

Thin documents, Thick claims: Reflections of liminal citizenship in the floodplains of Assam, India

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The floodplains of the north-eastern Indian state of Assam have been predominantly inhabited by the Bengali Muslims or Bengal origin Muslims or the Miyas. The Miyas have a century-old history in Assam but owing to their migratory and ethnic identity (of originating from East Bengal [current day Bangladesh] and practising Islam), the Miyas were unable to access substantive citizenship (citizenship of civil and social rights). In such conditions, the only way of claiming citizenship is through possessing documents. But in Assam, India or more generally in the Global South, citizenship documents are so often thin (documents with errors, ranging from misspelt names, changed surnames to mis-angled) in nature which makes it a difficult means to thick claims of formal or documentary citizenship (citizenship guaranteed by documents in the legal realm). These thin documents need to be further substantiated with a subsidiary set of documents for them to become useful. A vicious documentary trail inhibits the lives of Miyas in Assam. These thin documents alone cannot be used for making thick claims. This is not to say that thin documents are exclusive only to the Miya community. Errors might creep into anyone's identity documents. But the fact that Miya's lacks a claim to substantive citizenship and relies solely on documents to claim citizenship makes their relation vis-à-vis thin citizenship documents an illuminating case for research over others in the state. For other communities with substantive claims to Assam, the lack or mistake in any identity documents stands only as an error that could sooner or later be rectified. Their citizenship claims do not rest on pieces of documents, unlike the miyas. There is a racialisation of documentary citizenship bothering the Miya community of Assam.

This paper examines how such racialisation of documentary citizenship influences experiences, opportunities and aspirations of being a Miya in Assam. The emphasis will be on the attempts made by the community to seek formal citizenship and their struggles. The grounds and contexts of this exclusion will take the centre stage of the paper. Conceptually, the paper will trace the relationship between documents and liminality. This lens of liminality helps us understand that access to citizenship rights depends so much on the combination of numerous past, present and future risks, if not more than the nature of citizenship documents.

For the Miyas who are excluded from the substantive realm, citizenship is not an absolute category but one of degree. Citizenship is dependent on the arbitrary number of subsidiary documents presented to make a case for formal citizenship or the whims of the officials who accept or deny these subsidiary documents. Until formal citizenship is granted, the Miyas exist in a liminal position of being neither a citizen nor stateless.

Paper outline: The first section - outlines the historical background of peopling in the chars of Assam. The second section – dwells on the field and methodological concerns. The third section- situate the study within the broader field of documentary citizenship and liminality. Fourth section - ethnographic accounts that show the complex interplay of past, present and future events leading to the racialisation of documentary citizenship of the Miyas, and how thereby they are reduced to a liminal status. The final section - highlight the negotiations and failures faced while seeking formal or documentary citizenship.