



DECEMBER 23, 2019

FACILITATION GUIDE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF CITIZENS IN ASSAM: A HUMANITARIAN
PERSPECTIVE

URMITAPA DUTTA
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
Urmitapa_dutta@uml.edu



CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I. What is this guide?

This facilitation guide accompanies the Presentation/Module **National Register of Citizens in Assam: A Humanitarian Perspective**. The guide is intended as a resource for peer education and effective dialogue about the issue in your communities. The overarching goal is to building communities of resistance towards a more just and equitable society.

The guide/module will be most effective when it is used in a **dialogical manner** and when it is followed by **concrete steps for collective and individual action**. In other words, it can serve as a stepping stone for groups/communities to listen and share voices, reflect on meaningful engagement, and move forward their collective efforts.

II. Chapters

1. Introduction p. 1
2. An overview of the main sections in the module p. 3
3. Recommended uses for the module p. 10
4. Follow up and ongoing support p. 13

II. Framing and contextualizing the materials in the module

- ✕ The module focuses primarily on the **oppression, suffering, struggles as well as resistance of Bengal origin Muslim communities living in the *Char* areas of Assam**. These are tracts of land surrounded by the Brahmaputra river and its tributaries, usually a created by accretion in a river course or estuary. Chars are ecologically fragile regions that emerge and submerge with the ebb and flow of the river and hence uniquely vulnerable to floods and cyclones. The char inhabitants—a significant proportion of whom are Bengal origin Muslim communities or Miya communities—lead an uncertain life, often displaced

and forced to relocate to newly formed chars. The char areas suffer from extremely high levels of poverty and abysmal literacy rates. This guide centers the experiences and perspectives of these communities although it can certainly be used as a segue to discuss the potential implications of a nation-wide NRC for other vulnerable populations in India.

- ⌘ The module’s emphasis is **humanitarian** rather than politico-legal. It does outline the main points of the NRC – CAA nexus in Assam but does so in a way that highlights the **human costs**, i.e., the implications of these laws and regulations on actual communities, on their lived experiences. It **does not** provide detailed legal information about the policies or legal resources for communities. There are hyperlinks to other websites that do provide such information.
- ⌘ The module helps frame and understand what is happening in Assam with the **NRC as a form of state violence**. The experiences of impacted communities as they go through the process of hearings, verifications, and reverifications highlight how the demands for evidence as well as its adjudication can be rather arbitrary and punitive. As such, as much as legal advocacy/support is critical as an immediate response, it is also crucial to interrogate the historical, cultural, and political exigencies that are at the root of the current crisis.
- ⌘ The module has an explicit emphasis on **action** – highlighting what community activists are already doing on the ground as well as what communities and groups interested in solidarity and support could do. Importantly, the latter’s focus should be on bolstering, amplifying, and otherwise taking their cue from the needs and requests of people on the ground.



FIGURE 1: HIGHLIGHTS OF THE MODULE/PRESENTATION

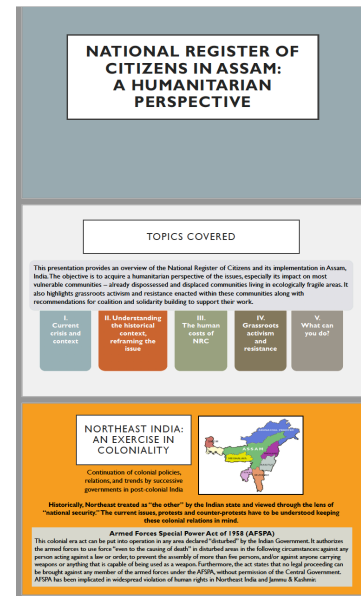
CHAPTER 2: AN OVERVIEW OF THE MAIN SECTIONS IN THE MODULE

This chapter provides a brief overview of the various sections of the module. Rather than detailed summaries, it provides highlights/key points in each section along with recommendations for facilitators.

INTRODUCTION

This section provides a roadmap of the module and also situates the issue in the geopolitical context of Northeast India. Introduce the issue and the context here. You may draw upon the framing/contextualization in Ch. 1 to do this. You can focus on what this module does and what it does not, which is important to set up and manage audience expectations.

