

'INDIA STILL AT RISK OF A BIASED CITIZENSHIP REGIME'

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Indian Constitution - Features & Significant Provisions related to The Preamble, Union & its Territories and The Citizenship

Though the COVID-19 pandemic overtook the anti-Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) movement last year, India is still in danger of having an undemocratic and biased citizenship regime and there was no room for complacency, N. Ram, Director, The Hindu Group of Publications, and former Editor-in-Chief of *The Hindu*, said on Saturday.

Addressing an online event organised by a diaspora group from Washington DC, Mr. Ram spoke about "Citizenship, the Constitution and Muslims in the time of Hindutva".

He said though the pandemic had trumped the issue of citizenship, there was "no room for complacency".

"It's very clear we are in danger of having a citizenship regime that is arbitrary, undemocratic, biased and surveillance-oriented," he said.

Constituent Assembly

Mr. Ram said there had been arguments made in the Constituent Assembly in favour of according citizenship on the basis of religion, but they were put down by leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Alladi Krishnaswamy Iyer. Today, he said, some of the same themes have cropped up.

He said the anti-CAA protests and the ongoing farmers' agitation had "shown the limits of power of those who seek to seize more" at a time of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Speaking about the Muslim population, which is estimated to be 207 million, or 14.6% of the total population, in 2021, he said, "It's not as if the Muslim population as a whole is threatened. There are many States where Muslims and Hindus, and people belonging to other religious groups live in perfect harmony. But the Hindutva project is to divide and target the so-called other."

He said the political project of Hindutva had been around for a long time. "They have bided their time. They have played the long game," he said.

'Collective failure'

On the citizenship issue, he said, "At the heart is the question whether Hindu communal majoritarianism — the concept of Hindutva put into practice — will be allowed to trump the secular character of the Constitution."

He said political parties, including the Congress, could not escape accountability. For instance, they could not explain why the exercise of compiling a National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam was conducted.

The proposed all-India NRC and the National Population Register (NPR), coupled with the CAA, which gives a path to citizenship to Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Christians, Parsis and Jains from

Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh, while leaving out Muslim refugees, posed a direct challenge to India's secular polity and political stability, Mr. Ram said.

While there has been no timeline for the NRC, the NPR was supposed to have started in 2020, but was pushed back due to the pandemic.

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N. Ram

Director, The Hindu Group of Publications

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