

SPOTLIGHT

Sitting inside her hut in Alipur char in lower Assam, India, 37-year-old Delowara Begum tries to explain where she is from. "I have always lived here," she says in a dialect of Bangla. "Sometimes there, a few kilometres away, when the river floods and my hut sinks. But never too far from here."

A few metres outside her door, people get off the ferry on the Brahmaputra river, holding baskets of spinach, bottle gourd and tomatoes, just harvested from the fertile river bank. One of them was a 23-year-old, Delowara's firstborn, whom she had named Delowar Khan, so he would always be a part of her. She gave birth to him when she was only 14 years old.

Delowara had gone to the village office to check if their family's name had appeared on the National Register of Citizens (NRC), a list that would determine their future in a way they had never prepared for. As he enters the hut, his mother and sister look expectantly at him.

"We are all in," he says, referring to himself, his father, a brother and two sisters. "But your name is not there, Ammi."

Delowara stares blankly at her son. And then at this reporter. "Will they send

voted to power for the first time in Assam in 2016.

For three years, the NRC has had over 3.29 crore people submitting tattered, yellowing identity and land documents in Assamese, Bengali and English. They had to log online to access digitised census data that goes back over 60 years. The NRC calls these List A documents, which establish ancestral presence before 1971. Households have also submitted intricate family trees listing siblings and grandchildren over four generations. They have had to find List B documents—birth certificates, school and college certificates, and land documents—linking them to their ancestors. NRC officials conducted more than 900,000 hearings with large families to identify, and thus verify, each other as descendants of the same ancestor.

Delowara is one of 40 lakh people in Assam who did not make it to the NRC list. Rajnath Singh, the Indian Minister for Home Affairs, assured people that they could appeal their exclusion from mid-August. No one excluded would be subject to punitive action, detention or deportation—yet.

So Delowara will have one more chance to appeal against her exclusion. But she does not have much reason to believe that she would be able to get on the list.

With a life shaped and reshaped by

devised to appease the flipside of Delowara's insecurity: Assamese anxiety about Bengalis. The resentment dates back to the colonial time, when the British Raj wooed Bengali peasant farmers to the largely Bodo and Assamese-speaking region with small plots of land. Over the years, different communities clashed over resources, and cultural and linguistic primacy. Riots and state-run anti-immigration programmes often targeted Bengali-speaking Muslims and Hindus who have lived in the region for generations. More recently, there is palpable alarm among the Assamese about the growing Muslim population in the state, often ascribed to illegal migration from Bangladesh, while statisticians say it is due to illiteracy and poverty.

The BJP added strong religious contours to the old divides. In parliament in 2016, it proposed a Citizenship (Amendment) Bill that seeks to recognise only non-Muslim migrants from neighbouring countries. Assam protested heavily against it. "We have no religious bias. We don't want Bengali Hindu immigrants either," argued former chief minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, leader of the Assamese nationalist Asom Gana Parishad, an ally of the BJP government in Assam.

Enumerators and village-level officials undertaking the NRC have been accused



PHOTOS: ROHINI MOHAN

HOW ASSAM'S CITIZENSHIP TEST DISOWNS ITS OWN PEOPLE

ROHINI MOHAN

me alone to Bangladesh now?" she asks. "But why? I'm from here."

The NRC is a list of people who have been able to prove that they were in India before the midnight of March 24, 1971, when Bangladesh declared independence. Assam, bordering Bangladesh, is the only Indian state with such a registry, which seeks to detect immigrants who may have entered India illegally after 1971.

Those on the list are deemed genuine Indian citizens, under laws and rules quite different from the rest of India. The 1971 date was decided in an agreement between the All Assam Students Union (AASU), Assam state government, and then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi after a violent anti-foreigner agitation in the early eighties. Sammujjal Bhattacharya, advisor to AASU that lead the 38-year-long movement against foreigners, says, "The NRC is a culmination of our long struggle against Bangladeshi infiltration, and we welcome it."

The citizenship registry is the biggest such effort in India, and perhaps the world. The Indian and Assam governments budgeted INR 1200 crores for the NRC. It was the plank on which the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was

the river, and having experienced migration, both long and short term, Delowara doesn't understand how a registry of citizenship could identify people's movement around a cut-off date from nearly 50 years ago, and across a sometimes-porous border. Owing no land, having never gone to school, and having delivered all her children at home, she barely had a sense of the Indian government. For her, being Indian means "flood relief" and "no attacks".

As Bengali-speakers, and Muslim at that, Delowara and her ancestors have often been conflated with Bangladeshi immigrants. Many like her had hoped that by getting on the NRC, the suspicion and related harassment would end.

But instead, the NRC process has rekindled simmering old divides, most visible today as warring claims about indigeneity between Assamese-speakers (especially caste Hindus) and Bengali-origin Muslims, both having historical roots in the region.

The NRC, monitored by the Supreme Court of India, sought to be identity-neutral. NRC's State Coordinator Hajela said, "The exercise is entirely about an individual, and his/her paperwork, not their religion, gender or language."

