WHAT CITIZENSHIP MEANS IN A 'PERIPHERY' OF A PERIPHERY: WOMEN'S NARRATIVES

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS CITIZENSHIP?

The manifestation of citizenship today lies in one's belonging to a particular nationality by holding documents indicating it, and entails deriving certain entitlements and claims associated with it. The commonly accepted notion of citizenship can be located in one of its earliest formulations by T.H. Marshall (1950) as 'full and equal membership in a political community'. With changes in societies over time, the notion of citizenship also underwent changes, whether it was globalisation or the issue of migration. Developments in the 19th century, corresponding with the growing influence of liberalism and capitalism also played a role. The period after both the World Wars had a significant impact on the definition of citizenship. A universal concept of citizenship unfolded in the post-War era based on universalism rather than national belonging (Soysal 1994). The idea of citizenship goes back to city-states in Greece, where the notion of citizenship came with certain privileges offered only to a select

few. The way citizenship is understood today as a system of rights as opposed to privileges took roots in the French Revolution in 1789. The concept of citizenship is a deeply contested one, even more so in a globalised world. Distinguishing between a citizen and a non-citizen is an arduous task, with ramifications for rights, duties, collectivities, and nation-states.

Roy (2010) states that some authors like Hoffman (2004) have asserted that citizenship is a momentum concept unlike other concepts such as state, patriarchy, and violence, which makes it infinitely progressive and egalitarian. This aspect of citizenship makes way for dismantling hierarchical inequalities and for enjoyment of citizenship rights. The dismantling of hierarchies has led to the enlargement of its inclusivity. Yuval-Davis (1997) says, 'The question arises then, what will happen to those members of the civil society who cannot or will not become full members of that "strong community."' She further states, in virtually all contemporary states, there are migrants and refugees, 'old' and 'new' minorities, and in settler societies, there are also indigenous people who are not part of the hegemonic national community (Yuval-Davis 1997). Citizenship then has been able to include many previously excluded groups, yet with a clear distinction between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', which has posed a challenge to many who couldn't be a part of the categories defining citizenship.

Brysk and Shafir (2004) argue that in present times, we are faced with two alternative traditions—citizenship and human rights—that interact in crucial ways. These traditions have been propelled by conflicting aims: anchoring rights in membership versus disconnecting them from membership, thus universalising them. While anchoring rights in membership poses the challenge of 'exclusion' for those who do not fit into a pre-defined category of citizenship, others have pointed towards the limitation of universalising an idea of human rights. In this context Brown (2007) writes, '…that individuals have, or should have, "rights" is itself contentious, and the idea that rights could be attached to individuals by virtue solely of their common

humanity is particularly subject to penetrating criticism.' His view comes from a critique of a liberal assumption of rights. He writes,

> The language of rights has facilitated the establishment of some of the freest, safest and most civilised societies known to history; on the basis of this record, in the second half of the twentieth century the liberal position has been extracted from its original association with particular kind of societies and turned into a template against which all regimes are to be judged.

Brown's understanding of human rights helps explain why for people from Assam, a discourse on 'human rights' associated with the undocumented migrating population from Bangladesh becomes problematic. Though there is no denying that human rights are important for the protection of the rights of people otherwise vulnerable, in Assam's context it has stood in sharp contrast with the indigenous rights to land and resources. Young (1989) argues that the universality of citizenship stands in tension with the other two meanings of universality embedded in modern political ideas: universality as generality and universality as equal treatment.

Yuval-Davis (1997) talks about another peculiar understanding of rights in which, 'the social rights of the poor are transferred, at least partly, from entitlements into charities.' In the context of Britain, the notion of 'the active citizen' has been put forward as an alternative to a welfare state in which the citizen fulfils their citizenship duties by giving spare money and time 'to the community', resulting in concerns around citizenship being a domain of politics and becoming involuntary involvement within civil society.[1]

Kymlicka (1995) explores the negotiations between individual and collective rights and talks about two claims that an ethnic or national group might make. The first is a claim made by the group against its own members, and the second is a claim made against larger society.

This discussion points towards the fact that citizenship as a concept has evolved over time. While those with citizenship claims have some form of rights attached to it, a lot lies in the grey area for

a non-citizen. A key dilemma of citizenship when defining a citizen is that it automatically excludes others who do not fit those definitions. This domain of exclusion is further complicated by globalisation, migration, and indigenous rights.

WOMEN AS CITIZENS

How does one look at women's experiences as citizens? A partial answer to this is by looking at women's 'experience' and 'language', and 'to address women's lives and experience in their own terms, to create theory grounded in the actual experience and language of women. Many a times, however, an exclusive focus on women leaves the problem of other genders and social minorities out of the analysis. Therefore, the importance of feminist, queer, and intersectional perspectives is acknowledged.

In India's context, the construction of women as citizens can be understood primarily with reference to the nation. Roy (2005) writes,

> The domestic became the arena where the nationalist (male) ventured to mark and define an Indian modernity. This modernity, conceived as the enduring spirit and essence of Indianness, was culled and sifted from a past unstained and unsullied by alien presence and dominance.

She further looks at how women were constituted as atavistic members of the political community; however, the nature of male membership is constructed as forward looking, active citizens capable of effecting change in their surroundings.

