

A NARROW NATIONALISM AGAIN

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

Residents check their names in the final list of the National Register of Citizens at an NRC centre at Buraburi village in Assam's Morigaon district on August 31, 2019. | Photo Credit: [AP](#)

With the release of the final draft of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam, which has pushed over 19 lakh people closer to statelessness, a coterie of Assamese ethno-nationalist intellectuals and their external allies have taken upon themselves the unenviable task of defending the exercise.

For instance, literary critic Hiren Gohain argued that “the process was impersonal and its strict machine-like operation pre-empted the targeting of any particular community”. Senior advocate at the Supreme Court, Upamanyu Hazarika, wrote that the NRC’s necessity has been overlooked amidst concerns of “human rights” (put in double quotes by Mr. Hazarika) of the excluded. Professor Walter Fernandes wrote that those speaking up for the human rights of the excluded fail to “understand why the people of Assam are concerned about migrants”. And academic Nandita Saikia wrote, “If not addressed now, hundreds of ethnic indigenous communities [in Assam] with distinct cultures will be wiped out in the advent of aggression by people of Bangladeshi origin.” Notably, even though these writers admit that the NRC was flawed, they staunchly defend the exercise and justify it by different means. None of them seems to be concerned about the serious follies in the process that has had real consequences on the lives, bodies and fate of millions of human beings.

The NRC is not just an isolated administrative exercise, but a process that is embedded in a history and the larger politics of Assamese nationalism, which is principally characterised by hatred towards the outsider, ‘the Bangladeshi’. In many ways, Assamese nationalism and its agents are directly responsible for the impoverishment and anxiety that the people of Assam are experiencing on account of this exercise.

The process is designed such that the law itself and various attendant institutions — Foreigners’ Tribunals (FTs), the Border Police, detention camps, Doubtful-Voter — have come to haunt the people. In the aftermath of the final NRC’s release, the spectre of these institutions looms larger. Even with 521 FTs, registering and disposing of more than 19 lakh cases within a reasonable period of time is nearly impossible. The opacity of the procedures of the FTs alongside the constrained appeal period make the NRC’s institutional basis even more precarious.

The accumulated impact of the NRC on the psyche of the vulnerable will be severe. The NRC is creating a public life where people experience extreme loneliness, which, for Hannah Arendt, is the most radical experience of man where everything becomes hopeless and bleak. For those excluded, the appeal period only brings the mere possibility, not certainty, of inclusion.

Moreover, the post-NRC period, if there is anything as such at all, has spurred a whole gamut of exclusionary political persuasions. One set of politics is that of the Hindutva cabal, including the BJP, that is aiming to undertake a communal distillation of the excluded mass, even if that means discrediting the final NRC. The other set is that of ‘erasure’ wherein an attempt, mostly by the mainstream Assamese middle class intelligentsia, is being made to brush aside all contradictions and psychological ramifications of the process. There will also be a politics which foregrounds Assamese sociocultural supremacy by means of Clause 6 of the Assam Accord. This will not only convert the excluded into second-class citizens, but isolate even the included

who were able to prove their Indian citizenship by legal means but won't be considered 'ethnic Assamese' by means of the ethno-nationalist consensus. As an outcome, many will find themselves in a suffocating social milieu marked by Assamese supremacy. This will have a detrimental effect on the organic identities of minorities who feel intimidated by the mainstream 'Assamese consensus'. One is reminded of the brave reporting of Assamese journalist Nirupama Borgohain decades ago when she showed how many Bengali families had to change names to hide their 'Bengaliness' in order to shield themselves from the brunt of Assamese nationalists.

The NRC process will also change the terms of Indian citizenship forever. Apart from laying grounds for a nationwide NRC, it has already influenced similar calls for exclusionary regimes in Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland. The positions held by intellectuals on Assam only further legitimise a rapid descension into regional exclusivism. Their assertions reveal a narrow vision of a society which cannot embrace differences and erases its own complicity in segregationist processes like the NRC.

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