Citizens](#) published on Monday has sparked great anxiety about the legal status of so many individuals. As with the first list published on December 31, 2017, the publication of the final draft before the Supreme Court-mandated and monitored exercise moves to the next phase of claims and objections wasn't accompanied by major turbulence. And this despite lingering doubts over whether the process was indeed foolproof, or even warranted. Causes for concern have been aplenty, from the frenetic pace to meet deadlines in the face of an unrelenting apex court to the omission in July of 1,50,000 names from the 19 million that had made it to the first draft. Monday's list again had its share of notable omissions, including serving and former legislators. Given such a gargantuan exercise, it is to the credit of the NRC bureaucracy and its 55,000-odd workforce that timelines have been adhered to. But even a skilfully devised system of digitised mapping of family trees is subject to human interface, subjective bias, and the inherent flaws in the NRC of 1951 and the electoral rolls of 1961 and 1971 that make up the core of the 'legacy data'.

The state owes it to [those now left out, a staggering 40,07,707 persons](#), to ensure that their claim to citizenship is exhausted in its procedural entirety. But it also has a larger responsibility — to ensure that people who have lived here a long time, or those who know no other home, are not left high and dry in any eventuality. On that front, the Central and State governments must step up their assurances that there is no need for panic. While the modalities of a standard operating procedure for claims and objections are being worked out, to be placed before the Supreme Court by mid-August, the window for contestation could be extended by a month beyond September 28. The Union Home Ministry has also tweaked rules to enable applicants to move the Foreigners' Tribunal, where earlier only the state could haul up a suspected alien before it. Bigger challenges lie ahead, especially after the final NRC list determines the precise number of deemed illegal immigrants; the state then has to grapple with what to do next. How India addresses the fate of those eventually left off the list will ascertain whether its democracy can lay claim to being humane or not. It is one thing to detain and deport illegal immigrants instantly when they cross the border. But when people have been allowed (or they have managed) to be in India for so long, when they have built their lives and become part of local economies and communities, they cannot and must not be rendered state-less on the basis of a list.

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