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INTRODUCTION



Introduction: mutual attrition of citizenship, democracy and the rule of law in South and Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

This special issue critically examines the interplay between the law and politics of state trans/formation, status precarity and the abuse of law. Globally, governments have exercised state power to undermine citizenship status, democratic well-being and the rule of law. This introduction makes the case for this focus and highlights the range of the special issue's intervention. Firstly, it shows how the contributions in the special issue build upon scholarship that tackles these three values independently and offers a more comprehensive analysis of contemporary challenges of the law and politics of citizenship. It studies the mutual attrition of citizenship, law and democracy by adopting a focus on South and Southeast Asia, especially India, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Secondly, it emphasises the special issue's methodological contribution by drawing from the theory-generative capacities of focusing on Asia and the Global South more generally. Thirdly, the introduction highlights the cross-cutting substantive contributions of the articles, especially status liminality and statelessness, securitisation and authoritarian politics, bureaucracy and paperwork, and minority and human rights.

KEYWORDS

Citizenship; the rule of law; democracy; South Asia; Southeast Asia

Introduction

Citizenship policies around the world are impacting the lives of millions of persons, rendering or threatening to render them stateless. Noteworthy about these policies is how states have strategically manufactured statelessness (Jain 2022), often by instituting bureaucratic and documentary regimes that weaken citizenship status of their own nationals (Balaton-Chrimes 2013; Canzutti 2022; Manby 2018). We are simultaneously witnessing a global phenomenon of democratic backsliding with the rise of majoritarian and xenophobic politics (Bermeo 2016).

This special issue integrates the analysis of contemporary citizenship, democratic politics and the rule of law, based on the proposition that these three axes are intricately interconnected with profound implications for each other. Populist leaders have politicised or are seeking to politicise citizenship laws to target national minorities and consolidate their hold on power (Jayal 2022; Shaw 2020). They have appealed to their democratic mandates to legislate exclusionary citizenship policies and further aggravated

ethnic cleavages. There is consequently an unease among international observers about the unquestioned role of sovereign states in determining their citizenship norms (Foster and Baker 2021). The instrumentalisation of the legal process raises serious questions about the effectiveness and promise of the rule of law. These citizenship policies are also reshaping the character of democratic polities and threatening to make them more illiberal, exclusionary and violent. Thus, in contemporary times, the three values of citizenship, democratic politics and the rule of law share both a relationship of mutual legitimation as well as mutual attrition.

The special issue builds upon scholarship that tackles these three values independently and offers a more comprehensive analysis of contemporary challenges of the law and politics of citizenship. It studies the mutual attrition of citizenship, law and democracy by adopting a focus on South and Southeast Asia, especially India, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. These countries have consistently been a subject of growing concern. For instance, documentary citizenship policies in India's eastern state of Assam threaten citizenship status of more than four million people and have been described as 'the biggest exercise in statelessness since the second world war' (Gordon and Sekercioglu 2020). Indian government proposes to extend these policies to the country of 1.4 billion people. India has also introduced citizenship laws discriminating against Muslims (Bhat 2023), raising fears of persecution and ethnic violence, and concerns that the repertoire of citizenship policies would fundamentally weaken India's democratic fabric. This is not unique to India. As contributions in this special issue show, these policies reflect affinities with other polities in the region and globally, and threaten to become models for replication and expansion outside India's borders. Scholarship has focused separately on the questions of ethnic politics, documentary citizenship, discrimination and state detention practices. The special issue contributes to the field of law and politics of citizenship by studying how social, political and institutional dimensions in this crisis interact with each other.

The special issue adopts an integrated multidisciplinary, cross-sectional and comparative approach. It brings together scholars from sociology (Gogoi, Das), political science (Shahid, Sharma, Berger, Garg), law (Bhat, Sen, Tiwari) and interdisciplinary social sciences (Lee, Field, Johar) to study how authoritarian or populist politics in the region capitalises on complex histories of migration to aggravate contemporary ethnic tensions, how citizenship law becomes a mode and site of racialisation, how this poses a serious threat to the well-being of the rule of law and human rights, what impact it has on the region's minority groups, and what are its transnational implications.

The combined themes of these articles shed light on the intricate relationship between citizenship law, identity documentation, bureaucracy, securitisation, racialisation and human rights. They underscore the urgent need for more inclusive and equitable approaches to citizenship and identity documentation processes that protect the rights of marginalised communities, ensure fairness in bureaucratic practices and adhere to international obligations. These discussions invite a critical examination of the intersection of law, politics and identity in various contexts, highlighting the broader implications for individuals and societies alike. The following section shows how the special issue's regional focus advances the current scholarly conversation. The subsequent sections bring together the cross-cutting themes shared by the contributions.

Theoretical perspectives

The focus on South and Southeast Asia demonstrates remarkable and disconcerting alignments among the countries in the region, particularly India, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Governments strategically wield violence, discriminatory policies and legal frameworks to target vulnerable minority groups, deliberately undermining their citizenship status. These actions have plunged communities into the abyss of statelessness, displacement and persistent marginalisation. While scholars have analysed what we call the ‘mutual attrition’ of citizenship, law and democracy in contexts of these individual countries, this special issue extends this conversation by making it comparative. The contributions collectively excavate the intersecting patterns of this mutual attrition, respecting their granularity and context, while also speaking to wider global concerns. They explore the entwined historical trajectories revealing the exploitation of ethnic divisions by right-wing political forces, using nationalism as a tool to manipulate citizenship laws, and advancing exclusionary agendas.

The intricate tapestry of Assam (India), Myanmar and Sri Lanka is interwoven with historical complexities, shaped by migration patterns, colonial legacies and enduring ethno-political tensions. Undoubtedly, the most dramatic instance is that of Myanmar. Myanmar’s historical narrative unveils a systematic persecution of the Rohingya, an ethnic Muslim minority residing primarily in Rakhine State. Rooted in historical prejudice, the 1982 Citizenship Law deliberately excluded the Rohingya, denying them citizenship and effectively rendering them stateless. A culmination of targeted violence, notably the military crackdown in 2017, exacerbated an extensive refugee crisis. This brutal crackdown led to an exodus of Rohingya fleeing to neighbouring countries, facing precariousness and statelessness due to the deliberate erosion of their citizenship rights. Sri Lanka’s historical landscape is marked by deep-rooted ethnic tensions, predominantly between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority. The Citizenship Acts of 1948 and 1949 stripped Indian Tamils of their citizenship, displacing them and rendering a significant population stateless. The protracted civil war further marginalised Tamil communities, subjecting them to severe human rights abuses and displacement, exacerbating their citizenship struggles. In many respects, the context in India, especially its eastern state of Assam, continues to reflect many of these dynamics. Assam, a region in north-eastern India, has grappled with a turbulent past, catalysed by colonial demographic changes and post-independence ethnic tensions. The Assam Agitation, a pivotal movement between 1979 and 1985, witnessed widespread protests calling for the identification and expulsion of purported undocumented immigrants, notably those from Bangladesh. This movement, under the guise of protecting Assamese identity, strategically targeted the so-called Bengali-speaking Muslims, also known as the Miya community. The agitation’s underlying narrative questioned their citizenship based on residency claims, rendering numerous individuals vulnerable to statelessness and exclusion.

