

Bureaucracy, Gender, And State: A Critical Study Of Women's Vulnerability In Assam's NRC Regime

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Abstract

This study explores how women were unnecessarily excluded and threatened with the fear of exclusion by the state during the National Register of Citizens (NRC) process in Assam and their importance in the gendered nature of citizenship and bureaucracy in India. Even though the NRC was presented as an unbiased administrative exercise to recognize “genuine citizens” but in reality there exists social and gender differences in this practice. During the process, women were asked to produce lineage proofs which was found difficult especially for the rural, widowed, poor women and those from marginalized sections.

My research revolves around the particular question that in what ways did the bureaucratic process of Assam NRC make citizenship gendered and how do these difficulties produce deeper structural inequalities within the Indian state.

By using empirical examples drawn from case studies, field reports, observation, the paper examines patterns of gendered exclusion. For example, it has been found that many married women in Barpeta district in Assam could not produce their official legacy documents since they moved to their husband's place after marriage at a very young age and during that time such documents for women were not given much importance by the women's house. Then widows from families in

Dhemaji and Morigaon were regarded as “doubtful” voters since their property papers were destroyed during the floods. There exists several women who appeared before Foreigners Tribunal were regarded as “non citizen” because of little disparities in their father’s document like spelling mistakes, in such cases where men were less like to be penalized for.

By tracing these lived examples, it is clear that the NRC process was more hazardous for women as the bureaucratic authority favoured written records over social reality. Verification camps, lineage proofs, tribunal hearings not only reflect the gendered nature but also emphasized it. The study, thus calls for rethinking citizenship process so they could consider the structural barrier faced by women during NRC rather than reproducing them.

Keywords: *Gender, women, citizenship, Assam, NRC, bureaucracy, exclusion, structural inequalities, state, South Asia, intersectionality*

Introduction

The issue of belongingness to the nation-state is not only an administrative process but also a deeply political process designed to determine identity conflict, historical account and institutional power expression of citizenship verification in contemporary history. Although it’s declared purpose was to recognize “genuine citizens”, the Bureaucratic process through which recognition took place immensely disadvantaged women. This paper argues that NRC is not simply a bureaucratic process but a place where gender, citizenship and state power together intersect.

According to Marshall (1950) and Yuval Davis (2011) establishing on political science scholarship that envisage citizenship as both a formal status and a lived condition, it

asserts that bureaucratic process often strengthen structural inequalities rather than correcting them. Women faced distinguishing difficulties due to patriarchal norms ruling inheritance, marriage and documentation. Many lacked formal educational certificates, property titles and birth records- these are the documents considered as central to NRC verification. This gendered gap was further intensified for Muslim, Adivasis, and riverine-island communities whose life conditions make document retention difficult. By analyzing these dynamics, this paper argues that NRC must be seen as a political process of state categorization which is enormously incriminated in gendered form of elimination.

My research question emerged from this concern that in what ways did the bureaucratic process of Assam NRC create gender-based barrier to citizenship, and how does these barriers reveal deeper structural inequalities within the Indian state. This question is important not only because it focuses on the results of NRC but the political logic deeply rooted in the bureaucratic structure themselves. Bureaucracy is often seen as unbiased and rule-bound, but political scientists like Hannah Arendt (1973) argues that citizenship is not merely a legal categorization but the “right to have rights” which can be eroded by administrative procedures. In a similar way, scholars like Akhil Gupta (2012) in his book *Red Tape*, shows that state is accomplished through everyday interaction with the bureaucratic agents and not really through the constitution. When we apply these logics to NRC, it becomes clearer that citizenship was not only determined by constitutional rules but by the specific documents like birth records, education certificates and so on, to prove their citizenship which majority of them simply did not have due to long history of gender inequalities.

Theoretical Framework – The Gendered State and Citizenship
Political science has questioned the gendered nature of state institutions. According to Charlesworth (2000, pp.190-212) and Chinkin (2000, pp.5-9), feminist political science theorists argue that the modern state - in no way a neutral mediator - reflects masculine norms in its structure, categories and bureaucratic logic. Gender becomes integral part of the administration and policy-making through everyday routines from documentation to classification.

Nira Yuval Davis (1997) conceptualized citizenship as multi-layered surrounding legal status, rights and political conditions which is enormously important to understand why the NRCs disproportionately impaired women. Citizenship is not merely something that one own but something one must constantly perform and prove through state- declared documents (pp.9- 12). When women lack such documents due to patriarchal social structure, citizenship become doubtful.