A study of citizenship and women is not just about contrasting the experiences of women with those of men but also about understanding women's position vis-à-vis the other group. Yuval Davis (1997) writes, 'A comparative study of citizenship should consider the issue of women's citizenship not only in contrast to that of men, but also

in relation to women's affiliation to dominant or subordinate groups, their ethnicity, origin and urban or rural residence.'

While the Indian national movement's relation to women is well researched and documented, research on women's diversified experiences is of recent origin. In the nationalist project, women are typically seen as symbolic bearers of the nation, but are denied any direct relation to national agency or citizenship. The subsumption of women in the national body politic is done by turning them into symbols of national honour, essence of the nation, as signifiers of differences or metaphorical boundaries between nations, and, by implication, men's power (Roy 2005). The needs of the nation are identified with men's aspirations in the nationalist discourse.

The division between the public and private domains gets re-asserted time and again in understanding women's roles. Earlier, women's roles were defined in terms of their feminine roles in familial spaces and not in the context of the public space, which was a domain of men and a contestation with the colonial powers. More often than not, women's participation in or contribution to the national liberation movement was either wrapped in the folds of a masculinist history or conceived in terms of supportive roles of nurses and cooks. Some feminists point towards the limitation of the public-private dichotomy in presenting the entire picture. 'Given all these inconsistencies and confusions in the determination of the "private" domain, I suggest that we abandon the public/private distinction. Rather, we should differentiate between three distinct spheres of the state, civil society and the domain of the family, kinship and other primary relationships' (Yuval-Davis 1997).

Women's experiences vis-à-vis the nation in the Northeast are significantly different. Compared to other parts of the country, women are relatively better placed in societies of Northeast India, with Meghalaya's Khasi society often being cited as an example of a matrilineal society. Yet, over the years it has been seen that women's position in these societies is only relatively better. While looking at

gender and infrastructure in Northeast India, Dolly Kikon(2019) writes,

> Across Northeast India, women have always been visible figures in the market spaces as vendors, workers, traders, and owners of mobile food kiosks. They have always remained visible in the public places as workers – in construction sites, road repairs and agricultural fields. They are also the driving force to keep the household running from cooking for the family, feeding the cattle, mending clothes, taking care of the sick, to fetching water and tilling the land. In tribal societies across Northeast India, the predominant distinction of gender identity is set by the traditional councils and the ancestral inheritance rights. *Women are neither allowed to hold decision making powers nor are they allowed to inherit ancestral property* [emphasis added].

The anti-CAA movement in the recent past saw women come out on the streets in large numbers to protest against the act. The Shaheen Bagh movement in Delhi was seen as a movement led by women. In the years to come, Shaheen Bagh will be etched in the archives of history as one of its kind. It will be remembered for being exemplary on several counts, more so as a movement spearheaded by women who had so far been identified as faceless, mute, and with practically no engagement in the 'public sphere' (Kazim 2020).

It becomes important here to look back at the women's movement in the 1980s and 1990s. That movements were clearly generated through ideas of citizens' rights, peopled and led by women. Any study on the participation of women in protests in India will be incomplete without referring to the history of their participation in those movements.

In the 1990s, the resurgence of the women's movement and its contours have to be seen in the light of: (1) the crisis of the state and government in the 1970s going into the emergency, (2) the post-emergency upsurge in favour of civil rights, (3) the mushrooming of women's organisations in the early 1980s and the arrival of women's issues on the agenda (of Indian movements) and (4) a fundamentalist

advance marking the mid-1980s and a deepening of the crisis in the 1990s with regard to the state, government, and society (Mazumdar & Agnihotri 1995).

Mokkil (2018) writes about changing contours of women's participation, 'Political claims to the public sphere have acquired new velocity in India with the mobilisations against sexual violence after the Delhi gang rape on December 16, 2012.' Mokkil further observes that many of these campaigns perpetuate the conception of a feminine subject whose sexuality is an aspect of her enclosed and safeguarded interiority.

The women's movement in India has come of age and has been able to raise crucial questions of importance from time to time. The protests that were witnessed in Assam towards the end of 2019 and beginning of 2020, saw a large number of women protesting on the streets and comparisons of their participation were made primarily in relation to a nationalist discourse. A news report said,

> Assamese women, who have been part of the recent protests, have been coming out in the thousands to protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). Remembering the enchanting legacy of the brave Ahom female warrior Mula Gabhoru who had fought off the invading Turbak army in the 16th century, the protestors vowed to fight against immigrants and 'protect the motherland' (Devi 2019).

Kalita and Dutta (2019)'s news report quoted the All Assam Students Union (AASU) as saying, 'Participation of women is the key to the success of any movement in the world. The women of this state had contributed immensely towards the success of the Assam agitation. This relentless, non-violent and disciplined movement will continue till the CAA is scrapped.'

Scholars from the region have pointed out that when it comes to Northeast India, things cannot be explained by reinforcing a nationalist narrative. The narrative here gets complicated by the history of the region. Bora (2010) emphasises that the body of a

A photo from the protest shared by Rupjyoti Dutta, who participated in the protest and was interviewed for the study.

