

The NRC must be cautious, fair

The final draft of the National Register of Citizens was released on Monday. The exercise, which is essentially a categorisation of all Indian citizens in Assam, is an outcome of a Supreme Court order, but has its roots in Assam's contentious politics. There has been a widely shared conviction among indigenous Assamese in the state that illegal immigration has changed the demographic complexion of the state and could well alter its politics. This formed the bedrock of the students agitation in the state in the 1980s, has shaped anti-immigrant campaigns since then, and influenced even the Bharatiya Janata Party's campaign in the state elections of 2016 where it promised to deport outsiders. The sharp focus has been on Muslim migrants from Bangladesh in particular

In this backdrop, the NRC is a one-of-its-kind exercise which, through a careful process of documentation, seeks to compile a list of all citizens of the state. The process has generated anxieties in Assam, where many are fearful of missing out because of inadequate evidence of their provenance. Minorities in particular, have harboured a suspicion that in the process of excluding Bangladeshis, indigenous Muslims may also be stripped of rights. Monday's list excludes about four million of the over 32 million people of the state. But the government has been quick to emphasise that this must not be considered the final list; it does not mean that those four million who do not find their names are illegal immigrants; they will have a chance to put forth evidence; and even once the final list is out, there will be legal avenues to prove their citizenship.

Citizenship forms the basis of modern states. Deprived of formal citizenship, a person cannot enjoy political, civil, social and economic rights and is reduced to statelessness. It would be gross injustice if any citizen is deprived of this right. At the same time, citizenship is also a privilege -- and it would be unfair to grant citizenship to those who are not genuine citizens. This generates resentment and produces toxic politics. The NRC exercise has to strike this balance. It must not exclude, and not be seen as excluding, citizens, especially because they belong to a particular community. At the same time, it has to maintain the integrity of the process. The government is correct to assure people there is no reason to panic; political parties too must not inflame passions at either end. The process is necessary and must be dealt with caution and fairness.

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