

**Transforming the ‘Lazy Native’ into the ‘Xenophobic Indigenous’:
Contemporary Online Media Discourses and Illocutionary Speech Acts in
Relation to Citizenship and Indigenous Assamese Communities**

Shaheen S. Ahmed and Bikash Kumar Bhattacharya

Abstract

On 30 July 2018, the Final Draft of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) that was updated in Assam, a state in Northeast India, for the first time since 1950, was released. The NRC was a popular demand of the Indigenous and ethnic Assamese people since the mid 1980s. However, the Indian national media industry went into an overdrive in covering this political and historical event in the state, with many publications terming the Indigenous peoples of Assam as ‘xenophobic’ and ‘ethnofascist’ for demanding the updating of the NRC. In this paper, we look at how the release of the NRC, the final draft in July 2018 and the final NRC in August 2019, was covered in various media outlets by focusing on certain tropes regarding the Indigenous and ethnic Assamese peoples, which were amplified in both traditional and social media. We also take a look at the Twitter archival data which we accessed through Twitter’s application programming interface (API) and examine the inter-connectedness between the content that was produced in traditional media on the Indigenous and ethnic Assamese peoples and how that content was amplified on Twitter. This paper brings together both digital and traditional humanities to deconstruct these current tropes, which we trace to

colonial legacies in the Northeast since the mid 19th century, with empirical data available from Twitter.

Introduction

In 2018-2019, the National Register of Citizens (NRC) was updated in the Northeastern state of Assam in India. While concurrently, in 2019, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) was implemented in the whole of India by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). These two political events brought to the forefront contentious issues of citizenship in India's Northeast region.

Assam is one of the states in India's Northeast region, the others being Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura. Together they are known as the Seven Sisters. At times, the other Himalayan state of the east, Sikkim, is also included in this collective called Northeast India. Long framed as the frontier of the British Empire's Indian colony, the region still remains a frontier zone for the post-independent Indian nation-state. Madhumita Sengupta argues that, 'Assam was made into a frontier through a series of acts of trivialisations long before policies actually began to override its material culture and convert the region into a *land frontier*...[t]he idea of a frontier was intrinsic to the manner in which Assam was imagined long before the actual acquisition of the region' (Sengupta, 2016, p. 9).

Assam has two river valleys, the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley. The British colonised the Brahmaputra Valley, the largest valley in this geographical region, in 1826 — the year they signed the Treaty of Yandabo — at the end of the First Anglo-Burmese War. Assam till then was ruled for a period of nearly six centuries by the

Ahom dynasty. Till 1874, Assam was ruled under the Bengal Province. In the same year, the colonisers carved out the new Assam Province and re-shaped the boundaries of Assam by annexing the Bengali majoritarian Sylhet District, which forms the Barak Valley, to Assam. The only other Valley in this region is the Imphal Valley in Manipur. The Northeast region shares an extensive international border with Bhutan, Tibet, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh. The region, 'shares approximately a mere 3 percent of its territory with India, connecting it to the state of West Bengal' (Baruah, 2015, p. 3).

As with the shared experience of the British Empire and colonialism in other colonised locations of the world, 'colonial rule in Assam triggered a series of sweeping changes, not only in its polity and economy, but in society and culture as well' (Goswami, 2017, p. 3), which also included the annexation of Sylhet to Assam without any consensus or dialogue with the Indigenous or native people of the Brahmaputra Valley. Colonial policies triggered major demography changes in Assam and occupation of native lands by marking those as 'wastelands'.¹

On 30 July 2018, the 'Final Draft' of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) that was updated in Assam, a state in the Northeast, for the first time since 1950, was released. It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into the entire colonial history of Assam and the legacy of which triggered the demand for the NRC in Assam since the mid-1980s. However, the national media industry went into an overdrive in covering this political and historical event in the state, with many publications painting the Indigenous people of Assam demands of the NRC as 'xenophobic' and 'ethnofascist'. In this paper, we look at how the release of the NRC, the final draft in July 2018 and the final NRC in

¹ For more details on the NRC and the history behind the demand for such a register, c.f. Counterview: Tracing the roots of Assam's NRC politics to the 1947 Sylhet Partition is misleading, *Scroll.in*, How global academia represents Assam & Northeast India, *Raiot.in*, Ahmed and Pathak (2020), and Bhattacharya (2020).

August 2019, was covered in various media outlets by focusing on certain tropes regarding the Indigenous and ethnic Assamese peoples, which were amplified in both traditional and social media. We also take a look at the Twitter archival data which we accessed through Twitter's application programming interface (API) and examine the inter-connectedness between the content that was produced in traditional media on the Indigenous and ethnic Assamese peoples and how that content was amplified on Twitter. We use affect theory (Massumi, 1995; Slaby and Mulhoffs, 2018), social media innovations (Ní Bhroin, 2015; Bruns, 2014), digital humanities (Neu *et al.* 2020; Torregrosa *et al.*, 2020), decoloniality (Mignolo, 2006 and 2020; Quijano, 2007), speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle and Vanderveken, 1985) and race studies (Caspari, 2010; Blakey, 1999) to examine and deconstruct the various tropes about the Indigenous and ethnic Assamese that were constructed in the period between July 2018 and December 2019. This paper brings together both digital humanities and traditional humanities to deconstruct these current tropes, which we trace to colonial legacies in the Northeast since the mid 19th century, with empirical data available from Twitter.