Northeastern woman is not just her body. The history of the region too gets entwined in her body. Bora also points out how a discourse on human rights might not be sufficient to uncover its complicated layers. Women's rights as understood in a human rights language do not provide us with the tools to understand how this particular body is entangled with Northeastern politics, as it considers the category of a 'woman'. By dissecting the protests around the Manorama Devi rape incident, she looks at how the discourse of rights is entangled between the 'human, citizen and the tribal', pointing towards how a human rights language might not be adequate for explaining the violations under the garb of Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), where the people of the 'Northeast' need not necessarily be seen as 'complete national subjects'.

AFSPA also provides a sense of impunity. To date, Manorama's killers have not been brought to justice. S.K. Das (2008) cited in Bora (2010) stated that the nude protest in Manipur was an expression of political motherhood as opposed to biological motherhood. The Manipur instance mentioned here is not meant to mean that experiences of all women in the region are homogeneous. However, one should also not overlook the predominant role that the state has played from time to time in the region.

METHODOLOGY

Updating the National Register of Citizens and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) triggered debates around citizenship and protests across the country, particularly in the Northeast region. Massive gatherings with large women's participation were observed even in small peripheral towns in the region. This article: i) explores the debates on citizenship in the larger narrative as well as in a localised context; and ii) tries to understand the perspectives and drivers of these women's protests.

Both primary and secondary sources are used in this research. Secondary sources include books, articles, and newspaper clippings. Women from the Dhemaji district who participated in the movement constituted the primary sources. In-depth interviews were conducted with these women. Due to the pandemic and incessant rain in September 2020 in Dhemaji, going to many places was restricted. The interviews were transcribed, and a thematic analysis was done.

Dhemaji district has a population of 6,86,133 with a 47.5 per cent tribal population as per Census, 2011. The urban population is only around 7 per cent, which indicates the predominantly rural character of the district. The anti-CAA protests at the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020 saw a large gathering in Dhemaji.[2] Despite the fact that a large number of people came together for the protests, it would be wrong to assume that the people who participated were a homogeneous group. Most of the people who came out were 'ethnic Assamese'. In Assam, a line of demarcation has existed between 'Assamese' and the tribal communities since the time when the region came under the British colonisers. Defining who an Assamese is has not been easy, and scholars from the region have engaged with this question for quite some time now. The definition of 'Assamese' has its own internal diversities as well as unresolved contradictions. While writing this paper, attempts were made not to overlook these diversities.

Mishra (1999) writes, 'The demographic break-up of the Assamese society on the eve of British entry into the province may be said to have included the different ethnic groups brought within the Hindu fold, the caste Hindus, the plains tribal communities and the relatively small number of Assamese Muslims.' However, the early 19th century saw increasing dissatisfaction among the tribal population. Congress leaders like Gopinath Bardoloi and Chandranath Sarmah were aware of the need to address justified tribal fears, but this was not necessarily reflected in the different rungs of Assamese society and politics. Deka (2019) offers a look into how the question 'Who is Assamese?' has been a central point of debate around which many of the identity claims in Assam have been negotiated. Deka (2019) writes, '...by the next round of tripartite talks held on April 10, 2000 in Guwahati, home ministry officials raised a question on the definition of the Assamese people, for the purpose of reserving seats for them in Parliament, the state assembly and local bodies.' Baruah too emphasises the need to incorporate other voices that sometimes stand in conflict with the 'ethnic' Assamese voice. Baruah writes,

> While my unusual field trips have been the source of many insights, I have also had to guard against the danger of privileging the ethnic Assamese experience. Assam, after all, is a multiethnic place, and the heart of many of its political and cultural conflicts is the fact that Assam is a land frontier with many 'immigrant' communities…. I hope I have succeeded in empathically incorporating other voices .that sometimes stand in conflict with the 'ethnic Assamese' voice, notably that of her many 'immigrant' communities and indigenous 'tribal' peoples such as the Bodos, Karbis and Misings.

NORTHEAST AS A 'PERIPHERY'

Northeast India has been at the peripheral political imagination of the Centre. This has led to this region being relatively underdeveloped as compared to many other states in the country despite being rich

in natural resources. Once the Look East Policy was launched in the 1990s, Northeast India became a frontier for a renewed focus on the East in terms of political imagination as well as policy implications. The Look East Policy was thought to have worked in filling the gaps in development. The main objective of the policy was the region's economic integration with East and Southeast Asia. This policy was also perceived as a policy towards reducing the Northeast's lack of development in terms of infrastructure and economy. With the launch of this policy, India saw the region not as a *cul-de-sac* but as a gateway to the East, thereby attempting to link the Northeastern region with Southeast Asia through a network of pipelines, roads, and rail and air connectivity (Haokip 2011). However, the policy did not impact the region much in terms of development. India's 'Look East' thrust in foreign policy may have helped the Northeast in terms of better transport linkages with the neighbourhood and greater market access for products made in the region, but the government's Vision 2020 document admits that the region needs huge improvements in infrastructure to become sufficiently attractive for big-time investors, domestic or foreign (Bhaumik 2009).

The region has also witnessed reluctance from the national leadership in making a commitment for the development of the region. Going back in history, the Refinery Movement (1956-57) of Assam points towards such reluctance. After the discovery of oil in post-independent India in Naharkatiya, Assam, an expert committee favoured Calcutta as the site for the refinery. A refinery in Calcutta was expected to gain profit like the coast-based refineries in Bombay and Vishakhapatnam (Baruah 2011). The resolution to establish a refinery in Assam was taken in the legislative assembly on 3 April 1956. However, no assurance for the same was given by the central government. Under pressure by the movement, the central government later decided to establish two refineries, one in Noonmati, Assam and the other in Barauni, Bihar under the public sector. It also took the Government of India 45 years to ensure that the broad-gauge track went beyond Guwahati. In fact, it reached Guwahati only in the 1980s.

