National Register of Citizens

Why in news?

Final draft of the National Register of Citizens published by Assam Government left out 40 lakhs people including the family members of former President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed.

What is the significance?

- Assam is the only State that had prepared an NRC in 1951.
- It has also now become the first State to get the first draft of its own updated NRC.
- The Register is meant to establish the credentials of a bona fide citizen as distinguished from a foreigner.
- This is to detect Bangladeshi migrants who may have illegally entered Assam after the midnight of March 24, 1971.
- This cut-off date was originally agreed to in the 1985 Assam Accord.

What is the Assam Accord?

- Assam witnessed a range of law and order problems and political turbulence driven by the anti-foreigners movement, in the early 1980s.
- Responding to this, the Assam Accord (1985) was signed by the Centre and the All Assam Students' Union (AASU).
- Accordingly, those foreigners who had entered Assam between 1951 and 1961 were to be given full citizenship, including the right to vote.
- The entrants between 1961 and 1971 were to be denied voting rights for ten years but would enjoy all other rights of citizenship.
- Anyone who entered the state without documents after March 24, 1971 will be declared a foreigner and were to be deported.
- Besides, the Accord had a package for the economic development of Assam.
- It also had assurance to provide safeguards to protect the cultural, social, and linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people.

What happened thereafter?

- The successive governments in the State failed to effectively detect and deport foreigners as set out in the Assam Accord.
- In 2005, another agreement was signed between the Centre, the Assam government and the AASU.
- Accordingly, it was decided to update the NRC that was first published after the Census data of 1951.
- The NRC update though started as a pilot project in some districts was stopped after violence broke out in some parts of the State.
- In 2009, Assam Public Works (APW), an NGO filed a petition in the Supreme Court.

- It called for identification of Bangladeshi foreigners in the State and deletion of their names from the voters' list.
- The recent publication of updated NRC comes as a result of the Supreme Court order to complete the exercise by December 31, 2017.

What challenges lie ahead?

- Claims - The list published is the first draft, and with verification of the remaining applicants subsequent draft would be published.
- However, if a citizen's name is missing, he/she can file an objection (with requisite documents) and request that the name be included.
- Given the further claims, a security challenge could possibly emerge when the process of updating the NRC gets completed.
- Post marriage migration - Nearly 29 lakh women, who have migrated after marriage, have claimed for residency status.
- Their claim is supported by certificates issued by gram panchayat secretaries and executive magistrates.
- The Supreme Court has clarified that while these documents could be allowed, it could by no means be taken as proof of citizenship.
- The challenge lies in verifying the authenticity of the certificates for establishing the link between the claimant and the legacy person (who has to be a citizen).
- Citizenship Bill - The Centre is pushing for the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016.
- It seeks to grant citizenship to Hindu Bangladeshis who have entered Assam illegally post-1971.
- Various groups have opposed identification of illegal migrants on the basis of religion.
- This unresolved citizenship related issue could further pose a challenge for the positive outcome of the NRC, even if completed.

Source: The Hindu, The Indian Express

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