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“The National Register of Citizens in Assam: Political Dynamics and Challenges”

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Abstract

The implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam has brought to light a number of issues concerning citizenship, migration, and regional political advocacy. Social scientists studying citizenship in the twenty-first century will find it interesting when an administrative exercise of this kind makes use of the law, technology, and bureaucracy to settle historically difficult complaints within a country's territory. This is particularly true given that almost 19 lakh people of diverse backgrounds and ethnicities were not included in the rolls, disappointing all parties involved—including the Assamese ruling party—with the results. Even though using technology has greatly benefited society, this article makes the case for paying more careful and thoughtful attention to ethnographic details about other contingencies that affect the process, like floods and climate change, especially since the process is being promoted across the nation.

Keywords: Assam, Bureaucracy, Citizenship, Climate change, NRC, Technology

Introduction

In Assamese political debate and mobilization for the parliamentary elections of 2014 and 2019, the National Register of Citizens (NRC) has taken center stage. This procedure might be viewed as the result of years of political turmoil and discussions between government representatives and civil society organizations. The state and federal governments were directed to update the NRC in accordance with the Citizenship Act of 1955 and the (amended) Citizenship Rules of 2003 after the Supreme Court of India granted cognizance to two writ petitions submitted by non-governmental organizations from Assam in 2013. Following the release of two rounds of drafts of the register—a final draft on July 30, 2018, and a partial one on December 31, 2017—the final list was released on August 31, 2019 (Barbora, 2019)¹. Particularly among those who doubt civic norms and regulations, the NRC has polarized public opinion. The solution to the long-standing problem of immigration from various regions of the subcontinent is seen by many Assamese critics and advocacy groups as being urgently needed, with a particular emphasis on migrants from Bangladesh, a bordering country. Others warn

¹ As per a press release from the NRC office a total of 3,30,27,661 person had participated in the updating process of the NRC. Of these, 3,11,21,004 were found to have valid documents to prove their citizenship through the legacy code. This left out 19,06,675 persons (including those who did not file claims following the publications of the two drafts). For more details see: <https://www.livelaw.in/pdf_upload/pdf_upload-363869.pdf>



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against the excesses and flaws in the process, pointing out that thousands of women and men in the state have suffered tragically as a result of technical failures, bureaucratic overreach, and advocacy overload. This problem is now more worthy of sociological study and attention because prominent members of the newly elected administration (in 2019) have advocated for the NRC to be expanded to all of the nation's states.

This article examines the paradoxical and contentious politics of citizenship in Assam, with a particular focus on the social and political outcomes of the NRC process. In order to determine the status of people who are not included in the NRC, I worked with government officials, journalists, humanitarian assistance organizations, and an advocacy group dedicated to char issues for two years. I contend that despite addressing issues unique to the twenty-first century, the NRC controversy compels us to consider outdated concerns regarding citizenship. The issues I'm referring about, like relocation brought on by violence and climate change, affect everyone on the earth, even though their repercussions are felt differently by communities in different parts of the world. I am driven to expanding the NRC discussions with issues that sparked social science research in the 20th century because I am studying human rights and agrarian transformation in Assam. What kind of organization is farming? What part do peasants, small farmers, and subsistence farmers play in the farming process? How much influence do they have over governmental decisions that have an impact on their daily life and means of subsistence? The focus of these inquiries was agriculture, which was the main source of the soil's roots and the cause of several political mobilizations that occurred in India during the 20th century (Weiner, 2016).

Many academics have built their empirical work on concerns of equity, representation, and rights, making these topics fundamental to the growth of sociology (and social anthropology) in India (Desai, 2019; Dhanagare, 1983). In fact, for the majority of the 20th century, the cause of the oppressed peasant/farmer was the driving force behind socialist revolutions, national liberation movements, and civil conflicts (Alavi, 1965; Wolf, 1966). The peasant/farmer became a contradictory but fundamental image for postcolonial nations and political leaders with the creation of a world order marked by circumscribed nation-states free from their erstwhile European colonizers in the middle of the 20th century (Verwimp, 2000). Postcolonial countries saw the farmer as the moral foundation upon which a new citizenship regime would arise, despite the peasant's backwardness and historical roots (Deutscher, 1971).

As a result, a lot of the justifications offered for upholding the NRC process are really predicated on adult franchise, permanent settlement, and property ownership. People and organizations that are against immigration do so because they believe that immigrants will upset the social and economic fabric of the region by displacing native groups from farming, taking over small-scale trade and business ownership, and eventually entering politics (Bhattacharyya, 2018). According to this schema, an immigrant is someone who denies citizens



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their rights, particularly to those who work the land and depend on the government to look out for their interests.

As noted by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) in their groundbreaking book *Empire*, the concept of the citizen, with its guarantees of rights and entitlements, is becoming less secure in the twenty-first century. Instead, we must deal with a plethora of other, just as compelling identities, such as those of refugees, internally displaced people, and so forth. The authors contend that the nation-state's ability to exert sovereignty has fundamentally decreased under certain conditions of globalization—capitalist and technical. They made the explicit observation that certain nation-states, like as Iraq and Afghanistan, had had their sovereignty rescaled while maintaining weakened institutions that served the interests of global capital. Their writings specifically addressed the turning point of the experience that altered politics in the United States and West Asia. They go on to say that a mobile subject compelled to meet the demands of capital is subject to this sort of sovereignty. They perceive global labor expanding across borders that were previously bounded within nation-states by capital, establishing the multitude and superseding past ideas of national people as they celebrate the final triumph of this topic.

