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Author(s): Sanjay Barbora
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National Register of Citizens: Politics and Problems in Assam

--- Sanjay Barbora

Abstract

The National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam has raised several issues pertaining to citizenship, migration and political mobilisation throughout the region. An administrative exercise of this order that uses technology, law and the bureaucracy to address historically contentious grievances within a region of a country is an interesting phenomenon for social scientists working on citizenship in the 21st century. This is more so since approximately nineteen lakh persons from various walks of life and ethnic heritage have been left out of the rolls, leaving every stakeholder (including the ruling party in Assam) disappointed with the outcomes. While there have been great benefits derived from the use of technology, this article argues for closer, nuanced attention to ethnographic details about other contingencies – such as floods and climate change – that influence the process, especially since the process is being promoted for the entire country.

Key words: Assam, Bureaucracy, Citizenship, Climate change, NRC, Technology

Introduction

The National Register of Citizens (NRC) has occupied a prominent position in political discourse and mobilisation in Assam for the 2014 and 2019 parliamentary elections. The process can be seen as the culmination of years of political unrest and negotiations between civil society organisations and the government. In 2013, the Supreme Court of India took cognisance of two writ petitions filed by non-governmental organisations from Assam and ordered the state and central governments to update the NRC adhering to the Citizenship Act of 1955 and the (amended) Citizenship Rules of 2003. After two rounds of publication of drafts of the register, a partial one on December 31, 2017 and a final draft on July 30, 2018, the final list was published on August 31, 2019 (Barbora, 2019). The NRC has polarised public opinion, at least among those who question the norms and rules of citizenship. Many commentators and advocacy groups in Assam see it as a much-needed solution for a long-drawn
issue of immigration from different parts of the subcontinent but with a greater public focus on migrants from neighbouring Bangladesh. Yet others raise caution about the excesses and shortcomings of the process, where bureaucratic overreach, advocacy overdrive and technological failures have led to tragic consequences for thousands of women and men in the state. The fact that senior representatives of the recently elected government (in 2019) have called for NRC to be extended to all states of the country has made the issue more deserving of sociological inquiry and attention.

In this article, I focus on the social and political outcomes of the NRC process and examine the contradictory and contentious politics of citizenship in Assam. In this article, I draw from my two-year engagements with a char-related advocacy group, humanitarian relief agencies, journalists and government officials involved in ascertaining the status of those left out of the NRC. I argue that the NRC issue forces us to revisit old questions about citizenship, while engaging with challenges that are peculiar to the 21st century. The challenges I refer to, such as climate change and conflict-induced displacement, have a universal impact on the planet, though communities around the globe feel their effects differently. As a sociologist working on agrarian change and human rights in Assam, I am drawn to extend the NRC debates with questions that animated social science research in the 20th century. How is farming organised? What is the role of the peasant, the small farmer, or subsistence farmer in the farming process? How much control are they able to exercise over political decisions that affect their lives and livelihoods? The subject of these questions was rooted to the soil, primarily in agriculture and on whose behalf various modes of political mobilisations had taken place in the 20th century in India (Weiner, 2016).

These questions have been central to the development of sociology (and social anthropology) in India, with a significant number of scholars basing their empirical work around issues of equity, representation and rights (Desai, 2019; Dhanagare, 1983). Indeed, for a better part of the 20th century, national liberation struggles, socialist revolutions and civil wars, were waged on behalf of the figure of the downtrodden peasant/farmer (Alavi, 1965; Wolf, 1966). With the emergence of a world order that was characterised by bounded nation-states that were free from their former European colonisers in the middle of the 20th century, the peasant/farmer became a paradoxical but foundational image for postcolonial states and political leaders (Verwimp, 2000). The peasant, though backward and rooted in the past, was still seen as the moral grounds upon which a new
citizenship regime would emerge in postcolonial societies (Deutscher, 1971). Hence, many of the arguments for the enforcement of the NRC process are actually based on permanent settlement, adult franchise and ownership of property. Those individuals and organisations who oppose the presence of immigrants on their soil, do so because they (immigrants) appear to disrupt the continuity of the social and economic fabric of the land, taking over farming activities from indigenous groups, controlling petty trade and businesses, and eventually the political sphere as well (Bhattacharyya, 2018). The immigrant, in this schema, is seen as someone who takes away the entitlements from the citizens – especially those that work the land – who expect the state to protect their interests.

