

ANXIOUS IN ITANAGAR

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Issues and Challenges Pertaining to the Federal Structure, Dispute Redressal Mechanisms, and the Centre-State Relations

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Just as the furore over the Citizenship Amendment Bill ended after the legislation lapsed in Parliament, a new round of protests has rocked Arunachal Pradesh. On Sunday, mobs angry over a Joint High Powered Committee report on the claims of six non-tribal communities to the Permanent Residence Certificate (PRC) attacked the deputy chief minister's house and many public buildings, including the office of the powerful All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU) in Itanagar. Two persons were killed in police firing and scores injured. A rattled state government has withdrawn the JHPC report and has promised protestors that the PRC claims are now a closed chapter. The tense condition in the state capital and three Arunachal districts bordering Assam may have forced the government's response. But the PRC demand is an old one and is likely to surface again.

There is a need to reflect on why matters concerning identity have become increasingly combustible. The PRC is a necessary document for education and employment under the state quota in Arunachal Pradesh and neighbouring states. The six communities which have been excluded from the ambit of the PRC live in districts bordering Assam, possess landholdings etc and claim that they have never been residents of Assam or any other state. In recent times, even groups like the AAPSU had come around to the view that their claims for the PRC need a sympathetic hearing, which may well be the reason why the mob targeted the AAPSU office in Itanagar on Sunday. Clearly, not everyone agrees with this reasonable position. The protests, reportedly, lacked leaders and were more uncontrollable because they were constituted of people who had gathered spontaneously, not under the banner of a party or organisation. The fear of shrinking opportunities and loss of control over resources seems to have fanned the mob violence. This reaction could well be the fallout of the foregrounding of the identity question following the introduction of the Citizenship Amendment Bill. The Bill, and the debate that ensued, has pushed the region backwards, privileging the claims for a less inclusive polity.

Sunday's unrest doesn't augur well for the [BJP](#), which holds office in Itanagar. The party, which won 11 seats in the 60-member assembly in the 2014 assembly election but managed to cobble together a majority by engineering defections from the Congress, is already seeing desertions ahead of the polls. Its push to privilege the claims of non-Muslims for citizenship has turned the region restive again. The BJP needs to acknowledge and respect the fact that the identity question in the Northeast is complex, and calls on it to tread carefully.

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