

Rethinking Citizenship in a Post-Colonial State: Identity and Conflict in Northeast India

Organised by:

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CONCEPT NOTE

Citizenship as a legal category was incorporated in a post-colonial state like India through its colonial past and its formation as an independent state. The notion and context of citizenship as being bound by territoriality defined by the Constitution of India and the subsequent Citizenship Amendment Act (1955) did not entail scope for indigeneity. Instead people were incorporated into the State with universal notions like equality, freedom, citizenship and so on, compromising the 'difference' principle resulting in severe conflicts in the post-colonial world, of which Northeast India is a good example. Notions of the modern, civilized citizen adhering to these universal principles emerged and natives found deviating from them were categorized as backward, undeveloped and uncivilized. Such a notion of citizenship as being defined by territorial jurisdictions and limited by its connectedness with the notion of inclusion and exclusion by state has come under immense stress particularly in the globalised world.

Citizenship is a contested category. The idea of citizenship as being a status bestowed on those who are full members of a political community and in turn are equal in respect of rights and duties and who are entitled to protection by the state as presented by T.H.Marshall suggests a legal framework of citizenship. The grand narratives of citizenship linking it with the State and its institutions have marked a departure from differences of culture, ethnicity, gender, race, caste etc. Citizenship marks a close relationship with the processes of identity formation with its emphasis on inclusiveness and

exclusiveness. Collective identities of groups having shared commonalities have been appropriated in the name of creation of a 'national' identity generating tensions and apprehensions while overlooking the borders, and the formal and legal setting of citizenship. Such contestations came to be renewed in the wake of the Indian government's exercise of updating its citizenship regime through the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) 2019 particularly in the context of Northeast India.

With its diverse cultures, languages, ethnicity, identities, Northeast India presents a unique landscape of the country. The process of integration of the states of the Northeastern region with the mainland in the post-colonial period has itself been a contentious issue with identity politics gaining preeminence. Imposition of universal notions of the 'modern citizen' masking the diversity that pre-existed the territorial boundaries led to clash of histories. This region has remained volatile and has been marked by violence, conflict, humanitarian crises, identity clashes with cultural and ethnicity overtones. In the post-economic reforms period, resource politics with conflict over land, water and other 'commons', has dominated the political discourse of the region. In the wake of such a background, attempts to update the citizenship criterion through actions like the NRC and CAA have created ripples in an already volatile region like the Northeast, causing uproars. Particularly for the state of Assam, the NRC updating process became a major issue of discontentment with fears of being 'stateless' and excluded from the protection of law gaining strongholds.

The NRC was an outcome of the Assam Accord of 1985 following the Assam Agitation in which the issue of unchecked illegal migration, particularly from erstwhile East Pakistan (present day Bangladesh) was most prominent. Migration of non-natives since colonial times to Assam has stirred up anxieties amongst the indigenous communities about preservation of their own distinct culture and traditions and control over resources. These anxieties resulted in contestations over citizenship in Assam and other states of Northeast India fuelling violence and separatist tendencies. Parallel to the NRC process, the CAA also is seen as a threat to the cultural fabric of the region, more so because of its religious overtones and also because of the apprehensions of demographic and related socio-political changes that will be brought about in the region with contestations over 'scarce' resources.

In this context, the proposed seminar shall bear these broad objectives:

- To engage with the contemporary debates on citizenship and its development in the post-colonial world.
- To comprehend critically and debate the citizenship questions in Northeast India *vis-a-vis* the issues of community, identity, indigenous peoples, etc.

Sub – Themes:

- Debating Citizenship : Approaches and Theories
- Changing Paradigm of Citizenship in India: Inclusion, Exclusion, Belongingness, Nationalism
- Minority Rights and Citizenship
- Citizenship and Human Rights
- Gender and Citizenship
- Governance and Citizenship
- Democracy and Citizenship
- NRC, CAA and Citizenship in Northeast India
- Identity, Autonomy movements and Conflict in Northeast India
- Migration, Refugees, Internally Displaced People and Citizenship

Dates of the Seminar: 24 -25th March, 2022

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