The classic work by T.H Marshall (1950) on citizenship recognizes social, political and civil dynamics, but feminist theorists have expanded his model by revealing that access to each dimension is regulated by gender inequalities. It is gender that determines who should own land, who gets educated and who controls household documents. These everyday structural factors regulate a women's ability to "perform" citizenship in bureaucratic spaces such as NRC hearings.

Partha Chatterjee's groundwork on "political society" also provide perception suggesting that marginalized communities communicate with state institutions through unstable negotiation of identification and not through formal citizenship (2004, pp.38-43). Women in Assam especially rural and Muslim women ended up navigating this unsettled

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Documentation regimes are not gender- neutral. According to scholars like Fox et.al, 2010, Brandt (2014) and Krishna (2002) have revealed that administrative system in developing democracies generate exclusive results when marginalized communities lack documents, literacy and institutional access. These structural difficulties in the context of Assam were intensified by patriarchal norms that confine women's public mobility and documentation ownership.

Thus, NRC must not be seen as an administrative process but also as political technology of state power that produce gendered hierarchy through apparently neutral bureaucratic process.

Historical -Political Context of citizenship in Assam

The politics of citizenship in Assam is somewhat attached to the regional histories of migration, ethnic mobilization and linguistic identity. The emergence of NRC traces back to the decades of controversy around the presence of Bengali speaking population. The Assam Movement (1979-1985) by All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the later Assam Accord institutionalized the demand for recognition of “illegal migrants”, shaping the political discourse of belonging. These political conflicts fabricated an environment where bureaucratic mechanisms, such as the NRC became an instrument of policing.

If we go back to the history, women had limited participation in this political mobilization, yet they became very susceptible during bureaucratic Citizenship determination. Scholars like Hassim (2006, pp.145-168) argues that women in societies where they have less access to formal institutions, drawing of state boundary disproportionately harm them. The NRC, in Assam, enlarge this dynamic by involving documentation of lineage which a biased process against women who lost their houses in natural calamities or changed their residence during marriage.

In this respect, the NRC should be seen not only as an administrative procedure but also an political indicator that signifies historical concerns over migration, ethnic identity and social control. It epitomizes how citizenship verification, though drafted as an unbiased technical process, reproduces historical inequalities and structural biases, particularly along the lines of gender. Political scientists note that these bureaucratic mechanisms often operate as a form of “categorical state power” where the definition of belonging is shaped as much by historical narratives and political priorities

as by legal frameworks (Gupta.2012, p.17). Thus, women's exclusion from the NRC cannot be separated from Assam's historical-political landscape; it is an outcome of decades of regional politics, social hierarchies, and state attempts to enforce a particular conception of citizenship.

Bureaucratic Documentation and Gendered Vulnerability

Citizenship verification under NRC is highly dependent on what the state defined as "acceptable documents" which includes birth certificate, voter list, land records, school certificate and legacy documents connecting individuals to ancestors listed before 1971. It is argued by the political scientists that bureaucratic process shaped inclusion and exclusion not only through rules but also a typical assumption of the state about what a "typical citizen" look like (Lipsky.1980, pp.27-31). In the NRC, the "model citizen" was tacitly imagined as one who possessed stable property, long- term residence and continuous documentation which were common among men in Assam.

There were many women who did not have the birth certificate because institutional birth became common only in 2000s in Assam. Marriage migration meant that a woman often moved to a new village, abandoning her natal home documents. According to Agarwal (1994, pp.58-61), Land titles intensely favor men due to patriarchal inheritance norms. Thus, women were unable to produce primary documents. Secondary documents such as Panchyat certificates were acknowledged but exposed to special verification process, generating an additional bureaucratic obstacles that disproportionately affected rural women.

Many studies shows that around 19 lakh people were excluded from the final NRC list including women who used Panchayat-issued certificates as evidence of linkage (Human

Rights Law Network, 2019). These certificates were questioned even when they were legally valid. Thus, Bureaucratic suspicion became gendered: women's documents were considered as weak, risky and less authentic. "Street - level bureaucrats" in Lipsky's term used discretionary power that led to propagation of structural inequalities. These designs explain that the NRC was merely a documentation practice but a political process that systematized patriarchal biases into the very procedure of citizenship verification.

Intersectionality: Gender, Religion, Class, and Geography

The concept of intersectionality as the term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is critical for understanding why women's rejection from Assam's NRC cannot be described by gender only. It points to how important multiple axes of identification such as religion, gender, class, and location interact to give rise to layered form of deprivation (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1244). In the NRC process, women's vulnerability is further heightened by intersecting gender with poverty, minor religious communities and ecological insecurity.