Even in its brevity, this summary indicates how these countries share crosscutting dynamics – racialisation, undermining of citizenship status, outright citizenship stripping, anti-minority violence and displacement – that the contributions here explore in detail. The academic virtues of these assessments of cross-border, regional and neighbourhood effects are obvious. The historical depth adopted by the contributors

underscores the urgency to dissect the contemporary complexities prevalent in this region. Understanding the intricate interplay between historical injustices, the rise of right-wing politics, and citizenship challenges is pivotal. It sheds light on the enduring humanitarian crises faced by stateless and displaced minority communities. There are also more immediate policy implications. As the sorry history of statelessness makes more than evident, any meaningful attempt at resolving such crises must be based on international dialogue. The case of Tamils in Sri Lanka testifies to this. The attempted resolution of Tamil citizenship crisis was in important ways a result of the diplomatic process between Sri Lanka and India. Unfortunately, no such attempt has been made in the other crises that this special issue documents and highlights.

Besides comparatively exploring the shared themes of mutual attrition, this special issue also makes contributions in terms of its methodological approach. We do not conceive of the South and Southeast Asian 'region' merely as a static space but as a socially and political pregnant 'place' (Kabachnik 2012) that is produced by and in turn constitutes mobilities. From this perspective, the geographical focus is not so much to capture the politics on either side of stable borders. It is to understand how this stability is politically produced and what political work does this constructed stability do. This special issue views this region as a hub constituting what one of the articles describes as 'neighbourhood effects' (Berger and Garg 2024). These neighbourhood effects take several forms that the contributions make visible through a focus on India-Bangladesh (e.g. Gogoi and Sen, Bhat), India-Myanmar (e.g. Tiwari et al 2024), and Sri Lanka-Myanmar-India (e.g. Berger and Garg 2024; Shahid and Lee 2024). Some neighbourhood effects are more direct, for example India's partition in 1947, which disrupted historical continuities of geographies, livelihoods and belongings. The partition, though, did not remove or minimise the neighbourhood effects. As the articles on Assam show (Bhat, Das, Gogoi and Sen, Sharma), they soon manifested in stigmatising minorities who found themselves on the 'wrong side' of the border. The partition was thus not lost in the past, but is an event that lives on in postcolonial politics today. Past mobilities, the special issue demonstrates, continue to constitute state formation in the present.

Thinking of space in these socially constructivist terms (Harvey 1996) also emphasises how geographies are constituted through complex processes of mobility, historical and contemporary, real and imagined. The regional focus illuminates how territory becomes the intersection point or a terminus of the flow of populations and ideas, constituting new political constellations, governance practices and perceptions of crises. The region is a hub of mobilities for security, and mobilities constructed as security threats. The account of the Rohingyas in India (Tiwari et al) shows how mobility for safety remains a privilege. Other accounts in the special issue (e.g. Sharma) show how these mobilities become securitised, based on moral panics. The contributions also show that politically pertinent mobilities can often be in the realm of political fiction. Bhat for instance shows how political paranoias of unfounded illegal immigration – generating anxieties of demographic and democratic subversion – have come to legitimise exceptionalist legal procedures in Assam, rendering millions in a state of precariousness.

Another important methodological dimension of the special issue is its emphasis on the theory-generative capacities of the Global South. It seeks to theoretically illuminate empirical concerns shared by several global sites. It radically transcends the North–

South divide by focusing on southern sites to reflect on these global concerns. Global South is not merely a place where global concepts like citizenship, democracy and the rule of law unravel. It is where these concepts get constituted, embodied and concretised as global concepts, with their meanings, limitations and potentialities revealed.

The emphasis of theory building from sites in the Global South resonates with Chen's (2010) advocacy of 'Asia as method' to 'multiply frames of reference in our subjectivity and worldview'. Chen's argument is for plurality of perspectives and sites of analyses, and to decolonialise our methods and decentre the West as the primary source of universal problematics, models and explanation. In its focus on South and Southeast Asian region, the special issue does not treat the Western experience as paradigmatic, or the non-Western experience as an incomplete work-in-progress. Both experiences are expressions of a shared globality and equally pertinent to study universal phenomena. The special issue, thus, is animated by the desire not merely to theorise citizenship, democracy and the rule of law *in* the Global South, but theorise the *global* predicaments of these concepts drawing from the Global South. This is why several dynamics we develop engage with and illuminate the crises in the Global North, whether the crisis of alienage and noncitizenship (Bosniak 2006), racialisation of minorities and the weakening of citizenship stability (Nyers 2018), use and abuse of law (Abel 2018) and democratic decline (Scheppelle 2018).

In this spirit, the contributions do not conceive of their empirical sites as characterised by a lack, of capacity or substance. Scholarship on citizenship, for instance, even when claiming to be written against the grain tends to treat non-western contexts as sites of lack, characterised by incapacities and divergences from the universal, explicitly or implicitly assumed to be Global North (e.g. Sadiq 2008). This special issue does not treat the Global South to be in the 'waiting room of history' (Chakrabarty 2000), where they will eventually catch up, so to say, with how citizenship, democracy and the law are *meant to be done* – as done in the Global North. Rather, the special issue's approach is animated by Jean and John Comaroff's (2012) suggestion of thinking about the Global South as a harbinger. As the Comaroffs note, Global North looks increasingly like the Global South in terms of social diversity and cleavages, pluralism and tension, and political dynamics and crises. While previously obscured (though not absent), these dynamics are today more easily visible in the Global North. Regions in the Global South, like South or Southeast Asia, are seen to be states in the making, especially because of their porous border, populations and political understandings. These porosities are increasingly becoming the characteristic of the Global North because of immigration in the historical context of imperialism and colonisation, neo-liberal dispossession, and visible racialised and graded citizenship.

This special issue's accounts of the 'mutual attrition', unsurprisingly then, directly informs how we think about developments at the very heart of the Global North, whether the denationalisation campaigns under Donald Trump in the United States or the Windrush scandal in the United Kingdom. Just as in the South, citizenship in the North is revealing itself not as a stable or unquestioned political fact, but a contested notion that can be and is politically instrumentalised. In the words of the Comaroffs (2012), 'there is much south in the north, much north in the south, and more of both to come in the future'.

