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## The Crisis of Citizenship in Assam

By: Sanjay Barbora

*Autonomy and social justice are often in a tense relationship in Assam. While the demands for autonomy reflect the desire for territorial control over land, demands for social justice reflect an insistence on citizenship and equality under constitutional law.*

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My first personal introduction to the flurry of activities that would be associated with the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam was in June 2015. My partner and I were in Australia for a conference, when my father left several text messages for us to call him. He wanted the exact spelling of my deceased father-in-law's name, as well as the name of his village in Nagaland. "Where have you both kept your school and college certificates?" he asked when I called. Thus it began, a scramble for documents that would prove that I was indeed a citizen of India, who was from Assam and had a formidable array of evidence as proof. My father explained that my partner's details would be sent to Nagaland and once the administration there verified the details sent to them, she too would be included in the NRC.

That evening, I caught up with an old schoolmate in a Sydney suburb. He, his wife and two primary-school going daughters, were Australian citizens. Over dinner, he told me that his father-in-law in Assam was very excited about the NRC and had been calling him to ensure that his documents were in place. My friend was born and raised in Shillong (Meghalaya) and had spent much of his adult life working outside India, so he was understandably curious about how this excitable rush for documents would play out.

On that chilly winter night in Sydney, he asked me if—like his father-in-law—I thought that the NRC would bring some closure to several decades of tumultuous politics in Assam. My response was non-committal and oblique. Fortified by our class that had slowly become better travelled than our parents and our Assamese surnames, we could afford to not find an answer to the question on that evening.

However, many others—especially women, indigenous groups, Muslims and those with no easy access to documents and papers—would find it difficult to be evasive about their futures and avoid critically engaging with the collective future of political mobilisation in Assam.

### A Place at Home

Since the announcement of the NRC draft on 30 July 2018, one has had to confront the fact that more than four million people had their names excluded from the list, leading many to commit suicide. This has divided civil society and public opinion vertically. Many student unions and political parties, as well as the administration, attempted to show that there would be no violence in dealing with the aftermath. Other members of civil society and political opinion have pointed out that the exercise itself was faulty and the rhetoric that pushed it was divisive in nature. Political commentators, advocacy groups, and public intellectuals have spent considerable time and energy in persuading those who disagree with their view of the soundness of their positions.

To muddle matters for observers and activists outside the region, the Citizenship Amendment Bill of 2016 that grants citizenship to all minorities from India's neighbouring Muslim majority countries was passed by Parliament on 8 January 2019. Organisations that welcomed the NRC came out in opposition to the bill, while many who were opposed to the NRC, especially in the Barak Valley, supported the enactment of the bill. Civil society remains polarised along language and regional lines even after the bill was allowed to lapse in the upper house of Parliament on 13 February 2019. Bengali-speaking Hindus, especially in the Barak valley, felt betrayed by the government's cynical mobilisation of communitarian politics, while most indigenous communities celebrated collective victory in the aftermath.

In Assam, the NRC was seen to be the legal and political way to address the two issues that have influenced political mobilisation in Assam since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century: autonomy and social justice. The Citizenship Bill, on the other hand was seen as a reiteration of a peculiar colonial relationship between Assam and the rest of India, periodically emphasised by the disregard for political opinions of

Assamese and indigenous people. While the demands for autonomy reflect the desire for territorial control over land, demands around issues of social justice reflect an insistence on citizenship and equality under constitutional law. Both issues have a very tense relationship with one another. They have led to decades of violent conflicts, where the state has used a combination of military subjugation and co-optation of voices of dissent to deal with the situation.

Hence, political commentators and representatives of civic and political organisations have had a difficult time explaining to the rest of the country and the world as to why they have either supported or opposed a Supreme Court monitored process to survey the legal status of every inhabitant of the state, even as they have differing positions on the Citizenship Amendment Bill. When did they, or their ancestors make Assam their home? Could they prove their presence in the state going back to the partition of British India? Or did they come to Assam after the formation of Bangladesh in 1971?

Answers to these questions are entangled in colonial history, ethnic identity, and control over resources in Assam. These three factors have been instrumental in defining the political discourse, anxieties, and activism associated with the NRC process. As a British colony, Assam saw an unprecedented inflow of labour and capital that transformed the economic and political landscape of the region in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This transformation hinged upon extraction of resources and resulted in the politicisation of ethnic identities. Radical political voices in Assam had frequently drawn from this mix to demand two seemingly contradictory guarantees—territorial autonomy (even secession) and differential citizenship rights—from the Government of India.