Social Media, Traditional Media and Being Assamese

As mentioned in the previous section, the two political acts, NRC and the CAA, affected Assam directly and within a rather short period of time. In this paper, however, we would not be explaining in detail the political ramifications of these two political events or acts in Assam, but discuss in detail the responses to these acts in the public sphere by political commentators and analysts.² Here, we specifically engage with public

² For more details on the NRC and CAA and how it impacted Assam, cf. Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019: What is it and why is it seen as a problem, *The Economic Times* and Ahmed and Pathak (2020).

commentary that responded to the publication of the NRC by terming Indigenous and ethnic peoples of Assam as ‘xenophobic’, ‘racist’ and ‘chauvinist’. We locate these tropes that were used mostly by mainland Indian commentators or other commentators belonging to dominant and hegemonic communities within the colonial tropes that the British developed to manage a ‘wild’ borderland and its peoples as the empire expanded its frontiers. Although, there have been multiple articles, commentaries, opinion pieces, editorials and social media responses to the NRC which termed and continues to term the Assamese people as xenophobic and racist, we will be examining only a few pieces and the responses that our search on Twitter’s API allowed access to. Some of the Twitter responses which we examine in this paper, were generated as immediate and strong responses to the news articles that we discuss.

We have focused on online and social media in our critique of these tropes that we term as ‘neo-colonial’ because media is a part of society as Alex Bruns (2014) argues. ‘Media reflect society not only in their content, but also in their organisational and technological structures...(media) are intermediate and do mediate between different parts of society , and as society changes, so do the media which are situated in between its constituent elements’ (Bruns, 2014, p.14). Thus, Bruns argues that because media increasingly drives and reflects social change, media innovations can be considered as societal innovations. This brings us to a fundamental change that emerged in social media as compared to traditional forums, because individuals on social media, including Twitter, can act as ‘ad hoc’, meaning they can operate independently without ‘requiring approval from Twitter administrators or their fellow users – are able to create and use whatever hashtags they feel are appropriate’(Bruns, 2012, p.4). This is what Bruns terms is an example of ‘produsage’ where the roles between producers and

consumers get blurred, especially while reporting on natural disasters or other cataclysmic events.

Along with this blurring of boundaries between the ‘producer’ and the ‘consumer’ social media is also a new form of the public sphere. This emergence of Twitter or Facebook as the public sphere is connected with how Internet technologies are embedded in every aspect of our lives, and the ‘Internet no longer constitutes a separate or (separable object) of study, but rather becomes an integral element of society itself’ (Bruns, 2014, p.18). This integration of the Internet into society has led to the emergence of social media as a public sphere which has given rise to a ‘dialogic citizenship’ that is a consequence of reasonable public discussion and debate is a crucial part of the public sphere. Dean Neu *et al.* (2018) argue that such a process is also intrinsic to social media as a new mediated form of the public sphere. They further point out that ‘it is reasoned discussion and debate within the public sphere that is the starting point for advocating social change’ (Neu *et al.*, 2018, p.474). Hence, ‘social media is a public arena of citizenship’ where ‘social media has increased the quantity of discursive spaces where voicing can occur as well as the speed by which these voices are disseminated and heard’ (ibid., p.475). We argue that within this visible and vocal public sphere, when a community of people marginalised in both the colonial and post-colonial periods such as the Indigenous and ethnic Assamese, are being repeatedly termed as ‘xenophobic’ and/or ‘racist’, there are real life implications of such illocutionary speech against smaller and marginalised communities.³ This is because the virtual and the real are inter-connected to each other intrinsically by what Brian

³ To go into detail on the marginalisation perpetrated by both the colonial regimes and the post-colonial nation state on borderland regions like the NER where Assam is located, is beyond the scope of this paper, but we would be examining some of the long time implications that colonisation had on the land and its various communities.

Massumi argues as ‘affect’ where ‘the simultaneous participation of the virtual in the actual and the actual in the virtual as one arise from and returns to the other’ (Massumi, 1995, p.96).

Within three days of the Final Draft of the NRC being published in 2018, a fairly well-known Indian news website published an article with the headline, *How NRC Legitimised Xenophobia and Chauvinism in Assam*.⁴ It is difficult to point out if this article was the first of many such pieces and commentaries that accused the Assamese peoples of being ‘xenophobic’ for the publication of the NRC, but it is one of the early ones which also received quite a bit of traction on Twitter as shown by Twitter’s API. Some Assamese scholars and writers such as Hiren Gohain (2020) and Akhil Ranjan Dutta (2021), have tried to counter these allegations. Gohain argues in strong words that the ‘whole narrative of Assamese xenophobia stinks’ and ‘the attempt to delegitimise Indigenous people’s desperation to hold to their land, language, and culture is itself disingenuous and conspiratorial venture’ (Gohain, 2020). Shaheen Ahmed and Suryasikha Pathak (2020) also trace these tropes to colonial stereotypes that emerged as bio-power means for the colonialists to exercise absolute control over the natives and their lands, which continues into the post-colonial period. They argue, ‘the Indian state’s inability to respond to the complicated remnants of the colonial state, produced the frontier of Assam as a constant borderland’ (Ahmed & Pathak, 2020, p.11).

