



Regional Exceptionalism and the CAA: Examining Northeast India's Protest Movement

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Passed in December 2019, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) was one of the most controversial events in recent Indian political history. While demonstrations broke out across, the Northeast saw a notably fervent and broad mobilising effort. By emphasising concerns of regional identity, federalism, and the constraints of majoritarian nationalism, I contend in this essay that the anti-CAA protests in the Northeastern states, especially Assam, represent a vital social movement that changed the course of Indian politics post-2000. This paper will demonstrate how the movement sought to provoke social change and reclaim regional political agency inside the Indian Union using social movement theory and primary interviews as a guide.

The Context: Citizenship and Identity in the Northeast

Amending the 1955 Citizenship Act, the CAA offers non-Musal refugees from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan who came in India before December 2014 a quick pathway to Indian citizenship. Although the Act was presented as a humanitarian gesture, many people condemned it for its community character and alleged breach of secular values.

The Northeast's resistance, however, was based on a different issue: ethnic and linguistic identity. Unlike many other areas of India where religion motivated political mobilisation around CAA, in Assam and adjacent regions the opposition was based on worries of cultural decline and demographic change. Signed following a six-year-long anti-foreigner campaign, the 1985 Assam Accord had previously set 1971 as the cut-off year for identification and deportation of illegal immigrants, regardless of religion. The CAA's revised terms were viewed as a violation of this pact, therefore compromising decades of effort to preserve Assamese identity.

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Social Movement Theory and the Anti-CAA Protests

Social movement theory offers a perspective to see how and why group action arises. Social movements, as Charles Tilly contended, need common interests, a planned organisation, and the capacity to assert group demands on powers. The Northeast's anti-CAA demonstrations captured all three.

The common concern was the preservation of ethno-linguistic identity. Diverse in form, the organisational structure included student unions such the All-Assam Students' Union (AASU), indigenous groups, artists, intellectuals, and civil society organisations. Digital mobilisation and public art gave even spontaneous protests an organised cadence. At last, the movement's demand was clear-cut: repeal the CAA to preserve regional integrity. Sidney Tarrow's idea of "political opportunity structure" also helps frame the protests. The Modi government's forceful drive for the Act, against popular sentiment, closed democratic channels and sent regional players to the streets. From police crackdowns to internet shutdowns, the state's reaction only served to further delegitimise the centre in the eyes of the demonstrators.

Primary Accounts: Voices from the Ground

After interviewing two people from Assam actively engaged in the protests to grasp the emotional and sociological undercurrents of the campaign.

A member of the protest organising committee and Guwahati University student stated, *"We protested as Assamese, not as Hindus or Muslims. We have battled for decades to preserve our culture, our language, and this Act is a direct assault on our being."* He underlined that the dread was profoundly material, not only symbolic. We are already fighting for employment. Imagine more migrants arriving, getting regularised. Our young will suffer. Our tongue will perish.

Likewise, a Bihu artist from Jorhat, underlined how crucial artists were to the cause. *"Our music went to the streets. Protest songs in Assamese were our form of defiance. It was our identity under siege from a government that doesn't know us, not only from immigration."* These stories underline the fundamental driving power: identification. Unlike other social movements motivated by rights-based demands or ideological biases, this one was existential; it was for survival.

The role of Digital Activism and Cultural Resistance

Particularly in light of state-imposed limitations like curfews and internet shutdowns, one of the defining characteristics of the anti-CAA movement in Northeast India was how protest culture and digital activism worked together to sustain the campaign. Often overlooked in national media coverage, the area turned to



local networks both physical and digital, to keep the debate going. Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp among other social media channels turned into instruments for planning demonstrations, sharing news on police activities, and even disseminating protest songs and artwork that caught the emotional core of the movement. Even when actual meetings were prohibited, protest songs in Assamese, many of which were written and disseminated extensively during this time, produced a common feeling of identification and resistance. This kind of activism let the movement remain active outside of geographical and logistical constraints.

This kind of activism let the movement remain active beyond geographical and logistical constraints. Even those from rural areas or Assamese groups outside the state might track events and provide help. Digital techniques combined with local culture helped the anti-CAA protests stay relevant and keep momentum going as well as created a community of politically conscious young people in the area. Digital and cultural platforms used in this way allowed the movement a lasting presence even after physical protests started to decline. This application of cultural and digital tools provided the movement with a lasting presence even after street protests started to decline.

