

The Politics of NRC and its Pan-Indian Dimensions

By K V Thomas

The issue of the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which still continues as a Gordian knot in Assam, is gradually getting pan-Indian dimensions with the recent announcement of Union Home Minister Amit Shah that NRC would be carried out across the country. This move, according to Shah, is in line with the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) poll promise to catalogue all citizens. The proposed nation-wide NRC would be undertaken after updating the National Population Register (NPR) alongside the Census 2021 exercise. The process of the preparation of the National Register of Indian Citizens (NRIC) will begin on completion of the verification of NPR.

In many respects, the implementation of NRC across the country requires replicating the just concluded exercise in Assam. However, no parallel can be drawn on the NRC process in Assam and the proposed one across the nation as the former was conducted as per the directions of the Supreme Court, under a separate law. Moreover, the issue in Assam was intrinsically intertwined with history, sociopolitical and demographic factors of neighbouring countries and decades of illegal migration to the State impacting the economy and the social fabric of the State. Thus, a closer look at the NRC process in Assam and the inter-related issues is necessary for a better appreciation of the proposed nation-wide NRC exercise.

History of Illegal Migration to Assam

The geographic and demographic features, history, language, religion, economy, politics and the socioeconomic and political conditions in the neighbouring countries, notably Bangladesh and Nepal, influenced the influx of illegal migrants to Assam. The State has an international border stretching to 533 kilometres, of which 267 kilometres are with Bangladesh, the rest being with Bhutan.¹ Geographically, river Brahmaputra and her tributaries form a large number of riverine islands ('*Char areas*'), which, having remained inaccessible for human habitation for many centuries had become fertile soil for migrants from across the borders. Added to this were the vast stretches of forest land, especially those in the districts coming under the Barak valley bordering Bangladesh.

The initial trends of migration started when the Burmese ceded Assam to the British on February 24, 1826 as per the treaty of Yandabo, thus bringing to an end Ahom rule in Assam, which had begun sometime in the 13th century. The British annexed Assam and placed it as an administrative unit of the Bengal Province. The organised migration from Bengal to Assam was recorded at the beginning of the 20th century when a few migrants had gone beyond the '*Char land*' of Goalpara district. Soon, it gained momentum during the 1921–31 period when hordes of migrants from the Bengal Province entered Nagaon district and spread themselves throughout Lower and Upper Assam. Their cultural and linguistic similarities enabled them to easily merge

¹<https://dbpd.assam.gov.in/portlets/boundaries-of-assam>.

with the indigenous population. The Census Report of 1931 highlighted this; “The invasion of the vast hordes of land-hungry Bengali migrants, mostly Muslims from the districts of East Bengal, and in particular Mymensingh, would destroy the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilization.”²

The British, instead of taking steps to check the migration, encouraged the process as the migrants formed cheap labour for the tea and oil industry. They introduced a ‘line system’ which envisaged an imaginary line in the districts, beyond which the migrants were not allowed to settle. With the introduction of the ‘line system’, polarisation began setting in between the migrant Muslims and Hindus. The issue had become more complex when leading political parties entered the scene with different lines: the Hindu leaders of the Indian National Congress (INC) clamoured for the strict enforcement of the line system, whereas leaders of the Muslim community and the Muslim League stood for its abolition. A powerful ‘migrant lobby’ that emerged in the State had virtually hijacked the issue with the support of peasant leaders from East Pakistan, especially the legendary leader Moulana Bhasani. This ‘pro-immigrant lobby’ fully made use of the political scenario that arose out of the INC’s withdrawal from the Provincial Government and initiated legislative and other measures to promote the interests of migrants. Saiyid Muhammad Saadulla, who was selected as Premier (Chief Minister) of Assam by British in 1937 and served in his post three times till the independence, liberally encouraged the settlement of migrants disregarding the opposition by Assamese Hindu leaders. The missionary zeal shown by Saadulla in increasing agricultural production was so brazenly in favour of the migrants that Viceroy Lord Wavel described it as “not grow more food, but grow more Muslims campaign”.

