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**The NRC Website:  
An Exclusionary Discourse**

**CASS**

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**ABSTRACT:**

This paper studies the official website of the office of the State coordinator of National Registration (NRC), Assam. The website is a comprehensive database indicating the exclusionary nature of the NRC process. It has legal documents, training and propaganda material, and instructions for enrollment. All of this is done with a strong nationalistic fervour. It is clearly seen through the use of images such as the Indian flag on almost all webpages. Images of Hindu, upper caste, heteronormative, monogamous and ableist couples are used as representations of “genuine Indians”. The language used (such as “seva Kendra”, Casteist and patriarchal “legacy data”) also point to a selective inclusion. Words such as “India”, “Foreign”, “Illegal immigrants”, “family”, “citizen” have been sufficiently problematized. But the NRC hasn't taken any of this into account. It has overlooked these glaring problems pointed out by the subaltern. The NRC is a violent attempt to produce knowledge. The epistemological violence involved in the process of making a supposedly innocuous list ends up minimising the Precariousness of the dominant communities and maximising the Precarity of the marginalised. The paper hence is an attempt to see how contemporary postcolonial discussions, that have gone beyond the idea of “Nation” as an emancipatory tool, can be used to understand the exclusionary nature of this discourse produced by the Indian government in the form of a website.

**Keywords : Assam, Discourse, Exclusion, NRC, Post colonial.**

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## **1. Introduction**

Tim Berners-Lee, working at CERN, conceptualised the idea of the Web to expedite information sharing and management across different computers. Right from its inception, the web has been geared towards enabling the easy acquisition, access and sharing of data. (Berners-Lee 10) Production and control over data is never merely a mechanical exercise and is an integral component of epistemology, ripe with its own politics. This historic engagement with knowledge was deeply related to and bore the seeds of a tightly knit interconnection with power.

### **1.1 Web: The Predatory Spin**

Websites are ways to utilise the internet (which is an interconnection of computers) and gather related content as one bundle. Evidently, it's inherent in the idea of the website to sort the randomness of knowledge. The website is a (in)validation of a desirable kind of data. There is hence a certain kind of epistemological power associated with the notion of a website. The words used with relation to the web also indicate the same. "Web", "net", "site", "protocol", "Resource Locator", etc. The internet and websites clearly help in creating a systematic connection with a discernible pattern (protocol) and data access and control.

The "web" is indeed the right word to describe it. It is interlaced, carefully woven and mostly helpful to the spider that spins the web. It is uniformly distributed in terms of thickness and space (or in an identifiable pattern). Its nature depends on the spider that's spinning it. It came about at a time when the spider moved to new realms (land). It helps the spider capture its prey without spending too much energy. Only the spider can access the web without getting entangled in it. Though the web looks like a trap to every vulnerable being that gets close to it, the spider has inbuilt mechanism that allows only itself to traverse the length and breadth of it without causing itself any damage. Now we see how the Web is the same for human beings too. It looks alluring and democratic. Anyone can get closer, engage with it and wish to emulate the model. But if ill equipped, one gets ensnared in the carefully designed set of strands. The recent global surveillance disclosures, the popular one being Snowden's, have made it quite evident as to how the internet is undemocratic and works in ways similar to a spider's web. (Lichtblau and Risen "Bush Lets U.S. Spy on Callers Without Courts");

### **1.2 Site: Building Imagined Territories**

This "web" is coupled with "site". The online Oxford English Dictionary defines site as "A place where a particular event or activity is occurring or has occurred." ("site") This real-estate term has the idea of private property attached to it. It is also land that is used for a particular purpose. The website then is a location on the otherwise vast, uncharted, deterritorialised space - the internet. It is a well thought out design that carefully picks a certain kind of content, excluding the rest deliberately. One who lands on the website, cannot have access to the proscribed material through the website. The website temporarily closes the outside world for the viewer.

