

## Call for Papers

### Assam: A Citizenship Battleground

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This Call for Papers seeks to launch a debate about the character and significance of citizenship controversy in contemporary India, by focusing primarily on the case of Assam. More precisely, it aims to shed light on new approaches and dimensions able to capture and explain the relationship (or lack thereof) between citizenship issues and migration, ethnic identity and conflict, and statelessness issues in Assam. We seek papers that critically investigate the theoretical, methodological and/or practical implications of citizenship issues in Assam and their wider implications not just across India but also worldwide, at the micro, meso and macro levels.

In December 2019, the Indian parliament passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that gives non-Muslim migrants who came to India before 2015 from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan a route to citizenship. The Indian government proposed to simultaneously implement a National Register of Citizens (NRC), which separately requires all Indian residents to prove their citizenship to be enlisted. The NRC has now been implemented in the north-eastern state of Assam, where various groups had been pushing for such a register since the 1980s. This process, which concluded in 2019, left out over 1.9 million people, who now stand at the risk of statelessness. Critics have argued that these policies are discriminatory, and violate Article 14 of the Indian Constitution that prohibits arbitrary targeting based on religion. They have also argued that these policies violate the Indian constitution's commitment to secular citizenship.

Critics further suggest that CAA and NRC, both singly and in combination, threaten the vast number of Indians who are illiterate and landless, without adequate documents and vulnerable to state excesses, and that they particularly risk disenfranchising Muslims across India. These developments have important consequences for our understanding of India and South Asia. Citizenship has become a ground for sectarian mobilisation. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has proposed imposing sanctions against the top leadership of the ruling BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) for fanning communal sentiments in India. The recent outburst of violence in Delhi on 23 February 2020, sparked by reaction to protests against CAA, indicates that this issue is a tinderbox that can aggravate inter-community relations and that may have long term consequences for India's secular polity.

These developments also have serious consequences in India's north-eastern state of Assam. The state has witnessed hostility and resentment against communities deemed to be "outsiders" and "illegal migrants", fuelled in part by changes in demography and competing resource claims: Hundreds of people lost their lives in the 1983 Nellie massacre. Over the past few years, this anti-migrant rhetoric has fed an anti-Muslim movement, culminating in controversies surrounding the publication of the NRC in 2019. There are wider complexities besides. When the final draft of the NRC was published in 2019, Hindu-nationalists in the state were unhappy that there were a substantial number of Hindus on the final list of 1.9 million people. This generated tensions with some regional Assamese nationalists, who are sensitive to "outsiders" irrespective of their religion.

In the meantime, the individuals who have been declared non-citizens are at risk of ending up in detention centres that are being built in Assam. UNHCR officials have expressed concern

that the denaturalization of Bengali Muslims has uncomfortable echoes of the processes by which the Rohingyas of Myanmar were gradually stripped of their citizenship rights and ended up as a stateless community. Moreover, after the passing of CAA, some state governments—such as West Bengal—declared that they would not implement the NRC. Since the Indian federal system has a provision of implementing President’s Rule, if states do not cooperate with the ruling government at the centre, there can be threats of suspending the state’s government and imposing the rule of the centre.

Furthermore, BJP’s approach could come at a cost and risk its bilateral relations with Bangladesh. Bangladesh is India’s eighth biggest export destination and fourth largest remittance source. Deteriorating relations also undermine India’s attempts to deepen security cooperation with Bangladesh to tackle cross-border insurgent groups in its north-eastern states. Bangladesh has categorically stated that the NRC is an ‘internal matter of India’, implying that those who are deemed ‘foreign’ in the NRC are not Bangladesh’s concern. If there is a push to deport people from Assam to Bangladesh, Bangladeshi non-Muslims largely comprising of the Hindu minority may face increased persecution.

The papers being sought will be collected for a special issue of a journal, to be determined depending on the paper topics. Potential topics include, but are not limited to, the following:

- The position of Muslim groups in the ethnic conflicts in Assam and North-east India
- The impact of Assam’s NRC on Bengalis and Muslims in the state
- The political impact of citizenship policies on the plethora of ethnic and indigenous communities in the region
- Political Implications of a countrywide NRC on Indian religious minority groups
- Legal Implications of the NRC and CAA in Assam on the Indian constitutional structure, including federalism and secular governance
- Issues of frontierisation and militarisation arising out of current citizenship policies
- Historical legacies, resource issues, and power relations which fomented Assam’s ethnic conflict
- Role of Indian nation-building project in Assam’s ethnic conflict
- International dimensions of Assam’s conflict, including relations with Bangladesh and wider statelessness issues in South Asia
- Assam’s NRC from the perspective of migration, citizenship and belonging in the region and beyond

Researchers and practitioners are invited to submit their paper proposal (between 1,000 and 2,000 words) to Dr. Mohsin Alam Bhat (mabhat@jgu.edu.in) and Dr. Rudabeh Shahid (rudabeh.shahid@york.ac.uk) by **July 31, 2020**.

Authors will be notified by **August 15, 2020** about the status of their proposals.

The full papers should not exceed 8000 words and should be submitted by **October 31, 2020**.