Racialising citizenship

The special issue also maps how the attrition of citizenship status in the region, both visible and in stealth, has happened through processes of racialisation. For us, racialisation refers particularly to those political practices that produce and others social groups as distinct, isolated and stigmatised (Hochman 2019). The articles in this issue highlight the evolving racialisation of citizenship and its entanglement with the wider political system.

Previously, Gunasingham (2019) explored the escalation of extremist Buddhist movements in the context of the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar and intermittent conflicts between Buddhist radicals and Muslim minorities in Sri Lanka to highlight how the intertwined relationship between the state and Buddhist clergy have legitimised hostility, discrimination and violence against Muslim minorities. In this special issue, Shahid and Lee and Berger and Garg show how the violence in each of these Buddhist-majority countries should be seen through the processes of incremental racialisation with the most violent results in the latter.

In many ways, the situation in India, particularly Assam, reflects similar patterns as Myanmar, making India and Myanmar an apt comparison. Previously, Roy (2010) and Jayal (2013), in particular, have shown how ethnic exclusion is immanent in India's citizenship regime. In India, this has resulted in the diminution of an inclusive *jus soli* regime to an exclusivist regime increasingly based on religious classifications. These developments reflect an erosion of what one of the contributions calls 'liberal citizenship' (Berger & Garg), which is inclusive, non-discriminatory, and stable citizenship status. This has happened because of 'the exclusionary effects' that 'emerge from the contestation of liberal citizenship regimes' by political actors motivated by their 'ethnonationalist imaginaries' (Berger & Garg). This is not to say that citizenship regimes in the region were previously inclusive. Jayal (2013) analysed how the legal differentiation between 'refugees' and 'migrants' in post-1947 partition India was institutionalised, effectively masking the religious connotations embedded within these terms. In essence, Hindus were often labelled as 'refugees' while Muslims were termed 'migrants'. This distinction led to divergent routes to citizenship for the two groups, with each category facing its unique set of challenges and opportunities. Natrajan (2021) recently points out that the mere existence of Muslims and Dalits (erstwhile 'lower caste Untouchable' communities) within the envisioned Hindu *Rashtra* (Hindu Nation) is identified as a challenge for the defining principles of this concept to come to fruition. The presence of Muslims, in particular, within the geographical and social domains of *Hindutva* (Hindu supremacist nationalism) is highlighted as a contradiction to the ideal of a racially pure Hindu state. Other scholars studying India's citizenship practices have also previously made an explicit connection with the notion of racialisation (Bhat 2023).

There are several important themes related to racialisation that this special issue contributes to. The first relates to the political geographies of racialisation. For instance, providing the granular political history of Assam, Gogoi and Sen show how exclusionary citizenship – what they describe as the shift in India from *jus soli* to *jus sanguinis* – emerged in India. Their major contribution is to show how several political registers, narratives and interests, sometimes aligned and sometimes conflicting, constitute exclusion and attrition of citizenship. They pay particular attention to how localised ethnic politics

can interact with larger national trends and produce citizenship attrition. While Gogoi and Sen concentrate on how local politics – bottom-to-top dynamics – undermine citizenship, Shahid and Lee offer a different entry point by focussing on how racialisation gets incorporated, entrenched and expressed in regime forms. Comparing cross-nationally and regionally, Shahid and Lee call these polities ‘Saffron Ethnocracies’ for incorporating ethnic divisions in their laws and policies, including in their citizenship regimes. This is informed by Yiftachel’s work (1998, 2008) on Israel which presents a critical distinction between democracy, where politicians represent the population of a territory (the demos), and ethnocracy, a form of nationalism where a dominant ethnic group (the ethnos) wields control over the state to mould both the territory and society along ethnic lines (more below).

Read together, Gogoi and Sen (for India and Assam), and Shahid and Lee, and Berger and Garg (for India, Sri Lanka and Myanmar) show how local, national and regional can produce racialised regimes of citizenship. These three articles complement answering this question from, so to say, opposing directions. Gogoi and Sen point out the interaction of national politics and the ‘little nationalisms’ of sub-national pockets in doing so. Thus, they do so by going *inwards*, from national to sub-national. The other two contributors go *outwards* by engaging in a cross-national comparison.

The articles also highlight the modalities through which states racialize citizenship. The articles by Gogoi and Sen, and Das, for example, show the historically evolving racialisation of Miya Muslims communities in Assam, crucially through legal and bureaucratic routes. Bhat documents the wider national-level racialisation of Muslims in India and its implications on the legal regulation and administration of citizenship status in Assam. These three articles bring forth the practical manifestations of the study by Shahid and Turner (2022) who previously examined the implications of India’s discriminatory citizenship laws, to show how minority groups who have experienced deprivation of citizenship or have been labelled as ‘illegal’ under these frameworks, compare to global contexts of deracination of citizenship.

The contributors also show how racialised features have been embedded in ostensibly inclusive citizenship regimes in the region often tied to the continuities of colonial practices. These exclusivist and racialised features were embedded in subtle ways in the three countries at the postcolonial moment during the 1940s. Sometimes they were incorporated through legal process that created uncertainty and citizenship liminality (Berger and Garg 2024) (more below); other times it is through the continuation of colonial ‘hybrid bureaucracies’ (Bhat citing Berda 2022) that governed citizenship status; still others by explicit discrimination against minorities despite adopting neutral legal language (Gogoi and Sen).

Taken together, the contributions also shed light on the several sites and subjects of racialisation, and its impact on the stability of citizenship status. Bhat’s contribution shows how racialisation transforms the ‘legal common sense’ in relation to how paperwork as ‘juridical truth’ of citizenship evidence is constructed in India. Furthermore, the prism of racialisation (as well as securitisation, another theme we discuss below) allows us to consider that the distinctions of citizen/non-citizen are inadequate to think about the attrition of citizenship. In fact, there is a profound constitutive relationship between the insider and the outsider. Tiwari et al, for instance, show how in India there is a ‘non-citizenship crisis’ that is simultaneously in existence along with a

citizenship one. They could have equally said that the non-citizenship crisis and citizenship crisis (discussed in detail by Sharma and Bhat), in fact, constitute each other. Wider processes of racialisation both aggravate and deepen the line between outsider/insider, and paradoxically, flatten the distinction between them altogether. The so-called insider cannot be secure in status. This is why racialised policies and politics affect formally citizens and non-citizens together.

Consequently, thinking about these processes of racialisation in these crisscrossing ways has the advantage of denaturalising the citizen-noncitizen binary. It reconceptualises the problem at hand. States in the region have framed their policies as if wanting to keep non-members out. But as contribution after contribution shows, these policies racialise both citizens and non-citizens. In fact, perhaps most troublingly, they transform citizens into non-citizens. Racialised policies, thus, *produce* and *manufacture* the demarcations of legal/illegal, members/non-members, citizens/non-citizens, documented/non-documented through various political and legal practices.