Even though *Empire* has been read critically, their interpretation ignores a counterintuitive detail that is crucial to this article. Technology and capital have transcended national borders in the 20th century, but the national-territorial form has resurfaced as a means of politically excluding others. The NRC procedure demonstrates how bureaucracy and technology have combined with populist movements against colonial settlements from the 20th century to generate judicial advocacy that has resulted in an exclusionary regime for thousands of people. The majority of those who are not included are from rural, agricultural communities that experienced political violence and displacement in the last quarter of the 20th century and the first ten years of the 21st. So how, I wonder, are we to interpret something as divisive as the NRC as a topic for 21st-century sociological research?

One has had to face the truth that over four million people had their names removed from the list after the draft was revealed on July 30, 2018, with many of them ending their lives as a result (Saikia, 2019). Public opinion and civil society have become vertically divided as a result. Numerous political parties, student groups, and the administration made an effort to demonstrate that there would be no violence in handling the fallout. The exercise itself was flawed, and the rhetoric that promoted it was polarizing in character, as several members of civil society and political thought have noted. Public intellectuals, advocacy organizations, and political pundits have invested a great deal of time and effort in convincing those who hold opposing views about the validity of their own. Since then, a large segment of civil society, political parties, and the ruling party have expressed dissatisfaction with the NRC's final list, which was released on August 31, 2019, because it excluded over 19 lakh people (Barbora, 2019). The NRC was viewed by many Assamese political observers as the legal and political



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means of addressing the two issues—autonomy and social justice—that have shaped political activism in the state from the middle of the 20th century. Since 1947, calls for autonomy have been at the heart of Assamese political movement. Beginning with the insurgencies of the Naga and Mizo people in the 1950s and 1960s, the province also witnessed the declaration of Meghalaya's independence in the 1970s. These movements represent the political aspirations of indigenous populations under British colonial rule, who were part of the "light-touch" administrative system, as well as their desire for territorial control over land (Chaube, 1968; Goswami, 2012). Especially among socially marginalized groups like tea workers and immigrant communities who had arrived from various parts of colonial India, movements for social justice that revolved around demands for social justice reflect an insistence on citizenship and equality under constitutional law (Guha, 1977). The two topics—autonomy and social justice—have a contentious history together. These have resulted in decades of bloody wars, during which the state has dealt with the problem by combining military repression with the appropriation of dissenting voices.

Periodically, specific incidents bring to light the conflicts within the political movement for social justice among individuals who perceive exclusion from the NRC. The NRC affected people from many backgrounds, religions, and linguistic groups, but some were disadvantaged more than others because they were Bengali and Muslim. Poets like Hafiz Ahmed draw emphasis to this experience in their writing:

Write
Write Down
I am a Miya

My serial number in the NRC is 200543²

People who felt wronged by the poems filed First Information Reports (FIR) in Assamese police stations, citing these lines and the efforts of a few other poets who claim to write "Miya" poetry instead of Bengali or Assamese. This was because the poems painted the entire Assamese community in a negative light³. At this point, Assamese society starts to exhibit more profound fractures within the community, land, and homestead. Subgroups speaking Assamese and groups advocating for them have proceeded to utilize regional government systems to further restrict individuals from entering the NRC. Anthropologist Ghassan Hage (2003) draws parallels between local communities' experiences of confrontation with individuals viewed as

² <https://indianculturalforum.in/2019/07/01/i-am-miya-reclaiming-identity-through-protest-poetry/>

³ On 10th July 2019, journalist Pranabjit Doloi filed a first information report (FIR) in a Guwahati police station against ten persons who, he felt, had used Miya poetry to belittle the NRC process, as well as painted the entire Assamese community as xenophobes in the national and international arena. Leaving aside the problematic phenomenon of associating a collective Assamese pride with the NRC process, the reaction to the FIR resulted in several weeks of acrimonious debates in the media. Prominent intellectuals weighed in on what was otherwise a small, creative expression of community pride, as they felt that the timing of the entire controversy was suspect (Gohain, 2019).



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outsiders in their region and similar worldwide processes of moral panic. Although there may not be a direct parallel between his research on settler-colonial paranoia in Australia and Assam, the roots of both worries are related to the interplay of three processes: (a) colonial history, (b) ethnic identity, and (c) control over resources (Barbora, 2019). Nowhere is this more evident than in land claims, which have resulted in terrible clashes between numerous communities since 1983 (Barbora, 2018). Each of these processes has an effect on the others.

However, I will go ahead and offer three sections that will describe and evaluate the complications faced by social scientists who want to research and comment on the NRC process in Assam in order to have a better empirical grasp of the subject. In the first section, I address Hardt and Negri's theory that the "multitude" has the potential to achieve a political breakthrough in their struggle against the 20th-century state that supports capitalist development by using field data from one quickly changing rural block in the Barpeta district. Here, I draw from a growing body of research by social anthropologists asserting that there is an irreversible connection between human life and climate change, as well as the numerous ways that other non-human factors influence politics in our day and age (Crate and Nuttal, 2009). In the second part, I concentrate on the bureaucracy's involvement and how it has implemented the NRC process in order to show how it prioritizes procedures over extremely intricate social and political realities in order to maintain logic. Here, too, I refer to the expanding body of research on state behaviors related to counting, recording, excluding, and expanding state-run welfare initiatives (Sharma & Gupta, 2006). In the third section, I examine responses from Assamese civil society actors to comprehend the ways in which claims to land, natural resources, and identity are intertwined with citizenship issues.