Websites are conceived of under two broad categories - Static and dynamic. Static websites are those that remain the same, irrespective of the viewer. Dynamic websites are those that, in a sense, interact with the user, also based on previously collected data regarding the user. The age, gender, nationality, previous clicks, etc determine what shows up on the screen. If we take the popular case of Google, we see how our geographical location, the account we have logged into, our search history on the device, the kind of device used, etc decide how the google website responds to us. Here, the website and the geographical-site work together to decide what we see on our screens. The seeming advantage and ease that these kind of responsive, dynamic websites provide us, make the users too prefer them over the others. Given that our social media accounts are connected to several other websites, the dynamism of the websites we visit is directly shaped by our “activity”, the data that we intentionally or unintentionally leave at the hands of the powerful multinational corporations and/or the state.

A website, hence, is not to be seen merely as a virtual existence with no connection to the real world. But the tendency has been to understand websites as reflections of the “real” world. Websites can’t merely reflect real world, nor can they exist in isolation from the real world, much like art. They engage in complex ways with the non-virtual world. It is usually argued that the progress technology makes affects the world intensely. This approach to understanding technology works on the assumption that technology that is something that is independently worked on in laboratories by science experts who are usually disconnected from the world. When they randomly produce a technological innovation, the outside world rearranges itself around the new technology. This approach is fallacious. Technological innovations are results of the needs of the world. We invent the technology we need. It’s not the CCTV camera that has increased surveillance, rather it is the desire to better our surveillance strategies that has innovated the CCTV camera. Seen this way, websites are the result of our desire to impose some order over the “clutter” that exists in the world (wide web). Websites, like the other media, then, open new ways up for us to engage with our existing problems.

## **2. Objective**

With this understanding of websites as “power”ful knowledge sites, I wish to comprehend how the “NRC website” works. The NRC website was created in 2004 by Maddoc Technologies, a Guwahati based private establishment, that offers IT services to many corporates too. This website is part of the process that aims to identify “foreigners” in Assam.

“Name of foreigners so detected will be deleted from the Electoral Rolls in force. Such persons will be required to register themselves before the Registration Officers of the respective districts in accordance with the provisions of the Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939 and the Registration of Foreigners Rules, 1939. Foreigners who came to Assam on or after 25th March 1971 shall continue to be detected, deleted and expelled in accordance with law.” (Assam Accord, nrcassam.nic.in)

As a mainland upper caste cis-het man, I have neither the ethical nor the epistemological means to validate or dismiss the large scale people's movement that has gone into the signing of the Assam accord. What is possible for me is to understand how mainland India and the Central governments have engaged with this demand from a section of the Assamese people. The NRC website says the following about the Assam accord :

“The Assam Accord was signed between AASU, AAGSP, Central and State Governments on the foreigner problem issue on 15th August 1985, which determined 1st January 1966 as the cut-off date for the purpose of detection and deletion of foreigners and allowed for citizenship for all persons coming to Assam from “Specified Territory” before the cut-off date. It further specifies that all persons who came to Assam prior to 1st January 1966 (inclusive) and up to 24th March 1971 (midnight) shall be detected in accordance with the provisions of the Foreigners Act, 1946 and the Foreigners (Tribunals) Order, 1939.” (Assam Accord, nrcassam.nic.in)

It should be noted that of all the people's movements in Assam, the subsequent governments have paid attention to this one movement, to twist it to serve their own hyper-nationalist (xenophobic) aims.

### **3. The NRC website of Exclusion**

Borrowing partially from Luc Pauwels' multimodal framework for analysing websites, I wish to study the NRC website as a cultural artefact that shapes and is shaped by the socio-political conditions of the Post-colonial Indian Nation. (252)

#### **3.1 First impressions - Pride and Prejudice**

The affective reactions that the user has at the first glance is of primary importance to both the website makers and the consumers. Given our drastically reducing attention spans, it is significant to note what the first impressions made upon the user are. Given my privileged social location and the growing patriotic political context that I come from, I can't help but notice the Indian flag on the homepage. Right next to the image, the NRC is written in navy blue. Right after this, the map of Assam is put up, coloured in green, implying prosperity, greenery and fertility by association. The last image in this sequence is the Ashoka Chakra. Beneath this image, satyameva Jayate is written in the Devnagiri script.

