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Updating of NRC 51: the tasks ahead

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The updating of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) 51, which is the buzzword since signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, means, preparing an NRC of the present time for Assam and since we are now in 2010, it can be NRC 2011 or 2012, which will encompass all the Indian citizens residing in Assam permanently. This is a crying need of the hour.

But the modality which is being adopted to achieve this 'objective' in the pilot projects of Barpeta and Chaygaon, which has run into controversy already, is not a practical one and will not achieve the desired results i.e. preparation of a correct NRC for say 2011 or 12 for the entire Indian population of Assam. The modality adopted by the government requires that every head of the family of all Indians and Bangladeshis who are to be regularized as Indians, residing in Assam, must 'apply' in a prescribed 'Application Form' showing linkages to NRC 51, voter's list of 1971 etc. alongwith details of the family, for verification and acceptance.

This procedure through 'application' for updating the NRC is not a practical one because most of the indigenous Indians will not simply 'apply'. He is an Indian and he knows it. He has no problem. 60-70 per cent people reside in rural areas struggling with day to day

problems of existence. Many are illiterate or semi literate. People in the city of Guwahati and other towns are also engrossed with day today pressures of urban life. Many are workers and labourers. To expect all these Indians to 'apply' just to be recognized as Indians in the NRC is absurd, to say the least. They just do not have the "compulsion" to apply. Even in the case where a person has a direct stake, say, in electing a representative to represent him, and which is only a matter of walking to the nearest polling booth to register one's franchise, - only 50-60 per cent voters turnout is generally seen. In an election, even 20 per cent voting or less can elect a candidate, but in case of preparation of a National Register of Citizens for 2011 or 12, even 70 per cent "application" will not do, as we need 100 per cent "application" or near about to arrive at a correct updated NRC.

In the present format, only people who will apply enmass are the pre-71 Bangladeshis because they are going to be regularized as Indian citizens. All Bangladeshis on arrival in Assam register their names in the voter's list of Assam. This is a gospel truth and so they will have no problem in showing necessary linkages. Illiterate amongst them will receive help from others as they are a cohesive politically

super conscious community because of circumstances.

Because of these lacunas, the modality of updating the NRC 51 through 'Application' may just create a lopsided and incomplete NRC. It will surely contain all the names of Bangladeshis who are to be regularized and the names of a small percentage of indigenous people because most will not 'apply'! Just now in the pilot projects, we are quibbling about the format of the Application only. But no one seems to realize that the modality adopted will create only a lopsided NRC 2011 or 12, wherein names of all Bangladeshis will be recorded in full, which is a good thing, but with only a small percentage of indigenous people included in the NRC. When we ultimately wake up to such a scenario after completion of the update process, it will be too late for any rectification. Also, the process of updating of the NRC 51 to present times will not distinguish the regularized Bangladeshis from indigenous Indians as the government modality does not have such a 'mechanism' and unless we get the list and data of such Bangladeshi persons who are regularized, we shall not be able to identify the remaining Bang-

ladeshis as "prima-facie foreigners". Identification of 'foreigners' is basically the "prime objective" of the NRC updating exercise and the government. Modality will not achieve this objectives.

What we need in the modality is a separation between identification process of (i) pre March 71 Bangladeshis as Indian citizens and inclusion of their name in the NRC, (ii) and inclusion of all indigenous Indians who are citizens of India ab initio. To subject the original inhabitants of Assam to clauses of the Assam Accord which are meant for identification of Bangladeshis, like voter's list of 1971 etc. is uncalled for. Also, many in the villages as well as in urban areas do not have linkage to 1971 voter's list etc.

In this context, it is logical to adopt a modality which will identify and record the (a) pre March 25, 1971 Bangladeshis as Indian citizens as phase I of the NRC update process. The same Application as is being finalized now for the pilot projects can be used by merely changing the title of the form to something like "Updating of NRC 51 (phase 1), - Application Form for Regularization of pre March 25, 1971 Bangladeshis for inclusion in NRC". This is a legal process as per Assam Accord as reflected

in the Citizenship Act 1955 (as amended) and there will be no controversy whatsoever in this process and this can be achieved very quickly through the pilot projects now, as well as for the entire State subsequently, constituency wise. Every Bangladeshi head of the family of pre March 71 stock will 'apply' because they are in a process to finally become Indian citizens. Unlike the indigenous people of Assam, they have an urgent 'compulsion' to 'apply'. The phase I of the process will be a complete success about which there can be no doubt in any quarter. (b) On completion of the phase (I), phase II of the NRC update can start through "house to house" Enumeration of all indigenous Indians who are citizens of India ab initio. They need not be linked to voter's list of 1971 etc. because those linkages are needed only for pre-1971 Bangladeshis to be regularized as Indian Citizens as per provisions of the Assam Accord. There cannot be any question of discrimination in this process because we are now dealing with Indians only - the original inhabitants of Assam, and Indians from other States who have settled in Assam permanently, the process of regularization and inclusion of pre 71 Bangladeshis having been resolved in phase (I) itself. Because of it, the house to house enumeration will avoid the Char areas and predominantly Bangladeshi inhabited

areas as identified by the District Administration. Any genuine Indian left out will have a mechanism to apply for inclusion of his name in the NRC, but such cases will be few and far between if the procedure is properly done. A similar concept i.e. regularization of pre 71 Bangladeshis as a first step has been advocated by Assam Public Works and they have filed a detailed modality before the Supreme Court last year in order to correct the voter's list of Assam and to update the NRC in one go.

The people of Assam are impatient now to see the updating of NRC 51 completed. We are once again in an emotive stage now. But time has come to view the issues not through a prism of "emotions and rhetorics" but through "realism and correct strategies" so as to arrive at our objectives correctly. The 'pilot projects' to update the NRC are now held up and this is the time to have a hard look at all the facets of the Modality and arrive at the best solutions for successful implementation of the NRC update.

AASU, whose persistence has resulted in signing of the Assam Accord must now ensure that the updating is undertaken through a proper modality by the government so that a proper and correct NRC is prepared and when this happens, everyone will be a winner.