Yet, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) point out in their seminal work *Empire*, as we move into the 21st century, the figure of the citizen, with its sureties of rights and entitlement, is not as stable a category as it used to be. In its place, we have a host of other, equally compelling identities to contend with – refugee, displaced persons and so on. The authors argue that under specific conditions of capitalist and technological globalisation, the nation-state’s capacity to exercise sovereignty has declined in many fundamental ways. Writing specifically about the turn of the experience that shaped politics in the United States and West Asia, they pointed out that individual nation-states (like Iraq and Afghanistan) had had their sovereignty rescaled, retaining hollowed out institutions that worked in favour of global capital. This form of sovereignty, they add, is acted upon a mobile subject that is forced to serve the needs of capital. In celebrating the eventual triumph of this subject, they see global labour moving across boundaries that were earlier bounded within nation-states by capital, creating the multitude and rendering redundant older concepts of national citizens. While there have been critical readings of *Empire*, a contrarian fact that is important for this essay sticks out in their analysis. Even as technology and capital take on 20th century national borders, the national-territorial form has reappeared, as one that is capable of politically excluding others. As the NRC process shows, judicial advocacy built on populist struggles against 20th century colonial settlements have converged with technology and bureaucracy to create an exclusionary regime for thousands of persons. Most of those excluded belong to rural, agricultural communities that saw political violence and displacement throughout the last quarter of the 20th and the first decade of the 21st centuries. How then, I ask, are we to read something as polarising as the NRC, as an object of sociological enquiry for the 21st century?
Since the announcement of the draft on July 30, 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 (Saikia, 2019). 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. Since then, the final list of the NRC was published on August 31st, 2019 and it left out more than nineteen lakh persons, leaving a wide cross section of civil society, political parties, political parties and the ruling party unhappy with the outcome (Barbora, 2019).

For many political commentators 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-20th century: (a) autonomy and (b) social justice. Autonomy demands have been central to political mobilisation in Assam after 1947. Starting from the Naga and Mizo insurgencies in 1950s and 1960s, the province also saw the assertion for separate statehood in Meghalaya in the 1970s. These movements reflect the desire for territorial control over land, as well as political aspirations of indigenous communities who were part of the ‘light-touch’ administrative set up under British colonial rule (Chaube, 1968; Goswami, 2012). Movements for social justice centred around demands of social justice reflect an insistence on citizenship and equality under constitutional law, especially among socially marginalised groups like the tea workers and immigrant communities who had come from various parts of colonial India (Guha, 1977). Both issues – autonomy and social justice – have had 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.

Occasionally, certain events highlight the tensions in the political project for social justice among those who feel excluded by the NRC. Even though people from various walks of life, religious and language speaking communities were affected by the NRC, some were doubly disadvantaged because they were Muslim and of Bengali heritage. Drawing attention to this experience, poets like Hafiz Ahmed write:
Write
Write Down
I am a Miya

My serial number in the NRC is 200543ii

These lines, as also the efforts of a few other poets who assert that they write ‘Miya’ poetry (as opposed to Bengali or Assamese), were enough to warrant the filing of First Information Reports (FIR) in various police stations in Assam by people who felt aggrieved, as the poems had painted the entire Assamese community in bad lightiii. This is where the community, land, homestead begins to show deeper fissures within the social fabric in Assam. Sections of Assamese speaking people and organisations that represent their interests have gone on to use the local state machinery to further exclude persons from the NRC. Anthropologist Ghassan Hage (2003) alludes to similar processes of moral panic that is happening on a global scale, where local communities find cause for conflict with those perceived as outsiders in their space. His work on settler-colonial paranoia about immigration in Australia might not have an exact equivalence in Assam, though the roots of both fears are associated with entanglements between three processes: (a) colonial history, (b) ethnic identity and (c) control over resources (Barbora, 2019). Each of these processes have had an impact on the other, nowhere more so than in the claims over land, which has been marked by tragic conflicts between many communities since 1983 (Barbora, 2018).