As various political movements emerged in Assam, the *lazy native*, *unproductive subject* became branded as an *insurgent* creating law and order situations’ (Ahmed & Pathak, 2020, p.11). Thus, Massumi’s idea of the ‘affect’ becomes crucial while understanding the impact of such illocutionary speech acts against a community of

⁴ C.f. Parag Jyoti Saikia and Suraj Gogoi, How NRC Legitimised Xenophobia and Chauvinism in Assam, *Newslaundry.com*, 2 August, 2018, accessed 30 July, 2021.

people who has had a constant history of colonisation either by the British or by the Indian state, and which led to a violent and turbulent period of almost twenty years from the mid 1980s to the early 2000s. This period saw the emergence of an armed movement for an independent Assam and witnessed violence, trauma and excesses of the state including deaths, torture, abductions, etc. A remnant of this violence is the continuing implementation in Assam of the 1958 Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) which grants ‘special’ powers to the Indian Armed Forces to maintain law and order in ‘disturbed areas’ of the country. Sanjib Baruah (1986) has argued how not being an ethnic Assamese was a premium in the above mentioned period of conflict, as being one would make a person more vulnerable to the state’s indiscriminate violence. On one hand, the Assamese people are living under a draconian law which explicitly marks the region as ‘disturbed’, and on the other hand, the same people are accused in the most virulent ways to be ‘xenophobic’ and ‘racist’. This is what we term as emerging neo-colonialist racist tropes to once again control the borderlands and its ‘wild’ people. For the reasons explained above, it becomes imperative for us to explore how both traditional and social media over the last few years have termed the Assamese people ‘xenophobic’.

Analysis

We did a Twitter API search for tweets between 29 July, 2018 to 31 December, 2019, with the key words ‘NRC’, ‘Xenophobia’ and ‘Assam’. We did the search for only English language tweets and not in any other regional language for India (which includes Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, etc). The tweet data that we have contains both original tweets, referenced tweets (RTs) and quote tweets (QTs). With these search

parameters, we got a database of 1119 tweets in English language this period. In the following section, out of this database we will analyse six randomly picked up media articles and the original, quoted and referenced tweet texts, some of which have amplified these articles.

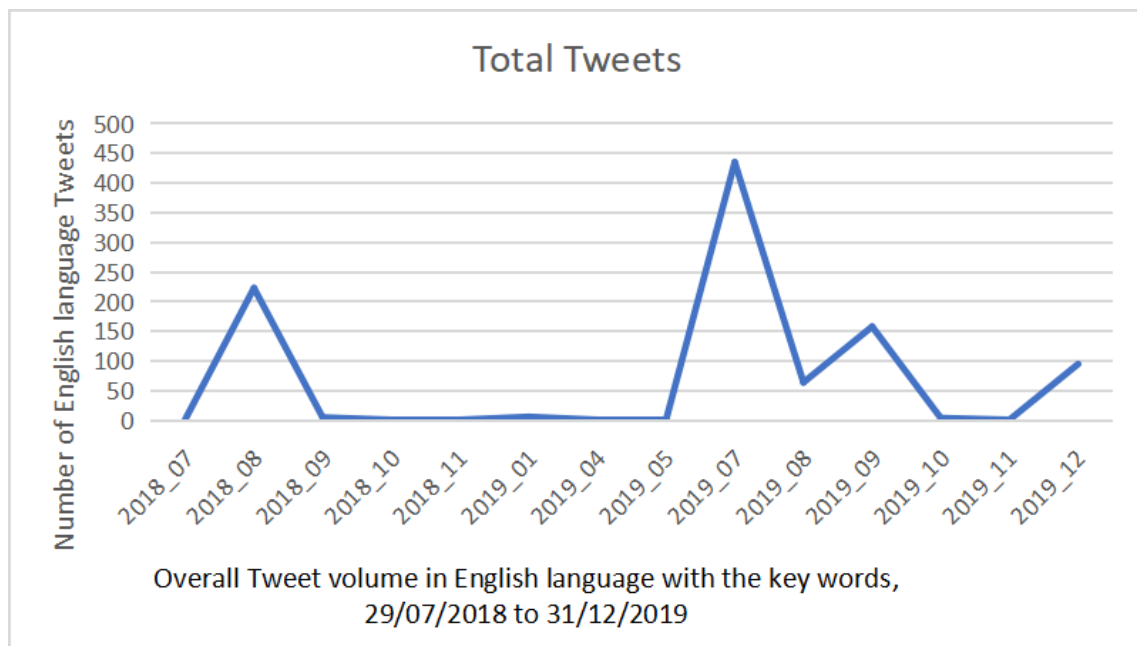


Fig. 1: Overall Tweet volume in English language with the key-words 'NRC', 'Xenophobia' and 'Assam', 29 July, 2018 to 31 December, 2019.

We have selected six news articles and opinion pieces, and examine the way they were amplified on Twitter. These articles include four that can be broadly located within the discourse of 'Assamese as xenophobic' leading to the NRC and the anti-CAA protests, while the remaining two claims to tell 'other' narratives that characterise the history of citizen-making in Assam. Dwelling on the critical literature of racial thinking and racialising discourses, we try to situate the recent racialisation of the Assamese communities on social and traditional media into the historical specificities of the region. Walter Mignolo argues that one of the fundamental tasks of humanities in this century is to decolonise knowledge so as 'to acknowledge that global citizenship is a myth while global racism is not overcome to work toward the decolonisation of imperial

knowledge that engendered the colonality of being' (Mignolo, 2006, p.329). Thus, it is crucial for us to decolonise these 'narratives of knowledge' regarding the Indigenous and ethnic Assamese people in popular and social media, and we attempt to do the same by finding linkages between colonial racialisation policies of this region and its continuation in the contemporary.

