



Opposition to Citizenship Amendment Act

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This article is based on “The distinct cry of an imperilled frontier” which was published in the The Hindu on 16/12/2019. It talks about the implication of the Citizenship Amendment Act.

Recently, there have been protests against the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019) in many parts of India.

The Act has been opposed, mainly on two grounds:

- One, exclusion of Muslim immigrants as Indian citizens while accepting all other communities from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh on the grounds of persecution.
This is the major reason for protests against the Act in Northeast India.
- Second, the promise to introduce a nationwide National Register of Citizens (NRC).
This move will render stateless all those Muslims immigrants who do not have the necessary documents to prove their Indian ancestry, even though they could have been born in India and have lived in India for decades.

Implication of the Act

Challenge on Foreign Policy Front

- The biggest negative impact of this Act is on India's relations with Bangladesh.
- India's relations with Bangladesh have been very cordial on various fronts like the economic and strategic.
For example, Bangladesh has shown an unfettered commitment to India's national security by showing zero-tolerance to all forms of terrorist activity against India on its soil.
- The question of illegal immigration, however has always been a deeply divisive issue between India and Bangladesh.

- The Indian government has antagonised Bangladesh by framing religious persecution of the Hindu minority in Bangladesh as one of the motivations for the Citizenship Amendment Act.
 - This had led to the cancellation of Bangladesh's Prime Minister's visit to India.
 - This signals a jeopardising of the bilateral partnership with Bangladesh, that will lead to undermining of the only successful example of India's neighbourhood first policy.

Threat to India's Constitutional Values

- Beyond Bangladesh, India's long-standing reputation as a constitutional democracy is taking a hit.
 - The US, for example, has urged India to respect religious freedom.
 - In this context, India's founding values were **equality**, including religious equality, **diversity** and **tolerance**.
 - However, the Citizenship Amendment Act sought to discriminate amongst the people on the basis of religion, this is **violative of Article 14** of the Indian Constitution.
- Stalwarts of the Indian freedom struggle Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar also had never envisioned India as a Hindu homeland.

Harming the Interest of a Particular Minority

- It is patently clear that (using citizenship amendments) if the existing Muslim citizens of India are unable to produce documents of Indian ancestry, the National Register later, can easily make them non-citizens.

In contrast, if Hindus face similar documentary deficit, they would neither be interned nor expelled.
- If the question is of persecution of some religious groups, then the Act must also encompass Srilanka (Tamils) and China (Tibetans).
- Most importantly, this Act will seek to deepen the communal divide that remains ever-present within the social fabric of South Asia.

Destabilising India's Northeast

- The Citizenship Amendment Act is against the Assam Accord of 1985.
- The granting of citizenship to illegal migrants (excluding Muslims), has created anxiety among the original habitants of the region.

- Moreover, the response in the Northeast to the Citizenship Amendment Act is not merely '*tribal xenophobia*' but a pursuit to preserve one's culture.
 - Going by UNESCO's definition of endangered languages, all of the 200 and more languages spoken in the Northeast, with the exception of Assamese and Bengali, are in the vulnerable category.
 - Even in the case of Assamese, though it is the language of the majority in the State with about 15 million speakers (Census 2011), they are still a tiny minority when the larger region of Bangladesh, Bengal and Assam is considered.
 - Bengali speakers in Assam total about 9 million (Census 2011); however, neighbouring Bangladesh alone has 164 million speakers of the same language.
 - The fear in Assam of being overwhelmed by an unceasing influx of people from Bangladesh therefore is nothing beyond legitimacy. **This is a peculiar situation often described as "a majority with a minority complex"**; its consequences have resurfaced in the region time and again, yet few take cognisance of it, perpetuating the phenomenon.
- Demographic changes due to mass immigration, can lead to dilution of native culture, which in turn can pose a threat to the very existence of a language and when a language dies, a world view dies with it.
- The Northeast is inhabited by diverse populations, sharing borders with several neighbours and granting citizenship to migrants in the region, will aggravate the ethnic tension in the region (which is a relic of colonial legacy).

UNESCO classification of endangered languages

- If a language is **vulnerable** because of the small size of the number of speakers, it becomes more so if the language is spoken only in certain domains — for instance at home, but not at schools and offices, etc.
- It becomes **definitely endangered** if parents speak the language and children only know the language but do not speak it as mother tongue.
- It becomes **critically endangered** if the grandparents' generation speak the language, parents know it but do not use it, and children do not know it any more.
- **Extinct** languages are those languages which no longer have any speakers.

Conflict in North east : A Colonial Legacy

- Assam was separated from Bengal and made a separate chief commissioner's province in **1874**.
- In **1912** after Curzon's 1905 partition of Bengal was withdrawn, Sylhet didn't wanted to be part of Bengal province.
- At the time of **Partition**, Sylhet's chance of remaining with India was for it to be treated as a part of Assam. The then Assamese leadership refused this as Assam would then have become Bengali majority.

- **Sylhet** had to face a referendum separately and by a thin Muslim majority was **awarded to Pakistan**.
- The current migration issue is thus a consequence of this bitter politics of antagonism of the past.

Conclusion

- The trust deficit among India's vulnerable communities doesn't augur well with India's ambitions of becoming a superpower.
- It is also essential to underscore that in no civilised country can religion be the basis of citizenship, specifically if the founding principles of such nation-states championed secular ideals and equality before the law.
- Therefore, the best way forward has to be on the path of truth and reconciliation as shown by great leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela.

Drishti Mains Question

Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 gets into conflict with India's constitutional values and poses a challenge on foreign policy and internal security front. Comment.