Floods, Climate Change and Being from Barpeta

In the Mandaia block of the Barpeta district, Mozidbhita is a char⁴ that is near to the Balikuri non-cadastral (NC) hamlet. It resembles a typical Assamese nomadic impoverished village in many aspects. Mandia, which encompasses 587.06 square kilometers, is the largest rural block in the Barpeta district, according to census data from 2011. At 65,511, it is also the one with the greatest number of homes. It is traversed by National Highway 427 (NH 427). Mandia has no significant industry, and of the 109,270 workers listed in the census, just over half work in agriculture. The majority of the mostly male workforce in the block works in daily wage labor and tiny industries because there are no significant industries there (Census of India, 2011). Mozidbhita, which is located across the Beki River and about 20 kilometers west of Barpeta town, has 208 homes as of 2018–19, which is a far lower number than the 296 that had relocated to the current location around four years prior. The families had relocated as a result of the river

⁴ Chars are seasonal river islands that are found along the Ganga-Brahmaputra Rivers, especially when they flow in the flood plains. For a better part of the 19th and 20th century, agricultural communities in the Bengal delta region that encompasses present-day Bangladesh and parts of India and Myanmar, were involved in claiming these fertile seasonal areas for winter cultivation.



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eroding their homesteads and land. They had arrived from Mozidbhita, Tapajuli, 4 No. Bhera, and Balikuri NC (non-cadastral), four nearby villages. Monsoon rains that fall in the summertime along the flood plains and in neighboring Bhutan consistently supply the area with enormous amounts of water. Engineers and managers of Bhutan's Kurichhu dam, which is located upstream on the River Beki, let off water in 2004, resulting in historically high floods in Barpeta⁵. It is essential for government agencies and aid workers to retrieve such civil engineering-related data for their job because of the yearly floods caused by the monsoon. Mozidbhita would be eligible to be classified as one of the more vulnerable areas where people live that are likely to be impacted by the planet's rising water levels. This is because of both climate change and human-caused mistakes like building unsafe embankments and dams (Arnell & Gosling, 2016; Hirabayashi, et. al, 2013).

In the chars, such as Mozidbhita, homes are constructed on raised terrain that is typically created using surplus soil from elsewhere. The dwellings are constructed from a mix of corrugated tin, bamboo, and mud. They get excessively hot in the summer and bitterly cold in the winter as a result. Nonetheless, the community members build the homes when the ground has been sufficiently lifted because such material is readily available. There are three elementary schools in the vicinity, but in 2018, one was destroyed by soil erosion. Assamese is the language of instruction, and most students find it difficult to finish high school because they must travel to Balikuri, which is nearby, to finish middle and upper primary school. In the summer, the majority of families in the char grow bao rice and jute; in the winter, they grow vegetables and lentils. High yielding variety (HYV) seeds and fertilizers have been available to local families for their winter vegetable crops for the last four years, and some families have made extensive use of both. Almost every home in existence owns cows and buffaloes, which they used to frequently sell during hard times but are now unable to do so because cow prices have dropped since the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in 2014. The vegetables are grown in three small tube wells over the winter. Nonetheless, they are nearly usually flooded by floodwater from the Beki River during the summer rains. The Beki is 200 meters away in the winter, but that distance is meaningless in the summer when the river floods the plains in all directions, leaving communities like Mozidbhita with only their roofs and homesteads to resemble little, abandoned dwellings that are in need of help. The daily pay and the produce from the jute and vegetable farms provide the two main sources of income for the families in Mozidbhita. Seasonality affects both the plant-based and daily wage revenues. Some families make more money working daily than they do farming some years. A family of five would make about 6,000 Rupees a month on average, but this is never consistent and there are significant medical costs. People who live in such hostile environments are motivated by a range of factors, which social scientists refer to using various words. Those who are perceived

⁵ <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/natural-disasters/floods-affect-over-30-000-in-assam-56023>



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as either evading the State (Scott, 2009) or succumbing to deterministic fatalism, as evidenced by their willingness to endanger their lives in the face of catastrophic natural calamities (Baqee, 1998), are the most common descriptions of them. During the floods, both descriptions come to mind as shallow pumps and latrines go under the water, livestock run to the confined higher land, and jute plants strain to keep above the rushing water.

The Parag Kumar Das Char Library, named after one of Assam's most well-known journalists and human rights investigators, is among the most sturdy and secure structures in the region who was killed by a hit squad due to his candid opinions on Assamese people's right to self-determination. Parag Das represented a fiercely independent political character that many Assamese intellectuals believed was indicative of the region's fight for self-determination (Baruah, 1999). Left-leaning activists in the area founded it in 2015 as a declaration of their political views. The elevated ground offers safety from flooding to both people and cattle. Youngsters are not allowed to access the library during these hours, and they don't see the need to go through the many books that are on display. The activists had appealed for children's books, particularly ones that had been published in Assamese, that would help their friends and supporters in urban Assam. Instead, most of the books on the four wooden shelves are written in English, ranging from children's books to computer software instructions. A bullhorn microphone is suspended on a shelf, according to one of the local activists, "to warn people when the river starts breaching the banks at night." They are stacked up against corrugated tin walls. Graduates in social work and other humanities fields are among the activists who have been active in the community since 2015. Having received their education at some of Assam's most prestigious universities and institutions, they ardently support the growth of the char regions with a primary focus on issues related to livelihood, health, and education.