Here, it is important to situate the issues in Assam and Northeast India. Northeast India is characterized by extraordinary ethn racial and linguistic diversity. While most of India underwent a political overhaul following independence from British colonization, the Indian government ended up adopting, reproducing, and adapting the colonial policies used to govern the northeast region. This is reflected in the historiographical, cultural, and political marginalization of the region. It is viewed largely through the lens of national security, most notably through the exercise of the Armed Forces Special Power Act or AFSPA. Therefore, both the NRC-CAA issues have to be understood within the larger context of the colonial stance that successive central governments in India have taken towards the Northeast region and its issues. Furthermore, different each state has distinct patterns of inequality, oppression, and othering—hence the need to avoid broad sweeping generalizations from one state/region/peoples to another.



I. CURRENT CRISIS

- i) Start this section by centering the actual communities who are most deeply impacted by the NRC in Assam – the vulnerable communities living in the char areas. **Show the video and emphasize the socioeconomic vulnerability and recurrent displacement faced by these communities.**

Then highlight the different groups of people who are impacted by NRC in Assam at the moment – **the focus of this presentation is on Bengal origin Muslim communities living in the char areas, who are one of the most vulnerable and exploited sections of society in Assam.**

- ii) Next review the different ways in which people are disenfranchised in Assam:

- 1) Exclusion from NRC
- 2) Labeled as Doubtful or D-voter by the Election Commission
- 3) Reference case or allegations of “suspected foreigner” filed by the border police

Here you will briefly explain (with examples) how each of these mechanisms work.

Please use the examples (right) to highlight the arbitrary manner in which the mechanisms work.

- iii) All of these cases are then adjudicated by the Foreigners’ Tribunals (FT). So, you now go on to explain what the FT is and how it functions (image on the next page).

Highlight the ways in which the FTs do not make independent decisions based on the merit of individual cases but were in fact put in place as a way to render more and more people as “declared foreigners” who then face

INTRODUCTION

Eroding Citizenship in Assam
 Watch this video (click on the icon) to learn about the people in Assam whose names are missing from the NRC - the National Register of Citizens; people who are labelled as "foreigners." Produced by Karwan e Mubtata, this is the story of the people who live in the Char islands and constitute ~10% of the population of Assam.

NATIONAL REGISTER OF CITIZENS (NRC)

1,906,657 disenfranchised at risk of detention and statelessness

WHO ARE AFFECTED BY NRC?

- Bengali origin Muslims
- Indigenous Muslims (e.g. Dohai, Garia, Mota)
- Bengali Hindus
- Nepali, Hmong, Koch, Khasi, and other tribal groups

Women, children, destitute people, people living in hard to reach areas like chars

There are three major mechanisms that are used to disenfranchise these groups.

MECHANISMS OF DISENFRANCHISEMENT

Excluded from NRC → Foreigners' Tribunal → Reference Case (Border Police) → Disenfranchisement

Note that the burden of proof is on those accused of being "foreigners"

EXCLUDED FROM NATIONAL REGISTER OF CITIZENS (NRC)

- First published after 1951 census to detect "illegal immigrants"
- Derived from the Foreigners Act of 1946
- Cut off date: March 24, 1971
- Exclusions during updating of NRC in 2014 – 2019

D (DOUBTFUL) VOTER: ELECTION COMMISSION

- 1997 Election Commission of India conducted extensive revision of voter lists
- 3.7 lakh voters were marked as doubtful or D voters
- From a one-time event to routine exercise

REFERENCE CASE: ASSAM POLICE BORDER ORGANIZATION

- 4000+ forces are engaged to "detect and deport illegal foreigners"
- Empower to fingerprint anyone who is a "suspected foreigner"
- Nearly 2.5 lakh cases referred to Foreigners' Tribunal

detention and statelessness. Note that India and Bangladesh do not have any extradition agreement, which means that only those who are acknowledged by Bangladesh as its citizens, are considered for deportation. To be clear, we are not advocating for deportation, but this point is important with regards to why Muslims who are considered non-citizens or “declared foreigners” risk statelessness.

- iv) Wrap up this section by focusing on the current scenario highlighting:
 - 1) the links between FTs and detention camps, and
 - 2) CAA and its implications for those who are excluded from the NRC or otherwise declared foreigners.

Highlight the discriminatory and disproportionate implications because of the religious foundations of CAA, specifically its exclusion of Muslims. Note that the NRC – CAA nexus also discriminates against other vulnerable and historically oppressed groups such as Dalit Bahujans, transgender people, landless people, adivasis, and others. Thus, the NRC – CAA could become yet another institutional mechanism for subjugating these groups.