Language has been another point of contestation. Referring to the imposition of Bengali in Assam by the British so that they could import Bengali Hindus who were educated in English and could help administer the place, Hazarika (1994) notes,

> Within a few years of the conquest of Assam, Bengali became the language of the courts and remained the official language until 1873. Assamese was passed off as a poor relative. The schools were in Bengali and in the race for jobs, the Bengali had a major advantage: his home state, the first to be colonised by the British, had English language schools and colleges. The first College in Assam did not start until 1901.

The Assamese people, however, regained some amount of official recognition after their language was made a valid medium for government work and school education when the state was detached from the Bengal Province in 1874.

In the post-Independence period, some of the states in the Northeast started demanding autonomy from the Indian Union. The demands were mostly met with force. Hazarika (1994) points towards the fact that these issues were addressed by the following three methods: i) brute force to crush physical capacity to resist; ii) a flood of funds to soften the resolve of indigenous groups; iii) and a campaign to portray them as 'misguided' elements.

Highlighting the situation in Northeast India, Bhaumik (2009) writes,

> How could the government deny the people of North East the democracy and the economic progress other Indians were enjoying? What moral right did Delhi have to impose draconian laws in the region and govern the North East through retired generals, police and intelligence officials? How could political problems be solved only by military means? Was India perpetrating internal colonisation and promoting "development of under-development?" These were questions that a whole new generation of Indian intellectuals, human rights activists,

journalists, and simple do-gooders continued to raise in courtroom battles, in the media space, even on the streets of Delhi, Calcutta or other Indian cities.

THE CITIZENSHIP QUESTION IN INDIA VIS-À-VIS ASSAM

To understand the citizenship debate in Assam one needs to look at the history of the region. The categories of nation, citizen, migration, and human rights are a part of discussions of/about the region. Baruah (1999) looks at the limits of the 'nation-building' process when it comes to Northeast India. He writes, 'The teleology of nation-building has to some extent enabled political scientists to avoid the issue of how to accommodate the logic of sub-nationalism into political institutions.' Baruah looks into the political and economic history of Assam from the time it became a part of British India. He traces the history of tensions between pan-Indianism and Assamese sub-nationalism since the early days of Indian nationalism.

According to Guha (1980), 'Ever since its beginnings in the early nineteenth century, our nationalism has been developing at two levels - one all-India and another regional on the basis of regional-cultural homogeneities. From the very outset, the two nationalisms are found intertwined and dovetailed.'

Pisharoty (2019) looks at events in Assam from the perspective of the Assam Accord, which is pertinent for understanding events in Assam since the time the NRC was updated. Key clauses of the Assam Accord remained unimplemented during Mahanta's controversial tenures(1985-1990; 1996-2001) and through the Congress rule (2001-2016), which ended with the BJP's victory in the state in 2016. Central to this accord was deportation of those who could not prove their roots in India prior to 24 March 1971. In 2015, the process of updating the NRC based on the 1971 cut-off of the accord began.

While the process of updating NRC had takers in the region, the people of Assam were critiqued for supporting the process. In a region that was not yet developed in terms of infrastructure and the economy, the capacity to absorb a huge population coming in from a neighbouring country for decades became an arduous task.

The NRC led to considerable discussions and two persistent lines of argument were seen about the process: one that opposed the process of updating the NRC, and the other that made an appeal to look at the history and conditions leading up to the NRC (Buragohain 2019). Besides, arguments based on a critique of capitalism also marked these discussions. These arguments were based on the fact that globalisation benefits from the vulnerability of labour. Roy (2016) writes that an absence of contestation over the NRC in Assam was symptomatic of the continuing appeal of an 'authentic' Assamese identity, which is currently being officially debated in the state, and of trust in an 'efficient' mechanism of identification of citizens, painstakingly developed by the NRC commissioner of Assam. Baruah (1999) writes,

> The citizenship issue in Assam is complicated and embroiled in two highly sensitive questions: (a) Treatment of India's Muslim minority population, and (b) What many see as an unavoidable legacy of India's partition in 1947: India's de facto obligation to allow Hindu refugees from Pakistan to settle in India.

Pointing to the persistence of the immigration issue in Assamese public life, Baruah (1999) further writes,

> An influential set of essays entitled *Axomot Bidexi* (foreigners in Assam) by Gyananath Borah was published in Raychaudhuri's *Cetana*. These essays were also printed as a booklet with the title *Axomot Bidexi* in 1935. It is a sign of the persistence of the immigration issue in Assamese public life that the booklet was reprinted in 1996.

In the last few years, the citizenship issue has become complicated in India with the proposal for NRC in every state in addition to the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB). With the passing of

CAB, the entire country was pushed towards unrest. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) occupied the centre stage of politics until the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country and the world. In this context, it becomes imperative to examine the idea of citizenship as it unfolded and what the 'Assamese exception' or the unique context of the citizenship debate in Assam is. Since the time of independence till today, the citizenship question in Assam has gone through various phases. It also led to unrest in the state in the 1970s in the form of the Assam movement. During this period and after, the dates for establishing citizenship status were vehemently debated.