In the next step, I see several moving photographs that easily draws my attention. I see what usually would be called “authentic” Assam- the quintessential tea gardens being the haunting presence. There are images of locals with facial features different from mine. They wear clothes that I haven't seen in my locality. They wear the bindi, a kind of turban and do their traditional dance. They have localised musical instruments. Fishing, farming, boating and animals like the rhinoceros and deer are shown. Pictures of handicraft works give me idea that they have tourists regularly and they are happy to have them there. While all these are in colour, I see a couple of black and white images. Here people stand in large crowds with placards and a photo of MK Gandhi. I understand they are protestors but the lack

of colour also tells me that it happened in the past. In the next image there is Rajiv Gandhi with a few other leaders being given some paper. Here I understand that this is the accord that is signed and given, as though to “give it in writing” to the protestors and their representatives.

### **3.2. Salient features of the website**

The website looks colourful, easy to access and has photos and the map of Assam in several places. The links given in the form of buttons, make it easy for one to access different parts of the website. The bottom most part of the website has the number of visitors and I realise that thousands of people have accessed it. That the new links are in different colours and that they blink make it easier for me to identify them. This is based on the assumption that visitors will need to visit the website more than once. Pictures, links and different colours make one feel like it is not an intimidating website. The image of a woman with headphones with the words “NRC call center” gives the impression that one doesn’t have to struggle with the process alone.

### **3.3. Proscription :**

It is not only what is provided that defines the website and its ideology, but what is intentionally proscribed. At least two stark instances give away the exclusivity at play through the website:

When the (updated) list of the those who are part of my imagined community is so clearly given, I should also be informed of the details of those with whom I once shared fraternal bonds through an imposed imagination. Just as how they are “deleted” from the NRC, their details are also not mentioned on the website. As an Indian citizen, if I need to know who else is an Indian, I also need to know who was an Indian.

### **4. Content analysis :**

At this stage of analysis, verbal, typographic, visual, sonic and design signifiers are analysed for their cultural denotations and connotations.

#### **4.1. Verbal signifiers**

The language of NRC is deeply rooted in an exclusionary politics of the idea of the Nation. Here too, a colonial enterprise such as the census is adopted with very little thought.

##### **4.1.1. Legal discourse**

The NRC attempts to decide the membership in the Nation through documents, registers and databases, taking the idea of social contract very literally. Mark Poster argues, extending Foucault’s argument about discourse, that discourses devise subjects and interpellate them whenever required. This database too devises subjects of the nature that is desired by the national imaginary and excludes those undesired. (87)

Further by presenting sections such as “About NRC”, NRC process” “Acts, rules & SC orders” etc., the website gives the impression of a meticulous procedure . It deliberately invokes legality to

validate the various political moves involved in the NRC. The discourse of the legality is conveniently used to shift the blame onto the court and wash the hands of a deeply communal project.

Robert Alexy famously argued that legal discourse has a “pretension to correctness”. (Barbarosch) Jurisprudence doesn’t work only on ideas of logic and argumentation but also on what is most apt, given our moral understanding of the world. This pretension to correctness gives a certain form of legitimacy to legal discourse, that political parties outside use it to justify their actions in return. It is enough to say “in accordance with law” and there would be no need to provide further explanation. The entire website is filled with words related to the law. “Legal”, “court”, “constitution”, “law”, etc can be seen used in almost all the important web pages, as though to absolve everyone else of the implications of this process and hold the Court alone accountable which anyway, by the nature of its discourse, is supposed to be logical, reasonable and “correct”. The link and the sub links under “Acts, rules & SC orders” are filled with legal documents that neatly present the above argued idea. Post colonial India has historically abused the power of its state machinery to crush the rights of the people down. It is only because of the pressure build up by the marginalised people that the court has been forced to give pro-people’s judgement on a few occasions.