The partition of the country in 1947 and the formation of East Pakistan had accelerated the influx of refugees to Assam. Vast numbers of Bengali Hindus were either driven away forcibly or compelled to leave the country due to widespread violence and intimidation. The rehabilitation of millions of such refugees had become an onerous task for the State alone. The suggestion of Gopinath Bordoloi, the legendary Chief Minister of the State, to the Nehru government to share the burden of refugees with other states was not accepted. Moreover, the “Nehru–Liaquat Ali Pact” of 1952, which essentially provided for the safety and security of migrants/refugees and their properties in both the countries on reciprocal basis, had given more impetus to the influx of refugees from East Pakistan to Assam. A similar situation had developed during Bangladesh liberation struggles in 1970–71 when there was a steady exodus of migrants from East Pakistan in the wake of large scale atrocities by the Pakistan Army and Security forces against civilians supporting the liberation movement. They were accommodated mainly in Assam, West Bengal and Tripura by upholding the international norms and conventions on the status of refugees and asylum seekers.

During normal times, too, illegal migration from East Pakistan/Bangladesh to Assam continued unabated, much like the concept of ‘*lebensraum*’ justifying more physical space and new

²From the Census Report of 1931.

territory to supply food and raw materials to the overgrown population in Bangladesh. Demographers agree that migration of people from poor regions to less poor ones is a natural process just as water seeking its level. For example, during the heydays of migration from East Pakistan/Bangladesh, the population density in Bangladesh was over 800 per square kilometre as against 287 in Assam. Moreover, East Pakistan was one of the poorest countries in the world, frequently inflicted by floods, cyclones and epidemics, leading to more poverty and miseries for a larger chunk of the population.

Similarly, socioeconomic and political factors led to the steady influx of Nepalis and Bhutias from Nepal and Bhutan to Assam for many decades. The monarchical form of governments in both the countries for centuries that failed to meet the aspirations of large segments of the population, coupled with poverty, unemployment, ethnic conflicts and violence, resulted in the continuous exodus of these sections to Assam. The porous nature of borders with these countries and liberal immigration rules accentuated the process. Moreover, the migrant Nepalis formed the bulwark of Assam's agrarian economy.

Migration and Demographic Changes

The continuous illegal migration to Assam has created drastic demographic changes in the State. In terms of religious communities, the Muslim population of Assam had increased from 25 per cent in 1951 to 34 per cent in 2011. As per the 2011 Census figures, 9 out of 27 districts in the State are Muslim-majority districts, as against 6 such districts listed in 2001 Census. Three other districts, namely Cachar (Muslims-6.5 lakhs; Hindus-10.3 lakhs), Kamrup (Muslims-6.01 lakhs; Hindus-8.77 lakhs) and Nalbari (Muslims 2.77 lakhs; Hindus 4.91 lakhs) have a sizeable Muslim population.

Table 1: Muslim–Hindu Population in Muslim-majority districts in Assam

Name of Districts	Muslims (in lakhs)	Hindus (in lakhs)
Nagaon	15.6	12.2
Dhubri	15.5	3.88
Barpeta	11.98	4.92
Karimganj	6.9	5.3
Darrang	5.97	3.27
Goalpara	5.8	3.48
Morigaon	5.03	4.51
Hailakandi	3.97	2.5
Bongaigaon	3.71	3.59

Source: Based on 2011 Census.

These demographic changes had their impact on the ethnic, linguistic and religious complexion of the Assamese society and paved the way for internecine strife and conflicts. The steady increase of migrant population accentuated the concerns of the “sons of the soil”, including

Ahoms, Bodos, Karbis and other tribal communities, that led to serious violence and bloodshed in the Bodo tribal belt during 2012 and 2014. On the linguistic plane, there was a steady decline in the number of people speaking Assamese in the State. The percentage of Assamese speakers which was 57.81 per cent in 1991 came down to 48.38 per cent in 2011. On the other hand, the Bengali-speaking population showed a marginal increase from 21.67 per cent in 1991 to 28.91 in 2011. The language Movement of 1960, the biggest manifestation in the socio-cultural history of the State was the outcome of the conflicting interest of Assamese and Bengalis on the question of the official language. The movement which gained momentum in the post-independent era finally came to an end with the historic Assam Official Language Act, 1960, with its declaration of making Assamese as the sole official language of the State. Similar apprehensions exist among a few sections of indigenous population about organised movements of migrants to establish hegemony of a particular religious community in the State with the tacit support of fundamentalist forces from Bangladesh and other countries.

The political undercurrents due to the demographic changes have come up as a matter of serious concern for mainstream political parties. Till 1962, the number of Muslim MLAs in 105-member State legislative Assembly remained 14/15 for three successive elections. There were 20 Muslim MLAs in the 126-seat State Assembly during 1967; their number has increased to 30 after the 2016 Assembly polls. Moreover, the migrants have a decisive role in deciding the outcome of the Lok Sabha Polls. Muslims constitute more than 20 per cent of the electorate in 6 out of 12 parliamentary constituencies in the State. The All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), a political party whose main plank is the immigrant Muslim identity, has now emerged as a major political force in the State.