In the 1980s, following the Assam Accord, the principle of differentiated citizenship was given legal recognition through an amendment to the Citizenship Act in 1986. It added Section 6A, which introduced a sixth category of citizenship in India along with birth, descent, registration, naturalisation, and incorporation of foreign territory into India. This new category of citizenship was to apply exclusively to Assam. All persons of Indian origin who came before the first day of January 1966 to Assam from the specified territory (including those whose names were included in the electoral rolls used for the purposes of the General Election to the House of the People held in 1967) and who had been ordinarily residents of Assam since the dates of their entry into Assam were deemed to be citizens of India from 1 January 1966, unless they chose not to be. It also added that persons of Indian origin from the specified territories who came on or after 1 January 1966 but before 25 March 1971; had been residents in Assam since; and had been detected as 'foreigners' in accordance with the provisions of the Foreigners Act, 1946 and Foreigners (Tribunals) Orders, 1964 would be considered citizens of India upon registration from the date of expiry of a period of 10 years from the date of detection as a foreigner.

In the period after the release of the final NRC, the Foreigners Tribunals were under critical scrutiny. Therefore, it becomes important to look at the history of these tribunals in Assam. India brought the Foreigners (Tribunal) Act in 1964 under the Foreigners

Act, 1946. As per the directive, each suspected foreigner would be taken through a judicial mechanism to address the citizenship issue. The final NRC draft was released on 30 July 2018 and updated on 31 August 2019. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), however, maintained that no punitive action would be taken against those left out of the final NRC draft.

The process of NRC's updation was followed by the sudden surfacing of the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB). CAB became an act after receiving the President's assent on 14 December 2019. The provisions of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) came into effect after the Home Ministry issued a gazette notification. The CAA grants citizenship to individuals who are Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Christians, Jains, or Parsis and who entered India from Pakistan, Bangladesh, or Afghanistan by the cut-off date of 31 December 2014, but it excludes Muslims.

The notification said, 'In exercise of the powers conferred by sub-section (2) of the section 1 of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 (47 of 2019), the Central government hereby appoints the 10th day of January 2020, as the date on which the provisions of the said Act shall come into force.'

This amendment established religion as a criterion for achieving citizenship status and led to unrest in the country. While the passing of CAB had a different meaning in the rest of the nation, in the Northeast, it had a different meaning owing to its unique history of colonial encounters as well as proximity to a nation that was formed in 1971.

Baruah (2020) writes,

> The Citizenship Amendment Bill of 2016 was an attempt to make good on the promise the BJP made to its supporters in the Barak Valley. Its ostensible purpose was to shelter persecuted religious minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians are groups that the proposed law identifies as religious minorities. Muslim groups like Ahmadis - certainly a persecuted religious minority in Pakistan - are conspicuously absent.

Migration into Assam was encouraged by the British, who developed tea estates on either side of the highway linking upper and lower Assam. Local labour was scarce because the Assamese were not willing to work on land other than their own. As a result, there was huge migration into Assam in the 19th and 20th centuries.

A 'PERIPHERY' WITHIN A PERIPHERY

How is Dhemaji a 'periphery' in a periphery? Two things about the region have always been an identifier of the district. First, the annual floods and second the relative inaccessibility of the region; the Bogibeel bridge was inaugurated in 2018 connecting Dhemaji with Dibrugarh, changing the dynamics of connectivity in a significant way. As the Brahmaputra flanks Dhemaji district with its numerous tributaries, the region has been perennially affected by floods for decades.

People from different communities have been living in harmony in the region for many years. The district is surrounded by the hilly ranges of Arunachal Pradesh to the north and east, Lakhimpur district in the west, and river Brahmaputra in the south. Ahoms, Misings, Bodos, Deoris, and Chutiyas are different communities who have been living in harmony in the region. Though the district is not generally very politically charged, it has witnessed protests from time to time like the anti-dam movement (since c. 2007) in Gerukamukh. These protests did not see a lot of participation by women. Based on the interviews I conducted, women came out to protest when they saw an 'urgency' to it. The urgency is the threat to the land and identity of the region from people coming from a neighbouring country. Many women that I talked to, referred to the Assam movement while discussing the protest under study, inevitably drawing parallels between the two, like how the central government has often been dictatorial in its attitude towards the region and how indigenous identities were under threat because of these policies.

In this otherwise sleepy town, the citizenship conundrum brought about by the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) got people to protest in record numbers. What was the reason that a region otherwise ravaged by floods and underdevelopment grabbed the headlines with a turnout in lakhs in support of the anti-CAA protests? What does the bill mean to the people who came out in support of the protests? How were the protests perceived by women who came out in large numbers to register their protest?

As has been mentioned earlier, it is important to understand that the Citizenship Amendment Act did not have the same meaning everywhere; even the same protest was perceived differently by different people. While some participated proactively, others came out only in solidarity with the ones protesting. Cedric (male, 27), a youth from the Mising community reiterated that, though he himself went in solidarity with the protest site, the Misings did not participate in the protests, as the protests did not have the same meaning for them as they did for the others.[3] Cedric, however, asserted that non-participation did not have anything to do with the agenda or the communities involved, rather the political parties that were actively

Swohid Bedi (Martyrs Column) at the Students Union (AASU) office in Dhemaji.

involved in the protests were not trusted by those who did not take part in the protests. He was very careful to point out that this lack of trust was not towards a particular community but very specifically towards certain political parties/interests who reap benefits at the cost of others.