I structure this essay into four interconnected sections: (a) underlining the importance of colonial history, ethnic autonomy, resources and the NRC debates; (b) a brief look at what exactly went into the NRC process (c) mapping the spectrum of reactions and the history of activism related to the NRC; and (d) looking at the future of political discussions about citizenship within India.

### **Ethnicity, Resources and Autonomy**

The colonial period is key to understanding many of the enduring conflicts in Assam today. Adversarial positions on the NRC fall into a process that has been researched and documented well over the past few decades. The presence of the colonial state in Assam was limited to parts of the populated valleys, where the government allowed people from East Bengal to settle on agricultural land for annual and decennial leases. The landscape, economy and society changed dramatically, as cash crops like jute and tea, as well as minerals like oil and coal were grown or extracted in abundance from the area in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This transformation also entailed a radical change in the demography of the region, as peasants and indentured workers from different parts of the British-controlled Indian subcontinent were brought to Assam. Tea plantations, in the central and eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley and in parts of the Barak valley were given longer-term leases.

In the upland areas however, the government followed a “light-touch” policy and allowed indigenous communities to retain their traditional chiefs and heads, while making way for indirect rule by the colonial state. This policy continued after Independence and was reaffirmed by the Bordoloi Commission in 1949, when they proposed that the hills be governed under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution.

Under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule, use and transfer of land between individuals was left to the discretion of the autonomous councils that allowed indigenous communities (defined as Scheduled Tribes under the Constitution) to govern certain areas where they were a numerical majority. The councils functioned as territorial enclaves within the larger state and in matters related to transfer of land and property reflected the light-touch administration during the colonial period.

While some territories and communities accepted this autonomy arrangement, others like the Naga and Mizo were less convinced. In both areas—Naga Hills (comprising the current state of Nagaland and parts of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur) and Lushai Hills—demands for independent, self-governing territories brought together small, kin-based communities who were able to organise successful armed resistance to the post-colonial state and to settler communities.

There is little doubt that Assam’s long, complicated history of settlement and demographic change continues to play a dominant part in political mobilisation in the region.

The first territorial councils were elected in the autonomous districts around the undivided province of Assam in the 1950s and continue into contemporary times. Since then, the state of Assam has been reorganised and currently there are three territorial autonomous district councils (Bodoland, Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong) and six non-territorial councils (Deori, Mishing, Rabha Hasong, Sonowal

Kachari, Thengal Kachari and Tiwa) in the state.

There is little doubt that Assam's long, complicated history of settlement and demographic change continues to play a dominant part in political mobilisation in the region. This process was informed by tropes of identity, embodied in differences between groups, bureaucratic distancing of the state from people and the eventual centralisation of power.

The postcolonial state has also held itself up as a neutral entity, claiming to uphold the rights of all citizens while simultaneously encouraging an incremental approach to demands for autonomy amongst indigenous communities and other communities who settled in the valleys during the colonial period. It continued after the partition of British India in 1947, as well as the formation of Bangladesh in 1971. It has predictably led to a polarisation of opinion on the rights of the people of the region and those who have a right to call Assam their homeland.

Assamese and tribal activists often allude to demographic changes as the continuing legacy of colonialism, where the colonial state (and its postcolonial inheritor) wilfully used settlers in order to politically subjugate and economically exploit the region. This fact is reiterated through political mobilisation along communitarian and ethnic lines, involving the formation of armed groups for almost all communities in Assam. Commentators argue that this is the precursor of attempts at creating majorities through acts of violence, causing large-scale displacement along India's Northeast borders (Banerjee and Basu Ray Choudhury 2012; ; Vandekerckhove 2009).

The discourse on identity politics does not allow for certain communities to assert territorial rights in Assam.