However, in order to have a better empirical understanding about the issue, I proceed to introduce three sections that will describe and analyse the complexities confronted by social scientists who wish to study and comment on the NRC process in Assam. In the first section, I draw on field data from one rapidly transforming rural block in Barpeta district to engage with Hardt and Negri’s theory that the ‘multitude’ has the possibility of making a political breakthrough in their fight against the 20th century state that promotes capitalist development. Here, I draw from a growing research among social anthropologists that assert that human existence is irrevocably linked to climate change and to the myriad ways through which other non-human factor impact politics in our time (Crate & Nuttal, 2009). In the second section, I focus on the role of the bureaucracy, specifically the manner in which it has enacted the NRC process on the ground, to
understand how it exercises rationality by emphasising on procedures over deeply complex social and political realities. Here too, I draw on the growing literature around state practices of enumeration, documentation, exclusion and expansion of welfare activities of the state (Sharma & Gupta, 2006). In the third section, I analyse responses from various civil society actors in Assam to understand how concerns about citizenship are interwoven with claims over natural resources, land and identity.

**Floods, Climate Change and Being from Barpeta**

Mozidbhita is a *char* that is close to Balikuri non-cadastral (NC) village in Mandia block in Barpeta district. It is, in many ways, a typical settlement of the itinerant poor in Assam. According to the 2011 census figures, Mandia is the largest rural block in Barpeta district, which covers 587.06 square kilometres. It is also one that has the most number of households at 65,511. It has a national highway (NH 427) that runs through it. There are no major industries in Mandia and of the 109,270 workers enumerated in the census, a little more than half are engaged in agriculture. There are no major industries in the block, so most of the predominantly male working persons are engaged in daily wage work and petty trade (Census of India, 2011). Situated approximately 20 kilometres west of Barpeta town and across the Beki River, Mozidbhita (in 2018-19) had 208 households, a significantly smaller number than the 296 who had moved to the current char around four years ago. The families had moved due to the erosion of their land and homesteads by the river. They had come from four neighbouring villages: Mozidbhita, Tapajuli, 4 No. Bhera and Balikuri NC (non-cadastral). In the summers, monsoon rains along the flood plains and in neighbouring Bhutan always bring vast quantities of water to the district. In 2004, engineers and administrators of Bhutan’s Kurichhu dam, situated upstream on the River Beki, had released water causing unprecedented floods in Barpeta. The annual monsoon-induced floods make it imperative for government departments and aid workers to recover such civil engineering related data for their work. Mozidbhita would qualify to be included as a part of the increasingly vulnerable spaces of human habitation that is likely to be affected by rising levels of water on the planet, both due to climate change and human-induced follies like construction of faulty embankments and dams (Arnell & Gosling, 2016; Hirabayashi, et. al, 2013).
Houses in the chars like Mozidbhita are built on elevated land that is usually raised with extra soil from elsewhere. The materials used to build the houses are a combination of bamboo, mud and corrugated tin. This makes them extremely cold in the winter and unbearably hot in the summer. However, such material is easy to come by and once the earth has been adequately raised, members of the community construct the houses. Although there are three primary schools in the area, one was lost due to land erosion in 2018. Children are taught in Assamese, most struggle to complete high school as they have to go to nearby Balikuri or further to complete their middle elementary and higher elementary levels. Most families in the char grow bao rice and jute during the summer, and vegetables and lentils during the winter months. In the past four years, the local families have had access to high yielding variety (HYV) seeds and fertilisers for their winter vegetables and some families use both abundantly. Almost every existing household has cows and buffaloes, which they often used to sell in times of distress but are not able to now, as the price of cows have decreased since the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) formed a government in 2014. There are three shallow tube wells that are used in winter to grow the vegetables. However, during the summer rains, they are almost always inundated by floodwater from the Beki River. In winter, the Beki is situated 200 metres away, a distance that is rendered redundant in the summer when the river spreads across the plains in every direction, making settlements like Mozidbhita look like tiny, marooned rooftops and homesteads waiting for relief and rescue. The families in Mozidbhita have two major sources of income: daily wage and from the jute and vegetable farming produce. The plant-based and daily wage incomes are seasonal. In some years, certain families earn more doing daily wages than from farming. The average income for a family of five would be approximately six thousand rupees per month, but this is never steady and expenses for medical needs are very high. Social scientists use a variety of terms to describe the motivations of people who live in such adversarial spaces. Most often, they are seen to be people escaping the reach of the State (Scott, 2009); or those who are given to deterministic fatalism, for wanting to risk their lives in the face of natural disasters of calamitous proportions (Baqee, 1998). Both descriptions come to mind during the floods, as the jute plants struggle to stay above the surging water, livestock scramble to the cramped raised land, and shallow pumps and latrines disappear under the water.

