

NOT WITHOUT HUMANITY

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

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On August 31, the final [National Register of Citizens](#), excluding 19,06,657 people from the 3,30,27,661 who had applied, was released in [Guwahati](#). This was a controversial document, much anticipated and dreaded in Assam for the past few years, ever since work on updating the [NRC](#) of 1951 started in 2013. The 19 lakh have been given another 120 days to submit documentary proof to the Foreigners' Tribunals.

The issue of identity has been central to Assam for decades. Agitations and movements demanding the ouster of “outsiders” have led to street demonstrations, peaceful processions as well as terrible violence. Students have lost years in academic lives, the economy has suffered greatly. There has been the inevitable lack of development because there is no peace. And yet there has been no satisfactory answer to the fraught question of the number of illegal immigrants in this state. The NRC seems set to be yet another controversial document, its relevance questioned by almost all stakeholders.

The process itself has been perceived, sometimes, to be heartless, as when inhabitants of remote areas reeling under calamitous floods were called, at very short notice, to appear before NRC centres in distant places. People have committed suicide, and many are being treated for depression, after not finding their names in the draft rolls. Strange things — such as one sibling appearing on the rolls, while another is missing, parents' names on it but that of children missing, the name of a soldier serving in another state missing — point to the flaws of the humongous exercise.

There have been doubts about whether the state government machinery was up to this complex task. Was it even practical to have a Register of Citizens in just one state, when both in- and out- migration within the country is common? Many of the respondents would be illiterate, they would not see documentary proof as a necessity. As it turns out, this last has turned out not to be true. People who, by their dress and appearance, are viewed as “foreigners” and “Bangladeshis”, with insecurity dogging them for decades, have carefully preserved the documents that would prove their citizenship. Besides, there are people with very “Assamese” names who do not find their names on the NRC. Others could not submit relevant documents and are now living in a state of fear.

There are also a large number of people of Nepali origin whose names do not figure, though they have lived here for decades.

The All Assam Students' Union, which spearheaded the anti-foreigner movement decades ago, calls it a flawed and incomplete document, because the number of those excluded is too small by their reckoning. The [BJP](#), AGP and Congress are united in their unhappiness about the document, though for different reasons.

For some decades now, a figure of 50 lakh immigrants residing illegally in Assam has been bandied about. There were fears about being “swamped” by the language, religion and culture of

the “Other.” Since this figure was about 16 per cent of the total population of Assam, it was certainly unacceptably high. But there is no convincing explanation of how it was arrived at. Even the draft rolls of the NRC had excluded around 40 lakh. And now that 19 lakh is the official figure, arrived at after a time-consuming and expensive process, a figure likely to become even smaller, those who believed in the veracity of the previous number, and who based their thinking and political careers on it, are left insisting that it is flawed. Depending on the side they are on, the flaws take on different hues. Meanwhile, almost two million people will need to prove their citizenship status again.

It is nobody’s case that Assam does not have illegal migrants. It does, as do many other countries, and states that are better policed, and have less porous borders. The sensitivity of this issue here, though, has been caused by several factors. There is the fact of the visible markers of identity of Muslims of Bengali origin. The bearded, lungi-clad man is called a Bangladeshi and a Mian, derogatively. This is why many people from the Char areas had welcomed the idea of an error-free NRC, since it would prove, publicly, their Indian citizenship. Migrants from Nepal do not face this abuse because they do not have identity markers like the Muslims of Bengali origin do. There is also the fact, unfortunately, of religion — Hindu, non-Hindu.

Assam has been a land of shifting borders. Even after Independence, several states were carved out of Greater Assam. The Brahmaputra and Barak valleys lie in uneasy coexistence.

The creation of Bangladesh in 1971 saw a huge influx of refugees, straining Assam’s resources greatly. The topography of the region is such that borders are difficult to define. Chars, the riverine islands that dot the Brahmaputra along its course, rise, and become inhabited. After a few years, they are washed away, and the inhabitants, who live in makeshift homes, move to a newer place. In the vast expanse of the Brahmaputra, with no shoreline in sight, who is to say, as one ekes out a precarious existence, whether one is a citizen of India or not.

There is a need for a valid and accurate NRC. But most people here believe that it cannot be at the cost of humanity. There is also the notion that the demand for the NRC is a product of xenophobia. Events have shown that this is not true. For instance, when many busloads of people from distant Chars in western Assam came, overnight, to provide, once more, their citizenship documents to NRC centres in eastern Assam, they were looked after by volunteers who came together to give them food and shelter. Many had the markers that identified them as Muslims of Bengali origin, while the majority of those who provided succour were not.

One can only hope that this humanism will show the way forward. What will happen to those who cannot prove their citizenship, and yet have their homes here? Not giving them voting rights, while they still keep rights to property and employment, would be one way out acceptable to most, since it was the idea of these migrants becoming vote banks for a particular party that gave rise to insecurities. In this exercise, there can be no place for religious affiliations or bias. But first and foremost, seal the porous borders with all neighbouring countries.

This NRC cannot be the definitive document to prove citizenship. At most, it can provide a base from which to move forward, with humane practicality.

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