THE TRAGEDY OF THE NORTH EAST

Why is the Region So Opposed to the CAA?

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An anti- CAA protest organised by the Artistes of Assam at the AEI playground in Chandmari, Guwahati.

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On January 26, 2020, the proscribed armed group fighting for a 'sovereign' Assam – the United Liberation Front of Asom -Independent (ULFA-I) – declared a state-wide shutdown, after a prolonged hiatus. It was to oppose the Narendra Modi government's decision to include Assam – barring seven of the 33 districts – within the ambit of the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).

From the 1980s to the early 1990s, January 26 was one of those dates in the annual calendar when we – as youngsters growing up in Assam/ Northeast -- barely stepped out of our neighbourhood. Bandhs and blasts would typically dent the Republic Day. Year after year. The same was true for Independence Day.

Highly armed central forces would take control of the public places including roads much before such a day of national significance would actually dawn, intensifying the inspection – of vehicles, people, their papers. Everyone on the street would be a suspect, seen as supporters of armed separatist groups. Preventive arrests would take place, cloaking common citizens in a veil of panic.

On January 26 this year, those memories came back. I stepped out, onto Guwahati roads to catch the pulse of the city. How was Guwahati responding to recent developments? After all, barely a month ago, the city, a vibrant business hub of the Northeast, had turned into a near 'war zone.' Live bullets were shot from security forces' guns silencing at least four young lives, while smoke billowed out of burnt tyres. People in thousands hit the streets defying curfew and sloganeered against the central and state governments, demanding that CAA be withdrawn for Assam.

Much before mainland India registered protests against the CAA, the Northeast had erupted – when it was just the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, introduced in Parliament in mid-2019. Though the Bill was against the secular tenets of the Constitution even then, would it for the first time define – legally – an illegal immigrant in terms of her religion? Although India was officially taking a position that three Muslim majority countries, particularly its friendliest neighbour Bangladesh, was unable to protect its minorities, engagement with it was near non-existent among the mainstream liberals -- media and intellectuals alike. Till then, the proposed amendment was looked at in mainland India as only a 'North-eastern concern.' It therefore provokes me to deduce now that had the Union Home Minister Amit Shah not spoken in party rallies of introducing the National Register of Citizens (NRC) for the rest of India, like in Assam, there might not have been any anti-CAA

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protest outside of the Northeast. The horrid experiences of the NRC update process in Assam, mainly of the poor for lack of documents, may have been enough to ring warning bells. The Muslims largely saw the CAA as a possible escape route for the Hindus and Christians if a nation-wide NRC was to take place, with only them being left to prove their citizenship during the process. In the BJP ruled Assam, the trust deficit in the system was paramount when the NRC update process unrolled in that state.

Though the Modi government passed the CAB in the Lok Sabha in mid-2019, it eventually didn't bring it to the Rajya Sabha, leading to the lapse of the Bill. The government's action was only due to the vociferous protests across the Northeast. Fearing backlash, the regional allies of the BJP put massive pressure on its central leadership to back off. That the Centre backed off finally, facilitated the ruling BJP to reap benefits in the 2019 general elections. For the first time, 17 of the 25 Lok Sabha seats of the region went to the BJP and its allies in the NDA.

While the Northeastern states have long been hoping that New Delhi treats each of the states differently, with their own unique battles to deal with, the Centre's gaze has always been of the eight states as a single bloc – as Northeast, essentially as one size fits all. However, the anti-CAB protests brought together – after a long while -- the conglomeration of various tribes and communities of the region, some of whom have been at long-drawn-out conflict with each other. They came together as one, as 'indigenous,' as the 'insider,' organising themselves against whom they see as the 'outsider.' In other words, the periphery united to strike back at the centre. How New Delhi dealt with the region while bringing in the CAA in December 2019, showed the measure of caution on part of the government.

A provision in the CAA, inserted into the Citizenship Act, 1955, says, "Nothing in this section shall apply to tribal areas of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura, as included in the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution, and the area covered under the inner line notified under the Bengal Eastern Frontier regulation, 1873."