These dynamics have tremendous costs for democracy in the region. Right wing, populist and ethnic party politics in the region have instrumentalised the racialisation of citizenship to entrench themselves, depending on the country, as dominant electoral players and/or in the state. Modi in India and Rajapaksha in Sri Lanka, for instance, have capitalised on divisive ethnic politics to win elections. Modi's Bhartiya Janata Party, in particular, has actively used the highly charged and racialised discourse on Muslims, 'illegal migrants' and citizenship to polarise civil society, stigmatise and target political opposition, and undermine democratic freedoms. All these developments, as argued by contributors (e.g. Shahid and Lee), also create grounds for perverse transformations of the body politic itself: from an inclusive democratic one to an ethnic state.

Liminal and precarious citizenship

The articles in the special issue also illuminate the crucial subject of precarious and liminal status. This subject has increasingly become a major focus of global scholarship, especially in the context of immigration (Lori 2017). The special issue advances this conversation by showing how states – taking the region as an example – produce liminality of their own citizens.

There are several key themes related to liminality that the contributions develop. The first relates to the modalities and channels of producing status liminality. The most significant factor here is the strategic abuse of law and bureaucracy (more below). Legal identity documents in particular play a disconcerting role. Despite diverging focuses and geographical scopes, these articles converge on the notion that bureaucratic and legal structures established by states can engender a state of 'in-betweenness' or liminality among specific social groups, significantly influencing their rights and livelihoods. Drawing on the groundwork laid by scholars like Menjívar (2006) and Goldring, Bernstein, and Bernhard (2009), these articles scrutinize how the proliferation of legal and documentary regimes generates liminality among precarious citizens, compelled to navigate intricate bureaucratic pathways.

This finding, of course, is not new. Notably, in the context of India, scholars (e.g. Jayal 2013; Zamindar 2007) have noted the significance of identity documents in acquiring citizenship during the early years of partition and the ensuing litigations between

India and newly formed Pakistan. Adding to this scholarly background, Das's treatment of 'liminal citizenship' specifically highlights bureaucratic challenges faced by the Miya community in Assam. Despite their formal citizenship status, administrative errors in identity documents create a significant gap between citizenship and the actual exercise of rights, leading to missed opportunities and disrupted livelihoods. This bureaucratic inefficiency and oversight render the Miya community's citizenship fragile and uncertain, echoing broader concerns identified by Gogoi and Sen, and Bhat. Das underscores how errors in identity documents, despite granting formal citizenship, result in a precarious existence where basic rights remain inaccessible. This state of liminality is not fleeting but a persistent condition for the Miyas, emphasising the crucial role of accurate documentation in asserting citizenship rights and seizing opportunities. Expanding on this theme, Bhat's analysis explores how states fabricate statelessness, particularly through documentary regimes in Assam. The article's focus on bureaucratic discretion, political manipulation of legal documents, and the ethnicisation of documentary regimes sheds fresh light on how bureaucratic practices and legal frameworks disenfranchise marginalised groups. This paradoxical situation renders documents, intended to affirm identity and rights, as instruments of exclusion and statelessness.

The second theme in relation to liminality is historical: the constitutive role played by colonial modes of governance that continue from the past to the present. This has happened because the postcolonial states in the region have used colonial modes of governance in service of state formation. Several contributors note these intersections that renders the status of individuals and groups – who found themselves on the 'wrong' side of the new national border – liminal. These 'zones of liminality', as described by Berger and Garg, originated alongside postcolonial citizenship regimes due to the amalgamation of rules, procedures and evidence. This amalgamated matrix fosters exclusion, uncertainty, precarity and liminality, evident in various countries' citizenship laws and documentary cultures. This artificially ruptured communities, geographies and mobilities; introduced new and often unrealistic demands of proof and documentation; and constituted new regimes of suspicion targeting minority ethnic groups.

The role of state formation and law/paperwork is further complicated by the politicised context of ethnonationalism. 'Zones of liminality' evolve and expand due to exclusionary politics. In India, documentary citizenship regimes, especially the Foreigners Tribunals and the National Register of Citizens, have increasingly brought more individuals under scrutiny. The contributions in the special issue emphasise that these zones of liminality are not merely due to state incapacity affecting individuals but arise from racialised violent ethnic politics impacting entire populations. Berger & Garg's article, for instance, widens the horizon by comparing citizenship regimes in India, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Their analysis of intricate citizenship structures, the impact of ethnonationalism, and the systematic shift in burden of proof reveals how states create zones of liminality, particularly affecting ethnic and religious minorities. This comparative approach underscores the transnational complexity of the issue, where bureaucratic and legal intricacies in one country echo and influence those in neighbouring states, resulting in regional challenges concerning citizenship. The collective works of Gogoi and Sen, Bhat, Das and Sharma paint a comprehensive picture of a region grappling with citizenship challenges amidst ethnic tensions, bureaucratic obstacles and security concerns.

Finally, these insights collectively reveal the nature of status liminality. Liminality in citizenship surpasses geographical and historical confines, and as the experience in the region reveals, surpasses even contexts of actual population mobility. Status liminality, in fact, is constituted by the political dynamics of state formation. The articles elucidate how bureaucratic processes, legal frameworks, and political manoeuvres reshape citizenship from a secure status into a precarious, liminal state. This state of in-betweenness is not a transient phase but a persistent condition marginalising entire communities, posing challenges to democratic principles and legal norms. This is perhaps best captured by Bhat's and Sharma's description of the aftermath of the National Register of Citizens in Assam, where, after having classified 1.9 million persons as 'foreigners' in 2019, the Indian state has kept the policy in abeyance. Here, precarious groups – mostly vulnerable and poor ethnic and religious minority communities – are liminal, not because they are moving from status to stateless. They are liminal because they appear to now be in a state of suspended animation: neither citizen nor stateless.

These insights shed light on the inadequacies of the 'statelessness' category in capturing the precise political and legal vulnerabilities within national territories. They underscore the fundamentally political nature of the problem, cautioning against a policy-centric approach that focuses solely on legal identities and technocratic resolutions. Instead, they advocate acknowledging the deeply political nature of these challenges, echoing sentiments expressed by earlier scholars like Arendt (1973). A focal point lies in the complexity of non-citizenship (Tiwari et al.) and statelessness (Bhat). The articles collectively argue for an evolution in the traditional understanding of citizenship and legality to accommodate the rights and personhood of non-citizens grappling with legal limbo due to documentation issues. This complexity underscores the importance of addressing the broader implications of statelessness for affected individuals and the legal and political systems they navigate.