This is particularly true for numerically large populations such as descendants of indentured workers in the plantations and subsistence peasants of the floodplains in the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys. Their presence in the region is tied to commodities, crops and a labouring history that places them in the point of contact between Europeans and pre-colonial society. This leads to a peculiar situation where radical political discourse on indigenous politics and rights over resources follows one that is similar to the cultural and political assertions of first nation communities in Canada, United States, Australia, and New Zealand.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, sections of the left-leaning advocates of autonomy made efforts to assert alliances that overcame ethnic identities. However, over time, as successive central and state governments began to negotiate with radical voices of dissent, ethnic territorial autonomy was foregrounded as a possible resolution. This allowed a section of people to remain outside the scope of political mobilisations and as outsiders in particular districts and regions.

The relationship between Assam's realities as a colonial province and the possibility of its existence as a nation separate from India was often raised in the Assam Association formed in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The lack of an unequivocal answer has been one of the major sources of political mobilisation, forming an ideological underpinning for movements for autonomy and secession throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, until contemporary times (Choudhury 2016; Saikia 1985).

### **Rights of Marginalised People**

There is a second order of issues linked to social justice that is linked in turn to such politics in Assam. They have to do with securing equal rights for marginalised people, regardless of their ethnic identity and based more on their social position within the political economy of the region. As mentioned earlier, the working class for Assam's tea plantations were forced to migrate from other parts of India, while many peasants in the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys were Muslims from East Bengal. Their conditions were markedly different from the white-collared workers, merchants and traders who were Bengali- and Hindustani-speaking Hindus from the Gangetic plains.

In the colonial province of Assam, religion was not the only factor that determined the decision people made to stay (or move). Language played an equally important role, especially for those who were going to become religious minorities within India.

Historians and political scientists who have written about colonial Assam's referendum in 1947 that resulted in the Muslim majority district of Sylhet joining (East) Pakistan and the rest of the province becoming part of India allude to the anxieties of local politicians in Assam when it came to colonial policies on immigration.

Assamese nationalists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century often differed with their counterparts in the Congress and also with the Muslim League on the issue. The League's best-known politician in Assam, Syed Saadullah, who has been portrayed in history texts as the person responsible for encouraging immigration from East Bengal in the 1930s in his time as the prime minister, was actually castigated by peasant leaders like Maulana Bhashani for creating impediments in the acquisition of land by settlers. Similarly, Congress leaders like Ambikagiri Raichoudhury and political commentators like Jnananath Bora frequently reminded the party leadership (and Nehru in particular) of the similarities between Assam and Palestine on the immigration and settler question.

Hence, when the Indian subcontinent was eventually partitioned, peasants and workers who were tied to the land and work in Assam were faced with difficult choices even though there did not seem to be much evidence of widespread violence (as in Punjab and Bengal). In the colonial province of Assam, religion was not the only factor that determined the decision people made to stay (or move). Language played an equally important role, especially for those who were going to become religious minorities within India. For a section of Assamese nationalists of the time, it was even more important than religion.

Coincidentally, two recent books—both anchored in colonial Burma—have appeared to allow one to make sense of what is going on in contemporary Assam (and its transnational neighbourhood).

Amit Baishya's translation of Debendra Acharya's novel *Jangam: A Forgotten Exodus in Which Thousands Died* (2018), detailing the harrowing escape of Burmese-Indian peasants from Burma into Assam during World War II, show how 20<sup>th</sup> century decolonisation was a violent process that disrupted the lives of many and led to a transfer of population from one part of the British Empire to another.

Anthropologist Anand Pandian and his grandfather M P Mariappan's evocative book, *Ayya's Accounts: A Ledger of Hope in Modern India* (2014), of the latter's life journey, part of it as an evacuee from Burma, also detail the trials of ordinary people caught up in extraordinary times and circumstances.

Both books are remarkable for their ability to depict the grainy details of uprooted lives that began with the unmooring of the British Empire. These events predated the formation of postcolonial nation-states and yet, almost 70 years hence, we find ourselves at similar crossroads again. Both books about Burma are memorable in the lack of rancour that the protagonists display for their Burmese neighbours, realising that they were all caught up in circumstances beyond their control. It was almost as though anti-colonial movements in the region would bring closure to these divisive political events.

Unfortunately they did not and as the current NRC process in Assam shows, the government added yet another layer of oppression to a large section of people who had placed their faith in the law.

Novelist Parismita Singh's thoughtful and reflective pieces on the fallout of the NRC allude to the difficulties that such people have had to endure, as well as the potential for violence that it has brought in its wake (Singh 2018a and 2018b). These conditions force one to assess the future of debates around citizenship, not just in Assam but also in parts of the wider region that includes other states of the Indian union and countries such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar and Nepal. After all, discussions about citizenship and belonging have been central to the wider region and the fallout of conflicts has been significant as well.