In this backdrop, the NRC issue assumes more political significance, especially when all the major political parties are focused on their electoral calculus. Over the last few years, the BJP was quite successful in Assam exploiting these demographic changes, especially in giving the linguistic and ethnic issues a communal colour. They are known to mainly concentrate on the indigenous Assamese and the Bengali Hindu vote bank. The NRC and the promise of the detection and deportation of all “foreign nationals” (illegal migrants who fail to figure in the NRC) are the best bait to keep these sections under tenterhooks, favouring the BJP.

The Historic Journey towards the Final Draft of NRC in Assam

The NRC is a list of all the legal citizens of a state. It is governed by The Citizenship Act, 1955, and The Citizenship (Registration of Citizens and Issue of National Identity Cards) Rules, 2003 (amended in 2009) and a 2010 order of the Ministry of Home Affairs, published in the Gazette of India. The first NRC was prepared in 1951 and included all those who were mentioned in the 1951 Census of India.

The idea of updating the NRC in Assam stems from the demand to identify illegal migrants who infiltrated into the State from the erstwhile East Pakistan/Bangladesh. The riots of 1964 and the India–Pakistan War of 1965 resulted in the out-migration of large numbers of Hindus from East Pakistan. Another massive out-migration from East Pakistan was triggered in 1971 when the

Pakistani military establishment tried to suppress Bengali nationalism through brutal military force. “An estimated 10 million persons, including 6.7 million Hindus, were forced to take refuge in India.”³ Majority of these migrants/refugees who spread to the North East, West Bengal and Bihar were rehabilitated as per the International Conventions and Protocols on the status of Refugees.

The All Assam Students Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) had spearheaded the six-year-long (1977–85) historic Assam Movement in support of the above demand. The movement, which witnessed serious violence, bloodshed and mass killing in places like Nellie during 1983, ended with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 between the Centre, the State and AASU, in the presence of the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. The Accord contained a provision that all ‘foreigners’ who came to Assam after March 25, 1971 should be detected and deported under the Illegal Migration Determination (by Tribunals) (IMDT) Act, 1983. It also talked about the deletion of foreigners’ names from the electoral rolls. This cut off date was a crucial bone of contention in determining the status of migrants from Bangladesh to India. It was on March 25, 1971 that the Pakistan military junta started a crack-down on freedom fighters and civilians of East Pakistan. The large scale atrocities led to the steady exodus of over 10 million refugees to India, who primarily spread in the states of Assam, West Bengal and Tripura. A bulk of these refugees was rehabilitated in accordance with the international norms and conventions.

From the very beginning of the accord, AASU was critical of various provisions of the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983 [IMD (T)] alleging that it provided a complicated and cumbersome procedure for the detection and deportation of illegal migrants and had failed to meet even the standards prescribed under the Foreigners Act, 1946. In view of such complexities, there was tardy progress in the detection and deportation of illegal migrants. These bottlenecks found mention in a memorandum (IA No. 6 of 2004), submitted on behalf of the Government of Assam before the Parliamentary Standing Committee of Home Affairs regarding the inquiries and detection of illegal migrants by the Tribunals as on August 31, 2003. Out of 3,86,249 cases initiated by the Screening Committees, inquiries were completed in 3,79,521 cases of which 76,228 were referred to Illegal Migration Determination Tribunals [IMD(T)]s which decided only 11,636 cases. The consolidated total number of deported/pushed back illegal immigrants on being declared as foreigners by IMDTs and Foreigners Tribunals collectively till July 2012 was only 2,442, for which crores of rupees were spent from the national exchequer.

Such issues were brought before the Apex Court through a writ petition filed by Sarbananda Sonowal (then Asom Gana Parishad [AGP]) MP and the present Assam Chief Minister) in 2004, challenging the validity of the Act. The Supreme Court on July 12, 2005 struck down the Act, declaring that its exclusive application to Assam was unconstitutional and violated the equality guaranteed in Article 14 of the Constitution. The Court further noted that the law violated Article

³Kumar, Chirantan. 2009. “Migration & Refugee Issue between India & Bangladesh.” *Scholar’s Voice: A New Way of Thinking* 1(1): 64–82. Centre for Defense Studies Research & Development.