III. UNDERSTANDING HISTORICAL CONTEXT, REFRAMING ISSUES

This section places the current crisis in historical context. Looking at colonial and postcolonial histories of migration, boundaries, and displacement helps to reframe the current issue – so that it is not reduced to merely an issue of “illegal immigration” or “infiltration.” This background is important because it helps to put the current issues in a humanitarian perspective, i.e., prioritize the lived impact on communities rather than abstract ideas of nationhood and borders.

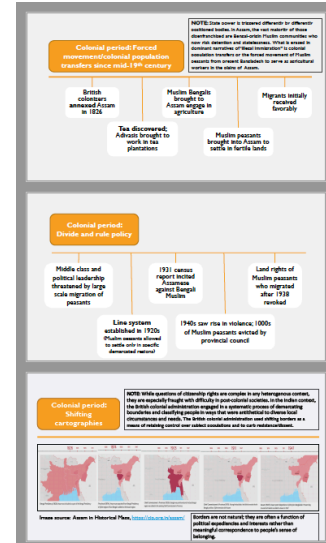
i) Highlight three key points about **colonial history**:

1) **Colonial population transfers** of Muslim peasants, tracing how Bengal origin Muslim communities came to be in the current regions of Assam;

2) **Institution of divide and rule policies** that led to increasing divides/conflicts between some of the indigenous groups and Muslim peasants; and

3) **Shifting and maintenance of borders/boundaries** as a means of controlling colonial subjects.

Emphasize how borders were/are often at odds with people's identities and their sense of belonging. Also note the violence associated with nation (and national boundary) making in South Asia.

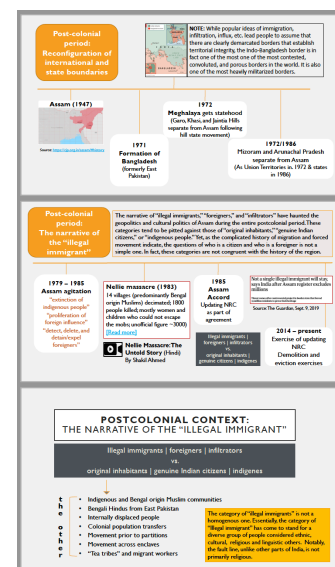


ii) Highlight three key points about **post-colonial¹ history**:

1) **Colonial influence on international borders** (arbitrary, porous, militarized) and **state boundaries** (reconfiguration, formation of multiple states as different tribal constituencies sought to separate from Assam);

2) **Creation and persistence of the narrative of "illegal immigrants"** – underscore that what is happening now is not a new phenomenon. Mention Assam agitation and violence and traumatization of Muslim communities – **the Nellie massacre**;

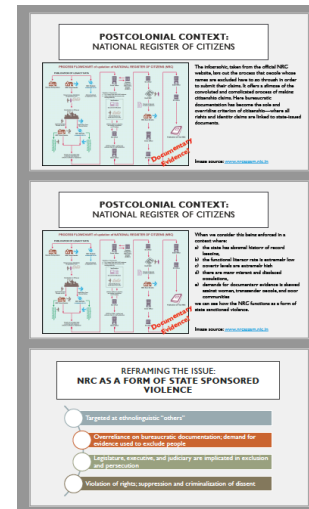
3) **Draw linkages between historical issues and Hindu nationalist agenda** - updating the NRC was one of the agreed upon points of the Assam Accord signed in 1985. Nevertheless, it was after the BJP government came into power, that it leveraged this to mobilize anti-immigrant sentiments and helped institutionalize the NRC process in a



¹ Note that the term post-colonial is used to signify the period from 1947 onwards – after Indian independence. It is used to mark this regime change; however, it does not signify the end of colonial policies and attitudes.

way that was inconceivable without the full force of the government. **Thus, in Assam, but also in the wider national context, the NRC can become a tool for detaining, persecuting, or otherwise harassing those groups that are considered “the other,” which could be based on intersections of religion, ethnicity, caste, gender, sexuality, and other invidious categories.**

- iii) Wrap the section by coming back to the **present – the implementation of NRC. Highlight: how citizenship and associated rights are reduced to bureaucratic documentary evidence – that these evidentiary processes—both demands for it and its implementation—are exclusionary and persecutory in nature → ending with a summary of how this constitutes a form of state sponsored violence.**