One of the most stable and safe buildings in the area is the Parag Kumar Das Char Library, named after one of Assam’s best-known journalist and human rights
activist, who was assassinated by a death squad for his forthright views on the right to self-determination for the people of Assam. For many Assamese intellectuals, Parag Das embodied a fiercely autonomous political spirit that was symptomatic of struggles for self-determination in the region (Baruah, 1999). It was started in 2015 by left-leaning activists from the area as a statement of their political beliefs. During the floods, the raised earth provides refuge to cattle and people alike. At such times children are not able to access the library, nor do they see the need to refer to the eclectic books on display. The activists had requested their comrades and sympathisers in urban Assam to donate books that would be useful for children, with an expressed request for material that had been published in Assamese. Instead, many of the books on the four wooden shelves are in English and range from children’s novels to computer software guidebooks. They are stacked against corrugated tin walls, where there is a bullhorn microphone dangling on a shelf, ‘to warn people when the river starts breaching the banks at night’, according to one of the activists who lives in the area.

The activist group has been working in the area since 2015 and have among them graduates of social work and other humanities subjects. Educated in some of the reputed universities and institutes in Assam, they zealously promote development of the char areas and focus mainly on education, health and livelihood issues. Other than English, the activists are keen that children in the char area learn Assamese, a language that frequently lands older, unlettered residents vulnerable when they travel to parts of upper Assam to work in the brick kilns. Their inability to speak a particular tonal form of Assamese allows local student groups to exercise everyday acts of micro aggression on the migrant communities. This kind of humiliation rankles the activists, driving them to focus on issues of poverty with greater passion. Their internal discussions and debates with other groups of developmental NGOs have made them concentrate on the flood as a particularly universal experience for the people of the char, one that requires a similar collective remedial effort. Raising the plinth of the houses is an obvious engineering innovation that they feel will help reduce a cascading effect on vulnerabilities for the people of Mozidbhita. In 2019, only a few homes survived the rising waters of the Beki despite having raised plinths and once again, many families were forced to move towards the highway and neighbouring areas where they could live in make-shift camps until the waters had receded.

‘It is difficult to access these areas’, said Rajib, a social worker employed with a non-governmental organisation working on developmental issues and based in
Guwahati city (situated approximately 100 kilometres away), on July 19, 2019. He and his team were surveying the swathe of land that had been inundated by floodwaters and were distributing tarpaulin sheets, drinking water and medicines to hundreds of families who had to leave their homes and come to higher ground. Rajib and his colleagues had been worried about the outbreak of disease and high mortality of animals during and after the floods. The camps, they say are necessary for survival. Nevertheless, they are also testimony to a series of damaging side effects on those who are forced to live in them for weeks. For people of the chars, the camps are disorienting places where they have little control over their lives. It takes a mental and financial toll on women and men alike, as they spend weeks without work, access to their jute and bao rice and livestock. Women are especially vulnerable as they adjust to a life with strangers with whom they have to share toilets and living space. Rajib’s colleagues, like the activists in Mozidbhita, are always concerned about the rising levels of dropouts and child marriages among the char dwelling communities. These have a bearing on the NRC process. Working with the local activists of the library, Rajib shares his concerns about the numbers of children and women whose names had been left out of the NRC and wondered if char habitation had anything to do with their exclusion from the first draft.