355 of the Constitution, which imposes a duty on the Central Government “to protect every state against external aggression and internal disturbance”. It directed that all tribunals constituted under the IMDT Act adjudicating the cases for identification of illegal migrants from Bangladesh cease to function with immediate effect. The cases pending before the tribunals would stand transferred to tribunals under the Foreigners Act.

Meanwhile, in view of the mounting pressure by various parties and organisations on the revision of electoral rolls, a formal decision to update the NRC was first taken by the Centre in 1999, but the work did not begin. Later, in a tripartite meeting between the Central Government, the Assam government and the AASU on May 5, 2005, it was decided to update the NRC. However, nothing much progressed beyond talks. In July 2009, Assam Public Works—an NGO—filed a case in the Supreme Court demanding updating of the NRC. In 2010, the government decided to hold pilot projects of NRC updating in two blocks in the State. But violence in Barpeta district stalled work. It was only after the Supreme Court’s direction in 2014 to the government to update the NRC that work on updating the list began in full swing.

As regards to updating, people whose names appear on the 1951 NRC and those who appear on any voters’ list in Assam up to the midnight of March 24, 1971, and the descendants of the above are eligible to register for the NRC. Those who came to Assam from Bangladesh between January 1, 1966 and March 24, 1971 and registered themselves with the Foreigner Regional Registration Office (FRRO) and declared by the Foreigner Tribunal as Indian citizens are also eligible. Indian citizens who moved to Assam after March 24, 1971 will need to provide proof of residence in another part of the country as on March 24, 1971.

The documents that could be submitted as proof included: (a) 1951 NRC; (b) Electoral Roll(s) up to March 24, 1971 (midnight); (c) Land & Tenancy Records; (d) Citizenship Certificate; (e) Permanent Residential Certificate; (f) Refugee Registration Certificate; (g) Passport; (h) LIC documents; (i) Any government-issued license/Certificate; (j) Service/Employment Certificate; (k) Bank/Post Office Accounts; (l) Birth Certificate; (m) Board/University Educational Certificate and (n) Court Records/Processes.

Monitored by the Supreme Court, the updating process started in late 2014, inviting applications for the NRC. Around 3.29 crore people sent in 6.6 crore documents that were verified as part of the process. Besides, house-to-house verification was undertaken for the verification of the family tree to ensure that claims of parenthood and linkages were not false. The final draft of the NRC released on July 30, 2018 included 28,983,677 citizens; 40.07 lakh people have been left out, of which 37.59 lakh applications were rejected and 2.48 lakh put on hold for want of prescribed documents as citizenship proof. Many applicants were excluded from the list mainly due to their failure to submit authentic documents to prove their citizenship claims. They have been given further option to submit documents to prove their citizenship.

In the final NRC list released on August 31, 2019, more than 3.11 crore people have been included as citizens, whereas over 19 lakh people have been left out as they failed to submit authentic documents. Those excluded 'included' 11 lakh Bengali Hindus, 7 lakh Muslims and the

remaining the local tribes and other ethnic groups. Once the list was out, new issues have cropped up mainly on the question of numbers: some feel that 1.9 million or 19 lakh is too large; others, especially in the BJP and its regional ally, the AGP as well as the AASU, feel that the figure is too small. They pose the question as how 40 lakhs and more who were left out in the final draft of the NRC in 2018 has come down to 19 lakhs? On this unique scenario, Lord Meghnad Desai, the leading Economist has presciently commented; “Be careful what you wish for. When you get it, you may not like it..... Alas, once you start counting, guesswork stops.”⁴ Ironically, the major stakeholders are not posed to end such guess works; they press for yet another exercise on NRC lines spending crores of rupees from national exchequer. (According to official statistics, more than Rs 1500 crores were spent on the NRC process in the State). Thus, the recent statement of Amit Shah that “when the NRC will be launched across the country, naturally the exercise will be repeated in Assam” is meant to pacify those sections not satisfied with the small numbers in the final list!

Yet, there are remedial measures for those who do not make it to the list. They can appeal against their exclusion before some 200-plus Foreigners Tribunals in the State, within 120 days of the release of the list. If an appeal is rejected, the affected person can approach the High Court, and finally the Supreme Court. But the crucial question is how many of these “excluded persons” who are vulnerable, distressed and poor and finding difficult to meet both ends can afford such legal remedies? The only succour to them is the State Government’s assurance of free legal aid through accredited lawyers on its District Legal Services Authority (DLSA). Meanwhile, the process of appeals has run into a major challenge from Bengali Hindus, numerous tribal groups and the Gurkhas because of their recalcitrant stand that they do not wish to appear before the Foreigners Tribunals as they are basically Indians for many decades and their kin have laid down their lives for the land and nation.