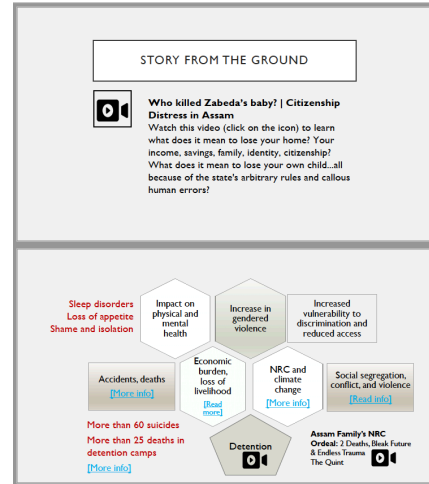
III. THE HUMAN COST OF NRC

This section provides a glimpse into the human cost of NRC, its implications for the most vulnerable communities in Assam.

It is important to **ground this section on stories from the ground** – experiences and incidents of actual people/communities who are bear the brunt of these policies. The strategy used here is a mix of numbers and stories. Note that **numbers alone are not always persuasive**, especially when they have to do with the suffering of already disenfranchised or marginalized people – hence the emphasis on humanizing the impact of NRC for audiences—so that we avoid debating legalese but are able to center those whose lives are most at stake. **Our responsibility and accountability should always be towards people and communities in struggle rather than abstract principles or policy.**

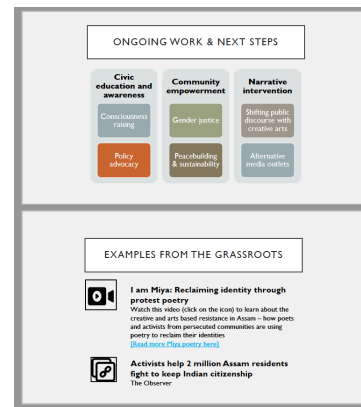
Anchor a humanitarian orientation by starting with the video: **Who killed Zabeda’s baby?** Follow it up with the pervasive and far reaching impacts and outcomes for

those affected by the NRC policy. **Emphasize that it impacts every aspect of one’s life: physical & socioemotional health/safety/well-being; social integration/rupture; family separation; discrimination & persecution; loss of life.** Here again, the videos may be used to center lived experiences.



IV. GRASSROOTS RESISTANCE & ACTIVISM

This section provides a quick overview of current grassroots activism and resistance taking place in Assam. The mobilization of young people from Miya communities is a true example of grassroots response to their continued and large-scale marginalization and disenfranchisement. The NRC served as the impetus for many people who to engage in civic and political activism in their communities. Start with the overview and move on to concrete examples:



- the first one, a short video provides an example of how creative arts-based resistance in the form of resistance (called **Miya poetry**) is increasingly used to reclaim identities, name suffering/struggles, and reassert claims for belonging.
- The second one links to a piece on the kind of on the ground activism related to NRC – how the activists support their communities.

Emphasize that these communities have been organizing, mobilizing people, and engaging in transformative community development. This is important to avoid perpetuating ideas of third world people as primarily victims who need rescuing, often



from entities in the west. Furthermore, seeing the odds and impediments against which they do their work, helps us appreciate the incredible courage, tenacity, and labor of local activists.

V. WHAT CAN YOU DO?

This section offers a few key ways in which those who are interested and committed can support the grassroots organizers and their communities persecuted through the NRC in Assam.

These ideas have been generated in consultation with the organizers themselves.

For those interested in forming coalitions and supporting capacity building of local communities in Assam, please contact Urmitapa Dutta at Urmitapa_dutta@uml.edu (note underscore between first and last name).



CHAPTER 3: RECOMMENDED USES FOR THE MODULE

I. WORKSHOP OR TEACH-IN

This is the most comprehensive use of the module and would be suitable for **peer education/training, coalition building, public awareness programs** and other formats where audience members are interested in in-depth understanding and follow-up advocacy/action. The module can be presented/taught in its entirety or split into segments/sessions² as follows:

Part I

- A. Orientation
 - a. Introduction of presenters and participants
 - b. Outline expectations/goals/outcomes
 - c. Quick warm up exercise to assess the levels of knowledge/awareness in the room – use that to moderate expectations.
 - d. Outline segments/flow of presentation
- B. Introduction
- C. Present Section I. Current crisis
- D. II. Understanding historical context, reframing issue
- E. Q & A/Clarification/Discussion

Part II

- A. Quick recap of Part I – **reiterate historical context**
- B. Outline segments/flow of presentation for this session
- C. Present Section III. The human cost of NRC in Assam
- D. Q & A/Discussion/Debriefing
- E. Focus on action
 - a. IV. Grassroots resistance and activism
 - b. V. What can you do? – **use this to segue into a discussion or brainstorming of concrete short- and long-term action steps**
- F. Wrap up plan/commitment to action steps

² This is only an example to help guide planning of sessions.