Chars are partly the outcome of a colonial history of raising embankments in agricultural lands that were rich in revenue earnings, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries. Historian Rohan D’Souza draws on archival material from the period to show how the draining of rivers and diversion of water by civil engineers was key to the creation of a particularly oppressive feudal order in eastern India (D’Souza, 2015). Following the transfer of power in 1947, the newly independent government of India dedicated resources towards expanding irrigation and protecting agricultural and grazing areas from flooding. In Assam too, changes in hydraulic flows led to far-reaching changes and conflicts in a wider area – causing floods in some, aridity in others and always resulting in the gradual movement of people from one place to another (Barbora, 2018). Swiss geographer Christine Bischel noted similar conflicts following the collapse of the legal and political order in the Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union. In her detailed account of the conflicts in the Ferghana valley, she writes about the pressures that local communities have to endure, once the centralised water-sharing regimes disappeared and were replaced by antagonistic communities that acted as if on behalf of their national governments (Bischel, 2009). The aridity of the Central Asian region and the water-soaked ecology of
the South Asian chars, therefore, have one feature in common. They force their inhabitants to be resilient, where people are constantly adapting to their landscapes in order to make a living and where water determines the production cycles of the land. In the chars however, water remains the most significant source of wealth as well as the biggest threat to human life (Lahiri-Dutt, 2014). Significantly, they become part of a regional and global debate on climate change, especially with regard to how little say they have in decision making processes in their engagement with the adaptive regimes (Paprocki, 2018). This poignant point is most visible during the floods, when people are forced to leave home and flee to a higher ground. In 2019, newspaper reports from Assam noted that many people refused to leave their inundated homes for fear of losing documents that would jeopardise their NRC status.

**Documents, Bureaucracy and Technology: Rolling out the NRC**

The headwaiter of the rice hotel near the Public Works Department (PWD) and District Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) is patient and forthcoming about the day’s menu with individuals who have an air of urgency about them. They are usually bureaucrats and NGO officials who visit town for flood-related work. In the summer of 2019, the numbers of officials working on the NRC were added to the existing one. As he took orders, the headwaiter would inquire: ‘Baan paani ne NRC?’ – flood or NRC – eliciting a response either way from the officers. He would proceed to ignore other customers, seating the officials first, regardless of a waiting group of persons. In 2019, the citizenship issue was entangled with flood and climate change issues in many discursive ways. Both processes have created unprecedented pressures on local bureaucracy. In Assam, almost all government officials, including teachers employed in government colleges, have had to report for NRC duty. At the district-level, all departments too have been involved in NRC work. During the floods, their tasks have diversified to include relief and rehabilitation of affected persons. The NRC demonstrates the state’s ability to categorise and penalise citizens, even as flood relief demonstrates its ability to provide care, relief and rehabilitation. How did these different practices, especially those related to categorisation and incarceration following the NRC process come about and did ordinary people have ways to counter this? Do personal views of local officials play any role in an activity that is both driven by technology and supervised by governmental machinery and embodies rationality and impartiality? In order to understand the
importance of both questions, one has to focus on the NRC timeline and the political environment within which it was resurrected in Assam.

The first NRC 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 Foreigners Act, 1946 and 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 (2009; 2008) underlined the different ways in which the partition narrative appeared in Assam and showed how it continues to have an impact on contemporary debates. He highlights the contentious identity and resource politics that led to the Assam Agitation (1979-1985), the Assam Accord (1985) and subsequently, three decades of insurgency (1979-2009). Baruah’s arguments about the Indian state’s deleterious policies in subverting democratic institutions and processes in Assam are backed by evidence of the government’s policies of using military coercion to deal with dissenting political opinion in Assam. In his recent writings on the NRC, he addressed the government’s lack of preparedness in conducting such a process, drawing attention to the manner in which key South Asian neighbours like Bangladesh, were not informed of the outcomes of this process, especially when political rhetoric was directed towards a historically specific population from the neighbouring country (Baruah, 2018).

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 human frailties that are attributed to the everyday workings of the state in developing countries. The 2015 edition of the NRC 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 March 24, 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 twelve other documents that could be shown as evidence, provided they were granted before March 24, 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 (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, many itinerant working people – who constitute Assam’s unorganised labour sector – were unable to produce these documents. Every person had to take these documents to the nearest NRC Seva Kendra, a government building designated for the purpose of gathering documents of individuals and loading it on to a database. For many trying to register their names in the database, this was their first encounter with computers and information technology. Hence, they were also daunted by the finality of the exclusion, when it happened, since there seemed to be no human error, or authority that could be chastised for failures. As a bureaucratic network of officials and staff, the NRC process was grafted onto the local administrative structure of governance as a time-bound project that had external support for a specific period of time. This allowed the state coordinator of the NRC to deploy various officers (and offices) to ensure a smoother functioning in places where human interface with potential technological shortcomings seemed inevitable.

