

ASSAM'S DOUBTFUL CITIZENS LEARN THEIR RIGHTS

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

Fighting tool: The Constitution centre in Barpeta was inaugurated on December 20 last. Special Arrangement

Aditpur is not known for academics. But this village, about 20 km from western Assam's Barpeta town, is teaching the Constitution of India to "doubtful" Indians who are unlikely to have heard of it.

Local activists and youth had on December 20 opened a *Sambidhan Kendra* (Constitution Centre) at Aditpur's TND Bazaar. Scores of people marked 'D' (doubtful voters) and facing citizenship issues have since been trooping to this two-room centre to know where they stand, what they need to do and how they can fight a system that makes them "victims" of the very Constitution that they are a part of.

"Assam has over 5 lakh people who are being deprived of their citizenship rights because of having been struck off voters' list and being slapped with notices as suspected foreigners," said Mahiuddin Siddique, a teacher of a private college who conceptualised the centre that took six months to plan.

"The *Sambidhan Kendra*, probably the first of its kind in India, is an effort to make such people aware of their citizenship rights," he told *The Hindu*.

Simplifying the Constitution for the mostly poor and illiterate or barely literate people struggling to prove their citizenship, is not the only objective of the centre run by about 100 *sevak*s (volunteers).

The centre with enough space for 30 people also organises an assembly of advocates and aspiring lawyers to update on cases of D-voters and suspected foreigners being handled, and motivate each other to help "victims of the system" get justice.

"The only condition for being a part of the Kendra is to offer free service unconditionally," Mr. Siddique said.

While the advocates associated with the centre offer free legal service, the *sevak*s assist them in making documents ready and running other errands.

"It is sad that most people are not aware of even the fundamentals of the Constitution, particularly the poor who need constitutional protection more than others. Our aim is to take the spirit of this holy book — as our Prime Minister refers to it — to the common man and woman so that no one is at the mercy of those who misinterpret the laws," Mr. Siddique said.

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Mahiuddin Siddique

A teacher of a private college

who conceptualised the centre

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