Muslim women and the Politics of Suspicion

Muslim women in Assam were inaccurately affected by the NRC process because of the long-lived political tradition of demographic tension that shapes Bengali-speaking Muslims as "outsiders" or "suspect citizens". According to Yuval-Davis (2011, pp.23-26), feminist scholars argue that gendered exclusion is expanded when women belong to marginalized communities as their claims to citizenship are strained through communal stereotypes. There are many Muslim women who lacked formal educational certificates, birth records or property rights due to early marriage which forced them to rely upon certificates as given by the Panchayat which was often looked down with mistrust.

Adivasi and Tea Garden Women

Adivasi women who were working in Assam tea plantations suffer from distinct form of rejection. In spite of being the resident for generations, many were there who lack legacy documents as their ancestors were appointed as a migrant laborers during the colonial times without any formal recordings (Xaxa.2008, pp. 141-145). Their labor contribution to the regional economy has not translated into documented citizenship, this signifying how class and labor history intersect with gender to frame exclusion.

Char and Riverine population

Women living in Char (riverine island) areas suffered typically due to frequent flooding and erosion, which regularly destroyed home and documents. Scholars like Ribot (2008, pp. 204- 212) studying environmental governance argue that bureaucratic system often overlook ecological vulnerability, leading to displacement of population. For women, who simply do not control documentation leading environmental loss into legal invisibility.

Together, these intersections show that NRC exclusion was not arbitrary but overlapping system of power. Gender interacted with religion, class, geography to form distinct type of citizenship hazards strengthening the point that the NRC functioned as a political mechanism of stratification and not just neutral governance.

Empirical Illustrations from Assam: District level patterns

A comprehensive picture emerges when we look into district -level patterns, where gendered exclusion was clearly visible. Following are the examples drawn from publicly documented reports and field studies.

Barpeta District

In Barpeta, repeated flooding led to displacement of families for number of times. It has been found that during such situations, women lost their documents because men generally controlled document storage (Deccan Herald Report, 2019). In households, where men usually leave

for work seasonally, women were left alone to handle the NRC hearings even without having any guidance. According to Ribot (2008, pp. 204-212), it is argued by political scientists studying disaster -prone regions that administrative procedures often fail to account for environmental hazards. The rigid documentary requirement of NRC ignored the fragile material condition of char and riverine population further intensifying gendered vulnerability.

Nagaon and Morigaon District

Reports reveal that many women who used Gaon Panchayat secretary certificate faced huge delays or re verification processes. In many cases, discrepancies in spellings - a widespread phenomenon in transliteration were served as proof of suspicious identity. According to scholars like Krishna (2002, pp. 79-84) bureaucracy often mistaken minor error as identity discrepancy affecting women with limited literacy.

Dhubri District

Dhubri, which has one of the highest concentrations of Muslim women population with low formal literacy saw thousands of struggles to produce birth or school records. There were cases like many were married off early or dropped school before class V. Without these certificates, they had to depend only on Panchayat linkage certificate but they are frequently questioned by NRC authorities. Even women who migrated

after marriage to different districts faced additional residency complications which aligns with the concept how marriage practices intersect with bureaucratic democracy.

Comparative Perspective: Gendered Citizenship in South Asia

Assam 's NRC is not unique. Citizenship verification in South Asia has often resulted in gendered exclusion. According to Hossain (2017, pp.112-118) in Bangladesh, the voter issue list faced similar discrepancy where women lacking land rights faced difficulties in proving their identity. Studies on the Rohingya crisis by UNHCR also explain how women fleeing persecution often did not have any legal documents making them more susceptible to statelessness.

According to Ghimire (2017, pp. 44-52), the 2006 citizenship act in Nepal required paternal proof for citizenship by descent, making many women's children stateless. In Tamil Nadu, many women failed to produce documents for re-citizenship due to the displacement during civil war.

According to scholars like Yuval Davis (1997, pp. 23-29), modern documentation regimes accept stable surname, fixed border, and patrilineal lineages, emphasizing the idea that men anchor the family 's political identity. In South Asia where women often change their name and address after marriage, their bureaucratic logic of citizenship clashes with social reality.

Pakistan also reveals a similar pattern where the National Database and Registration Authority frequently rejected application from women who does not have a male guardianship documentation. These examples shows that gendered exclusion from citizenship is not unique to Assam but a part broader system of South Asian political pattern in

which bureaucratic state render women's identity through patriarchal suppositions. What makes Assam particularly significant is that exclusion did not occur from such margins but through state -recognized project that claimed legality and neutrality.