In most cases, the diligence of individuals and groups meant that most people were able to provide documentation. Years of activism had built into the system some checks and balances that could ensure a process of redress, as well as a human interface that people could appeal to. Therefore, when one’s name was excluded from the NRC, a person could appeal to a Foreigners Tribunal (FT), a body that was originally constituted by the government in 1964 and later amended in 2019, specifically to deal with the cases that had come up after the exclusions of 2018. With support from the central government, the government of Assam recruited 1000 members (as those judging the cases under the FT are called) into the FTs. Any advocate between the ages of 45 to 60 was eligible to apply and would be considered for a contract of 2 years, where they would be employed by the government of Assam. An interesting, but leading criterion for their recruitment was stated early on. The government notification stated that the
person (applying) should ‘... have a fair knowledge of the official language of Assam and its (Assam) historical background giving rise to foreigner’s issue’ix. Such conditionality has severe consequences for people who do not speak standardised Assamese, who are char dwellers and who are itinerant as they are already seen to be interlopers in the region. They were also most likely to be summoned to the FT members to answer questions about their missing documents and irregular data.

‘Let me explain how this technology works’, said Dhiren, a humanities lecturer in a government college just outside Guwahati city. He had been inducted as a disposing officer (DO) in the early months of 2019. The DO worked within a particular circle area and was the first – or last – human line of verification of the claims and objections that were filed by those who had failed their meetings with the FT. They reported to the Circle Registrar of Citizen Registration (CRCR, a circle officer in the administrative set up), who reported upward to the District Registrar of Citizen Registration (DRCR, a district commissioner in the administrative set up). Dhiren had been involved in the autonomy movement among the Karbi and Tiwa communities in the 1990s and early 2000s, before he got his job as a lecturer in 2013. He continues to be involved in cultural and social issues among indigenous communities, especially in the wider Kamrup, Morigaon, Nagaon and Karbi-Anglong areas. His work as the DO had kept him away from college, a fact that caused him some irritation. However, despite his personal misgivings about the nature of his work, he was all praise for the kind of technology that was being deployed in the NRC process. ‘Once the field-based work got over last year (in March, 2018), things started getting a shape’, he further explained about the family tree verification (FTV). As our conversation got into specifics, I had to keep track of the almost objective type, algorithm-based tenor of his descriptions.

‘We had a domain to allow for second and third generation respondents to make mistakes about the names of their immediate lineage relatives’, he stated and added in the same breath: ‘but can you forget the name of your own sister?’ He claimed that many of the false claims of legacy data resulted from people giving different names for their immediate kin and siblings. He outlined the way in which the software was able to ‘capture’ the inconsistencies in the manner in which certain persons claimed their family tree. Hence, lack of knowledge about immediate kin in an extended bilateral descent family would cause the software to determine that there was something amiss in the data provided. Dhiren was
convinced that the software could not have got anything wrong, as far as catching on to the inconsistencies of personal narratives. Instead, as he explained the unfolding of a particularly poignant human drama, it was almost as if the software – in this case DOCSMEN – had begun to unravel family secrets into the public domain. When there was a mismatch in the family legacy (assigned an algorithm under the Legacy Data Code, or LDC), especially in the cases where two families claimed the same person and yet did not know anyone from the other family, they were asked to explain how the family trees for the same assigned LDC could go so wrong. In many cases, explanations attested to the frailty of human relationship: an aggrieved father who might have disowned a daughter for marrying against his wish, a man with a family in two towns that did not know one another and so on. Others, Dhiren continued, were harder to let go. It was even more so when officials higher up the administrative chain had already verified the claims and objections at the investigative stage. In that case, the DO became the last human to deal with people who wanted answers from the executive body of the government.

This is where the role of small, committed local advocacy groups becomes very important. In Mozidbhita, the activists, who began the library, had worked with the community in order to ensure that they were included in the draft. This meant ensuring that the people of the char had all their documents in order: a government receipt as a beneficiary for some scheme, or even an old court document that showed a person’s permanent address to be the seasonal char, were all part of a repertoire of documents that were being produced as evidence that would be taken to the NRC Seva Kendra. It is important to remember that a person could file their NRC papers through either their mother’s or their father’s legacy and if one set of documents did not add up, they would not be able to change their lineage. This could lead to a lot of anomalies and difficulties for those who attempting to establish that their claims for citizenship were correct and that they had been excluded due to a combination of technological errors and human prejudice.

