

## CITIZENSHIP, FIGURED: ON ASSAM NRC FINAL LIST

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

The publication of the final National Register of Citizens on Saturday brings no closure to the vexed issue of illegal immigration to Assam yet. Those left out are not foreigners until the tribunals set up to determine their fate pronounce them so. The process could go all the way to the Supreme Court. The Home Ministry has also extended the time to file appeals against exclusion in the Foreigners Tribunal from 60 to 120 days. The point, however, is that the process has yielded an updated register, and a figure. It has had its warts and all even as it left over 1.9 million people staring at statelessness — in a continuing saga of glaring omissions, a serving lawmaker, a former legislator, and retired Army man Mohammad Sanaullah, whose case propelled NRC excesses into the spotlight, did not make the cut. But protests across the spectrum expressing concern over the excluded, suggest the judiciary-led process was perhaps largely robust and the errors were more procedural than targeted. The State government and many political parties have promised to offer legal help to those excluded, but such assistance should have been forthcoming from the time the updating exercise was rolled out on the ground in 2015. Instead, it was mostly left to sundry organisations and concerned activists to come to the aid of hundreds of thousands oblivious of documentation novelties such as legacy data.

Beyond that lies the question of what to do with those declared illegal aliens once the quasi-judicial process is done and dusted. The administration is readying detention centres, but only a veritable 'prison state' can house such numbers. Options being bandied about include instituting a system of work permits, a renewed attempt to nudge Dhaka to take in some of the declared foreigners with appropriate deal sweeteners (though India has thus far maintained that the NRC update is the nation's internal matter, and Bangladesh has never acknowledged any illegal crossings across its borders), or 'friendly' State governments volunteering to share some of the burden. While the Assam Chief Minister struck a temperate tone, the studied silence of the Prime Minister and the Home Minister on publication day is unnerving. Of greater concern is the stance of the de facto No. 2 in the State government, who said that the NRC was no quarter-final, semi-final and final for driving out Bangladeshis and promised "more finals". The Centre might have a plan in place, but if it is in the form of the Citizenship Amendment Bill to extend citizenship to non-Muslims alone, left after judicial filtration, that would negate the very non-denominational premise of the exercise to identify those who entered the country illegally after the cut-off date of March 24, 1971. While the apex court could still consider limited reverification to satisfy sentiments even though it had rejected the plea in the run-up to final publication, the aim should be to bury the bogey of the Bangladeshi.

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