

Proposal for Research Grant

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Title- Navigating Precarity- Analysing Multiple Narratives of Citizenship in Assam

Abstract

Citizenship, both in theory and practice, has emerged as the enduring link between the principles of public sovereignty and the exercise of individual capacity (Balibar, 1988) and has hence become a central component of contemporary political life. Paradoxically though, despite its centrality in modern political life, it has gained a precarious status too. The dimension of precarity hereby, is associated with both the content (rights) and the status (membership) of citizenship and it refers to the uncertainty faced by different sections of the global society in terms of claiming citizenship as a legal status and/or rights (Lori, 2017). This proposal intends to investigate a location where the precarity of rights and precarity of status become competing articulations of citizenship. For this purpose we propose a multi stakeholder analysis of citizenship based on the historical and the contemporary political developments in Assam: which is a location that has faced an influx of displaced population and ‘illegal’ migrants and understand how the presence of both these categories informs the perspectives on statelessness, desirability and anxieties of various hues.

The state of Assam has had to accommodate a section of the people displaced during the partition of 1947 and also during the war of 1971. Simultaneously, sections of the Assamese society have long complained of illegal migration into the state, which they claim to be a threat to their citizenship rights. These claims to precarity were accepted by the Indian state in the Assam accord, which was a politically negotiated settlement between the leaders of the Assam movement¹ and the Indian government, ultimately leading to the 1986 amendment to the Indian citizenship law. More importantly, in the contemporary context, the process of updating the National Register of Citizenship in Assam, something that required active participation of the people of the state², was a long standing demand of certain sections of the Assamese society. The state, on the other also saw large scale mobilisations against the most recent amendment to the Indian citizenship law³. The roots of this opposition regarding granting of refugee status to a section of the presumed ‘illegal’ migrants are embedded in the same articulation of precariousness that has been accepted by the Indian state on multiple occasions. This is not to say that the recent amendment to the citizenship law is without precedent, especially in the case of Assam⁴.

Citizenship has historically been inexorably tied to the process of state formation and has hence been intertwined with governmentality directed towards the visualisation and the affirmation of state power (Roy, 2010, p. 11). Given the specific context of state formation in

¹The Assam movement refers to the prolonged struggle in the state of Assam which had at its core the issue of outsiders in Assam (Roy, 2010)

²See section 4A of citizenship rules 2003

³See citizenship amendment act of 2019

⁴See Illegal Migrant (Expulsion from Assam) act of 1950

South Asia, where each post-colonial entity is plagued by a crisis of distinction due to the juxtaposition of distinctive and indistinctive traits, it can be claimed that cartographic anxieties become a prominent signifier of the post colony (Krishna, 1994, p. 509) and post-colonial citizenship. The category of the citizen in most cases is defined or validated by the policies and decisions of the state that are directly influenced by cartographic anxieties. Given these factors, it is unsurprising that most accounts on precarious citizenship have taken a critical look at the role of the state in creating conditions for precarious citizenship. But the decisions and the policies emerging out of the anxious impulses of the state need not always be exclusive. The idea of cartographic anxiety relates not only to the territorial form of the nation state but also to the manner in which they are articulated and visualised. Hence, decision making influenced by these anxieties may also be influenced by geo political, racial, religious and ethnic dynamics. The most recent amendment to the Indian citizenship law and the discussions regarding the ‘desirability of refugees’ in context of the European scenario are also signifiers of these anxieties. In essence cartographic anxieties not only influence norms of exclusion and statelessness but also direct norms of inclusion and desirability.

The primary objective of this proposal is to understand the varied articulations of precarious citizenship that have emerged out of the Indian state of Assam and how these varied experiences and articulations of precarity respond to the dual impulses of the state. For this purpose we propose a multi stakeholder case study in the multilingual/ethnic state of Assam to highlight the unique and antagonistic articulations of precarious citizenship and how these articulations are essentially related to the politics of place making (Roy, 2010). The fact that the Indian state has historically tried to accommodate varied and antagonistic articulations of precariousness highlights that the state in effort to articulate a coherent discourse of citizenship has to navigate different dimensions of precarious citizenship to create desirable categories i.e. citizens, refugees, labour etc. This proposal thereby intends to look at how differing articulations of precarity influence the state’s understanding of citizenship. This will allow us to formulate a layered and descriptive perspective on precariousness of citizenship by addressing the role of mobilisation and the agency of different groups and their claims vis-a- vis the state. In a nut shell, this analysis may also lead us to a newer conceptual understanding as well.

Summary

This proposal investigates a location (Assam) where the precarities of rights and status become competing articulations of citizenship. While, one can find a significant quantity of academic literature on the emergence of precarious citizenship, there remains a gap concerning the relationship between precarity of rights and status. This proposal thereby intends to look at how differing articulations of precarity influence the state’s understanding of citizenship. This will allow us to formulate a layered and descriptive perspective on precariousness of citizenship by addressing the role of mobilisation and the agency of different groups and their claims vis- a- vis the state.

Statement of Intent

This proposal investigates a location where the precarities of rights and status become competing articulations of citizenship. For this purpose, we propose a multi stakeholder analysis of citizenship based on the historical and the contemporary political developments in Assam - a location that has faced an influx of displaced population and 'illegal' migrants and understand how the presence of both these categories informs the perspectives on statelessness, belonging and associated anxieties. This will allow us to formulate a layered perspective on the precariousness associated with citizenship by addressing the role of mobilisation and the agency of different groups and their claims vis- a- vis the state.

For this study we intend to document the perspectives of the two geographically and politically distinct locations, namely, the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley. In this project we intend to understand how the dimensions of location and domicile affect the articulation and the perspectives on citizenship. In addition to these two locations we also consider the Guwahati High and the various Foreigner Tribunals as part of our field. This approach allows us to break free of the majority- minority dynamic that has been a dominant theme in the academic literature on citizenship by investigating the link between precarity and location. To gain a varied perspective on citizenship we will conduct semi structured interviews with political/human rights activists, lawyers, journalists and individuals accused of being foreigners. The questions/ points of discussion in this project will be centred on two related themes. The first theme will relate to the long history of mobilisation in the state of Assam against the influx of outsiders and how our participants, who belong to two distinct locations, remember and relate to these movements. The second theme looks at the role of the judicial, quasi judicial and the policing institutions/agencies involved in the process of validating one's citizenship status from the perspective of the participants. Additionally, given the salience of various government and legal documents, this project will also involve extensive content analysis.

Estimated Budget & Schedule

As this project intends to cover both the Brahmaputra and the Barak valley the field work would be conducted in two different stages. In addition to this we will also require a month for the collection of legal and government documents that are not available online. Based on these considerations and the stipulated time period the project is scheduled as follows:

Task	Number of Months
Literature Review and Framing the Research Questions	1 month
Field work 1 st leg	1 month
Field work 2 nd leg	1 month
Collection of legal documents	1 month
Data Analysis	2 months
Report Writing	2 months

Based on the above schedule the estimated budget is as follows:

Expenses	Cost
Travel (Kolkata-Silchar-Guwahati-Kolkata)	15,000
Field Expenses (in several locations of Barak valley and Brahmaputra valley)	10,000
Living Expenses (during fieldwork)	25,000
Lodging (during fieldwork)	20,000
Other Expenses (stationary, photocopy, scan, printing etc.)	10,000
Total	80,000

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