

## General Studies-1; Topic – Post-independence consolidation and reorganization within the country

### National Register of Citizens (NRC)

#### 1) Introduction

- The National Register of Citizens (NRC), is the list of Indian citizens in Assam.
- Assam, which faced influx from Bangladesh since the early 20th century, is the only state having an NRC.
- It was prepared in 1951, following the census of 1951.
- It is being updated to weed out illegal immigration from Bangladesh and neighbouring regions.
- Recently Assam released the final draft of the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which included 1.9 crore names out of a total applicant pool of 3.29 crore.
- The political leaders have assured that everyone will be given a fair and patient hearing to prove their citizenship.

#### 2) Background

- The NRC was last updated in Assam way back in 1951.
- Then, it had recorded 80 lakh citizens in the State. Since then, the process of identification of illegal immigrants in Assam has been debated and become a contentious issue in the State's politics.
- A PIL was filed in the Supreme Court seeking the removal of “illegal voters” from the electoral rolls of Assam and the preparation of the NRC as required under the Citizenship Act, 1955 and its rules.
- A six-year agitation demanding identification and deportation of illegal immigrants was launched by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) in 1979.
- It culminated with the signing of the Assam Accord on August 15, 1985.

#### 3) Who is a citizen in Assam?

- Post the Assam agitation against ‘foreigners’, and the subsequent Assam Accord signed in 1985 between the government of India and the All Assam Students Union, the Citizenship Act, 1955, was amended.
- All Indian-origin people, including from Bangladesh who entered Assam before January 1, 1966, were deemed as citizens.
- Those who came between January 1, 1966 and March 25 1971 could get citizenship after registering themselves and living for 10 years.
- Those who entered after March 25, 1971 were to be deported.

#### 4) NRC Verification

- The process of NRC update was taken up in Assam as per a Supreme Court order in 2013.
- It was done in order to wean out cases of illegal migration from Bangladesh and other adjoining areas.
- NRC updation was carried out under The Citizenship Act, 1955, and according to rules framed in the Assam Accord.
- A total of 3.29 crore people applied.
- The verification involved house-to-house field verification, determination of authenticity of documents, family tree investigations in order to rule out bogus claims of parenthood and separate hearings for married women.

### 5) Why a separate National Register of Citizens?

- This is because of a history of migration.
- During British rule, Assam was merged with Bengal Presidency for administrative purpose.
- From 1826 to 1947, the British continuously brought migrant workers to Assam for cheap labour in tea plantations.
- Two major waves of migration came after British rule.
- First after Partition, from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh).
- Then in the aftermath of the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971.
- This eventually led to an agitation during 1979-85, led by the All Assam Students' Union.
- It culminated in the 1985 Assam Accord, under which illegal migrants were to be identified and deported.

### 6) Is there a similar situation for migrants in any other state?

- There are demands for the NRC to be implemented in Meghalaya as well.
- Similar demands are coming from Nagaland and Tripura.
- In Arunachal Pradesh, a demand for citizenship to Chakmas has been pending for decades.
- While the Centre is keen to grant them citizenship, it is being opposed by the state government.
- Arunachal state government fears that the state's political demography will suffer a change.
- There are more than 10 million people in the world who don't have any citizenship.

### 7) Impact

- The question of what will be the status of the several lakh individuals who would have lost Indian citizenship with no recourse has remained unanswered.
- The immediate consequence is that they will lose their right to vote.
- The biggest fallout of the NRC updating could be India's relations with Bangladesh, which has been on an upswing in recent time.

### 8) Concerns / Challenges

- The exercise on updating the "National Register of Citizens" (NRC) in Assam has created a political storm.
- Many had to spend their life's earning in legal fees, in the long process of submitting documents, and challenging declarations of their non-citizenship with the courts.
- It was hoped that the Supreme Court's monitoring of the process would have ensured fairness and transparency.
- Regrettably it has not been so.
- From the non-transparent "family tree verification" process, to the somewhat arbitrary rejection of the gram panchayat certificates (affecting mostly women), the process has been riddled with legal inconsistencies and errors.
- The family tree verification process has resulted in numerous instances of parents being on the draft list but children being left out.
- The number of people affected by the rejection of panchayat residency certificates is more than 45 lakh.
- The fate of lakhs of people relying on these documents remains uncertain as each person will now have to prove his or her linkages afresh.
- Preparing the NRC within a deadline seemed more important than ensuring legal clarity over the claims of citizenship.

### 9) Way Forward

- South Asia has seen many crises over citizenship. The Supreme Court must ensure there isn't another one in Assam.
- The claims of those left out in the NRC must be heard carefully, humanely.
- Need for a robust mechanism of legal support for the four million who have to prove their citizenship to India with their limited means.
- India's approach to citizenship is going to be scrutinised by the world.
- All state authorities need to be prudent in their actions so that good sense prevails and ensure that large-scale humanitarian crises do not erupt.