The data collection process for the NRC tended to disaggregate citizens on the basis of property and lineage. It also collated on the basis of ethnic identity, gender, and religion, leading to almost four million individuals scrambling for more documents and filing objections on how the process was carried out. In the following section, I address the evolution of the NRC and the kind of governmental resources that went into it. What was it? Was it like a census but with disciplinary consequences? Or was it a toothless exercise meant to pacify agitated opinions?

### **What was the NRC and How Was it Rolled Out?**

The NRC has an interesting timeline in the history of modern Assam, especially after 1947. It followed the 1951 census and appeared in government circulars issued to reassure agitating groups in Assam that the immigration issue would be addressed by the administration. This meant taking recourse to laws like the Foreigners Act, 1946 and the Foreigners (Tribunal) Order, 1939.

Such a process was in marked contrast to the upheavals of the tragic transfer of people between India and Pakistan in the west, where these laws were put aside to accommodate people escaping violence in West Pakistan. This difference between the two partitioned sectors of British India is important, as it alludes to the different ways regional governments responded to the humanitarian crisis.

Drawing attention to the government’s unwillingness to address the movement of people in the east, as well as the persistence of civic efforts to raise the issue of immigration, Sanjib Baruah underlined the different ways in which the Partition narrative appeared in Assam and showed how it continues to have an impact on contemporary debates (Baruah 2009, 2008). In his recent writings on the NRC, he has addressed the government’s lack of preparedness in conducting such a process, drawing attention to the manner in which key neighbours were not adequately informed of the outcomes of this process, especially when political rhetoric was directed towards a historically specific population from Bangladesh (Baruah 2018).

In 1951, people in Assam—especially Muslim cultivators and urban poor who lived along the East Pakistan border—were asked to fill out an enumeration form by the government as the initiation process of the NRC. As mentioned earlier, it was not for the first time since the country had attained independence from Britain that an enumeration process was being held. Ordinary citizens would have felt a sense of confusion, since the Census had just taken place. Moreover, those living along the Naga Hills were being asked a related set of questions regarding autonomy.

Hence, the idea of a government process involving various organs of the state but without much public debate, would have been seen as yet another administrative issue whose impacts were not immediately tangible, especially since it involved the declaration of documents and evidence by individuals to the administration.

This was in marked contrast to reaffirmation of independence after a plebiscite on the question of Naga territory and people being part of India that was undertaken by Naga leaders in the province of Assam. The referendum began on 16 May 1951 in the Kohima playground and involved only one ballot paper upon which every adult Naga was asked to stamp his or her view on the political future of the people. The plebiscite is central to the moral and political apparatus upon which Naga people continue to assert their independence and autonomy in India.

The 1951 NRC, on the other hand, was not central to the debates around citizenship for a greater part of the political history of Assam. No elected government took it upon itself to revise the NRC until 2010, a story that I deal with in the following section.

The capacity of the state to conduct such head-counts on the basis of documents that attest to property, occupation and proof of residence has increased manifold since 1951. However, as anthropologist Matthew Hull (2012) has pointed out, there is no clear correlation between an administration’s ability to document and how people respond to such demands (Hull 2012).

Most people who need to negotiate with the state know that there are theoretical (and practical) ways to create the kind of documentation in order to finish a job. In the recently concluded NRC in Assam, the government sought to minimise these shortcomings in two ways: (a) by throwing in the entire state machinery, including all departments of the Government of Assam, the Registrar General of India and the Supreme Court, into the process; and (b) using technology to iron out wink-wink deals that are attributed to the everyday workings of the state in developing countries.

### **2015 Edition of NRC**

The 2015 edition of the NRC was more robust. It required individuals to show their legacy data that included having a family member’s name in the 1951 NRC and/or having the individual (or a direct family member’s name) included in the electoral rolls as of 24 March 1971, a day after the Bangladesh liberation war was formally announced.

