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**Bhagat, R. B. (2022). Population and the Political Immigration: Census, Register and Citizenship in India. London: Routledge (xii + 174)**

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**Abstract**

This book presents a groundbreaking analysis of population issues in India through a political lens, diverging from traditional descriptive or predictive approaches. Prof. Bhagat situates demographic practices—like the census, NPR, NRC, and Aadhar—within the framework of governmentality and political imagination, drawing on Foucault’s concept of surveillance. He critically examines how state definitions of citizenship have evolved, particularly after independence, and how these definitions impact rights, identity, and belonging. Through detailed discussion of the Citizenship Acts, NRC, and CAA, the book highlights the contested nature of citizenship in India, especially in Assam, where religion often informs labels like “refugee” or “infiltrator.” Bhagat challenges myths around religious fertility differences and emphasizes the socio-economic roots of demographic disparities. Arguing for a secular and inclusive political vision rooted in fraternity, the book advocates for a pragmatic reimagining of citizenship that respects diversity and human rights. It is a vital contribution for scholars of demography, sociology, political science, and related fields, offering original insights into how population data intersects with state power, identity politics, and democratic aspirations in a multiethnic society.

**BOOK REVIEW**

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Population analysis and debate in India is largely descriptive, causal or predictive. So far there has hardly been an attempt to place population question in a political framework. In my view this is the first and original work on population of India, by an Indian demographer, that has looked at state policies, classificatory systems, and the population size and trends that they produce, in a theoretical political framework. It focuses on how the census definitions are linked with the changing political ideology of state with implications for diversity, development and documentation (three Ds). The main idea that this book produces is that the sedentary idea of citizenship is not adequate for classification in a country like India. In the past for complex historical and political reasons population of India has been affected by internal as well as international migration of significant magnitude. In this context citizenship emerges as a contested asset for diverse groups of people. The book begins by showing a connection between growth of population and development under various systems of governance in different parts of the world. Governmentality requires enumeration of population under different categories for the purpose of welfare and ensuring human rights. Now since rights and entitlements are linked with citizenship, counting and classifying population creates a need for distinguishing citizens from others. This explains the present concerns about refugees with the rise of nation-state on the one hand and the processes of globalization and post modernization on the other. Nation state separated the governance from nationality and the idea of nation was replaced by state. Consequently, a new legal bond was required between individual and state in the form of citizenship. After the second World War when colonies in the triad of Asia, Africa and Latin America became free, most states had to grapple with the legal-

ity of the definition of citizenship. Ethnic conflicts of various forms in different countries produced a large amount of cross-border migration. The migrants in the countries of destination were bound to face the problem of having full rights – the rights as enjoyed by the indigenous people and natives. In this context, using Foucault's famous concept of panoptical device, Prof. Bhagat maintains: "Census emerged a panoptical device to people what was a microscope to bacteria." It was the need of governmentality, i.e., the need to know about people, to govern and control them. Statistical knowledge of people also legitimized the various activities of state. The statistical categories that counting people, such as census, civil registration, surveys, NPR, Aadhar etc., uses, therefore, need to be seen as part of political imagination. I think that he has coined this term in his own way, under the influence of C. Wright Mills' concept of sociological imagination. I support Prof. Bhagat in use of political imagination in demography. After all, state collects data not only for providing various types of assistance but also for surveillance. For example, data on the numbers of scheduled castes (SCs) and scheduled tribes (STs) are used to determine the total number of seats from these categories to be reserved on Parliament and Legislative Assemblies. Proportion of population of Muslims was used to divide British India into two independent countries – India and Pakistan – and define boundaries of the two countries. Thus, the main issue the book deals with is that of the definition of citizenship which is a dynamic and political issue, and that cannot be taken for granted. To quote: "... citizenship is a contested area of political imagination. Looked at from this way, citizenship status is very fundamental to rights, entitlements, dignity and fulfilling human aspirations. It is a status based on the nature of relationship between people and the state. It is a

legal status that embodies rights and entitlements and is also about identity and belonging. In this sense, it has political, social and cultural dimensions connected in ways that are sometimes convergent and sometimes divergent.” (p. 152) It is shown that at the time of independence in India citizenship was based on the concept of *jus soli*, i.e., citizenship by birth. After 1985 Assam Accord it was changed to the concept of *jus sanguinis*, i.e., citizenship by descent/parents. Citizenship Act 2003 said that children born after 3rd December would be treated as citizens of India provided both of their parents are Indian citizens or one of their parents is a citizen of India and the other is not an illegal migrant. National Register of Citizenship (NRC) and Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019 have separated refugee from illegal migrants and made illegal migrants as country specific and religion specific. Prof. Bhagat avers that “India needs a clear definition and classification of categories like refugees, immigrants and illegal migrants included in a policy framework consistent with its international obligations and compliance of UN conventions, protocols and practices.” (p.69) The issue of citizenship is closely connected to the concept of refugees. From time to time, even after independence and in the aftermath of partition in 1947, India has been receiving waves of refugees from Tibet, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. There is no doubt that India has a large number of refugees. According to his projections NRC and CAA may lead to a situation in which India has close to 81 million stateless people. India is not a signatory to UN Refugee Convention 1951 or Protocol 1967. India does not accept the principle of non-refoulement. Thus, the differences between stateless people, citizen, refugee, infiltrators, asylum seeker, internally displaced people and foreigner are not clear and un-contested. The practices with respect to