Journalist Arunabh Saikia’s story about a woman, Kaddbhanu, lays bare the tragedies that are involved in such case. Kaddbhanu’s husband Hitmat Ali committed suicide because he was unable to bear the legal costs of trying to get her included in the NRC. The officials who were verifying her claim, refused to believe that Kaddbhanu was her father’s daughter. Being unlettered, she requested her gaonburah (village headman) to validate her claim that she was indeed her
father’s daughter. As one might expect from functionaries of small, face-to-face communities, the gaonburah signed a certificate that had the state’s emblem embossed in the middle. This, the tribunal claimed, was unauthorised. Moreover, the gaonburah had also not appeared in person. Hence, Kadbhanu’s Kafkaesque experience of the threat of incarceration began because of the local official’s unwillingness to accept her document. Saikia had another poignant story of technological and human error in the case of Rupa Dutta, whose father started the Tinsukia Commerce College in 1972\(^{\text{iii}}\). She decided to claim her legacy through her mother’s LDC but found that the NRC authorities were not convinced that her mother had genuine papers. As it turned out, the mother got a matriculation certificate from Gauhati University in 1955, while her citizenship papers were processed over the year and she became a citizen in 1956.

The NRC process as it was rolled out in Assam relied on the convergence of technology, administrative efficiency and political will in order to achieve its goals. However, as media reports show, there have been instances where Bengali-speaking persons have been subjected to unprecedented harassment for not being able to provide documents that could have made it through the NRC software\(^{\text{xiii}}\). Often, as middle- and lower-level officials and part-time officers employed to conduct the NRC will attest, there has been pressure from political organisations and mid-level civil servants, including those in the courts of law and appellate bodies like the FT. In such cases, documents (and software) have the ability to strip away the context in which local interactions have become aggregated in the NRC process. They present a dilemma for students of social sciences who wish to research issues of citizenship. 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century citizenship research looked at the various ways through which an individual entered into a political and social relationship with the state that included economic welfare and civil rights (Marshall, 1950), protection of cultural rights of minorities (Kymlicka, 1996) and an overall protection of the sanctity of personal freedom that emanated from Kantian ideas of universally applicable rules that allowed individuals to be free. In a relatively short span of time since the Supreme Court instructed the government of Assam to conduct the NRC, one has been confronted by a different order of issues. For social scientists then, the idea of generating data from a big, government and software driven data gathering process is daunting. However, this is also the moment when one sees a greater need to put this data into a context. One needs to allow a plurality of narratives to emerge that challenges the current situation where the state’s narrative is considered superior to that of the neighbour, friend and relative (Dourish & Cruz, 2018).
The state’s capacity to conduct a process of this scale on the basis of documents that attest to property, occupation and proof of residence have increased manifold since 1951. To paraphrase social anthropologist Annelise Riles (2011), some projects are too big to fail. These embody a process by which the state finds itself exposed by oversights and failures but continue to hold sway because in the moment of crisis the various ideas and political strategies reveal their interdependence. In the context of the NRC in Assam, a similar argument may be made about the need for infallibility that has been attributed to the convergence of technology and bureaucracy, in their dealing with matters that evoke historical evidence in deeply contested political time. However, as anthropologist Matthew Hull has pointed out in the context of the bureaucracy in Pakistan, 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. There are forms to fill out, windows to present them at and officials to meet in order to be permitted to do something, or to be counted for one of the schemes that is being employed by the state. In classical sociology emanating from Max Weber, this is the bureaucratic work at its best – impersonal, rational and uniform. Yet, as Akhil Gupta argues, bureaucratic mechanisms and procedures used by the Indian state systematically produce arbitrary outcomes whose consequences can be catastrophic (Gupta, 2012). Gupta’s work focuses on the routine manner in which government files, forms, procedures, complaint mechanisms and inspections have the ability to normalise structural violence upon the poor in the country, even as there is a paradoxical effort by the government to ameliorate their condition.