II. OVERVIEW FOR SMALL GROUP

If using with a small group of people that you can reasonably assume have some basic knowledge and awareness of the issues, the module can be shared in advanced and then reviewed using Chapter 2 as a guideline (much like the training session). Time should be allotted for clarification or follow up.

III. FACILITATE CONVERSATION/DIALOGUE

The key points from the guide along with videos and news stories from the module can be used to facilitate discussions or reframe how the issues around NRC and CAA get talked about—shifting attention away from an emphasis on legal documentary/evidentiary procedures to the **big picture issue (NRC-CAA as a form of state violence)** as well as a focus on **lived experiences and struggles of communities at the frontlines**.

Note that ongoing legal advocacy is critical as it is urgent. It is certainly necessary but not a sufficient response to the larger issues that undergird NRC-CAA processes. In fact, mobilization at the community level by local grassroots organizers supported by organizations such as CES, CJP, Nazdeek significantly, led to significantly more claims filed at the Foreigners' Tribunals resulting in fewer people excluded from the NRC than expected. The point is that for individuals or groups wanting to act in solidarity, focusing narrowly on legal points is not an effective strategy.

Our goal is also to support the affected communities as they focus on changing popular perspectives about Miya communities, advancing literacy and gender justice, and developing alternative media and historical archives - so that they are more empowered to resist and fight sectarian forces. The goal of this guide is to help us frame that vision for those interested in supporting disenfranchised communities – to highlight the long-term aspirations in addition to ongoing legal advocacy.

IV. USING SPECIFIC SEGMENTS

There are three ways of focusing on specific segments (other options may be possible but these are a few recommended ways):

- 1. Understanding the NRC-CAA as a form of structural and state-sponsored violence:** This version is a quick primer into the current situation followed by a detailed understanding of how the NRC is not a matter of “illegal immigration” – we cannot consider frameworks of legality or illegality when the judiciary, legislature, and executive bodies collude to persecute specific groups based on their religion, culture, and ethnicity.
 - a. Show video: Eroding Citizenship in Assam
 - b. Present pages Sections I and II from module (Note: Depending on level of awareness/knowledge, could go over the current scenario briefly and focus on historical context)
 - c. Wrap with a brief summary/statement about implications/impact for people.

- 2. The human costs of NRC:** This version focuses on helping people understand what the NRC means for communities on the ground, particularly vulnerable communities that are historically dispossessed and disenfranchised. The goal is to help people move away from getting caught up in legal and technical arguments and instead prioritize lived experiences of affected communities.
 - a. Brief introduction contextualizing the NRC in Assam and highlighting key points from Chapter 2.
 - b. Present Section II from Module – Provide historical context to refute narratives of “infiltrators” who lay claim to scarce resources.
 - c. Present Section III from module.
 - d. Discussion/Linkages to other struggles in the global south

- 3. Collective action and coalition building around the NRC implementation in Assam:** This version would focus more on mobilizing and planning collective action around the NRC.
 - a. Brief introduction contextualizing the NRC in Assam and highlighting key points from Chapter 2.

- b. Set up expectations – remind what solidarity entails – must not take over – always center the voices and experiences of communities in struggle.
- c. Present Section IV from module.
- d. Present Section V from module.
- e. Generate ideas on how to contribute – make sure to ground discussion on the modules presented as these have been generated directly by/with local grassroots activists in Assam.
- f. Form action sub-groups, contact people/groups as needed.
- g. Follow up as needed.

FOLLOW UP/ONGOING SUPPORT

It is critical to maintain a peer network to debrief and discuss as you facilitate sessions – to support each other, to build shared resources, and to create structures of accountability. Reach out to other people for support as needed.

Finally, this module/presentation is a live document and may need to be updated from time to time. Please contact **Urmitapa Dutta** (Urmitapa_dutta@uml.edu) for updates. Urmitapa Dutta is working directly with local activists in Assam and will consult with them on any major modifications/updates.