In discussing the colonial structures of power and governance, Aníbal Quijano argues that these structures 'produced the specific social discriminations which later were codified as racial, ethnic, anthropological or national according to the times, agents, and populations involved' (Quijano, 2007, p.168). Thus, Quijano says that these constructions, which were intersubjective, were a product of Eurocentric colonial domination, but were still assumed to be historically significant 'objective' and 'scientific' categories. These observations are evident when we discuss 'biologisation'. Reflecting on the origin of racial thinking, Rachel Caspari (2010) argues that it may be part of the human condition to construct naive taxonomies of the natural and social world, and essentialism is a hallmark of all such taxonomies. A conflation of biological and social taxonomies by fiat leads to 'biologisation' of social categories (Blakey, 1999). While race is now understood to be a social category (Obach, 1999; Haney Lopez, 1996), the 18th century natural history tradition and Linnaean taxonomy embedded in essentialism and biological determinism, linked behavioural traits such as intelligence, criminality, industriousness, and other personality traits to the essences of racial categories (Caspari, 2010).

The different human 'types' thought to carry information about the 'essence' of a type of person — what the persons belonging to that type are supposed to look like, think like, or act like — just as biological categories carry information about the essence of

a species, genus or class (Hirschfeld, 1996 & 1998). These categories and their essences with both physical and behavioural components, were believed to be unchanging and stable. It was this racial understanding of human types that incorporated European prejudices which typified Africans (*Homo sapiens afer*) as impassive and lazy, and Europeans (*Homo sapiens europus*) as smart. Blakey (1999) argues that as European colonisation expanded, racial classifications were used to make sense of new social groups, effectively ‘biologising’ relationships between Europeans and other people they encountered, and even relationships between different European groups. Thus, when British colonial discourses in Assam stereotyped various native and immigrant communities and projected essentialised imageries onto them, the traits representative of a community were portrayed as stable racial attributes of that community, which is what Blakey (1999) calls ‘biologisation’ of a social category.

Such biologisation of these various communities was not the mere manifestation of racial thinking of the European mind, but served critical functions of running and expanding the colonial apparatus. The ways in which the colonisers expounded on such racialised discourses is evident in how they frontierised and colonised the Northeast. The *lazy, indolent, unproductive* image of the native Assamese was the justified logic for the colonisers to bring in *productive* migrants (Sharma, 2011). We argue that, in a similar tone of the colonial discourses of biologisation, the citizenship discourse about Assam which consists of flagging the purported ‘xenophobia’ of the Indigenous Assamese communities, has biologised a heterogeneous social category.⁵ Such a

⁵ By Indigenous Assamese communities we mean the Assamese language speaking communities, which include multiple tribes and non-tribes who are followers of various religions, as well as tribal communities who speak one of the languages peculiar to the state/region, all of who trace their history to pre-colonial Assam. Thus ‘Assamese’ in general refers to a heterogeneous social category that include a plethora of communities who trace their histories in the region prior to the British conquest in early nineteenth century.

process is visible in the following three tweets from the corpus of tweets which we extracted through the API.

“The Xenophobes of Assam. And the hatred is so innate and so deep rooted that it manifests itself most keenly in the students. Kids!!”

“Axomiyas are the ones who should learn something from the great Dalai Lama. Who cares? Xenophobia runs in veins. Isn’t it? People of Assam? Demanding NRC?”

“Ask an axomiya supporting NRC! THE FIRST WORD, XENOPHOBIA WILL COME TO YOUR MIND. THEY ARE HIDING THEIR INCOMPETENCY VIA A PROPAGANDA CALLED DEMAND FOR NRC. ASSAM SHOULD BE ACCOUNTED FOR. ENTIRE WORLD SHOULD KNOW” [the original tweet is in upper case letters]

All these tweets present, not only a totalising view of the heterogeneous peoples of Assam as essentially xenophobes but the second tweet goes a step ahead in attributing the xenophobia to the inherent racial/biological nature of the Assamese (‘xenophobia runs in veins’). The third tweet similarly takes a totalising and essentialist view of the Indigenous peoples, and plays into the colonial and racial trope of the *lazy unproductive* Assamese by attributing the demand for the NRC in Assam to the Indigenous peoples’ attempt to hide their *inherent* ‘incompetency’ against the *productive hardworking* migrants. It is worth mentioning here that just as the myth of the *lazy native* was the result of biologising discourses on native communities in colonies globally, so was the hardworking image of the immigrants a product of colonial discourses of biologisation. In colonial Assam, the discourses of ‘wastelands’ and wasteland colonisation schemes that favoured bringing in East Bengali peasants portrayed an essentialised, gendered, and oftentimes, a dehumanised image of the East Bengali peasants. A. Porteous, Deputy

Commissioner of the Naga Hills, noted in his diary on 22 April 1890, that ‘the stout and fanatical Mohammedans of East Bengal’ were deemed the most eligible for such land colonisation schemes because they were ‘hard-working and prolific cultivators’ (Hilaly, 2016). ‘Stout’ and ‘fanatical’ were two repeated racial tropes that the British used to describe the East Bengali peasant.