In case a person was unable to find her/his name in the legacy data, the administration allowed for 12 other documents that could be shown as evidence, provided they were granted before 24 March 1971. These were: (i) land tenancy records, (ii) Citizenship Certificate, (iii) Permanent Residential Certificate, (iv) Refugee Registration Certificate, (v) Passport, (vi) LIC Policy, (vii) Government issued License/Certificate, (viii) Government Service/Employment Certificate, (ix) Bank/Post Office Accounts, (x) Birth Certificate, (xi) Board/University Educational Certificate, and (xii) Court Records/ Processes.

These documents have an aura of middle-class respectability to them. They attest to a person having ownership of property, access to education, jobs and documents that allow her/him to travel at will. However, a vast majority of itinerant working people—most of whom constitute Assam’s unorganised labour sector—were unable to produce these documents.

### **Reactions: A Place on the Spectrum**

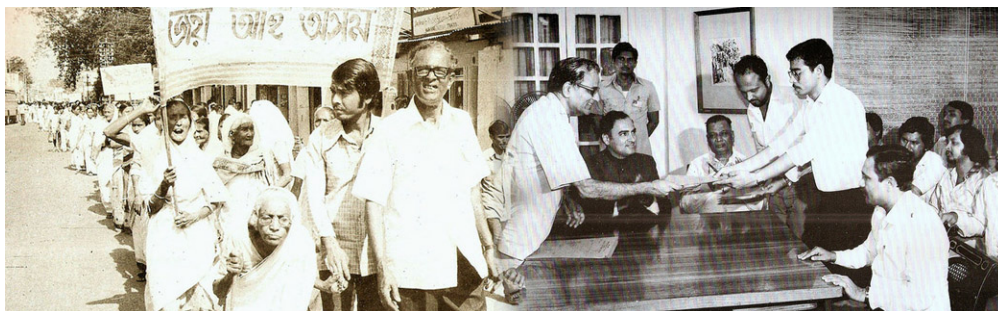
In this section, I map the range of positions that were articulated before, during and after the NRC process. In order to do so, I lay out the history of activism that informed the various parties that were intimately involved, including the tumultuous years of political violence that occurred during the 1990s and 2000s, centred on issues of territorial autonomy and sovereignty. Before one can make sense of the varying positions on the spectrum, one has to place the NRC within the context of radical activism that involved a wider range of actors than the ones frequently alluded to in Assam, namely the students unions and organisations that assert the rights of indigenous communities. In addition, as I show, there was also a certain degree of advocacy and urgency to address the issue that was shown by the Supreme Court of India, the Election Commission, and the Government in Assam.

In 1951, the NRC exercise was not extended to all districts of the state, which at the time included the current states of Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland. A little more than a decade later, the Prevention of Infiltration from Pakistan (PIP) scheme was launched in 1962 and its enforcement to identify and deport was entrusted to the Assam Police. The Foreigners Tribunal (FT) Order was passed in 1964, to further enable local state officials to deal with undocumented migration from across the border, especially from erstwhile East Pakistan.

These legal measures affected the lives of Muslim communities living along the border areas, who were often pushed back into East Pakistan. They also extended an incommensurable level of power to determine matters related to citizenship, to local functionaries of the state at the block and village level.

Perhaps the legal measures were not able to identify undocumented immigrants, since in 1969 the government—headed by Bimala Prasad Chaliha—put an end to the PIP scheme. In all this while, the NRC of 1951 was not revised, nor was there a concerted effort by civil society organisations to call for its revision.

A key moment in the reappearance of the NRC in its current form goes back to 1979 and the by-election following the death of Hiralal Patowary, a Member of Parliament from Mangaldai constituency in the North Bank of the river Brahmaputra. Prior to the by-election, the Election Commission of India announced that there were more than 40,000 names of “fake” voters on the list.



Source: [National Register of Citizens, Government of Assam](#).

## Assam Agitation

Following this, Assam experienced over four years of civic unrest, a period popularly called the Assam Agitation (or anti-foreigner agitation, by some). It was during the agitation that the Government of India enacted the Illegal Migrants (Determination) Tribunal (IMDT) Act, specifically for the state of Assam in 1983. Until then, suspected foreigners were identified and made to leave the country under the Foreigners Act that was enforced by the Foreigners Tribunals.