Securitisation and citizenship attrition

The articles collectively emphasise the power of securitisation processes, often fuelled by diverse security concerns, in shaping not only policies but also the very construction of identities. The articles explicitly or implicitly grapple with securitisation theory, developed Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde (1998) of the Copenhagen school, which claims that security is a social construct, and how any issue can be transformed into a 'security issue' if it is exaggerated to the point being an 'existential danger' (Williams 2003).

Huysmans (2006) examines how in Western Europe, migration has evolved into a significant security issue through the European integration process. He details how the political construction of migration has increasingly been linked to the destabilising effects on domestic integration and public order, a development mirrored at the European level by the Third Pillar on Justice and Home Affairs, the Schengen Agreements, and the Dublin Convention. This framing is indicative of a wider politicisation where immigrants and asylum-seekers are seen as challenges to the protection of national identity and welfare provisions, underlining the role of migration as a tool in the politics of belonging and security concerns within European societies. This European experience provides a critical parallel to the narratives seen in South Asian contexts, where security concerns lead similarly to expansive and often exclusionary practices.

The most direct engagement with this theoretical theme is by Sharma who argues that processes of securitisation – the preoccupation with national security ‘real, perceived, or manufactured’ – have affected the ‘character’ of citizenship in India. Read with other contributions, this ‘character’ refers to formal law, informal practice, and the ‘documentary culture’ (Berger and Garg) of citizenship. Sharma’s analysis shows how securitisation operates as a mechanism for the regulation and control of identities, effectively demarcating individuals and communities into categories of ‘secure’ and ‘insecure’. Security concerns, particularly related to terrorism and immigration, play a pivotal role in this process and often lead to the exclusion of certain groups from full citizenship status.

Complementing this, Bhat examines securitisation within the context of state-manufactured precarious citizenship, primarily in Assam. While the term ‘securitisation’ may not be explicitly used, the core theme emerges as the discretionary and biased treatment of individuals seeking to defend their citizenship status. The article reveals the intricate ways in which securitisation manifests itself in bureaucratic practices and documentary requirements. Bhat underscores how bureaucracy can, at times, securitise citizenship through the declaration of individuals as ‘foreigners’, often by suspending ordinary legal norms, and accentuate other exclusionary processes like racialisation.

Although term ‘securitisation’ is not overtly employed, Shahid and Lee’s article shifts the focus to the concept of ‘Saffron Ethnocracy’ in India, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, and elucidated how the concept is clearly at play. This form of ethnocracy reflects the securitisation of public spheres and institutions in favour of the dominant religious and ethnic identities, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism. Majoritarian religious groups influence state policies, and this securitisation leads to authoritarian-leaning governance, the marginalisation of minority communities, and the framing of citizenship laws based on religious identity. In essence, the dominant groups securitise their own religious and ethnic identities to shape state policies and reinforce their dominance. The influx of migrants also leads to the phenomenon of ‘nativism’ (Swain 1996) where there is an assertion by a group of its superior rights to land, employment, political power, and cultural dominance based on its indigenous status and historical claims. This sense of entitlement often leads indigenous people to form groups to safeguard their interests against the perceived threats posed by migrants.

Several contributions show how the mobilisation of national security, and the securitised framing of blameworthiness of non-citizens and national minorities constitutes right-wing populist threats to citizenship. For instance, Tiwari et al. show how India reversed even the minimal protections of the Rohingya refugees by claiming that the community ‘pose[s] grave security challenges’ to Indians. In the case of the Rohingya in India, Tiwari et al. show how these processes of securitisation turned the community from having some rights (what they call ‘status non-citizen with personhood’) to being pariahs (what they call ‘a rapid depreciation of personhood’). Similarly, Bhat’s account of the Indian policies show how Indian institutions mobilised paranoias of ‘Islamic terrorism’ and ‘infiltration’ to expand burdensome and exclusionary regimes of documentary citizenship.

Sharma notes that ‘the logic of securitization may lead to the emergence of competing narratives within the state’. She highlights how processes of securitisation become sites, pretexts, modalities for states to constitute ‘establishing the nature of political community’ and ‘determine who is included and who is excluded’. Sharma shows how this

logic of security slips inside the national borders. This is what Bhat notes as the process of ‘migration crisis’ becomes an ‘internal’ threat of the ‘body politic’. Processes of securitisation, thus, do not follow from a pre-existing insider/outsider binary, but constitute that binary both inside and outside national territory. As Sharma notes, ‘the threat of security provides a strong justification for laws’ for ‘shrinking of citizenship’, and languages of risk, danger and insecurity are ‘framed to exclude some groups’ within the body politic.

Another related theme is how securitisation and bureaucratic technologies are inter-linked. Sharma shows how states rely on digital technologies like biometrics ‘to verify and manage people’. Similarly, Bhat maps the emergence of influential digital technologies in India based on the emerging racialised and exceptionalism citizenship politics. There are several transnational comparisons to be made here. One, as Sharma notes, securitisation of status is a wider phenomenon, including in western contexts of citizenship revocation, securitisation or heightened criminalisation of immigration and border control, and treating asylum claimants as national security threats. Two, the expansion of digital technologies – surveillance and carceral policies among others – in border control, where borders are both outside, inside or at the edge of national technologies. Three, the constitution of ‘borders’ comes out strongly in the contributions. The outsourcing of ‘borders’ by Europe, Australia and the UK (Menjívar 2014; Zedner 2022) is the flipside of what Sharma and Bhat describe as the ‘internalisation’ of border through securitised digital technologies.

Securitisation in the case of India has done many things. First, as Sharma notes in detail, securitised (and ethnicised) political discourses narrowed down and eventually diminished India’s inclusive secular citizenship. In her words, the state used it to ‘deny, postpone, or expedite’ citizenship claims. Second, as Bhat, and Gogoi and Sen note, it legitimised the expansion of discretionary regimes of status adjudication, particularly in Assam. Bhat (2023) described them as exceptionalist regimes ‘at the edge of legality’ because even courts treated them to be immune to ordinary constitutional standards of due process. Third, it has procedural manifestations, best described as paradoxical. In Bhat’s account, while these processes legitimised an unprecedented expansion of documentary regimes, they simultaneously undermined the trustworthiness of documents in the eyes of precisely those official functionaries who demanded them. In Berger and Garg’s account, they laid the foundation of extensive, complex, and contradictory legal routes of proving citizenship, which in the ultimate analysis were too burdensome.