The news and opinion pieces that we have selected for this paper, reduce the complex historical processes that led to the popular demand for the NRC in Assam into an overtly simplified and slanted narrative of a politics of xenophobia by the Indigenous peoples of this already marginalised region. Such articles pin this purported xenophobia into the illogical fears of the migrant other which is supposedly inherent among the Indigenous peoples of the Northeast, including Assam, and such verdictive opinions then get amplified on social media. In doing so, they fail to take cognisance of the impact and the afterlives of colonial policies in making a resource frontier of this region (Baruah, 2020). We locate such neo-colonial categorisations of the Assamese people into what Mignolo has termed as ‘gatekeeping’ while discussing decoloniality. Mignolo argues that, ‘gatekeepers are the tools of a historically formed belief that has been naturalised and transmitted from generation to generation of schools, colleges, universities, state institutions, tourism agencies, and the like’ (Mignolo, 2006, p.323). Such gatekeeping of knowledge, material and epistemic histories of the people of this region, as is visible in these tweets and news pieces is evident when we compare such texts to the scholarship by and of the people from this region. Scholars from the Northeast such as Arkotong Longkumer (2020), Sanjib Baruah (2008, 2019 & 2020), Udayon Misra (2017 & 2018), and Sanghamitra Misra (2018) have engaged with the plethora of histories that have led to the present citizenship practices in the region. Dutta (2021) gives a historical overview of the citizenship practices in postcolonial Assam

and explains in detail how the Assamese xenophobia narrative propounded in digital commentaries have contributed towards unmaking the public and cross-cultural consensus around the NRC. On the other hand, while they acknowledge the historical context which necessitated the popular demand for the NRC in the region, Gohain (2019) and Baruah (2019) have also not been shy in critiquing the bureaucratic pitfalls and potential regimes of exclusion that the NRC may have garnered. The media commentaries in contrast to the historical scholarship on the region, tell a prejudiced ‘single story’ and refuse to acknowledge the existence of a multiplicity of narratives. In the following section, we analyse the selected media articles that have rekindled a racialising discourse of the Indigenous Assamese peoples by (re)producing a singular narrative.

The danger of a singular discourse: Denying plurality of narratives

The biologisation of Indigenous Assamese in the contemporary, has been spurred by the continuous process of reducing complex histories of immigration into colonial Assam and the ambivalent Indigenous responses to such migration, into a simplistic narrative of a ‘single story’. Chimamanda Adichie argues in a 2009 TED Talk that inherent in the power of stories, is a danger — the danger of only knowing one story about a group:

The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.
(Adichie, 2009)

In contrast to the ‘single story’ of Assamese xenophobia, we look at the historical specificities and polyvalent narratives that many of these articles tend to overlook. The first article in our corpus is *Assam NRC: A History of Violence and Persecution*, which got considerable traction on Twitter.⁶ Bikash Bhattacharya (2020) has demonstrated how this particular article not only misquotes a colonial text, but also blurs historical chronologies in order to perpetuate the colonial discourse of Assam being a *terra nullius* which enabled a smooth colonisation of the land. In reproducing a controversial colonial narrative, the article fails to take note of how in the process of settling *hardworking* East Bengali peasants, the existing usufructuary histories of the *subsistence* Indigenous land users were not taken into consideration by colonial state (Bhattacharya, 2020). In many places in lower Assam, the East Bengali peasants were settled by directly curtailing Indigenous access to land as had happened in allotting native lands in upper Assam to European tea planters (Ritupan Goswami, 2010). The article traces ‘the legacy of anti-immigrant sentiment in Assamese public sphere’ to ‘more than a century’, which according to the author, ‘has created an environment of deadly silence and trauma’, in a bid to infuse a historical continuity to the narrative of Assamese xenophobia. However, historical scholarship points out otherwise (Baruah, 1991). Until the late 19th century, migration to Assam was deemed sustainable by ethnic Assamese leaders as the population of the state was relatively low compared to other parts of the Indian subcontinent at that time, and many of them appreciated the settlement of new peoples in Assam.

Writing in the 1880s, Balinarayan Bora, an Assamese writer and publisher of *Mau*, an Assamese magazine, appreciated the colonial government’s policies encouraging immigrants to settle in the Brahmaputra valley (S.N. Sarma, 2008). Gunabhiram Barua,

⁶ C. f. Abdul Kalam Azad, *Assam NRC: A History of Violence and Persecution*, *The Wire.in*, 15 August, 2018, accessed, 2 August, 2021.

a prominent Assamese intellectual of the 19th century, wrote a booklet expounding the benefits of settling in Assam (A.K. Baruah, 1991). Assamese litterateur Atul Chandra Hazarika deployed literary interventions to remake the Assamese language by accommodating lexicons from the immigrant Muslim linguistic registers (Bhattacharya, 2021). Jyotiprasad Agarwalla, an icon of Assamese culture, termed the East Bengali immigrants *Na-Axomiya* (neo-Assamese) and accorded them equal status as the Indigenous in his definition of Assamese identity.⁷ Even Ambikagiri Raychoudhury and Jnananath Bora, two hard-line Assamese nationalists, were in favour of embracing the immigrants willing to assimilate to the local socio-cultural mores within an inclusive Assamese identity (Baruah, 1991).