The IMDT was specifically aimed at migration from East Pakistan/Bangladesh and inserted 1971 as the cut-off year for undocumented immigrants to be considered for deportation from Assam. The implications of analysing this law in contemporary times are two-fold: (i) it laid the conditions for amending the laws for citizenship in India in 1985, from one that was based on naturalisation to one based on birth; and (ii) acknowledged the need for diplomacy, in addressing politics and history between India and Bangladesh. The second implication is important to bear in mind. It lays out the fundamental difference of opinion between those involved in the study and practice of Indian foreign policy and a populist political opinion on immigration within Assam.

The IMDT, until its repeal, was a cause for concern for representatives of both immigrant and indigenous communities, who viewed it as a problematic piece of legislation. For people of East Bengal heritage, it signified the persistence of doubt and accusations about their status. For indigenous communities, the law signified double standards in determining and bestowing citizenship rights on

individuals in the country, placing the burden of proof on private individuals instead of the state.

The Assam Accord was signed in 1985 between Rajiv Gandhi (then Prime Minister of India) and representatives of the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) and All Assam Students Union (AASU) to end the conflict and civil strife. It had several clauses built around the detection and deportation of undocumented immigrants, especially in the riverine areas, invoking the pre-Independence Foreigners Act, 1946 and Foreigners (Tribunal) Order, 1939.

It is interesting to note that there were no legislative efforts within Assam to find an alternative to the old colonial laws upon which much of the administrative exercise of detection and deportation was taking place. However, there was no mention of the NRC even though its current exercise is seen as a promise made as a part of the Assam Accord.

When the IMDT was finally repealed for being at odds with constitutional provisions for granting citizenship in the rest of the country in 2005, the current chief minister Sarbananda Sonowal and leader of the All India United Democratic Front, Badruddin Ajmal, appeared as primary protagonists in the oppositional politics around the law. The repeal also elicited the involvement of Supreme Court of India in the issue and come up with an alternative that could assuage demands for harder borders and controls over immigration in Assam. It was only after the repeal of IMDT that updating the NRC appeared as a concrete proposal from the state to repair a relationship that had been marked by bloodshed, mistrust and antagonism between itself and civil society organisations in Assam (Gohain 2018).

I shall explain the origins of this conflict in the subsequent section, but it would help to foreground violence in underlining the spectrum of positions and advocacy around the NRC.

An important organisation in the activism around the process was the Assam Public Works (APW). It had come into existence in the year 2000 mainly to draw attention to the tensions arising from the armed conflict in Assam. In terms of political positions, it was squarely on the side of the government, making public pronouncements about the futility of the demands for self-determination and autonomy.

In 2009, the organisation filed a petition [WP (c) 279/2009] demanding that the NRC of 1951 be updated and undocumented migrants be deported from Assam. The government of Assam, then under the control of the Indian National Congress, attempted a pilot project in 2010 using the old 1951 forms that had references to Pakistan as a place of origin, leading to protests by the All Assam Minority Students Union (AAMSU) in many parts of western Assam during which four persons died on 21 July 2010 in Barpeta town.

Media reports of the incident talked about the protestors burning effigies of Tarun Gogoi, who was then the chief minister of Assam and Samujjal Bhattacharya, who was the advisor to AASU. Both figures have seldom been on the same side of the spectrum on identity politics in Assam. The former chief minister's party was seen to be sympathetic to immigrants, partly due to the role that it played in opposing the Assam agitation in the early 1980s. The AASU advisor, on the other hand, was associated with a more robust nativist position on the matter.

The deaths in Barpeta forced the government of Assam to set up a cabinet sub-committee to decide on matters pertaining to the updating of the NRC in the state in 2012. Until that time, the issue had not become as divisive, or even publicly debated, as it would become only a few years later.

## Supreme Court Intervention

In 2013, the Supreme Court of India intervened in the project. Justice Ranjan Gogoi, then a judge in the Supreme Court, instructed the state government to update the Court on the NRC, beginning a series of interventions that border on judicial advocacy. This nudge included demands for a timeline for completion of the process, a budget for undertaking the process, the immediate release of Rs 400 crore to the state government by the centre and the appointment of Prateek Hajela as the person to oversee the NRC update.

Operations however began in 2015, after the change in government in New Delhi. Two thousand five hundred *seva kendras* were set up across the state to help people understand the process for filing their applications.