The activists want children in the char area to learn Assamese in addition to English because it is a language that often leaves elderly, uneducated inhabitants vulnerable when they travel to certain areas of higher Assam to work in the brick kilns. Because they are unable to speak a specific tonal form of Assamese, local student groups are able to commit regular acts of microaggression against the immigrant community⁶. The activists are enraged by this kind of humiliation, which motivates them to devote more of their energy to fighting poverty. They have focused on the flood as a particularly universal experience for the people of the char, one

⁶ Hafiz Ahmed, president of the Char Chapori Sahitya Parishad, raises similar concerns in his explanatory interview with journalist Sangeeta Barooah-Pisharoty in an online journal. Following allegations by Assamese nationalist intellectuals that members of the Miya community – a pejorative term once used for char Muslims of Bengali heritage, which some are now attempting to appropriate – were portraying all Assamese people as xenophobic, Ahmed explained their position in great detail. He speaks about the Miya community's resolute efforts to integrate with mainstream Assamese society by drawing on all manner of real and tenuous links from the past. He also rues the lack of effort among the mainstream Assamese – of every religious colour – to understand the deeper political significance of the Miya community's dilemmas in contemporary Assam. <https://thewire.in/rights/hafiz-ahmed-assam-miyah-poetry>



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that calls for a similar community remedial effort, as a result of their internal talks and arguments with other groups of developmental NGOs. An obvious engineering solution that they believe will assist lessen a cascade impact on vulnerabilities for the residents of Mozidbhita is raising the plinth of the dwellings. Only a few homes with raised plinths in 2019 withstood the rising waters of the Beki, and once more, many families were compelled to relocate to the highway and nearby locations where they could live in temporary camps until the waters had subsided.

On July 19, 2019, Rajib⁷, a social worker working on developmental concerns for a non-governmental organization based in Guwahati city, which is around 100 kilometers distant, said, "It is difficult to access these areas." In addition to evaluating the area that had been overflowed by floodwaters, he and his team were providing tarpaulin sheets, drinking water, and medications to hundreds of families that were forced to evacuate their houses and seek higher ground. During and after the floods, Rajib and his coworkers were concerned about the significant animal mortality and disease breakout. They claim that the camps are essential for survival. However, they also provide as evidence of a number of detrimental side effects experienced by people compelled to live in for weeks. The camps are confusing environments where the chars have little influence over their life, according to them. Both men and women suffer psychologically and financially as a result of having to go weeks without employment, access to their animals, and bao rice. As they learn to live with strangers and share bathrooms and living quarters, women are particularly vulnerable. Like the campaigners in Mozidbhita, Rajib's colleagues are always worried about the rising rates of underage marriage and dropouts among the char dwelling groups. These are relevant to the NRC procedure. Collaborating with the local library activists, Rajib expresses his apprehension regarding the quantity of women and children whose names were omitted from the NRC and ponders whether their deletion from the initial draft was related to char occupancy.

A portion of the cause of chars is the legacy of colonialism, which involved building embankments on productive agricultural lands, particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries. Historian Rohan D'Souza uses historical records to demonstrate how the construction of a particularly harsh feudal system in eastern India was largely dependent on the diversion of water and the draining of rivers by civil engineers (D'Souza, 2015). After the change of leadership in 1947, the newly independent Indian government committed funds to increasing irrigation and preventing flooding in pasture and agricultural areas. Changes in hydraulic flows also caused far-reaching changes and conflicts in Assam, resulting in aridity in some areas and floods in others, as well as the constant migration of people from one place to another (Barbora,

⁷ Names of all interviewees and respondents have been changed to protect their identities (unless otherwise stated).



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2018). Similar disputes emerged in the Central Asian countries of the former Soviet Union once the legal and political order collapsed, as highlighted by Swiss geographer Christine Bischel. The strains that local communities faced after the demise of the centralised water-sharing regimes and the emergence of antagonistic communities acting as if on behalf of their national governments are described in detail by Bischel (2009) in her account of the conflicts in the Ferghana valley. Thus, there is a single characteristic shared by the arid Central Asian region and the wet ecosystem of the South Asian chars. They compel their residents to be resilient because water controls the land's production cycles and people must continually adjust to their environments in order to survive. Water, however, continues to be both the greatest hazard to human life and the most important source of income in the Chars (Lahiri-Dutt, 2014).

They play a significant role in the regional and international discourse surrounding climate change, particularly in light of their limited influence on decision-making processes when it comes to their engagement with adaptive regimes (Paprocki, 2018). This moving statement is especially evident when there are floods and people have to evacuate their homes in search of higher ground. Assamese newspapers reported in 2019 that a large number of people refused to evacuate their flooded homes out of concern that they would misplace paperwork that would make them ineligible for the NRC⁸.

Documents, Bureaucracy and Technology: Rolling out the NRC

When speaking with people who exude urgency, the headwaiter at the rice hotel close to the District Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) and Public Works Department (PWD) is kind and transparent about the day's menu.