Effectively, what the Centre did was to carve out a couple of boxes to distribute the population of the region. In Assam itself, two such boxes were put to use. While the CAA won't be effective in the three autonomous district council areas operative under the Sixth Schedule, comprising seven districts, it would be, in the rest of the state, leading the anti-CAA protesters to question the government. How is a law not good for one section of people of the state fine for the rest? If you go by what the anti-CAA protesters have to say about the Centre's move in various rallies across the state, the intention behind it was to divide the people, and rule; weaken the united voice against the amendment.

Though the mainstream intellectual and media focus is presently on the anti-CAA protests in the rest of India, the spate of protests in Assam, Tripura and some other pockets of the Northeast has not ebbed. So have not the central and state governments' arbitrary arrests of those at the forefront of it, some by the National Investigating Agency (NIA) under the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) on the accusation of being 'Maoists.'

At this point, it is important to seek answers to two key questions:

- Why is the region so opposed to the CAA?
- Why was there an overwhelming support to the NRC?

In Assam, a violent response was recorded no sooner did Parliament pass the amendment in early December for the primary reason that it violated the core clause of Assam Accord. Signed on August 15, 1985, with the Rajiv Gandhi government by those spearheading the six-year-long anti-foreigner agitation, the Accord is considered by a large swathe of Assamese as a promise of New Delhi towards addressing the concerns of a set of people residing in a state with open international borders. Assam

shares its border with Bangladesh and Bhutan. Though the Centre had begun fencing the India-Bangladesh border, some parts of it are still open, including the riverine areas. Since the 1970s, due to the ethnic drive against the Nepalese in Bhutan, large numbers of the former had also entered Assam.

As per the 1985 Accord, Assam got an exclusive citizenship cut-off date of March 24, 1971. It was in keeping with the birth of Bangladesh, to the spirit of the Indira-Mujeeb pact, as India's commitment to the newly born nation. It was decided that those who crossed over to settle down in Assam from what was East Pakistan till March 24, 1971, would be considered Indian citizens. Those found to have entered the border state after that date – after Bangladesh was born – would only be considered foreigners. The MHA, the nodal agency to implement the Accord, would detect such foreigners and deport them to Bangladesh – both Hindus and Muslims.

While India has failed to detect and deport such foreigners by bringing Bangladesh on board (Bangladesh has been maintaining that its citizens have not illegally entered Assam or India since its birth), the CAA has been added to the equation. It not only distinguishes between Hindu/ Sikh/ Buddhist/ Jain/ Parsi/ Christian and Muslim undocumented migrants from that country, which the Accord doesn't do, but also gives preferential treatment to everyone else apart from Muslims by extending their citizenship cut-off date (in the context of Assam) from March 24, 1971 to December 31, 2014.

Since the first bout of large-scale migration took place from East Bengal during the British rule, the Assamese have been fearful of losing their political, cultural and linguistic hegemony in the state due to the growing number of Bengali speakers, alongside losing their land. During the colonial period, while the British preferred the Muslim Bengali peasants over the locals for their sheer ability to conform to the system of procuring more revenue from the agricultural land, the English educated Bengali Hindus were brought in large numbers to man the offices. Bengali was introduced as official language, setting aside Assamese, much to the consternation of the native population. Later, even after being educated in English, and Assamese being introduced as a medium of education too, the native population had to struggle hard to break the Bengali hegemony over government jobs. Without much say in the economy of the state even after Independence, the Assamese masses tend to look at land as their only resource. So lack of land rights over the migrants has been a core concern too.

The CAA, facilitating citizenship to another set of Bengali speakers, naturally then evoked the long-standing concerns. Those opposed to the CAA cite the 2001 and 2010 Census reports. As per the 2001 Census, 48.80 per cent of Assam's speakers were Assamese. In the 2010 census, it has slid to 48.38 per cent. Concurrently, the number of Bengali speakers has shot up from 27.54 per cent in 2001 to 29.91 per cent in 2010. The example of Tripura is often cited across the region to substantiate the fear of losing political and linguistic identity due to the migration from East Pakistan/Bangladesh. Tripura's 19 scheduled tribes, who were a majority prior to Partition, have been reduced to 30 per cent of the state's population today due to massive migration from East Pakistan/Bangladesh. As per the 2011 Census, Tripura has 24.14 lakh Bengali speakers as against 8.87 lakh speakers of the native Kokborok language.