The Mugas of Ahoms in the district and the fine and intricate weaving of Mising women are also famous. One such weaver, Oima (female, 42), who is from the Mising tribe shared that it was not possible for her to join the protests, as she gets no time outside her weaving work. She added that in the recent past, she had to go to Nepal a few times for an eye treatment, which left her with no time to waste.[4]

A few observations can be made based on the interviews conducted:

1. People saw a similarity between the Assam movement of the 1970s and the anti-CAA movement. Some of the women who participated in the current protests referred to their participation in both the *Axom Andolan* and the anti-CAA protests. Similarities between the two were drawn in terms of the agenda of both the protests and the 'urgency' which brought them out to the streets.
2. A day in the protests was led by women in response to a call from the *Satro Xontha* (Students Union). On this day, women came out in large numbers and participated through speeches and poetry recitations.
3. Apart from mobilisation by the students' union, the movement was also seen as *swotosfuto* (spontaneous) by many.
4. The participation of the tribal community in the region was minimal.
5. The underdevelopment of the region is relatively a non-issue compared to the citizenship issue.[5] In the words of Ruli Hazarika (female, 37), 'Floods are a natural calamity; you cannot stop the floods. But something like the Citizenship Amendment Act is a political document and therefore it has to be opposed.'[6]

6. It was their first time participating in a movement/ protest for most of the women interviewed.
7. Many people who participated in the protests later joined the BJP.

Discussions with the women from the district regarding citizenship and women's roles can be understood through the following:

1. The constitutive 'Other' here is important for understanding the concept of citizenship.
2. A geographical periphery need not necessarily lead to a political periphery.
3. Women's participation in large numbers does not automatically translate into their 'empowerment'; more often than not, it can be a re-assertion of gender roles. Reassertion of 'gender roles' here means that women were more passive participants. The intention is not to take away the agency from women, but to point out that they chose to give leadership to *Satro Xontha. Satro Xontha* plays a unique role in Assamese society. It is seen as a vanguard of society and generally has a positive image in the eyes of the common citizens. One of the interviewed women, Nibedita Bora Handique (Female, 54), said that people from *Satro Xontha* kept coming to her for political advice when the protests were going on.

THE IDEA OF CITIZENSHIP CONSTITUTED BY THE 'OTHER'

Authors like Bora (2010) and Mishra (2000) have pointed towards the fact that the 'Northeastern' subject as a citizen of the country is not really seen as a national subject. Therefore, it becomes easier to impose laws like AFSPA here. The exercise of democratic rights in the region has been under strain since Independence, which took shape in various separatist outfits and autonomy demands. These were

accompanied by internal neo-colonialism of sorts, whereby the rich resources of the region did not translate into economic growth in the region. Despite initiatives like the Look East Policy, the region remains behind other states in terms of development. Development here implies employment avenues for the youth and development of infrastructure in the region as opposed to a loot-based capitalistic form of development. A sense of powerlessness has prevailed vis-à-vis the Indian state as major decisions about the region always come from Delhi. This powerlessness has also made the 'us' versus 'them' question very prominent. An understanding of citizenship in the region is also fraught with a debate on 'us' versus 'them'. In the context of a bill that was passed with active opposition from the people of the region, which was to see a significant rise in population as a result of the bill, the situation turned tense within a short span of time. The 'Other' becomes a key not only to demarcate boundaries but also to define citizenship.

Most of the people interviewed pointed towards threats from an 'Outsider' if the bill were implemented. Sima Borgohain (female, 48) who teaches in a private school in Dhemaji said that she spent her childhood in Arunachal Pradesh and had to return overnight when tension broke out between Arunachal Pradesh and Assam.[7] She added that the demography of Silapathar (a small town that falls midway between the Siang side of Arunachal Pradesh and Dhemaji, which has also seen violence break out between Assamese and Bengali in recent past)[8] change right in front of her eyes. On her return, she saw a significant number of Bengali-speaking people in the town. Due to demographic and political vulnerability, an outsider is often seen as a threat. The example of Tripura, where the indigenous population has been outnumbered by a settler population, also serves as fodder for such insecurities.

A paragraph from a poem composed by Rupjyoti Dutta (female, 37) from Dhemaji, for the anti-CAA protests goes,

> *Kaan pati Xuni lo Badan hot*
> *Jatir Xorboswo Kaahi niya, Xukhonkarir dol*

Xun Xun gono gorjonor Broj Ninad
Shohidar konkolar ostro gohi
Bibhedkarir Bokkhyo bidari
Shohidor kesa roktere jati jagi
Bor luitok Xakkhi dhori
Kolonkito naam tholu
Jati druhi bodon!

Here, the poet beseeches the likes of Badan (Badan Borphukan was a chief of Ahom forces who betrayed the kingdom by inviting the Burmese to invade Assam) that they have to face the wrath of the people if they give out *jati* into the hands of exploiters.[9] The fear that an 'Outsider' will come and settle on their land was a fear shared by many, both men and women.