Bureaucrats and representatives of non-governmental organizations typically come to town for flood-related tasks. The NRC employs a larger number of officials than it did in the summer of 2019. The headwaiter would ask, "Baan paani ne NRC?" (flood or NRC), getting an answer in either direction from the officers as he took orders. Regardless of the number of people waiting, he would seat the officials first while ignoring other patrons. In 2019, there were numerous discursive ways in which the citizenship problem was intertwined with flood and climate change issues. The municipal administration is under unprecedented pressure as a result of both processes. Nearly all government employees in Assam, including educators working in government colleges, are required to report for NRC duty. Every department in the district has also participated in NRC projects. Their duties have expanded to encompass aid and rehabilitation for those harmed by the floods. In the same way that flood relief shows the state's capacity to offer care, relief, and rehabilitation, the NRC proves its capacity to classify and punish its population. How did these various procedures come to be, particularly the ones pertaining to classification and incarceration after the NRC process, and were there any means

⁸ <https://scroll.in/latest/930834/assam-flood-victims-go-back-to-fetch-nrc-documents-some-refuse-to-leave-homes>



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by which the general public could have resisted them? Do local officials' personal opinions matter in a process that is governed by government machinery, technology, and the principles of objectivity and reason? One must concentrate on the NRC timeline and the political context of its revival in Assam in order to comprehend the significance of both questions.

Following the 1951 census, the first NRC was announced in government circulars meant to calm Assamese agitation groups by promising government action on immigration. This required using legal measures such as the Foreigners Act of 1946 and the Foreigners (Tribunal) Order of 1939. This procedure stood in stark contrast to the chaotic events surrounding the terrible migration of people from India to Pakistan in the west, when these restrictions were suspended to provide refuge to those fleeing conflict in West Pakistan. This distinction between the two British India sectors that were divided is significant because it suggests that the regional governments' approaches to the humanitarian situation differed. Sanjib Baruah (2009, 2008) drew attention to the government's unwillingness to address immigration and the ongoing civic efforts to bring up the issue. He also highlighted the various ways in which the partition narrative manifested itself in Assam and demonstrated how it still influences discussions in the present day. He draws attention to the controversial issues around identity and resources that precipitated the Assam Agitation (1979–1985), the Assam Accord (1985), and the succeeding three decades of insurgency (1979–2009). Evidence of the government's use of military force to quell dissenting political opinion in Assam supports Baruah's claims of the harmful policies of the Indian state in undermining democratic institutions and processes in the state. He discussed the government's lack of readiness for carrying out the NRC in his most recent writings, highlighting how important South Asian neighbors like Bangladesh were kept in the dark about its conclusions, particularly when political rhetoric was aimed at a historically marginalized population in the neighboring nation (Baruah, 2018).

The government attempted to minimize these flaws in the recently concluded NRC in Assam in two ways: (a) by involving the entire apparatus of state, comprising the Supreme Court, the Registrar General of India, and all Assamese government departments; and (b) by employing technology to iron out human weaknesses that are ascribed to the routine operations of state in developing nations. The NRC of 2015 mandated that people present their legacy data, which included having a family member listed in the NRC of 1951 and/or having their name listed on the electoral rolls as of March 24, 1971—the day the Bangladesh liberation war was formally declared—or both. Should an individual be unable to locate their name in the heritage data, the administration permitted the presentation of twelve additional documents as proof, as long as they were approved prior to March 24, 1971. They were as follows: documents pertaining to land tenancy; (i) certificates of citizenship; (ii) permanent residence certificates; (iv) certificates of refugee registration; (v) passports; (vi) LIC policies; (vii) government-issued licenses and certificates; (viii) certificates of government service and employment; (ix) bank and post office accounts; (x) certificates of birth; (xi) certificates of board and university



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education; (xii) court records and procedures. There is a respectable, middle-class air about these texts. They attest to an individual's possession of property, ability to get employment and education, and possession of documents enabling unrestricted travel.

The unorganised labour market in Assam is made up primarily of nomadic workers, many of whom were unable to obtain necessary credentials. Each person was required to bring these documents to the closest NRC Seva Kendra, a government facility set aside for the collection of personal records and their entry into a database. Many of the people attempting to register their names in the database were unfamiliar with computers and information technology. As a result, they were also intimidated by the exclusion's finality at the time since it appeared that neither human error nor authorities could be held accountable for mistakes made. This made it possible for the NRC state coordinator to assign different officers (and offices) to locations where potential technological flaws in human contact were inevitable in order to ensure a smoother functioning. Due to the diligent efforts of both individuals and groups, most people were able to produce supporting documents. A human interface and a system of checks and balances that might guarantee a process of redress had been included into the system via years of struggle. As a result, if someone's name was removed from the NRC, they had the option to file an appeal with the Foreigners Tribunal (FT), an organization that was established by the government in 1964 and subsequently modified in 2019 to handle issues that arose following the 2018 exclusions. The Assamese government appointed 1000 members (the term for people who decide cases under the FT) to the FTs with help from the central government. Early on, a compelling but intriguing condition for their hiring was mentioned. According to the official government notification, the applicant must "...have a fair knowledge of Assam's official language and its (Assam) historical background giving rise to foreigner's issue"⁹. People who are itinerant, char dwellers, or who do not speak standardized Assamese face dire effects from this kind of conditionality because they are already viewed as outsiders in the area. They were also more likely to be called before the FT members to respond to inquiries concerning their inconsistent data and missing papers.

"Allow me to elucidate the functioning of this technology," stated Dhiren, a humanities instructor at a government college situated somewhat outside of Guwahati. In the early months of 2019, he has been inducted as a disposal officer (DO). The DO was the first, or last, human line of verification for the claims and objections made by those who had not met with the FT, and they operated inside a specific circle region. In the administrative hierarchy, they answered to the Circle Registrar of Citizen Registration (CRCR), a circle officer. From there, they went up to the District Registrar of Citizen Registration (DRCR), a district commissioner. He is still active in addressing social and cultural concerns affecting indigenous groups, particularly in

⁹ See Notification of Gauhati High Court dated June 21, 2017:

https://districts.ecourts.gov.in/sites/default/files/Notification-21-06-2017_0.pdf



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the larger regions of Kamrup, Morigaon, Nagaon, and Karbi-Anglong. He was a little irritated by the fact that his work as the DO had prevented him from attending college. But in spite of his own reservations about the nature of his profession, he had nothing but appreciation for the kind of technology being used in the NRC operation. He went on to say, "After the field-based work concluded last year (in March of 2018), things started taking shape" with reference to the family tree verification (FTV). I had to pay attention to the almost objective, algorithmic tone of his descriptions as we went into more specifics.

