

IT IS IMPORTANT TO CONTEXTUALISE THE NRC

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People check their names on the final list of the National Register of Citizens in Guwahati. File | Photo Credit: [Getty Images](#)

The National Register of Citizens (NRC), which was expected to land with a bang in Assam, seems to some as having landed with a mere whoosh. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders are particularly upset as it has belied their hopes of netting a huge number of immigrant Muslims in a dragnet — reportedly, a majority of those left out are Hindus. The All Assam Students Union (AASU) has expressed disappointment, arguing that the numbers did not tally with earlier figures mentioned by the government. Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has even given dark hints of ‘other measures’ in store to offset the ‘errors’ in the NRC.

On the other hand, former Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta has welcomed it as satisfactory. Pradip Bhuyan, whose PIL galvanised the process of preparing the NRC; The Forum Against Amendment of the Citizenship Bill, which I chaired; and organisations representing immigrant Muslims have also welcomed it, while pointing out that such a massive and complex exercise in a country where official documentation is still at a rudimentary stage is not likely to be foolproof.

Those expressing their disappointment ignore that the rigorous procedures and methodical cross-verifications were not put in place to fulfil some people’s fantasies. The previous figures cited by the government in earlier times were not based on any systematic procedure.

The concerns over the migration of Muslims also mask a social phenomenon. As Dr. Ilias Ali, a surgeon and crusader for family planning, and Abdul Mannan, a retired professor of statistics, have shown, the Muslims’ swelling numbers are the result of widespread poverty, illiteracy, early marriage and lack of birth-control measures rather than migration. However, this is not to deny that some migration did take place.

The results should also set at rest the tireless campaign by certain well-meaning but ill-informed people in the academic and media circles to paint the NRC as a vicious plot by some ‘xenophobic Assamese’ to oppress and torture Muslims. The process was impersonal and its strict machine-like operation pre-empted the targeting of any particular community. While there may have been errors and lapses, there is no truth to the allegation of bias.

People outside Assam have very little idea of the terrible times Assam lived through from the 1980s to the late 1990s. Social unrest, ethnic conflict, militancy and insurgency under different flags created a monstrous and stifling atmosphere. There was a complete lack of security, loss of trust between different communities and uncontrolled violence. The government’s attempt to quell these with the Army and the police made matters worse.

On the other hand, there was also an attempt by a group of civil society activists, saner political elements and mature tribal leaders to mobilise support for peace. At that juncture in the late 1990s, popular Muslim clerical leaders came aboard and publicly declared their support for the Assam Accord, which they had opposed tooth and nail for a decade after 1985. This was a watershed moment, when the demand for an NRC gained greater traction.

Earlier, since 1979, a turbulent stir in the State against a perceived threat to native identities had

practically held the government to ransom, disrupted businesses and put a stop to education. Looking back, I cannot help feeling that underground saffron brigades had a lot to do with some of the grim incidents. In any case, there was a stream of BJP leaders visiting the State to rally massive crowds. The curtains were drawn on these scenes in 1985 after the signing of the Assam Accord, which set 1971 as the cut-off year for determining citizenship. Immigrant Muslims initially considered it a betrayal and even formed their own political party but, as mentioned above, they began expressing support for the pact in the late 1990s.

‘But why is there so much hue and cry about migration, which is a natural human phenomenon?’ wonder many outsiders who do not know the history of Assam. Such an attempt to naturalise sociopolitical events is an intellectual folly. The roots of the State’s discontent can be traced to the early decades of the 20th century. The British colonial rulers, after fleeing poor East Bengal peasants for more than a century, apprehended a massive peasant revolt and promoted the latter’s migration to Assam. The relocation, which began as a trickle in the early decades of the 20th century, turned into a deluge in the 1930s and ‘40s.

Running with the hare and hunting with the hounds, the British also set off an alarm among native Assamese people about their lands being ‘seized’ and their culture ‘being’ buried. Provocative remarks like those by Census superintendent C.S. Mullan in 1931 made the situation worse, turning anxiety into panic. Muslim leaders like Maulana Bhasani breathed fire into this by demanding both land for new immigrants and inclusion of Assam in Pakistan. However, following Independence, when Bhasani went to East Pakistan and left millions of his followers in the lurch, it was a grim acceptance by the immigrant Muslims of their fate, patient negotiations with Congress leaders and sheer grit that saw them through.

Fortunately, there was also a strand of Assamese national culture that tolerated diversity of faith and promoted peaceful coexistence and fraternal relations. Cultural icons like writers Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, Bishnu Prasad Rabha and singer-musician Bhupen Hazarika upheld that tradition and until the Assam Movement, which began in 1979, the relations remained cordial.

Now that the NRC has ended, what are we to do with the 19 lakh people left out? The problem is that their fate will be decided by Foreigners’ Tribunals which are short of mature and judicially trained members and which have so far leaned on reports of the Border Police. An option of appeal to the higher echelons of the judiciary does exist for those excluded but that is likely to be expensive and sometimes unaffordable. The government has promised legal aid but we have to wait and watch if it is dispensed impartially.

And what will be the fate of those left out, most of them poor and hapless, after these appeals are exhausted? Deporting them is not an option. However, many of the Assamese people, living in a State that is still under-developed, are not willing to bear their burden at a time when their own lot is facing difficult times due to the annual floods, a drying up of natural resources and the cut-throat competition. They are scared of losing whatever political power they have enjoyed. It is the Centre’s responsibility to rehabilitate and look after those who are left out after the exercise. In the meantime, patience and a refusal to take the bait of rumours and inflammatory rhetoric may see the Assamese through.

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