A GEOGRAPHICAL PERIPHERY DOES NOT TRANSLATE INTO A POLITICAL PERIPHERY

A tragedy hit the district in 2004, when there was a bombing in the district in broad daylight. This bombing in Dhemaji district killed many including school children, allegedly by ULFA opposing Independence Day celebrations.[10]

It is interesting to note that many armed groups in the region are gross violators of human rights and humanitarian laws. As such they become objects of both hate and fear. Charles C. and Hazarika (2009) write,

> The state at least can be called to account; these groups cannot, and therefore a very strong mobilisation of civil society is called for, across the spectrum of scholarship, media, and non-governmental organisations to raise the people's voices against predatory actions, by the state and by non-state actors.

Has the region become a peripheral political entity because of its peripheral geographical status? The potential of populist governance

is that it leaves no one out of its ambit. Despite the fact that the region had many issues, it did not impede people from participating in the citizenship protests. The protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act were called by All Assam Students Union's (AASU) leadership, whose formal office was set up in 2015 in the district. AASU is not seen as a 'political' organisation, but as a students' organisation, which has immense legitimacy in the eyes of the common population of Assam.

Sanjib Baruah (1999) writes, 'The power of Assamese sub-nationalism is best understood by locating it theoretically in the space of civil society. One consequence of this is the central role of avowedly "nonpolitical" organisations in sub-national political mobilisation in Assam.'

Purabi Dowarah (female, 44), who teaches in a college in Dhemaji and who saw the movement closely in Assam in 1983, talked about the devastation caused by the floods in the Somajan area of Dhemaji in 1999. But since the floods did not affect many in the district, there

A flag from the protest lying outside a house.

was not much activity around them except occasional relief work for the flood-affected people.[11] She added, 'protests' as a manifestation of claims of human rights for something like floods is hard to witness in the region, as many see floods as a natural phenomenon, as opposed to something like the Citizenship Amendment Act, which has political authority behind it. Rinku Konwar (Female, 39), who had never participated in a protest before says it was for the question of *jati* that she came out and participated.[12]

REASSERTION OF GENDER ROLES?

A large number of women participated in the protests. During the protests a day was especially earmarked for participation by women. On this day women came out in large numbers, mobilised others and participated in every way possible. Sima's presence in the anti-CAA protest started when one of her neighbours called her in the morning and said, '*Bou, najai neki*?' ('Sister-in-law, will you not come?'). 'We went like we were going to war, as we were also very apprehensive that violence might break out,' Sima added.

In some cases, a few women came out with ladles in their hands for the protest. Pranati Handique (female, 32) said that women brought the ladles as they stay in the kitchen and do not possess any weapons, therefore whatever 'weapon' a woman had, she came out with it.[13]

Nibedita Bora Handique (female, 54), who is an active member of *Lekhika Xomaruh* in Dhemaji, added how she had participated in the 1983 protests in Assam.[14] She also contested elections for Dibrugarh University, where she was a student with AASU's help, as it urged her to contest. She recited poems on the radio in programmes like *Jubo Bani* and *Ghor Jeuti*. She was not a part of any protests between the 1980s and the anti-CAA protests. She stated that women's participation in Dhemaji was a result of a call for their participation by AASU. AASU asked women to gather in front of the court and not in the court field

(which is usually where large protests/gatherings take place in the district), as people did not think that many women would come out, but surprisingly women did come out and covered the entire location. She too reiterated that women coming out in large numbers was an assertion of their 'caring' qualities as mothers. Some of the women who participated in the protests shared that they participated because everyone in the family was going to the court field. Though it was the first time that many women participated in a protest, it was definitely not the last, as many said that they want to come out on the streets when required again. The call might have been given by AASU, but it became spontaneous as women felt that it was their responsibility to protest against something that was anti-people and undemocratic.

However, everything did not go smoothly during the protests. There were instances of hooliganism against people who did not support the protests or were from an opposing political organisation. There were others who joined the BJP as soon as the protests died down. One such enthusiastic participant was Lovely Dihingia (female, 37), who also held a ladle on one of the days of the protest to register her voice against the CAA. When asked why she joined the BJP, she said that one of her friends in the movement was taken to jail, and

A picture taken at the protest site by Rujyoti Dutta.

no party made an effort to free him, so she was disillusioned with the movement.[15] She added that she faced a lot of online harassment after joining the BJP and was trolled on social media platforms.

Purabi Dowarah (Female, 44) said that she had participated in other forms of protests on violence against women in Dhemaji. She reported a particular case to the police and newspapers, but neither was an FIR was lodged, nor did the newspapers publish it. This protest definitely made way for women to comprehend their role in public life, but women's sustained role in public life can be visualised only in a situation of sustained engagement with issues of public importance. A limitation of movements like this is also their spontaneity. They fail to keep women engaged for a longer period of time. As soon as the protests are over, women go back to their everyday lives. Therefore, the visualisation of a sustained way of women's participation requires more than a protest.