He said, "We had a domain where respondents who were second or third generation could make mistakes about the names of their immediate family members, but can you forget the name of your own sister?" in the same sentence. He asserted that many of the erroneous assertions made regarding legacy data were the consequence of persons identifying themselves and their siblings by different names. He described how the software was able to "capture" the discrepancies in the ways that different people claimed their ancestry. Therefore, the software would conclude that there was a problem with the provided data if it did not know about immediate kin in an extended bilateral descent family. When it came to the software's ability to detect the discrepancies in personal narratives, Dhiren was certain that nothing could have gone wrong. It was almost as if the software, in this case DOCSMEN, had started to reveal family secrets to the world as he described the events of a particularly moving human drama. They were asked to explain how the family trees for the same assigned LDC could go so wrong when there was a mismatch in the family legacy (assigned an algorithm under the Legacy Data Code, or LDC). This was especially the case when two families claimed the same person but did not know anyone from the other family. Dhiren went on, some were more difficult to let go of. This was made the more apparent by the fact that investigatory level personnel had previously confirmed the allegations and rebuttals. In that scenario, the DO ended up being the last person to interact with citizens seeking clarification from the government's executive branch.

This is where little, devoted local advocacy groups play a critical role. The activists in Mozidbhita, who initiated the library, collaborated with the local population to guarantee their inclusion in the draft. This required making sure that the residents of the char had all of their documentation in order. Examples of this included old court records proving an individual's permanent address to be the seasonal char, as well as government receipts attesting to their eligibility for various programs. These documents were part of a portfolio being submitted as proof that would be presented to the NRC Seva Kendra. For people trying to prove that their claims to citizenship were legitimate and that their exclusion was the result of a mix of bias and technological faults, this might cause a lot of anomalies and challenges¹⁰.

¹⁰ Online news and views portal, Scroll.in had done a series of stories based on bureaucratic errors and personal



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Journalist Arunabh Saikia's account of a woman named Kadbhanu exposes the horrors inherent in cases like this one¹¹. Hitmat Ali, Kadbhanu's husband, killed himself because he could not afford the legal fees associated with attempting to have her admitted to the NRC. The authorities who were confirming her statement didn't think Kadbhanu was her father's daughter. She asked her gaonburah (village headman), who was illiterate, to vouch for her claim that she was, in fact, her father's daughter. The state's symbol was imprinted in the center of the certificate the gaonburah signed, as one might anticipate from officials of small, face-to-face communities. The tribunal asserted that this was not authorized. Furthermore, there had been no physical appearance of the gaonburah. The local official's refusal to accept Kadbhanu's papers therefore marked the beginning of her Kafkaesque encounter with the fear of incarceration. Another heartbreaking tale of technological and human error was provided by Saikia regarding Rupa Dutta, whose father founded the Tinsukia Commerce College in 1972¹². She made the decision to use her mother's LDC to claim her inheritance, but she discovered that the NRC officials weren't persuaded that her mother possessed authentic documents. As it happened, the mother received a diploma of matriculation from Gauhati University in 1955. Her citizenship documents were processed during the course of the year, and she was granted citizenship in 1956.

In order to accomplish its objectives, the NRC procedure as it was implemented in Assam depended on the convergence of administrative effectiveness, political will, and technology. However, as documented by media sources, there have been cases of unprecedented harassment directed towards Bengali-speaking individuals because to their inability to produce documents that would have passed the NRC software¹³. As attested by middle- and lower-level officials as well as part-time officers hired to carry out the NRC, political organizations and mid-level public personnel, particularly those working in the legal system and appellate bodies such as the Financial Times, have frequently exerted pressure. In these situations, documents (and software) have the power to eliminate the context that has allowed local interactions to be combined into the NRC process. They provide a conundrum for social science students who want to study citizenship-related topics. The study of 20th-century citizenship examined the different ways in which a person interacted with the state on a political and social level. These included the protection of minorities' cultural rights, economic welfare, and civil rights (Marshall, 1950), as well as an overall defense of the sanctity of personal freedom, which came

dilemmas of a range of people whose names had been omitted in the NRC. Journalist Arunabh Saikia filed most of the reports under the title Humans of Assam. For more, see: < <https://scroll.in/article/931788/humans-of-assam-do-we-need-to-show-pieces-of-paper-to-prove-that-we-are-people-of-this-land> >

¹¹ <https://scroll.in/article/930649/death-by-citizenship-this-man-killed-himself-anxious-over-wifes-fate-and-he-is-not-the-only-one>

¹² <https://scroll.in/article/931382/humans-of-assam-if-they-want-to-send-me-to-bangladesh-so-be-it>

¹³ <https://scroll.in/article/932134/worse-than-a-death-sentence-inside-assams-sham-trials-that-could-strip-millions-of-citizenship>



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from Kant's ideas of universally applicable laws that guaranteed people's freedom. One has encountered a new set of challenges in the comparatively short time since the Supreme Court gave the Assamese government the order to perform the NRC. Thus, the thought of creating data from a large-scale, software-driven, government data collection procedure is intimidating to social scientists. But it is also the time when it becomes more apparent how important it is to contextualize this data.