At the same time, uncertainty continues on the fate of those who failed to figure in the NRC, after exhausting all such legal processes. The deportation of such persons, as consistently demanded by the AASU and regional parties/outfits in Assam appears to be bleak as Bangladesh from the very beginning had taken the stand that they would not accept the so called “illegal migrants”. Moreover, Bangladesh has been assured, not once but several times, that the NRC exercise is an internal matter and will not impact the country. Even the Prime Minister himself has given such an assurance to his Bangladeshi counterpart Sheikh Hasina Wajed, when they met on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York in the last week of September 2019. Further, when India plays a pivotal role in building up a new Asian architecture through cordial relations with Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal and pursuing “soft power diplomacy”, contradictory processes/issues such as citizenship and identification and deportation of “foreign nationals” (to these countries) cannot go hand in hand.

The second aspect is the status of such persons. The government’s assurance is that no one can become a non-citizen until proven so: if anyone is ‘excluded’, that person does not

⁴Desai, M. 2019. “Out of My Mind: No Winners in the NRC Exercise.” *The Indian Express*, September 22.
<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/no-winners-in-the-nrc>.

automatically become non-Indian. However, neither the Indian Constitution nor the international covenants or Conventions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to which India is a signatory do not allow statelessness of citizens. The Election Commission of India (ECI), however, has declared that those excluded will not be struck off the voters' list or be classified as the D (Doubtful) Voter.

The NRC exercise in Assam is a microcosm of the proposed nationwide NRC process as indicated by Amit Shah. But, a clear distinction should be drawn between the two. As brought out in our analysis, the NRC process in Assam and the inter-related complexities are the result of various historic, demographic, ethnic and sociopolitical and economic factors unique to the State or the North-Eastern states bordering Bangladesh and Nepal. Such issues are unlikely to crop up in the proposed nationwide NRC, provided that the same is undertaken in an organised and systematic manner without evoking controversies or concerns to any section. On the other hand, if the nationwide NRC is undertaken with hidden communal or political agenda with complexities in proving the citizenship of floating or migrant population in sprawling slums and colonies in many metros and urban agglomerations, the exercise would open a Pandora's box of issues like status of non-citizens/stateless persons, legal process to deal with them, their electoral rights, etc.

In fact, the preparation of a comprehensive NRC for the entire country or detection of all illegal migrants, especially from neighbouring countries hostile to India, is salutary from internal security angle or in the matter of sovereignty and integrity of the nation. But such initiatives would yield the desired success or achieve the exact goals when there is national consensus. This was lacking in the case of the NRC in Assam, and for that matter the proposed process across the country. The main reason for this discernible trend is the organised move of parties to politicise or communalise the issue in pursuance of their "vote-bank politics".

The Politics of Nationwide NRC

The BJP's stand is that the party has been pursuing the issue of nationwide NRC in line with its poll promise. Amit Shah clarified that "no one irrespective of their religion should be worried; it is just a process to get everyone under NRC". But, his assurance could not cut much ice with the other parties and organisations which see a clandestine agenda in the BJP's moves on the nationwide NRC by linking it with appealing themes like patriotism, national security, demographic balance, stability and culture. Such concerns have been aggravated in view of the BJP's firm stand to go ahead with the enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB), 2016, which proposes to grant citizenship to non-Muslim migrants/refugees or asylum seekers (Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Christians, Jains and Parsis) from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The opposition parties and Muslim outfits have criticised the Bill which excluded Muslims. Their main contention is that dividing "illegal immigrants" on the basis of religion is in contravention with the fundamental principles of Constitutional law and the provisions of the Citizenship Act, 1955, as well as of the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution. The proposed amendment would shake the foundations of the Citizenship Act, 1955, which has

formed the basis of India's citizenship regime since it gained independence from the British. They are apprehensive that the nationwide NRC would be used as another weapon to discriminate Muslims. The CAB which was lapsed as the term of the Lok Sabha has ended, is set to be brought to Parliament again.

