Displacement diaries

How the son-of-the-soil syndrome scarred the Northeast

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Last month, rampaging mobs, agitated over the State government’s proposal to ‘discuss’ the issue of granting Permanent Resident Certificates to six non-tribal communities in Arunachal Pradesh, laid siege to the Assembly building in Itanagar. Overnight violence and the deaths of three protesters sent the plan into deep freeze. In adjoining Assam, an insistent Supreme Court, in early February, asked for the July deadline for finalisation of the National Register of Citizens to be met irrespective of a general election in the intervening months.

The fate of 3.6 million people, of around four million who were left out of the list and have filed claims for inclusion of their names, hangs in the balance. From NRC to PRC, the insider-outsider dialectic in the Northeast is as old as its hills.

For communities such as the Hindu Sylhetis, the trauma of displacement and dispossession was twice-lived, first on account of Partition and then owing to the pogroms carried out by Khasi ultra-chauvinists. For the Assamese elite that grew up in the macro-State of which Shillong was capital, the descent to Guwahati after the carving out of Meghalaya was more benign, leaving nostalgia intact. For the ‘mainlander’, acceptance was hard to win, even if — as an author did — one married into the local community.

For others still, such as the Chakmas, inclusion remains a will-o’-the-wisp in two States. The pieces have a Shillong skew, with 11 of the 16 referencing the ‘Scotland of the East’; perhaps the urgency of bringing out the volume while the tailwinds of NRC-citizenship Bill still blow dictated such a selection.

Yet as account after account illustrates the crumbling of the hill town’s cosmopolitanism in pursuit of constitutional protectionism, the horror of the dkhars’ (non-tribals’) realisation that ‘the ground they stood on wasn’t theirs enough’ hits home. Insider/ Outsider holds a mirror to a Northeast increasingly seeking a warmer embrace in the wider India, retelling what must be retold: do unto others as you would have them do unto you.