#### **4.1.2. Family-iar Discourse**

What also strikes one as peculiar is the choice of words to describe a few important components of the process. For instance, “family tree”, “Legacy data” are used as though to further normalise the idea of India as consisting of only upper caste, monogamous and heterosexual families. Several marginalised groups have critiqued family as an institution for being rife with hierarchies of caste and gender. Families have also been re-conceptualised by many. For instance, many transgender people who are harassed by the traditional families, leave that setup to become part of “families” the way they deem fit. The idea of tracing the family line in the name of “Legacy data” is problematic, given that the upper caste hindus have prided themselves over their legacy and have systematically ensured the erasure and degradation of the “Legacy data” of the oppressed castes.

Special mention is made of women who might have migrated after marriage. Here too, there is a normative idea that is considered. One, that only women migrate after marriage and two, that marriage means one that is between heterosexual persons. The website says the forms have to be filled by the heads of the families and only when the head is not present, will someone else fill the form. It conveniently leaves the idea of the head ambiguous. When ambiguity prevails, the “norm” presides. The patriarch is again bestowed with power in the post-colonial Indian state. In contexts like these, any attempt to uncritically use the same old oppressive terms furthers discrimination.

#### **4.1.3 The (ab)use of Language**

The website operates only in english. As per the latest linguistic survey, 1,53,11,351 people speak Assamese. (Abstract of speakers’ strength) The census survey’s very first line is “Language is an important attribute of a population, and has great relevance and significance in a pluri-lingual and

pluri-ethnic land like India.” (General note) As a postcolonial nation when we pride ourselves on the diversity of the Nation, it remains to be asked how much is actually done to aid this diversity. Given the technological advancements and the budget allocation for NRC which has been revised to Rs. 1220.93 crore upto 31.12.2018, making the website available in several languages for the benefits of different groups of people wouldn't be difficult.(Cabinet approves revised cost estimates) On the other hand, the help centres are called NSK - NRC Seva Kendra. One has to wonder why there is this necessity to use Hindi (that is standardised and sanskritised) instead of the local languages. The forms, the website says, will be distributed in Assamese, English and Bengali. If it is based on the demographics, then it is a deeply political question and not merely a bureaucratic choice. This imposition of several norms of the Postcolonial Indian state leads to exclusion that works on very strong caste, class, gender and ableist lines.

#### **4.2. Visual signifiers :**

The Indian flag right at the top with NRC written in navy blue next to it, instead of the chakra, makes it look the process in as integral part of the national unity and prosperity. But this is a deconstructive moment, for we see that the chakra, which stands for Dharma, is missing from the flag. We see it separated and present far from it in the form of the lion capital of Ashoka. In the place of the Chakra, Japi, the traditional Assamese hat is used. This is an attempt to present Assam as identified with “tradition”, which definitely excludes the “foreigners”.

##### **4.2.1 Photos**

The photos that follow too present a similar narrative. The assamese local culture is presented, as though the state has had no “modernisation” and it is only through the traditional occupations that they make their livelihood. The local protests are appropriated by the mainland people using a couple of photos - two photos where the Assamese have MK Gandhi's photo with them, giving us the idea that they identify with India and its icons; then the photo with Rajiv Gandhi gives us the impression that the mainland government was in fact empathetic and heard the demands of the Assamese. This national integration on the one hand is aided by the nativist narrative of Assam, both of which work to keep the “foreigners” away.

The photo gallery has about 300 photos. We see that the locations are different for these photos, giving us the sense that they took the effort to reach out to people in inland areas to ensure inclusivity. But several photos have a police officer there with the officials. This is another deconstructive instance in the website. The Police is associated with violence - by actively involving themselves in harming others or by using violence only to protect us (as another narrative would have us believe). This physical violence manifested in the pictures is symbolic of the epistemological violence that the register inflicts. Almost all the photos have documents in them, giving us the impression that it is merely a bureaucratic exercise. But the documentation is the political activity undertaken, with very

little being given away, for all of which could be glaringly political in this process is subtly wrapped in the language of the law and the domestication through documents.