Practically, however, keeping identity out did not prove easy.

The NRC was born of an agreement



An 89-year-old walked to the NRC centre with his application number to check if he made it to the list. As the oldest ancestor, his entire family's citizenship depends on his.

of acting on their own biases. Hasina Ahmed, a 28-year-old woman from Alipur Char village, says an official rejected the village link certificate she submitted as proof of lineage. "He said it looked fake," she informs. Subsequently, a higher official cleared it as authentic. The NRC village offices allowed Assamese women to submit the same document with no verification. "They're original inhabitants," an official in Barpeta explains, citing a category that

does not officially exist. The release of the NRC list on July 30 was telling. The press conference began with officials and local journalists singing the Assamese state anthem, their heads held high. The list excludes over 12 percent from the about 3.29 crore people who applied. The NRC does not provide a demographic break-up, but within a week, ground reports showed that it was clear that most of these were Bengalis—Hindu and Muslim.



Double Jeopardy: Some of the 80 residents of Dholaguri Pathar village in Dhekiajuli who are facing their second trial in the Foreigners Tribunals, even after being declared Indian earlier

On the day the NRC released the list, in Sathkali village in Durrung district, 25-year-old Jintumoni Deka shrugs when asked if he had found his name on the list. "Of course, my name will be there," he says, admitting that he has not checked. "I'm Khilonjia"—Assamese for original inhabitant.

On the other hand, Shankar Barman, a Bengali Hindu government school teacher in Barpeta district, states that

although he had been included in the NRC list, his daughter, and son have been left out. "If I'm a citizen, then how come my children are not? What sense does it make?" he asks. His wife is excluded too. Her father, a Bengali Hindu refugee, was granted Indian citizenship in West Bengal—she herself was born in Cooch Behar district in West Bengal. "I don't understand. Will Assam not accept Indian citizenship granted in

another state?" asked Anima Barman. The most brutal exclusions are those of applicants whose parents or siblings are so-called "doubtful voters". This refers to those who were disenfranchised by the Election Commission of India in 1997 and 2005, and referred to Foreigners Tribunals by the Foreigners Regional Registration Office and Assam border police. These opaque and corrupt Tribunal and police processes have been determining nationality since the nineties. While these individuals attempt to establish their citizenship in the eyes of these courts, the whole family has to suffer. Until the Tribunals deliver a verdict determining their citizenship, the NRC defers a decision on the family's application.

"This process is entirely outside the NRC, and given to gross political interference," argues Hafiz Rashid Ahmed Choudhury, a senior advocate in the Gauhati High Court.

NRC State Coordinator Prateek Hajela says more than 248,000 persons were left out this way. Those who will not make



Shانبano Khatun, 55, shows how the border police asked her to give her fingerprints. Not on the NRC, she's scared she will now be taken to a detention camp.

the complete list will finally face these Foreigners Tribunals, which have of late declared hundreds of illiterate and poor people as foreigners over spelling and age errors in decades-old documents.

In a village in Dhekiajuli, at least 80 people showed certificates issued by the Tribunals in the past years that declared them Indian. And yet, they were not on the NRC list. Many of them had received notices to go on trial again. Fertiliser seller Maksidur Rahman said, "I'm sick of going to the tribunals and begging to be seen as Indian. No citizen should go through this."

Amidst the fear of Indians being declared foreigners, few in Assam are concerned about the fate of those who are indeed irregular immigrants from Bangladesh, and those who fail to reclaim their citizenship when the enormous bureaucratic exercise is finally complete.

There are over 90,000 declared illegal migrants in Assam already; over 1500 are

in six overcrowded detention camps. The Centre has approved funds for another exclusive detention camp, and Assam has set aside land that will accommodate 3000 people in Goalpara district.

India has no treaty with Bangladesh about returning the many more millions of "illegals" Assam says it will weed out. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi have already met thrice this year, but they have not discussed the NRC. The spokesperson for the Ministry of External Affairs, Raveesh Kumar, clarified, "The NRC will not impact India's excellent relationship with Bangladesh... The Bangladeshi government has taken the view that the ongoing process is an internal matter of India."

In the meanwhile, self-appointed border-guards in neighbouring states of Meghalaya and West Bengal are randomly blocking people at state borders, claiming to prevent an influx of the declared foreigners. Undeterred by the NRC's flaws, some quarters of Indian

nationalists are also demanding such an exercise for the entire country "to root out illegal immigration".

In the wake of West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee saying that the NRC "will destroy" India's friendship with Bangladesh, in a political rally in Kolkata, BJP President Amit Shah sharpened the debate. "We want to ask Mamata Banerjee why is she protecting the Bangladeshi infiltrators," he said using the word 'ghuspathiye'. "All that she has done is protest the NRC, but it is the process to throw illegal migrants out. Shouldn't Bangladeshi migrants be thrown out?" He suggested that an NRC should be carried out in West Bengal as well.

Even as the political slug fest continues, the two Prime Ministers are scheduled to meet on the sidelines of the BIMSTEC summit in Kathmandu beginning August 30.

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