One of the first conflicts with immigrants from East Bengal was reported in 1920 in the Barpeta subdivision of Assam. When the colonial government introduced the ‘Colonisation Scheme for Barpeta Sub-division in the Kamrup district’, through which grazing grounds and public commons were distributed to immigrant peasants to fillip revenue generation, there was resistance against this move by the graziers and Indigenous farmers. This resistance was a result of contestations over resources — against vast grazing grounds along the Brahmaputra being converted to settled agricultural fields — rather than any real or perceived fear of being swamped by an alien other or hatred towards the other. ‘The strongest opposition to further settlement of immigrant peasants came from Nepali Graziers and local peasants’, noted W. A. Cosgrave, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup in 1930, when implementing the ‘Colonisation Scheme for Barpeta Sub-division in the Kamrup district’ (Saikia, 2011).

⁷ Jyotiprasad Agarwalla in his famous poem *Axomiya Dekar Ukti* written in 1943 termed the East Bengali peasants *Na-Axomiya* (Neo-Assamese), an equal claimant in his idea of the Assamese identity. The poem can be found here: https://akansya.blogspot.com/2013/07/blog-post_20.html?m=1, accessed 2 August, 2021.

While Longkumer (2020), Baruah (2019), Misra (2018), and Ahmed and Pathak (2020) point out the intricacies behind the Indigenous peoples' legitimate fear and apprehension and fierce resistance to the CAA, the second article in our corpus, *Citizenship Amendment Act and NRC are two sides of same coin; both seek to alienate India's Muslims*, in a reductionist reading of history, attributes the protests against the CAA in Northeast India to Indigenous peoples' 'hate for the *bidexi* (foreigner)'.⁸ This article erases the violent history of colonisation and the 'peopling' of the region (Baruah, 2019) and post-colonial continuation of colonial practices which had adverse impact on the access to resources in the region by the Indigenous peoples'. The third article, *How NRC legitimised xenophobia and chauvinism in Assam*, while conceding that many Indigenous persons of Assam also did not find mention in the NRC ('names of many *sons of the soil* being excluded'), did not hesitate to reduce the NRC — an Indian Supreme Court mandated citizen registry to identify undocumented migrants — is a result of the Assamese peoples' collective xenophobia and chauvinism. The fourth article, *Assam Protests due to Politics of Xenophobia*, concludes that the protests against the CAA in Assam are 'driven by a desire to exclude all 'outsiders, but the main targets are the Bengali Hindus'.⁹ The article further states that, 'illogical fears and historical half-truths have powered Assamese politics of xenophobia for decades'. Before discussing the problematics of this article which tries to negate the agency of the settlers, it is noteworthy that many of the communities mentioned here settled en-masse in this region as compradors of the colonial state post British annexation of Assam in 1826. Such settler policies of the colonialists fall in tandem with Quijano's

⁸ C. f. Angshuman Choudhury and Suraj Gogoi, Citizenship Amendment Act and NRC are two sides of same coin; both seek to alienate India's Muslims, *Firstpost.com*, 14 December, 2019, accessed, 1 August, 2021.

⁹ C. f. Samrat, Assam Protests due to Politics of Xenophobia, *Deccan Chronicle*, 17 December, 2019, accessed, 29 July, 2021.

argument on distribution of work under colonialism, where we see in Assam that menial administrative work was entirely delegated to the Bengali clerks who the British got into Assam from Bengal. Quijano (2007) argues:

During European colonial world domination, the distribution of work of the entire world capitalist system, between salaried, independent peasants, independent merchants, and slaves and serfs, was organised basically following the same 'racial' lines of global social classification, with all the implications for the processes of nationalisation of societies and states, and for the formation of nation-states, citizenship, democracy and so on, around the world. (p.171)

The article negates the agency of the Bengali elites (specifically the Bengali clerk who accompanied to the British to aid in the colonial administration) in the introduction of the Bengali language in colonial Assam. However, historians Apurba Kumar Baruah (1991) and Nirode K. Barooah (2010) show that the Bengali elites in Assam had a role to play in undermining the status of the Assamese language.¹⁰ A prominent Bengali chemist and litterateur, Prafulla Chandra Ray, an ex-president of the Bengal Literary Conference, while presiding over the Tezpur session of *Assam Chatra Sanmilan* in 1919, remarked:

[T]here has been a controversy for long about the independence and the identity of the Assamese language. This is extremely foolish. This is due, I hold, to the provincial patriotism and national conceit of the Bengalees living in Assam. (Hazarika, 1960, p.63)

¹⁰ In the period between 1836-1873, Bengali was declared the official language of Assam. The Bengali community grew partly due to the encouragement that the East India Company gave the Bengali language by using it in its courts, administration, and schools. Scholars like Apurba Kumar Barua, Tilottama Mishra and Nirode K. Barooah have argued that the Bengali elite and officials have a role to play in undermining the identity and status of the Assamese language.