The Deeper Political Fracture: Identity, Agency, and the Social Contract

Apart from the obvious legal and political conflict, the anti-CAA movement in the Northeast reflects a deeper rift in the developing relationship between India's peripheries and its central government. Alain Touraine's social movement theory helps to explain the protests as an assertion of agency by groups who believed their identities were being written out of the Indian state national narrative rather than just opposition to a specific policy. The protesters were not just defending a legal cut-off date or fighting demographic change; they were challenging the centralisation of political power and the redefinition of Indian citizenship itself, which more and more reflected the priorities of majoritarian nationalism rather than constitutional pluralism. The protesters' anxiety was based on the possible decline of economic prospects, cultural space, and linguistic importance. In addition to this was the symbolic prospect which was the loss of political agency in a Union that appeared more remote than ever. Interviews with student leaders and artists show a common thread: the battle was more about protecting an identity whose survival was thought to be under existential threat than about religion or ideology. The anti-CAA demonstrations, therefore, were not only about changing a particular law but also about renegotiating the social contract between the government and its northeastern residents, hence challenging Indian politics to confront the boundaries of majoritarian decision-making in a varied federal structure. Although the law still exists, the movement has



changed the shape of political debate in India and left an unerasable imprint on how regional dissent and national identity will interact in the years to come.

Political and Social Impact

Though the CAA was enacted and still in effect, the demonstrations in the Northeast had enduring effects. To start, they raised awareness of identity politics and regional autonomy. States such as Mizoram and Meghalaya showed a unique time of cross-state unity by passing motions opposing the Act.

Second, the demonstrations in the area undermined the political momentum of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Though the BJP kept control in the 2021 Assam Assembly elections, it did so with a noticeably different campaign that minimised the CAA. Furthermore, the 2023 elections in Meghalaya and Nagaland saw regional parties distancing themselves from the BJP, citing CAA-related worries.

Third, the movement revealed the boundaries of majoritarian nationalism. While the rest of the nation argued the Act on religious lines, the Northeast demonstrated that the Indian identity is multiple and regionally negotiated. It questioned the idea that national interest could, without consequence, trump regional aspirations.

Limits and Possibilities of Social Change

Although emotionally strong and visible, the anti-CAA movement in the Northeast has had mixed success in generating genuine social change. The Act is still in force; its complete implementation plans are yet unknown. But the impact of a social movement is not measured just by whether it attains instant legal reversal; its real strength usually resides in its capacity to change public conversation and redefine political involvement. Social movements, according to Alberto Melucci, are "laboratories of meaning" that create new cultural narratives and shared ideals long after the street protests recede. The anti-CAA campaign in Assam and the larger Northeast created more than simply headlines; it created a lasting lexicon of resistance via songs, murals, protest art, and theatre, so transforming cultural expression into a potent extension of political opposition. It also ignited a nationwide renaissance of collective action, breathing new life into once-declining groups like the All-Assam Students' Union (AASU) and motivating many young people, usually first-time protestors, to discover both identity and agency in grassroots mobilisation.

The demonstrations also set off a strong regional criticism of the centralisation of authority under the present government at the same time, particularly when comparisons were made between the CAA and the removal of Article 370 in Jammu & Kashmir. For many in the Northeast, these moves indicated the decline



of India's federal system and the rejection of region-specific political sensibilities. Though the law stayed in place, the anti-CAA campaign forced national and state political leaders to face an unpleasant reality: that promises of integration and economic growth cannot take precedence over long-standing concerns about identity, demographic balance, and resource security. Opposition to the Act was not just a theoretical discussion for the people of Assam but a visceral reaction to genuine concerns—of cultural loss, future unemployment, and the socio-economic relocation of local groups. The movement therefore strengthened the regional group identification and showed that the politics of belonging could resist majoritarian stories. Although the CAA itself is still legal, the demonstrations changed the area's relationship with the Indian government and established the tone for next democratic contestation, hence increasing federal policy-making's susceptibility to public examination and grassroots opposition in the years to come.

The anti-CAA movement in the Northeast was a statement of identity, a criticism of centralised authority, and a call for significant federalism, not only a response to a law. It signalled a break in the relationship between the area and the centre, hence pushing Indian politics to face its multicultural underpinnings. This was a turning point since it revealed that identity-based movements in India could no longer be limited to the binaries of religion or ideology just like what Assam's heartthrob, Zubeen Garg said "I have no caste, I have no religion, I am free. My caste is Assamese and my religion is humanity". This is what resonates with the people and this social movement. Now they function at the crossroads of history, economy, and culture. Rooted in a long history of struggle, the Northeast's protests questioned the prevailing political narratives and reaffirmed the region's power to influence India's democratic destiny.

Though the Act itself might not have been revoked, the movement it generated still affects people and might lead to a major conflict in the future if not mediated at the earliest. It reminded the country that democracy lives on in streets, in songs, and in the narratives of resistance that communities like those in Assam keep telling; it does not stop at the vote box.

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