The related theme is the interlinking of securitisation and bureaucratic technologies. Tazzioli (2022) explores how technology mediates access to asylum and financial support, revealing the bureaucratic challenges that are also prominent in Assam as highlighted by Bhat. Walters (2022) offers a historical and political analysis of deportation, contributing to our understanding of how these practices are embedded in a broader regime of citizenship regulation and emphasise the role of governmentality. Bigo (2022) discusses the proliferation of smart borders within the European Union, illustrating how security stakes have been technologised through systems like SIS-VIS – EURODAC, EES, ETIAS and ECRIS, which filter travellers and assess their risks. This process, he notes, has led to a reconfiguration of security professions, blending data analysis and IT expertise into new forms of governance. Aradau (2020) further deepens this discussion by examining how mundane devices and big data transform security landscapes, shifting focus from

traditional enemies to anomalies detected through algorithms, which reshapes our understanding of conflicts and security measures. Sharma and Bhat also depict how digital technologies, especially biometrics, are utilised by states to manage and verify identities, reinforcing the internalisation of borders through securitised digital technologies. These analyses collectively underscore a transnational continuum of securitisation practices, from the outsourcing of borders by Europe, Australia and the UK to the internalisation described by Sharma and Bhat, presenting a complex interplay of technology, policy and governance in shaping modern citizenship and security.

Law, bureaucracy and paperwork

The contemporary global recession in citizenship stability has brought the role of law into sharper focus. As noted by Jain (2022), states worldwide have systematically created statelessness within the framework of legality. The contributors to this special issue shed light on various themes intertwining citizenship attrition and the law. A noteworthy point is the paradoxical relationship between law and citizenship. While legality is expected to establish secure foundations for citizenship, this special issue reveals that it can yield precisely the opposite outcome by fostering instability in citizenship politics, methods and ramifications. Crucially, we contend that exclusionary citizenship politics is not solely reliant on explicit legal alterations; it can operate subtly alongside or behind formal legal changes.

Law plays a role in ‘marking’ and ‘masking’ individuals as insiders or outsiders (Sharma 2024). It may formally designate individuals as outsiders, or covertly relegate insiders to outsider status through nuanced adjustments in citizenship regulations. State formation in the region like anywhere else has been about disciplining and othering mobility, and constituting staticity as the political normal. Even though historical mobility was the characteristic of all communities, these postcolonial states deemed certain population as ‘non-mobile’ and more nationally authentic, say the dominant Assamese (Gogoi and Sen 2024). On the other hand, they deemed minority communities as somehow more mobile (say the Tamils in Sri Lanka, or Muslims in Assam or Myanmar), engendering suspicion. Law has been central to this process. It has been used to normalise this staticity, and entrench and police borders. The contributions also show how legal recognition of documents and adjudicatory techniques have become subtle and everyday mechanisms for this. Authorities make documents difficult to procure for mobile populations, refuse to recognise how mobility shapes documents by classifying them as erroneous (Das 2024), or suspecting documents if they indicate any mobility whatsoever (Bhat 2024).

Bureaucratic processes, especially the legalities of paperwork, are central to this phenomenon (further elaborated below). These practices often persist ‘at the edge of legality’ (Bhat 2023), partly because they operate ‘not through overtly discriminatory laws and unequal treatment, but rather by manipulating ostensibly neutral criteria for nationality’ (Sharma 2024). This underscores the importance of scrutinising detailed governance practices and their entanglement with populist politics, often evading notice due to their inconspicuous nature.

The articles also highlight paradoxical legal practices contributing to the erosion of citizenship status. In various contexts presented in the articles, the proliferation of

regulations, forms and documents creates a liminal form of citizenship. This apparent paradox stems from inconsistencies in managing citizenship status. In certain cases, as observed by Bhat, contradictory official stances towards the credibility of legal identity documents – termed as ‘documentary doublethink’ – give rise to everyday legal uncertainties regarding citizenship status. Meanwhile, Berger and Garg note the role of astute state elites who exploit ‘the contradictory effects of legal abundance and seemingly technical implementation problems’ to foster and extend liminal citizenship. Specifically, they demonstrate how ‘an abundance of rules and forums, often contradictory or confusing about different pathways to citizenship’, shifts the ‘burden of proof’ onto individuals to establish their citizenship.

Another significant theme is the practice of ‘illegalisation’. This process, at times explicit (evident in the case of Rohingya refugees in India highlighted by Tiwari et al.), or gradual (such as observed among Miya Muslims in Assam), underscores that the legality-illegality dichotomy is not fixed or inherent but shaped through intricate interplay among politics, history and institutional norms. According to the contributors, illegalisation occurs through various avenues: incorporating ethnic exclusion in the law (Gogoi and Sen), ethnicising routine legal and administrative practices (Bhat), establishing unfair documentary regimes (Berger and Garg), restricting access to ordinary legal resources through the proliferation of hollow documents (Das), or, more broadly, fostering ‘a deliberate lack of clarity’ (Tiwari et al.).

These observations intricately relate to the bureaucratic administration of citizenship. Developments associated with citizenship attrition emerge from legal manoeuvres involving paperwork. The contributors illustrate how the creation of exclusionary and precarious citizenship hinges on ‘the interplay between legislative changes and bureaucratic practices to capture exclusionary tendencies across the region’ (Berger and Garg). It’s crucial to note that these practices are not solely driven by politically aligned actors but often involve the active engagement of courts and bureaucracies. For instance, Bhat and Tiwari et al. reveal how India’s elite institutions, especially the judiciary, actively contribute to the ongoing ethnicisation of immigration, perpetuating the marginalisation and targeting of immigrant communities.

The discretion embedded within these documentary regimes is pivotal. This discretion is visible in contexts like Myanmar (Berger and Garg) and India (Bhat), both concerning citizens and non-citizens. Regarding non-citizens, Tiwari et al. demonstrate how, despite international and constitutional obligations, the Indian state wields ‘broad power’ to exclude vulnerable refugee communities from legal protection. Concerning citizens, Berger and Garg, along with Bhat, highlight how South and Southeast Asian states have established discretionary regimes of legal procedures, echoing colonial continuities. History plays a central role in this aspect. Berger and Garg, Bhat, and others illustrate how contemporary citizenship practices maintain links with colonial legacies, evident in discretionary decision-making processes characterised by exceptionalism, observed in Sri Lanka and India.

All this speaks to the need to critique and demystify the role of legal process in citizenship processes in the region and beyond. Gogoi and Sen, and Bhat, for instance, examine documentary mechanisms and their impact on citizenship status in India from diverse angles but reach analogous conclusions. Gogoi and Sen reveal how legal discourse operates under a ‘myth of transcendence’, exacerbating and obfuscating violence. In contrast,

Bhat exposes how racialisation and exceptionalism in political contexts generate exclusionary legal practices, where law serves as both a tool and a legitimising cover for citizenship deprivation. They further highlight the interplay between legal citizenship processes and social constructs.