Sri Lanka's perpetual civil war and internal displacement provide us a crucial insight into how conflict aggravate gendered Citizenship vulnerabilities. Women who were displaced as a result of war causing destruction of house, forced migration leading to the loss of identification documents. Studies reveal that post - war document recuperation procedures were often not available to women because of complex bureaucratic structure, language barriers and the assumption of household documents to be under the control males (UNHCR,2015). Widows were particularly affected since the authority preferred document related to male kin. This experience coincidences with the char and Riverine population of Assam, where environmental displacement caused documentary loss, highlighting how both conflict and ecological instability overlap with gender to erode official citizenship claims.

Thus, the comparison suggests that NRC is a part of a broader system in which state -led citizenship verification disproportionately affected women's belonging, particularly in society with strong patriarchal tradition. This, Assam's case became a crucial case for grasping how administrative procedures can erode the democratic promise of equal citizenship.

Political Consequences of Exclusion

According to Das (2007, p.40) being left out of the NRC does not make someone stateless but it places them at a risk of being identified as "foreigners" in the tribunal court.

Excluded women found themselves in long standing battle with the fear that they might be excluded from getting the right to vote, getting access to welfare schemes or securing their children's future. For poor and marginalized women, exclusion intensified existing vulnerabilities. The political climate encompassing the NRC, especially anti -migrant rhetoric, increased the fear. This seems to appear not only a bureaucratic exercise but a political protect that louden the concern over identity, nationhood and belonging.

The Citizenship Amendment Act added further political complexities by giving access to the non Muslim communities to obtain citizenship while, in actuality, the NRC's main aim was to recognize migrants without proper documentation. According to Sharma (2019), this meant that Muslim women were more severely affected by this documentation failures. The integration of CAA and NRC created a risk by distinguishing Citizenship regime, when legal rights stands on both religion and paperwork. According to Saika (2019. P, 900), the exposure of women at the intersection of gender and religious vulnerabilities mirror South Asian regional trends: Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Myanmar show similar selective citizenship practice based on the gendered nature.

Democratic Implications of Gendered Citizenship Regimes

The NRC poses fundamental question equality, democracy and political membership. According to liberal democratic theory, citizenship promises equal protection and rights under the law. However, feminist political theorists argue that formal equality often conceals significant inequality when institutions fail to think for social hierarchy (Lister.2003, p.75)

Formal Equality vs. Substantive citizenship

Even though, women are officially equal citizens under the Indian constitution, the NRC imposed a gap between legal equality and lived citizenship. When access to rights rely on documentation and not on substantive belonging which is based on only legal documents and no meaningful inclusion in the society, citizenship becomes restricted and uneven. As a result, it suppresses the democratic promise of equal citizenship as said by Menon (2012, p.29).

Bureaucracy and the erosion of Democratic Inclusion

The NRC epitomizes how bureaucratic rationality can erode democratic inclusivity by changing political queries into technical processes. According to scholars like Ramanathan (2009, pp.118- 121), when citizenship verification heavily burdens on document, the state shifts control onto individual while hiding it's own role in giving rise to inequality.

Rise of Statelessness and Democratic Backsliding

The chances of detention, disfranchisement or Statelessness particularly for women points to a hazardous shift from welfare -oriented governance to coercive state power. Political theorists like Hannah Arendt (1973, pp.296-302) alert that those practices regularize exclusion and undermine democratic accountability.

Rethinking citizenship in Democratic States

From a political science perspective, the NRC compels a rethinking citizenship keeping behind the legal formalism. Citizenship must be acknowledged as a political relationship shaped by power, history and social structure. The gender inequalities remain unaddressed implanted in documentation regime, as a result democratic risk producing exclusion under the form of administrative order.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that NRC process in Assam offers a revealing case of how bureaucratic system propagate gendered exclusion. While the NRC presented itself as a neutral administrative practice, it's reliance on inflexible documentary norms- birth certificate, property titles, school records, lineage proofs was profoundly disordered with women's socio-economic realities. Patriarchal inheritance systems, marriage migration, limited educational access, and environmental vulnerabilities combined to position women as disproportionately at risk of exclusion.

My research question about how do gendered system of documentation, mobility, inheritance communicate with bureaucratic structure to disproportionately make women vulnerable to exclusion in the NRC process clearly find its answer that the interaction between gendered life path and bureaucratic logic of the state produces structured inequality. Thus, the NRC becomes a political tool of categorization rather than a neutral tool of governance.

From a political science perspective, this case provides broader theoretical insights that is citizenship is not simply a legal categorization but a product of history, power and administrative pattern. The gendered state, according to political feminist theorists, remains deeply rooted in the everyday functioning of political institutions. Understanding Assam's NRC through this lens exposes the limits of bureaucratic rationality and make us to rethink how democracies define membership in ways that do not propagate inequalities.

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