#### **4.2.2. Publicity material**

The flipchart in English has a group of people standing in the first slide. An evidently upper caste looking Hindu woman is in the front of this group. In almost the first instance in the entire website, we see two skull cap wearing muslim men, of which one is made to stand at the end (shown his place). We don't see any burqa clad muslim women anywhere in the website. By way of clarification, I don't mean to say all Muslim women wear the burqa. The point being made is that there is a section of the population that does wear the burqa but given mainland's fear and hatred to the burqa, it is deliberately erased from the entire visual landscape. Women mostly with a saree have a bindi and also a tilak on their forehead. The unmarried Hindu woman who might not belong to anyone is also a threat. The women are always shown with some man, either the father or the husband. As noted earlier, the family presented through this flipchart is also one that is heterosexual, monogamous and upper caste Hindu.

In the leaflets given, almost all of them begin with "As per direction of the hon'ble Supreme Court". This is done despite clearly knowing that the amendment to the Citizenship act is being opposed throughout Assam and the NRC process is not satisfactorily supervised by the SC and that they have several hearings where they still are reconsidering many aspects of the NRC process. Ironically, the unfamiliar, unfair leaflets read "Our NRC, fair NRC".

In one of the leaflets, while explaining the family tree, photos of two documents are given as examples. One has a "Sarma" family, while the other one is of a "Kalita" family. Can it be a mere coincidence that only Brahmin and Kshatriya families are used as examples? If one does think it is a coincidence, the website helps us clear this out, by giving us another leaflet where it says the process of filling the application form up is explained through an example of a fictitious family - Chandra Sarma. Even when imagining, our (national) imaginary is circumscribed by caste, that too upper caste (unsurprisingly). It is apt here to note that the representation of the bodies on the website is also ableist. It is as though Assam doesn't have or doesn't want anything outside of what it has conceived of as the "right" persons.

Over fifty print advertisements published since 2015 are available on the website. They all employ the same exclusionary discourse through print. It is to tell the citizens that the state has done all it can and any exclusion from the list is the citizen's fault for not keeping up with the updation process. "Media reports, our response" contains a detailed response to many items that have appeared on the state level and national level media questioning different aspects of the NRC. By responding to opinions against the NRC, the state is ensuring that all attempts to question the process are immediately nullified.

#### 5. The interplay



Attention is paid to the interplay of various modalities. For instance, “story” apart from denoting fiction, also connotes the idea of “development” - in the sense of one event leading to another and so on. Be it with the set of pictures right in the beginning, or the photos in the gallery or the content under “ story so far”, the narrative is one that is smooth, collective, transparent and just. This interplay between the visual and the verbal content of the website is also very smartly designed to not let inconsistency seep in. Not just within, but with the hyperlinks to content outside too, the content has been properly chosen and designed to encourage and enhance the NRC process. But all throughout, the idea of hybridity is downplayed.

## **6. Conclusion :**

The postcolonial nation that is India, is a hybrid mix of its own past cultures and the European cultures that settled smartly over this sub-continent. While the validity of this subcontinent as a nation is still an unsettled dispute, processes such as the NRC and the amendment to the citizenship act are deliberate attempts to bring a violent closure to these discussions which usually also give way to exploring ways of co-existing, even when India as a community is still a fragment of an imagination. Instead of aiding this imagination, the supposedly emancipatory idea of India is only invalidating the several attempts to go beyond what has been inadequately imagined for over a century now. This exclusionary postcolonial discourse needs to be extended to engage with the existing Subaltern discourses that have kept the idea of emancipation alive. The NRC process is another attempt to circumscribe our imagination to refer to only normative frames and privilege a particular religion, a few castes, one gender, one sexuality and one idea of the human body. Websites like these play an active role in constructing and consolidating these select choices. The sooner we realise these insidious moves, the sooner we can stop ourselves from trampling upon the subaltern of this subcontinent.

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