The significance of paperwork emerges in how these processes perpetuate exclusion. The contributions draw attention to the distinct social significance of documents among various groups, such as Miya Muslims (Das) and defendant lawyers representing persons facing threats to citizenship status (Bhat). There is a profound concern for accuracy and errors in these documents. Instead of dismissing this concern (assuming that documentary claims will be decided based on social relations beyond these documents), Das seriously considers the ‘objectification’ of documents, making it a focal point of her study. She argues that citizenship claims and rejections among Assam’s char communities hinge deeply on documentary accuracy, including aspects like spellings and photo angles. Despite severe marginalisation, documents remain ‘key to the very formation of networks and organization of people’. This parallels Tiwari et al.’s observations that ‘unsettled normative and legal conceptions’ under Indian law render Rohingyas vulnerable. A ‘general lack of clarity’ about refugee law in India becomes a means to entrench vulnerability. These arguments converge in the idea that legalities are constructed, and uncertainties in legal norms and legal documents have tangible effects on vulnerable communities. Such uncertainties – be they ‘documentary gaps’ (Berger and Garg 2024) in Assam or ‘procedural gaps’ (Tiwari et al.) in refugee regulations – are not a natural state but profoundly political, either actively constructed through prejudiced state action or cumulatively through racialised state inaction. In essence, liminal citizenship is constructed through various means: states issuing ‘thin’ (error-ridden) documents (Das), imposing ‘burdensome’ procedures (Berger and Garg 2024), and fostering ‘documentary doublethink’ (Bhat).

The contributions, taken together, redefine law not merely as a tool or outcome but as a constitutive process. They conceive law and policy not merely by individual legal impacts but by their collective and interdependent influences. For example, Tiwari et al. examine the ‘process’ of Rohingya illegalisation in India through ‘interconnected’ policies. Similarly, Bhat delves into India’s Foreigners Tribunals, exposing discretionary, exceptionalist, racialised and inherently contradictory features that generate precarious citizenship. Berger and Garg highlight the contradictory interactions within historically evolving legal frameworks that undermine citizenship status.

Citizenship attrition and regime transformation

The question of regime identity, and regime transformation are central to these dynamics. This is because of the erosion of democratic rule, as the contributions in this special issue show, flow from, produce and constitute, in the different ways, the erosion of citizenship.

The contributions reflect on the relationship between the attrition of democratic rule and citizenship status in different ways. In India, this relationship is marked by the politicisation of the insider/outsider (citizen/noncitizen, majority/minority) in the ostensible democratic sphere, and through this, the growing popular authorisation of the slide towards a hybrid polity. Citizenship law has become the site of ethnonationalist

consolidation and the generation of an ethnonationalist identity of the polity. In Myanmar, the ethnic state has mobilised citizenship law to advance genocidal politics. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, the state has consolidated its ethnic Buddhist character by incrementally excluding minorities, especially Tamil, Hindu and Muslim minorities (DeVotta 2021). These three countries appear to be at different points on the spectrum: India is starting to become an ethnic state using, among other things, citizenship law as the site of exclusion; Sri Lanka is very much the central case of an ethnic state where citizenship law expresses exclusion; and Myanmar is at the pinnacle of a vile ethnic state engaging in genocidal politics (Lee 2021).

The case of India should be of particular concern and deserves explanation. This is a democratic constitutional state, which has had secular and seemingly non-discriminatory laws. Despite an inconsistent track record in practice, this has remained a flawed yet profoundly impressive feat. But increasingly, as scholarship is mapping closely (Bhat 2023; Khosla and Vaishnav 2021), the country is slipping on several fronts of democratic governance, secular governance and even the rule of law (Freedom House 2023). The contributions in the special issue, especially Shahid and Lee, connect the wider erosion of citizenship with these wider dynamics, and specifically link it to the regime transformation taking place. They argue that India, along with Sri Lanka and Myanmar, are best described as a particular version of ethnic states or ethnocracies: what they call Saffron ethnocracies.

Citizenship law is germane in these developments. First, because citizenship, perhaps more than any other area of state regulation, encapsulates regime and constitutional identity. Second, legal practices of citizenship status have profound material and symbolic consequences for excluded groups, something that is both immediate and long term. Specifically in the case of India, the citizenship-regime dynamic is particularly useful to highlight some key features. First, there is a formal connection, most explicitly illustrated by the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019. The legislation discriminated against Muslims by removing the label of illegality from non-Muslim unauthorised immigrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, and providing them a faster route to citizenship. The law – anachronistic in a formally secular system – is seen as incrementally encoding sectarianism in India's constitutional governance. Second, there is a procedural aspect, most explicitly illustrated by documentary regimes like the National Register of Citizens in Assam, a citizenship enumeration exercise discussed at length by Gogoi and Sen. The policy places large swathes of population, specifically, the Miya community, under grave legal vulnerability despite being facially neutral. Third, outside and in relation to legality, there is an ongoing, violent ethnicisation of public life that marginalises minorities, turning them into political pariahs, diminishing their political voice. For instance, India's Home Minister has called minorities and refugees 'termites'. Finally, there are also patterns of extralegal, non-state violence against minority groups, most explicitly seen in the violent attacks against the Miya community in Assam. All this suggests a state that is complicit, supportive or even encouraging of everyday violent and authoritarian rule (Bhat 2023).

In exploring the complex dynamics of nationalism and citizenship in South Asia, particularly focusing on India, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, Shahid and Lee, and Berger and Garg offer complementary perspectives on how dominant religious and ethnic ideologies shape state policies and societal norms. Shahid and Lee introduce the concept of 'Saffron

Ethnocracy', a political system where Hindu and Buddhist majorities in these countries wield state power to promote their own interests, often at the expense of minority groups, especially Muslims. Their work adds to the larger work on 'ethnocracy' by Yiftachel (1998, 2000, 2006, 2008), who in the context of Israel notes how the dominant group (the *ethnos*) controls the state apparatus and uses it to ethnicise the territory and society. Berger & Garg, on the other hand, delve into the evolving citizenship regimes in these countries, highlighting the systematic marginalisation of specific groups.

Both sets of authors agree on the significant impact of majoritarian nationalist ideologies on the legal and civil framework of these countries. Shahid and Lee's discussion of Saffron Ethnocracy reflects a political environment where the majority's religious beliefs significantly influence governance, leading to a form of authoritarianism steeped in religious and ethnic biases. Concurrently, Berger and Garg's examination of citizenship regimes reveals how these biases are institutionalised through legal and bureaucratic means, creating barriers for minorities and reinforcing systemic exclusion. This intersection highlights a critical aspect of ethnonationalism in the region, where the intertwining of religious identity and state power not only undermines the status of minorities but also erodes the fundamental principles of equality and freedom.