For a set of people who are less in number, this is no ordinary fear to be boxed only within the modern contours of xenophobia, and derided and dismissed. Though the Assamese are in majority in Assam, various communities and plains tribes which come together to claim that identity, are individually few in numbers. Among those who call themselves Assamese are plains tribes like the Mishing, Deuri, Tiwa and Rabha, who have their own dialects, weaves, literature, customs and belief systems. The caste Hindus who form part of the Assamese identity too are few in numbers

individually. So the fear and concern are raw and real.

The concern of the smaller communities, the fight of the smaller sub-nationalities over larger nationalities, therefore, forms the crux of the opposition to the CAA, and also to their support of the NRC. This narrative is true of not just Assam but in other parts of the Northeast too. For instance, in Manipur, though the Meiteis are in majority, only 1,522,132 speak the Meitei language. Additionally, as per the state's laws, while land traditionally held by the Meiteis, mainly in the valley areas, can be bought by the hill tribes, vice versa is not allowed. This is despite the fact that Manipur's topography comprises more of hills than the valley. With little say in the state's nascent economy, and long battered by armed movements and their counter by armed forces with draconian laws that spare no one, the identity of most of the communities is firmly territorial.

In the Indian physical map, the largest number of diversity in terms of population, cultures, traditional practices, languages, is to be found in the Northeast. Most of these communities are small in numbers, hence their fear of migration from outside. The Indian state and its intelligentsia will have to take this aspect into consideration while noting down why the region is up in arms against the CAA and is often found supporting processes like the NRC. Generations of youth have picked up arms against New Delhi primarily because they see it treating the region only as a borderland without taking into consideration what its people want for themselves. According to recent news reports, the Centre's move to implement CAA in Assam has led several youths to join ULFA-I.

Indian mainstream intelligentsia must also take into cognisance that, like in several parts of the country, with the rise of the Hindu and Muslim Right in Assam, a large swathe of people are caught between their allegiance to linguistic ethnicity and religious identity. The rise of the Hindu Right is also threatening to swallow the strong sense of *Axomiya bhaxik jatiotabad* or Assamese linguistic sub-nationalism into a primarily Hindu assertion, like it did in Maharashtra (*Marathi Manush*), Gujarat (*Gujarati Asmita*), et al.

While taking a round of Guwahati city on January 26, a conversation with a young man, not far from the iconic Cotton College where students were protesting against the CAA, highlighted that schism. All of 25, the youth, from the post Assam anti-foreigner agitation generation, dismissed the ULFA-I's call for 'Assam Bandh' opposing CAA, asking me in return, "Why is that we are protesting only when Hindus are coming?"

The Assamese community today is at the crossroads, pondering where to head – to being Hindu first or an Assamese first, which comprises a syncretic culture promoted by the 15th century Vaishnava saint Sankardeva and the 17th century Sufi mystic Ajan Fakir. The bulk of Bhupen Hazarika's songs are perched on that syncretic, humane culture.

Even as the protest against the CAA continues in Assam and the fate of those nearly 20 lakh people left out of the final NRC is yet to be decided, the Modi government is set to unroll another set of legalities through the Clause 6 committee set up by the MHA last year. The committee, set up to provide recommendations to the Ministry to grant "constitutional safeguards" to "Assamese people" as per the Assam Accord (not for accepting those who came till December 2014 as per the CAA but for those who settled till March 1971), has recently submitted its report.

While the suggestions are not officially in the public domain yet, it is to be seen whether they will succeed in amicably minimising the fear and concern of the majority population. Or will they start a new chapter of 'us' and 'they', 'insider' and 'outsider', 'indigenous' and 'migrant', thus producing only a new set of leaders to further rumble the conflict-ridden politics of the state?

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