It is imperative to provide space for other narratives to surface, which will subvert the prevailing order in which the state's story is seen superior to those of friends, neighbors, and family members (Dourish & Cruz, 2018).

Since 1951, the state's ability to carry out a procedure of this magnitude using records attesting to ownership, occupation, and proof of residency has grown significantly. As social anthropologist Annelise Riles (2011) put it, not all endeavors are meant to be failed. In times of crisis, the interdependence of numerous concepts and political techniques enables the state to maintain its power, even in the face of oversights and errors¹⁴. This process is embodied by these. A similar case for the necessity of infallibility—which has been linked to the convergence of bureaucracy and technology—may be made in the context of the NRC in Assam when it comes to handling issues that call for historical proof during hotly debated political times. However, there is no obvious relationship between an administration's capacity to record requests and how individuals react to them, as anthropologist Matthew Hull has noted in the context of Pakistani bureaucracy (Hull, 2012). The majority of people who have to bargain with the state are aware that there are theoretical as well as practical approaches to produce the kind of documents needed to complete a task. To be allowed to do something or to be counted for one of the state-run schemes, there are paperwork to fill out, windows to present them at, and authorities to meet. This is the epitome of bureaucratic activity in Max Weberian classical sociology—it is impersonal, rational, and uniform. However, as Akhil Gupta contends, the Indian state's bureaucratic methods and procedures routinely result in arbitrary conclusions with potentially disastrous repercussions (Gupta, 2012). Gupta's research focuses on the regular ways that government records, forms, complaints processes, inspections, and other mechanisms have the power to normalize structural violence against the nation's impoverished, despite the government's contradictory attempts to improve their lot.

The impoverished have limited access to state institutions in many regions of the nation, despite the state using a variety of techniques to assess the risks associated with the poor and vulnerable and ensure that they receive proper care. The impoverished are more intimately and severely

¹⁴ Riles' work looked at the particular ways in which the US stepped in to bail out banks like AIG during the financial crisis in 2008. Riles asked her readers to consider the conditions under which this particular event is made possible. How, despite pressures from politicians on the Left and concerned citizens, the US treasury decided to bail out private parties like the banks, is a matter that pushes us to look at different forms of legitimacy and accountability in the study of markets and the state.



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affected by bureaucratic apathy than other groups, in part because they have far lower retention rates for records and follow-through with legal processes. Therefore, despite the need for the government to maintain some level of support for the impoverished, the political environment in India and throughout the world today indicates a growing fear of immigrants as the unworthy target of societal resentment (Kymlicka, 2015). Then, how are social scientists meant to react to the theories put forth by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000), which were mentioned previously in this essay? According to their analysis, in the end, the contradictions between capitalism and bourgeois liberal nationalism will lead to the emergence of a multifaceted order of the dispossessed, known as the multitude.

Reactions to the Citizenship Debate

Mahmood Mamdani (2001), an anthropologist from Uganda, highlights the significance of politics, history, and colonialism in shaping people's opinions about divisive, violent events. He demonstrated in his book *When Victims Become Killers* how ordinary governance issues can be perverted to dangerous ends. Advocates of this kind of aim are able to give crimes committed by one group of people against another a distorted political justification. It's possible that comparable events are occurring in India, where the Assam case is relevant. Individuals, ideologies, and political stances tend to favor selective historical interpretations, particularly when it comes to the disturbances brought forth by colonization. Certain histories are given priority during this process, while others are marginalized.

In the part that follows, I examine how Assamese communities have developed distinct political spaces as a result of colonial history. I do this to emphasize the significance of ethnicity in territory and resource control, as all three are critical to comprehending the NRC procedure. Furthermore, I address potential consequences of the citizenship controversy, both within Assam and about its influence on a broader area. This is especially significant in view of the Brahmaputra Valley protests against the Citizenship Amendment Bill¹⁵ organized by NRC-supporting groups and people. It's interesting to note that people who opposed the NRC in the Barak Valley—particularly organizations that spoke for Hindus who spoke Bengali—came out to back the legislation. Because of this, when irate Assamese students yell phrases like "Bangladeshis go back," many people outside the area are perplexed and wonder why they are against the Citizenship Bill. It is more difficult to explain that the term "Bangladeshi" refers to a sociological process rather than a religious identity, which has masked regional specificities in nationalist discourse. If someone is removed from the list, they must go through a drawn-out bureaucratic process before they can file a lawsuit. In order to challenge their exclusion,

¹⁵ The Bharatiya Janata Party-led government introduced the Citizenship Amendment Bill in Parliament in 2016. It (the Bill) proposed that citizenship be granted to non-Muslim persons from other South Asian countries where religious persecution was rife. Critics of this bill point to its communal and anti-Constitutional overtones. Civil society in the Northeast also opposed the bill on the grounds that it opens out the possibility for the settlement of non-Muslim Bangladeshis in the region.



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individuals must file an appeal with the Foreigners Tribunal (FT), which was established by the Supreme Court, within four months of receiving the notification of their exclusion. Additionally, the administration declared that individuals who were left out would not be detained, at least not until the FT has had an opportunity to examine their cases¹⁶.