CONCLUSION

India's Northeast has been a site of armed ethno-national movements by ethnic minorities for decades. The Naga armed struggle for independence from India, the longest running armed conflict in the region, started immediately after the transfer of power from the colonial British administration to India in 1947. In Assam, the issue of migration has been marked by unrest in the region, which has also led to the formation of the militant United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and a demand for a *Swadhin Axom.* The issue of migration into the region has been constant for many decades. Across the world, concern is growing over migration that is forced or created by economic pressures as well as the state's failure in the migrant-producing areas to provide economic security to its people (Hazarika 2008). Some scholars are of the opinion that in the coming years migration is going to be a common phenomenon because of the

alienating effects of capitalism and globalisation, while others have tried to find an answer in 'job permits' for communities without civil or political rights. In Brazil, a form of citizenship was experimented with through a legal recognition of social differences.

In the case of Assam, the issue has only been layering up since Independence where the Citizenship Act has gone through various amendments. Though the National Register of Citizens was seen as a hope by many, it raised more questions than answers. The NRC was also used for garnering political support by the BJP. In the Barak Valley, the BJP built its image as a party that cared about the sentiments of the Bengali Hindus by enacting CAB, 2016. In the Brahmaputra Valley, which has the largest number of assembly seats, it played on Assamese sentiments of protecting *jati*, *mati*, and *bheti*.

This paper is an outcome of a query on how to envision women's roles vis-à-vis the fact that one lakh people, a significant number of which were women, came together against the Citizenship Amendment Act in the small, sleepy town of Dhemaji.[16] Though this district abounds in natural and ecological richness, it is subject to annual floods. Despite the floods and other issues like underdevelopment and unemployment, the citizenship movement found takers in this district. This paper enquired into the 'spontaneity' of the movement and why and how women associated with the movement. In a region otherwise plagued by unemployment, annual floods, and underdevelopment what was it that prompted women to participate in such large numbers, and what did it mean to them? Though the interest was primarily in the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act of late 2019 and early 2020, this is inevitably and inextricably linked to the history of the region. Women coming out on the streets in protest against the CAA cannot be readily read as empowerment or an exercise of agency by women, but it is important to analyse patterns in women's participation in the movement. There were other factors that contributed to the mobilisation of women too, like the urgency created around the Citizenship Amendment Act by AASU and the successful utilisation of community ties that already exist in such societies.

Though the periphery is not homogeneous, every place is affected by the push and pull of power politics. The sheer number of women on the streets did make it to news headlines, which led to an enquiry into the nature of participation by women. With the bill being passed and many opposers languishing in jail, the ramifications of the Citizenship Act are yet to unfold in their entirety, and whether the act will be further amended is a matter of speculation.

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NOTES

1. Nira Yuval Davis quotes Lister (1990) and Evans (1993) to explain this idea. Lister quotes Conservative Minister Douglas Hurd talking about active citizenship: 'Public service may once have been the duty of an elite, but today it is the responsibility of all who have time or money to spare.' In this scheme of things, obligations are shifted from the state to the private domain of charity.
2. There was a gathering of over a lakh people in the district demanding the BJP government at the Centre and in the state to scrap the Citizenship Amendment Act for the indigenous communities of the state, Assamese culture, literature and language to survive. https://www.sentinelassam.com/north-east-india-news/assam-news/massive-protests-against-citizenship-amendment-act-2019-hit-dhemaji/ (accessed 18 October, 2021).
3. Cedric Lagachu (student), telephonic interview, 28 September 2020.

4. Oima Pegu (weaver) in discussion with the author, Dhemaji, 16 September 2020.
5. Though under-development is a non-issue vis-à-vis the citizenship debates, even in normal times when under-development and floods are issues, little attention is given to them.
6. Ruli Hazarika (member of the Jatiya Mahila Parishad) in discussion with the author, Dhemaji, 18 September 2020.
7. Sima Borgohain (teacher in a private school) in discussion with the author, Dhemaji, 16 September 2020.
8. Tension between Bengali Hindus and Assamese people broke out in March 2017 after an office of the All Assam Students Union was vandalised by a Bengali Hindu group in Silapathar. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bongal_Kheda (accessed 17 October, 2021).
9. This poem was shared and also recited by her during the personal interview with Rupjyoti Dutta at her residence in Dhemaji on 21 September 2020
10. Independence Day celebrations in Dhemaji were held in the college field in 2004, when a bomb exploded and killed many. The incident shook the entire district as young school children died too. Today a memorial, remembering all who died in that blast, stands near the college field http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3566460.stm (accessed 18 October, 2021).
11. Purabi Dowarah (Assistant Professor) in discussion with the author, 14 September 2020.
12. *Jati* here is used to connote the identity of an Assamese. Ambikagiri Raychaudhuri articulated a notion of Assamese as a *jati* (sub-nation or nationality) within the great Indian *mohajati* (nation) (Sanjib Bauruah 1999). Baruah states that, these ideas appear in essays by Raychaudhuri that are part of a collection called Ahuti.
13. Pranati Handique (home-maker) in discussion with the author, 18 September 2020.
14. Nibedita Bora Handique (government school teacher) in discussion with the author, 19 September 2020.
15. Lovely Dihingia (home-maker) in discussion with the author, 30 September 2020.
16. Kaman, Prafulla. 2020. Assam: Over one lakh protestors raise voice against CAA in Dhemaji, Prafulla Kaman https://nenow.in/north-east-news/assam/assam-over-one-lakh-protesters-raise-voice-against-caa-in-dhemaji.html (accessed 18 October, 2021).

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