In fact, the lessons from 2019 Lok Sabha polls prompt the BJP to vigorously pursue such strategies which are intended to better its electoral prospects in the next Lok Sabha polls as well as in the State Assembly polls by rejuvenating the 'nationalist'/pro-Hindutwa sentiments among large segments of Indian voters. The BJP/NDA could virtually break many citadels of the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal during 2019 Lok Sabha polls, riding high on a wave of Hindutwa agenda, especially the NRC issue and the minority appeasement policy of the TMC government. West Bengal accounts for the largest number of illegal migrants (5.4 million) out of the total of 10.83 million illegal migrants in India.⁵ The other states like Assam (4 million); Tripura (0.8 million); Bihar, Maharashtra and Rajasthan (0.5 million each) and Delhi (0.3 million) have a sizeable number of illegal migrants. By uprooting the "vote bank of migrant lobby" in these states through nationwide NRC and winning over the sentiments and support of the majority community on this account, the BJP/NDA hopes to fly its flag high in the election horizon of these states. Taking cue from these trends, some BJP-ruled states such as Uttarakhand, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh have indicated their willingness to conduct Assam-like NRC exercise. Naturally, these states along with other NDA/BJP-ruled states would welcome the proposed nationwide NRC. But some of the regional parties in the North East (notably Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya) which are the allies of the BJP, but having overriding sentiments to keep up their ethnic/'sub nationalist' identities are not too keen to endorse legislations like CAB apprehending threat to their identity and culture. Nagaland Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio has already ventilated the concerns of Naga people during the fourth conclave of the BJP-sponsored North Eastern Democratic Alliance (NEDA) held in Guwahati during September 2019.

The TMC which has burnt its fingers during the last Lok Sabha polls mainly due to its strident opposition against the Assam-like NRC exercise and related issues in West Bengal continues its bitter tirade against the nationwide NRC too. West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has categorically stated that "we will never allow NRC in Bengal". Even during the NRC exercise in Assam leading to the exclusion of over 40 lakhs people in the final draft list of NRC, Mamata warned that the BJP's move to divide people with such decisions would lead to a "bloodbath and civil war". She was the one to fire the first salvo by mobilising an open protest against the visit of Amit Shah to Kolkata to address a BJP rally on the NRC issue.

The Congress is on a sticky wicket on the issue, especially in the light of the orchestrated campaign by the BJP that Congress is dragging its feet over the issue of the detection and deportation of illegal migrants from Assam despite the fact that the party was in power for

⁵Quoting Home Ministry/Intelligence Bureau sources. *The India Today*, August 10, 1998. Inderjit Gupta, the then Union Home Minister, stated in Parliament on May 6, 1997 that there were 10 million illegal migrants residing in India.

decades in the State. In this context, BJP supremo Amit Shah, during July 2018, raised broader issues such as that the NRC in Assam has been taken for protecting the rights of the people of India and that every party should make their stand clear whether the rights of Indians are important or not? Thus, parties like the Congress definitely have reservations to totally oppose the proposed nationwide NRC, especially when the move is tactfully linked to internal security and the rights and interests of Indian citizens. In order to overcome such dilemma, the Congress adopted a tactical move on Assam NRC, limiting its objections to the manner in which the exercise had been undertaken and not opposing the process in toto. The party was also conscious to avoid any reference to the harassment of minorities on this issue in order to avoid any backlash from the majority community. It also emphasised to adopt a humanitarian and secular approach on issues like the NRC.

The Left parties, notably the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which steadily eroded their bases in West Bengal and Tripura, tried to give an ideological twist to the NRC issue holding that parties like the BJP and the TMC were polarising people for their vested political gains and that people must boycott the two parties to stop such polarisation in the country. Such ideological sermons would seldom impact the psyche of the large majority of the people, guided by caste, communal, parochial or religious sentiments. On the other hand, by highlighting such mundane themes, the Leftists too try to rebuild their eroded vote base in states like West Bengal and Tripura by taking a leaf out of the NRC issue.

More than the organised opposition and criticism from mainstream political parties against the proposed nationwide NRC, certain Muslim organisations at national and international level are likely to project the issue as a surreptitious attempt to target Muslims. The enactment of Citizenship Amendment Bill which excludes Muslim migrants in granting citizenship, may give more credence to such campaigns/propaganda. There were such attempts in the wake of NRC exercise in Assam. For example, an organisation named 'Avaaz' launched a global campaign in a petition titled "India: 'Stop deleting Muslims'" which highlighted that "in a few days India would delete as many as seven million Muslims in Assam State from its master list of 'citizens' because they speak the wrong language and worship the wrong God." Such campaigns—distorted or otherwise—will malign the image of the country among the comity of nations. However, a nationwide NRC—secular, transparent and cosmopolitan—and guided by constitutional principles and norms, ensuring equality and natural justice to all citizens, irrespective of caste, community and region, can blunt any such campaign or criticism at national or international level.

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