The societal and economic implications of these political ideologies are profound and far-reaching. Shahid and Lee articulate how Saffron Ethnocracy impacts various aspects of society, from land ownership to business operations and interpersonal relations. They particularly emphasise the heightened vulnerabilities faced by Muslim populations, exacerbated during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In parallel, Berger and Garg's focus on the production of liminality and zones of uncertain citizenship illustrates how state policies create environments of legal and social uncertainty for minorities. This systematic approach to marginalisation, fuelled by ethnonationalist ideologies, not only disrupts societal harmony but also has tangible economic and social repercussions for those caught in the crosshairs of these policies.

Lastly, both articles stress the importance of a deeper, more nuanced understanding of these phenomena, emphasising the need for further research and highlighting the global implications of these regional dynamics. Shahid and Lee call for studies on the development of non-Abrahamic ethnocratic frameworks and their impact on democracies in the global south, pointing to the potential threats of statelessness and genocide against minorities. Berger and Garg, meanwhile, advocate for a comprehensive analysis of the interplay between legal, bureaucratic, and political factors in shaping citizenship regimes. Their insights into the erosion of democratic processes and the rule of law in these countries underscore the broader implications of these nationalist and ethnocratic tendencies, not just for the nations involved but for the wider international community. This synthesis of themes from both articles offers a detailed and multifaceted view of how religious and ethnic majoritarianism in India, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka shapes state policies, citizen rights, and societal norms, with significant consequences for democracy, social cohesion, and human rights.

Another important dimension is added by Gogoi and Sen, who discuss the political role of federalism in the formation and undermining of citizenship status. They frame the attrition of Indian citizenship to highlight the role of 'little nationalisms' (Guha 1979). In late 19th and early twentieth century India, a strong form of nationalism, championed by the emerging pan-Indian upper caste bourgeoisie, sought to dominate the

growing nationwide market, either independently or in alliance with foreign capitalists. This movement, aligned with the interests of the well-educated professional middle classes which was epitomised by the Indian National Congress from 1885 to 1917. In contrast, 'little nationalisms' emerged among regional middle classes, who, fearing competition from other regions and pan-Indian elite, advocated for the exclusive control of their regional markets. Gogoi and Sen situate Assam's citizenship politics within this history of nationalists, which are sometimes competing and at other times overlapping in their exclusivism.

Highlighting both the dramatic and creeping attrition of minority citizenship status in the context of regime identity is illuminating. It shows how wider political patterns of racialisation and ethnicisation are constitutive of citizenship attrition. In the case of India and Myanmar in particular, hyper/ultra-nationalism, Islamophobia and majoritarianism have been the ideological features producing racialisation. This is connected with how the public sphere is instrumentalised and transformed. In India, just like in Myanmar, it has been through dangerous hate speech especially through social media. The country studies in the special issue also provide the best illustration of how citizenship status is a deeply political issue of constitutional identity, even if it may often be incorporated, operationalised and even dismantled through banal bureaucratic modes. As Shahid and Lee note, ethnocratic politics is compellingly related to the politics of statelessness: 'Saffron Ethnocracy reaches its logical policy conclusion with the total, genocidal, exclusion of Muslims'. Sometimes the wider patterns of democratic attrition weaken citizenship status; at other times, the attrition of citizenship status runs in a parallel manner as a symptom of democratic decline; and sometimes the weakening of citizenship status is what drives the erosion of democracy.

Conclusion

The main aim of this special issue was to make a case for collectively studying the undermining of citizenship status, democracy and the rule of law in contemporary global politics, with a focus on India. This introduction highlighted several cross-cutting themes in the contributions to reflect on how these three notions are interlocked in mutual attrition. It also sought to show how a historically grounded and contextual analysis of this issue – with its focus on South and Southeast Asia – is well placed to explore this interlocking, while illuminating wider global concerns. By weaving together expertise from law, political science, sociology and interdisciplinary humanities, the contributions shed light on the complex mechanisms through which citizenship is constructed, contested and reimaged amidst ongoing political turmoil and societal shifts.

Specifically, this introduction showed how right-wing, populist and authoritarian politics today target minorities by making their citizenship status vulnerable. The form this targeting takes is not through bare denationalisation reminiscent of the early twentieth century but through complex and insidious legal routes. The contributions develop this theme by a nuanced analysis of bureaucratic and juridical procedures that may retain the appearance of legality but, in essence, use it as facade. These tactics obscure these violations, making it difficult to identify and rectify the attrition of citizenship status.

The role of other interlinked factors is key. National security discourses normalise such targeting, introducing and permitting exceptionalist measures. This feeds into the racialisation of minorities, othering them and ultimately rendering their status liminal. There is a feedback loop here, where these tactics produce or entrench ethnicised state formations, and either inhibit or altogether remove the political participation of minorities.

The case of Assam stands as a critical example within this broader discussion. The region exemplifies the acute challenges of citizenship attrition, illustrating the devastating impact of legal and bureaucratic measures on individuals' lives and livelihoods. Assam's experience underscores the urgent need for inclusive and equitable solutions that recognise the complexities of identity, migration, and historical injustices, ensuring that citizenship, a fundamental right, is not wielded as a tool of exclusion and marginalisation.

The special issue highlights important areas of further research. There is a need to further study the existence and mechanisms of global transfers and learnings among regimes and political actors engaging in the undermining of citizenship and democracy. It also makes a case for greater reflection on the legal form that such mechanisms take. For instance, the international audience, particularly in relation to statelessness, must take into consideration the blind spots in legal rights and policies. Finally, the contributions as a whole show the need for taking seriously the everyday authoritarian state practices that produce and legitimise status precariousness.

The special issue underscores the importance of comparative studies that could reveal the common patterns of citizenship attrition across diverse non-Western contexts, thereby enriching our global understanding of these dynamics. It also highlights the value of theory generation from the Global South. Furthermore, there is a critical demand for thorough investigations into how legal uncertainty impacts marginalised and vulnerable groups, findings from which could guide the development of more inclusive policies. Additionally, the confluence of digital technologies and bureaucratic procedures with citizenship legislation presents a rich area for new scholarly inquiry. As digital tools and bureaucratic processes increasingly dominate governance structures, comprehending their influence on citizenship frameworks is essential. Exploring these intersections is expected to provide valuable insights into the implications of technological progress and bureaucratic operations in contemporary governance.

The policy implications of this special issue are both timely and critical. The detailed analyses provide a vital lens through which to view the manipulation of citizenship laws by authoritarian regimes, offering crucial lessons and warnings for those committed to upholding democratic values. The case studies presented serve not only as a reflection of current challenges but also as a guide for developing strategies to counteract the erosion of democratic structures. As we observe significant transformations in the global political landscape, the themes addressed in this special issue are poised to remain at the forefront of academic and policy discussions.

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