Tilottama Misra (1987) documents how *Mrinmayee* and *Prabasi*, two prominent 20th century Bengali magazines, ran a series of anti-Assamese articles and letters which repeatedly reduced the Assamese language into a dialect of the Bengali language. L. N. Bezbaroa mentions that one Jogesh Chandra Rai, a Bengali professor of Cotton College in Gauhati, referred to the native Assamese communities as ‘non-Bengali inhabitants of Assam’, implying that Assam was a homeland of Bengalis and the Assamese communities were merely another community inhabiting this Bengali homeland (Misra, 1987). These discursive articulations at times led to actual political mobilisations in late-colonial Assam. For example, the Calcutta based Bengali daily, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, reported on 20 November, 1935, that the Bengali residents of Assam assembled in a big meeting and resolved:

The brains of the 5.5 lakhs of Bengali speaking Hindus, the wealth of 20,000 Marwaris, the great labour force of (6,00,00 ex-tea garden coolies) of Biharis, the agricultural instinct of 5.5 lakhs Bhatia immigrants, the martial spirit of 3,000 Sikhs, 1,40,000 Nepalis and other settlers, if united together, these settlers would surely rule this country. The Assamese leaders must live here on the terms of the Bengali settlers who have already flooded the province. (Baruah, 1991, p.29-30)

The last two articles, *I Don't Exist if I'm not Assamese* and *Of Grounded Hope and Xenophobia: The other NRC narrative in Assam*, are responses to the xenophobia narrative that has been created around the NRC.¹¹ These two articles allude to the historical developments and events in which the demand and consensus for the NRC emerged as has been outlined in detail by Misra (2018) and Dutta (2021).

¹¹ C. f. Kaushik Deka, *I Don't Exist if I'm not Assamese*, *DailyO.in*, 12 December, 2019, accessed, 28 July, 2021. C. f. Sanjib Kr. Barua, *Of Grounded Hope and Xenophobia: The other NRC narrative in Assam*, *Moneycontrol.com*, 3 September, 2019, accessed, 28 July, 2021.

Doing things with tweets: Illocutionary acts and Force

J. L. Austin (1962) outlines his speech act theory and argues that there is speech in action by which, ‘there are many things that can be done with words’. According to him, the acts that a speaker performs *in* speaking, through the *use* of locutions are ‘illocutionary acts’. Certain distinctively linguistic acts such as promising, telling, warning, and betting are illocutionary acts. If X says to Y, ‘there’s a tiger’, it involves both *telling* and *warning*, two illocutionary acts. But the force of the illocutionary act of *warning* here cannot be distinguished by the content alone, and thus, the context becomes critical in discerning the force of illocutionary acts. Drawing on Austin’s concept of illocutionary acts, Searle and Vanderveken (1985) developed a schema of seven components of illocutionary force which are, i) Illocutionary point; ii) Degree of strength of the illocutionary point; iii) Mode of achievement; iv) Content conditions; v) Preparatory conditions; vi) Sincerity conditions; vii) Degree of strength of the sincerity conditions. Taking cue from the works of Austin, Searle and Vanderveken, we examine the illocutionary speech acts and force of the tweets that referenced to the articles we are analysing in our study.

The response that these articles have received on Twitter through original, referenced or quote tweets, are also part of the illocutionary force of the articles — because the tweets help to extend and diffuse the conversation, as well as, to channel the conversation into something that has the potential to spill out of the communication medium, which is the virtual, and into the real. With the historical context that we have discussed in the paper, illocutionary speech acts on social media becomes crucial in our engagement with decoloniality and deconstructing the contemporary media narratives

of Assamese peoples as xenophobic, because it is the ‘accumulation of individual voices into a collective that determines the illocutionary force of social media reactions’ (Neu et al.,2020, p.476). Thus, with the help of illocutionary speech act theory we examine below the tweet texts related to each of the six articles that came up in our Twitter API search.¹²

Article 1: *Assam NRC: A History of Violence and Persecution*

Tweet: In this must-read piece how the NRC and extra-judicial processes prior to that have been used to victimize Bengalis, esp Bengali speaking Muslims, over years. Violent Assamese chauvinism...xenophobia are responsible...

This tweet performs a verdictive illocutionary act. Verdictives, as per Austin’s taxonomy of illocutionary acts, ‘consist in the delivering of a finding, official or unofficial’ (Austin, 1962, p.152). The tweet does not merely *state* how things are, but *invites* (illocutionary point) its readers to be part of a ‘dialogic verdictive behaviour’.¹³ The degree of strength of the illocutionary act is high as the tweet *insists* on reading the article rather than *requesting*. In stating that the article documents, instead of narrating, the tweet invokes authority of the writer, because to document is usually to do so in one’s capacity (mode of achievement).

¹² While documenting the tweets here, we have erased some of the details that may point or lead to any identification of the handle or other handles mentioned in the tweet.

¹³ Illocutionary speech act and force of the tweet, invite readers to engage in a dialogue on social media which would involve *doing* verdictive speech acts which we term as dialogic verdictive behaviour.

Article 2: *Citizenship Amendment Act and NRC are two sides of same coin; both seek to alienate India's Muslims*

Tweet: If #CitizenshipAmendmentAct came out of the Hindu supremacist hearth of the #BJP, #RSS and its allies, #NRC is the product of decades of xenophobia and chauvinism cultivated in #Assam.

This tweet also involves a verdictive illocutionary act which is demonstrated by the writer's passing judgement on the CAA and the NRC. The illocutionary point being a call to action to *hold* the actors deemed to be behind the two citizenship instruments responsible. The statement surprisingly exonerates the role the postcolonial state played in further making Assam and the Northeast into an embattled borderland which necessitated the demand for the NRC in the first place.