In the process, many non-governmental, community- and student-based organisations were co-opted into aiding the government to ensure a smooth end to the NRC. Several commentators had brought up this issue in their defence of the NRC process (Ahmed 2018, Bora 2015, Bhuyan 2018). However, others pointed out the disturbing realities associated with the behaviour of local state

representatives on the ground, especially in their ability to make it difficult for Muslims of East Bengali heritage to engage in the process (Kalita 2018). Bengali-speaking people and organisations from the Barak valley also protested against the NRC process, saying that it was designed to exclude them.

The United Nation’s (US) special rapporteur on minority issues Fernand de Varennes, also wrote a cautionary to the Government of Assam stating that any government-aided process that wilfully sought to deny citizenship rights to a section of the population based on religion, language or other social markers was tantamount to rendering them stateless. This view was endorsed by several nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) working on minority rights within India and outside, but was subjected to severe criticism by student bodies and commentators in the Brahmaputra Valley.

People, ideas and political positions swerve towards selective readings of the past, especially when it comes to the disruptions caused by colonialism. In this process, some histories are privileged, while others are relegated to the margins.

Amidst the various student and political organisations weighing in on the issue, NGOs such as the Prabhajan Virodhi Manch (Forum Against Infiltration) led by a senior advocate Upamanyu Hazarika have called for direct participation of citizens concerned about the rise of immigration from Bangladesh. The organisation’s website prominently displays the percentage of Muslim-populated districts in Assam as evidence of undocumented immigration and has been critical of the NRC’s inability to be more forthright in its mission to identify foreigners in Assam.

Ugandan anthropologist Mahmood Mamdani draws one’s attention to the weight of history, politics and the colonial encounter in the kind of views one asserts about brutal, polarising events. In his book *When Victims Become Killers* (2001), he showed how routine matters of governance have the ability to be twisted to malicious extents. Those who advocate such intent are able to bestow some kind of warped political logic on atrocities that are committed by one section of people upon another.

Perhaps there is something similar happening in India, where the example of Assam is pertinent. People, ideas and political positions swerve towards selective readings of the past, especially when it comes to the disruptions caused by colonialism. In this process, some histories are privileged, while others are relegated to the margins.

In the following section, I look at the manner in which colonial history has created different political spaces for communities in Assam. I do so in order to underline the importance of ethnicity in the control over resources and territory, since all three are very important to understanding the NRC process. I discuss some of the possible outcomes of the citizenship debate, specifically within Assam, but also in relation to its impact on a wider region. This is particularly important in light of the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Bill in the Brahmaputra Valley by organisations and individuals who were supportive of the NRC.

At the centre of the contestations is the process of migration, or more precisely, of mobility of human beings forced to move by the sheer force of geographic and political considerations not entirely of their making.

Interestingly, those who opposed the NRC in the Barak Valley, especially organisations representing Bengali-speaking Hindus, came out to support the bill. Therefore, when angry Assamese students shout slogans like “Bangladeshis go back,” they confuse many outside the region who wonder why then are they opposed to the Citizenship Bill. It is harder then to explain that “Bangladeshi” is not a religious category, but sociological shorthand for a historical process that has muted regional specificities in nationalist debates.

## Citizenship Debates

Against this bleak backdrop is what Irish poet Seamus Heaney in his Nobel acceptance speech called “the abattoir of history,” with a past full of violent expressions of identity. The triggers of the episodes of violence are many. Regardless of the spectrum of causes of conflict in the region, the recurring binaries that operate (in the conflict) are those of the *migrant* and *native*; or *settler* and *indigenous*; or *citizen* and *foreigner*, or the generic *insider* and *outsider*.

At the centre of the contestations is the process of migration, or more precisely, of mobility of human beings forced to move by the sheer force of geographic and political considerations not entirely of their making.



Such political predicaments are not unique to North East India. The evocation of fear of the outsider, hence the evolution of a narrative to “drive out” those who are seen as the mirror opposite is similar to what transpires in other parts of the world. As different actors use the mediated public sphere to articulate their grievances against migrants/outside/foreigners, they simultaneously point to perceptions of anarchy among the actors themselves.

Mobility (across national borders) in this case, is seen as a weakness of the state to police its boundaries (Alexseev 2006). If the features pages and editorials of vernacular dailies are anything to go by, migrants are seen to have an undue advantage in the mobility narrative (Kimura 2008). This implies that the host populations are most likely to react to strategies they feel aid migrants and the conditions that aid migration, in a manner that is confrontational (rather than reconciliatory).