In many parts of the country, even as the state goes through various methods of calculating the risks of the poor and vulnerable, while making sure that they receive adequate care, the poor are hardly able to access the institutions of the state. The poor experience bureaucratic apathy far more intensely and with more intimacy than others, especially since their ability to preserve documents and follow through legal procedures is very weak. Hence, even though the government has to continue with some degree of welfare for the poor, the current political climate around the world and in India point towards an increased fear of the immigrant as an undeserving object of social anger (Kymlicka, 2015). How then are social scientists supposed to respond to the ideas propounded by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) referred to earlier in this essay: in the eventual analysis, the contradictions between bourgeois liberal nationalism and capitalism
will result in the rise of a multi-dimensional order of the dispossessed – the multitude.

Reactions to the Citizenship Debate

Ugandan anthropologist Mahmood Mamdani (2001) 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*, he showed how routine matters of governance have the ability to be twisted to malicious extent. 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. In addition, 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. 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 to explain that ‘Bangladeshi’ is not a religious category, but sociological shorthand for a historical process that has muted regional specificities in nationalist debates. For those who have been excluded from the list, the bureaucratic process involves a lengthy process to seek legal recourse. Those who wish to appeal (their exclusion) will have to do so to the Supreme Court mandated Foreigners Tribunal (FT) in four months from the receiving the notification of their exclusion. The government has also announced that it would not detain those who have been excluded; at least not until the FT have had a chance to review their cases.
The NRC process provides an analytical moment to assess the range of issues that are aggressively inserted into citizenship debates in contemporary South Asia (and across the world). Recent scholarship on outmigration from Northeast India has focused on the conditions of militarisation and lack of opportunities that have forced indigenous communities to move away from the homelands that were being sought for in the 1990s and 2000s (McDuie-Ra, 2012). Furthermore, Kikon & Karlsson’s (2019) work on the lives of Northeast migrants to other parts of India and their return home offers us a complex picture of the impact of affective labour on politics and policy making in the region. These works eschew the binary view of settler and indigenous ideas of belonging that have been foundational to 20th century nationalism and national territory-centric growth of capitalism. 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. As the debates around the standard sociological units of analysis – individuals and communities – undergo, and emic change in response to external pressures of climate change and nationalist discourse, there is a need for social scientists to ask critical questions about the manner in which certain forms of knowledge find prominence in debates on citizenship, migration and climate change (Whyte, 2017; Todd, 2016). Here, the voices of the marginalised – in this case both the indigenous as well as the itinerant seasonal migrant – need to be included, not merely as passive data, but as discursive ontological entities that have a historical relationship with each other.

Such political predicaments are not unique to Northeast 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/outsiders/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 that aid migration, in a manner that is confrontational (rather than reconciliatory). Whether it is the dominant narrative of the All Assam Students Union (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 s/he has lived and worked in the country all their life, unless s/he can prove that s/he 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.

Ranabir Samaddar (2018) had a melancholic view of this predicament in his recent article published in The Wire. 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. Yet, the political discourse, framed as it is around notions of identity and history, do 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 be 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 it’s supporters displayed a monochromatic view of society, history and culture in Assam – one that continues to view society through a 20th century lens, where the stable, landholding peasant is at the foundation of social and political structures. Journalist
Sangeeta Barooah-Pisharoty’s recent book on the Assam Accord and its aftermaths points towards the shared suffering of all communities across Assam and cautions readers from assuming that a victim-perpetrator binary can be applied to understand the outcomes of the exclusionary process (Pisharoty, 2009).

If anything, the sociological outcomes of the NRC debate are 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, 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 state, especially in its new software-driven environment. The NRC involved colossal expense for the state and civil society in Assam that are financial and political. Political parties (including the ruling party) expressed dissatisfaction about the outcome of the process, pointing towards the presence of many Indian citizens in the list. This almost universal disappointment should serve as a moment to examine the impact that the NRC will have on social science scholarship in the future. While it has disrupted relationships and forced people and organisations to revisit old colonial debates about autonomy and social justice, it has also forced the need to revisit new ones about transformation of the citizenship debates and the realities of climate change.

Notes:

i 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

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

iii 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).

iv Char is a 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.
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

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


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

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

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

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

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.

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.

The government of Assam had sought to employ 1000 officers to the FTs. There are 100 that already exist and an 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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**Sanjay Barbora** is Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Guwahati Campus.

Email id: sanjay.barbora@tiss.edu