Article 3: *How NRC legitimised xenophobia and chauvinism in Assam*

Tweet: THE XENOPHOBES OF ASSAM.

And the hatred is so innate and so deep rooted that it manifests itself most keenly in the students. Kids!!

The illocutionary speech act in this tweet is the terming of Indigenous and ethnic peoples of Assam as 'xenophobes', who needs to be *civilised* and *disciplined*. The tweet is verdictive in its semantics.

Article 4: *Assam Protests due to Politics of Xenophobia*

Tweet: The protests against the Citizenship Act there, but not the erroneous NRC, is part of the same deep-rooted politics of xenophobia that has been normalised for so long...

This tweet also involves a verdictive illocutionary act that holds the ethnic and Indigenous peoples' xenophobia responsible for the protests against the CAA.

Article 5: *I Don't Exist if I'm not an Assamese*

Tweet: Sorry, I don't agree. Assam's language, culture...traditions is intact. But this is a shameful denial of the racist xenophobia that has persistently targetted Bangladeshi immigrants Nepalis, Biharis too. It led to the Nellie massacre #CABProtest.

This tweet using the hashtag #CABProtest renders a verdict disagreeing to the contents of the article that the protests against the CAB/CAA in Assam is the result of racist xenophobia against not just Bangladeshi immigrants but also against Nepali and Bihari immigrants too. In making this verdictive statement, the author of the tweet remains oblivious of the fact that Nepalis, Biharis and citizens of Bangladeshi immigrant communities not only lent overwhelming support to these protests but they themselves

actively protested against the CAB/CAA.¹⁴ The tweet also concludes that the undercurrents behind CAB protests and the Nellie massacre are the same.¹⁵

Article 6: *Of Grounded Hope and Xenophobia: The other NRC narrative in Assam*

Tweet I: #Nehru gave a veiled ‘economic’ threat to Bordoloi in a 1949 letter “if #Assam adopts an attitude of incapacity to help in solving refugee problem, then the claim of Assam for financial help would obviously suffer

Tweet II: Good piece. Must read for those journalists who have been displaying through their writings their ignorance about....

The first tweet is a quote tweet (QT) that refers to select statements from the article and the author of this tweet has not added any comment. As such it is impossible to discern the illocutionary point at play here because a QT may not by default mean endorsement. The second tweet refers to a verdictive illocutionary act endorsing the contents of the article. The illocutionary point being a call to take cognisance of the historical specificities and contexts of the citizenship apparatus in place in Assam.

¹⁴ The participation of these communities in protests against the CAA has been widely reported in local and national media outlets. A few such reports can be found here: <https://thewire.in/rights/assam-cao-protest-rahul-chetry-gorkha-leader-nia>; <https://www.telegraphindia.com/north-east/thousands-at-tinsukia-anti-citizenship-act-rally/cid/1728971>; <https://www.freepressjournal.in/india/women-protest-against-cao-in-guwahati>.

¹⁵ In an interview with *The Hindu*, Makiko Kimura, the author of the book *The Nellie Massacre: Agency of Rioters*, said that the killings of over 2000 Muslims of East Bengal origin would not have happened if the elections had not been imposed by the then government of Assam on a tense and divided society. See: <https://www.thehindu.com/books/books-authors/that-spot-of-shame/article5275859.ece> and *The Nellie Massacre: Agency of Rioters*.

Searle (1975) provides an alternative and revised taxonomy of Austin's schema of illocutionary acts. In Searle's taxonomy, Austin's *Verdictives* are accommodated under the category 'representative illocutionary acts' which Searle defines as such types of illocutionary acts that commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition. According to Searle, the truth of representative illocutionary acts has a 'word-to-world direction of fit' meaning the words that characterise an assertion may or may not match the state of the world. The truth value of a verdictive/representational illocutionary act depends on the match between the speaker's 'belief' to the state of the world. Thus, these classes of illocutionary acts are not premised on absolute truth.

Conclusion

While discussing Spinoza's concept of affect, Jan Slaby and Rainer Mühlhoff argue that affect is 'intimately connected to an understanding of power' (2019). When we discuss social media, affect is inherent to the potential of social media voices and their reach. Thus, an affective relation does not impact just one individual unilaterally, but 'the way one individual is affecting and being affected in a situation co-depends on all the other participating individuals' (Slaby & Mühlhoff, 2019, p.31). By understanding this argument about affect theory, we have applied speech act theory to social media voices amplifying traditional and digital media articles that talk about citizenship in Assam by linking it to Indigenous Assamese communities' purported xenophobia. This study illustrates that digital media commentaries regarding citizenship in Assam have produced an essentialist discourse on the Indigenous communities of Assam. The study further demonstrates that Twitter users while amplifying this narrative, biologise a heterogeneous group of people. While we understand social media voicing as 'an

important but fragile step in inciting forceful demands for social accountability and change' (Neu *et al*, 2020, p. 483), such *call to action* illocutionary speech acts could further potentiate the singular discourse on the Indigenous peoples of Assam with serious practical implications for the Indigenous communities. Such acts are therefore, hugely concerning in a fiercely resistant frontier region where the Indian state has employed in recent history, violence and coercion as instruments to retain its sovereignty which has faced contestations in this region since the dawn of the post-colonial period.

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