Whether it is the dominant narrative of the AASU (in the 1980s), or the campaign for recognition of rights of the people of Terai in the new Nepali constitution, movements in the region have always tested existing notions of citizenship.

Sometimes, movements have used the dominant narrative of constitutions, while there have been times when constitutional language has been rejected in favour of innovative alliances that defy prescribed political possibilities. These processes are best captured in the manner in which the national constitutions and laws reflects the concerns of the inhabitants of the region.

In India, the government has used the political events and discourse in Assam to amend the Constitution and push through a version of citizenship that is marked by blood ties and cultural ascriptions, where it has become harder for a person to be granted citizenship in India even if she has lived and worked in the country all her life, unless she can prove that she has parents or ancestors who were born here (Roy 2016).

However, it is puzzling to come to terms with the fact that some of India’s most abused citizens, living in one of South Asia’s most militarised regions, can in turn seek the disenfranchisement of those they see as their *other*.

This is why I often find myself making subtle alterations to my views on the NRC depending on the person I am speaking to. Even as I understand the anxieties of the indigenous political discourse, I find it odd that its proponents were unable to be critical of the statist discourse on citizenship, as they once did in their opposition to militarisation throughout the 1990s and first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is especially true given the manner in which they had come out in protest of the government’s blatantly anti-Muslim Citizen Amendment Bill. It has forced me to engage with ideas that I dislike and disagree with.

Ranabir Samaddar (2018) expresses a melancholic view of this predicament in his recent article. In positing citizenship and statelessness as inseparable twins, he concludes that the voices of support for the NRC are emblematic of a collective revulsion towards an imagination of mixed lives.

### **Myriad Ways to Co-exist**

Yet, the political discourse framed as it is around notions of identity and history, does not do justice to the myriad ways in which people have managed to live with each other in Assam. These pathways of coexistence are evident in mundane spaces like weddings, funerals, village festivities during the harvest season and other events that allow for more layered lives to evolve.

For those trying to make sense of the contentious politics surrounding the NRC, there seems to little hope for reconciliation between communities that see each other in adversarial positions over a government-sponsored, advocacy-driven process. It is true that a focus on the NRC process alone can lead one to the conclusion that its supporters displayed a monochromatic view of society, history, and culture in Assam.

I recall asking a lawyer friend in Guwahati about the dogged defence of the NRC among left nationalist Assamese commentators in August 2018. He and I agreed that the manner in which our friends and colleagues were defending the NRC was somewhat anachronistic and belonged to 20<sup>th</sup> century nationalist politics. It had alienated the “Miya” (Muslims of East Bengali heritage, most of whom speak a variety of regional dialect) people, many of whom had embraced the Assamese language and culture over the decades. My friend had spent much of his life fighting cases against the state’s human rights violations during the brutal years of counter-insurgency in the late 1990s and early 2000s. He was presciently convinced that trusting the state to resolve the immigration issue was a mistake. We both agreed that the NRC was a distraction from other pressing matters that confronted the people of Assam.

As the streets of Guwahati were filled with angry young women and men protesting against the Citizenship Amendment Bill, we felt vindicated by our analysis but disturbed by the manner in which this anger was being used in social media and on the streets.

The Government of India cynically used the Citizen Amendment Bill to iron over any pretence of non-partisanship on the matter of resolving the conflicts arising from demands for autonomy and social justice. If anything the sense of collective ennui, even after it was allowed to lapse, is a reminder that the militarisation of politics and civil society in Assam has led to an untenable reality. Today, it is easier for middle-class Assamese men to reminisce about home and culture in distant places than it is for working-class Miya women who have been born and raised in the *chars* (seasonal river islands along the Brahmaputra in Assam and Bangladesh) to find their names in the NRC. Yet, asserting secular ethics and quotidian examples of tolerance will be left to those who have been systematically excluded by the government.

The NRC involved colossal expense for the state and civil society in Assam. It has disrupted relationships and forced people and organisations to revisit old colonial debates about autonomy and social justice. As the protests against its sinister cousin—the Citizenship Amendment Bill—gain ground, one needs to imagine an alternative discourse that is built on dialogue and diplomacy. Such a discourse could start with conversations between governments and exchanges between writers, students, and artists in the wider region that incorporates our transnational neighbourhood.

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