An analytical opportunity to evaluate the variety of topics that are forcefully introduced into citizenship discussions in modern South Asia (and around the world) is presented by the NRC process. The militarization of the region and the dearth of employment possibilities that drove indigenous groups to flee their homelands in the 1990s and 2000s have been the subject of recent research on outmigration from Northeast India (McDuie-Ra, 2012). Furthermore, a nuanced picture of the influence of affective labor on politics and policy making in the region is provided by Kikon & Karlsson's (2019) study on the lives of Northeast migrants who go to other parts of India and then return home. These works reject the dichotomous understanding of settler and indigenous conceptions of belonging, which served as the basis for nationalism in the 20th century and the expansion of capitalism centered on national territories. With a past filled of violent displays of identity, this depressing backdrop is what Irish poet Seamus Heaney referred to as "the abattoir of history" in his Nobel acceptance speech.

There are numerous factors that can lead to violent episodes. The recurrent dichotomies that function (in the conflict) are those of the "migrant" and "native," or the "settler" and "indigenous," or the "citizen" and "foreigner," or the general "insider" and "outsider," regardless of the range of reasons of conflict in the region. At the heart of the disputes is the process of migration, or more accurately, the mobility of people who are compelled to relocate due to external political and geographic factors. Social scientists must critically examine how certain types of knowledge are given prominence in discussions on citizenship, migration, and climate change as the debates surrounding the traditional sociological units of analysis—individuals and communities—undergo emic change in response to outside pressures of nationalist discourse and climate change (Whyte, 2017; Todd, 2016). The voices of the marginalized—in this example, both the seasonal migrants and the indigenous people—must be included in this situation, not just as passive statistics but also as discursive ontological individuals with a shared past.

These kinds of political quandaries are not exclusive to Northeast India. Similar to what happens in other parts of the world, the evocation of dread of the outsider leads to the development of a narrative to "drive out" people who are perceived as the mirror opposite. In the process of airing their grievances against migrants, outsiders, and foreigners through the mediated public domain, various players also highlight feelings of anarchy inside the actors

¹⁶ The government of Assam had sought to employ 1000 officers to the FTs. There are 100 that already exist and additional 200 FTs were added in September 2019. For more details see: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/assam-government-to-set-up-foreigners-tribunal/articleshow/71263494.cms>



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themselves. In this instance, mobility (beyond national borders; Alexseev, 2006) is perceived as a sign of the state's inability to maintain boundary control. Vernacular daily editorials and features pages suggest that migrants are perceived as having an unfair edge in the mobility narrative (Kimura, 2008). This suggests that rather than responding in a reconciling way, the host communities are more likely to have a hostile reaction to policies that facilitate migration. Movements in the region have long challenged preconceived concepts of citizenship, whether it is through the dominating narrative of the All Assam Students Union (in the 1980s) or the battle for acknowledgment of rights of the people of Terai in the new Nepali constitution. Movements have occasionally employed the popular narrative of constitutions, but there have also been instances where creative coalitions that challenge established political norms have taken precedence over constitutional language. The simplest way to describe these processes is to look at how the national constitutions and laws represent the concerns of the local populace. It is now more difficult for someone to be granted citizenship in India, even if they have lived and worked there their entire life, unless they can demonstrate that they have parents or ancestors who were born (here), according to Roy (2016). This is because the Indian 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. However, it is perplexing to come to terms with the notion that some of India's most oppressed residents, living in one of South Asia's most militarised regions, can in turn seek the disenfranchisement of individuals they regard as their other.

The situation was seen in a depressing light by Ranabir Samaddar (2018) in a recent piece that was published in *The Wire*. By suggesting that citizenship and statelessness are indivisible, he comes to the conclusion that those endorsing the NRC are symbolic of a general distaste for the idea of mixed-race existence. However, the political discourse, which is centred around concepts of identity and history, fails to adequately acknowledge the diverse ways in which Assamese people have coexisted. These coexisting pathways are seen in everyday settings like as marriages, funerals, harvest celebrations in villages, and other occasions that facilitate the development of more complex lifestyles. In attempting to make sense of the divisive politics surrounding the NRC, there doesn't seem to be much chance of reconciliation between groups that see one another negatively over an advocacy-driven, government-sponsored process. It is true that concentrating only on the NRC process might lead one to conclude that those who support it have a monochrome understanding of Assamese history, society, and culture. This perspective maintains the peasant's central place in social and political structures as they see it through the prism of the 20th century. Journalist Sangeeta Barooah-Pisharoty warns readers against assuming that a victim-perpetrator binary can be applied to understand the outcomes of the exclusionary process in her recent book on the Assam Accord and its aftermath (Pisharoty, 2009). Instead, the book highlights the shared suffering of all communities throughout Assam.



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The NRC debate's sociological results serve as a reminder that Assam's politics and civil society have become increasingly militarized, creating an unsustainable situation.

Currently, working class Miya women who were born and raised in the chars find it more difficult to locate their names in the NRC than middle class Assamese men who are far away from home to remember their hometowns and cultures. However, individuals who have been consistently marginalized by the state will be the ones who demand secular ethics and everyday instances of tolerance, particularly in its new software-driven world. The NRC entailed enormous financial and political costs for the government and Assamese civil society. Political groups, including the ruling party, voiced their displeasure with the process's conclusion and cited the inclusion of a large number of Indian nationals on the list. This nearly unanimous dissatisfaction should provide an opportunity to consider how the NRC will affect future social science research. In addition to upsetting relationships and compelling individuals and groups to reconsider previous colonial discussions about autonomy and social justice, it has also made it necessary to consider new ones on the evolution of civic discourse and the severity of climate change.

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