identification and deportation of refugees vary from state to state and change with the changes in political elite in the states and centre. A full chapter is devoted to the problem of citizenship in Assam to illustrate the contest over nature of citizenship in India. Assam is, undoubtedly, the best example of a state which is “experiencing a tug of war surrounding the issues of refugees on the one hand and illegal migration on the other more aggressively in the last few years.” Presently infiltrators are distinguished from refugees largely on the basis of religion. The term “infiltrators” is used for Muslims and “refugees” for Hindus. Prof. Bhagat explains the Assam situation very well in terms of history: decisions taken by Ahom rulers (originally from Myanmar) to invite Muslims to give top positions; definitional decisions taken during the British rule; changing class background of migrants; rise of Bangladesh; and rise of a nativist ideology of Assamese middle class. His discussion of class and occupational differences between natives and migrants, politics and court decisions help in understanding the complexities of claims over citizenship. Ironically, this is happening at a time when Assam seems to be developing as a net out-migrating rather than an in-migrating state – due to both migration to other states (internal out migration) and migration to other countries (emigration). Further, according to some estimates, the size of illegal migration to Assam after 1971 is almost negligible. It is National Register of Citizens that aims to distinguish citizens from “others”. To quote: As a sequel to the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2003, citizenship rules 2003 were framed which specified the preparation of NPR as a prelude to the creation of NRC. Following this, the Census of India undertook the exercise of the NPR along with Census of 2011. The NRC is expected to be built on top of the NPR, segregating those who

claim to be Indian in the NPR and then publishing another list of 'doubtful' citizens, who then have to prove their ancestry to be an Indian to the registrar who is authorized to do this job." (p.33) Differences in growth rates of different religious and cultural groups is a reality. The new politics is based on newly created insecurities, apprehensions and new mythologizations among different ethnic groups. Thus, the politics of Hindutva in India may easily be explained in terms of the growing apprehension among Hindus that in the future they would be outnumbered by Muslims. The book presents data on the growth of Hindu and Muslim populations in India in a historical perspective. (Surprisingly the differences in size and growth rate in the post-independence India is missing although a table is devoted to the same for the period 1881-1941.) Prof. Bhagat shows that religious differences in the growth rates of Muslims and Hindus had created similar apprehensions among Hindu intellectuals even before independence although the task of defining Hindu was not simple. Practically, it became a term for all diverse groups other than Muslims and Christians. During various census decades before independence Muslim population grew faster than Hindus. The same trend continued after independence. Prof. Bhagat, however, argues that this is only a myth that sometime in the near future Muslims would outnumber Hindus. According to one estimate, if it happens it would take not less than two centuries. Prof. Bhagat rightly says that one main reason behind the religious differences in population growth rate between Hindus and Muslims is the higher level of fertility among Muslims as compared to Hindus. There are two arguments that are often given to explain the higher fertility among Muslims: a. polygamy among Muslims; and b. opposition of Islam to family planning. Prof. Bhagat counters both the arguments He

says that polygamy may actually reduce fertility, and fertility among Muslims has also declined as among others. Many demographers have shown that the religious differences in fertility between Hindus and Muslims (of the order of 0.5 children) arise largely due to differences in their socio-economic levels. I agree with Prof. Bhagat. The religious differences in polygamy do not explain the present fertility differentials. Also, there are many Islamic countries, such as Iran and Tunisia, where fertility rate has gone well below the replacement level. With spread of education and rise of aspirations for modern life fertility rate among Muslims is going to decline further. To me the central message of the book is that for a long time India has been a land of diversity. People speak different languages, have different religious faiths, practice different cultures, and are divided into distinct social groups called castes. Yet, in the post-independence democratic polity religion and caste have emerged as two competing identities, though the caste identity is "uprooted from their regional moorings." (p. 151) The present-day politics is attempting to replace caste politics by religious politics. In this context, intellectuals need to work for a secular and all-inclusive politics rather than sectarian politics. Towards the end of the book, Prof. Bhagat says that "the political process must guarantee inclusion, equal treatment and co-operation rather than exclusion, discrimination and conflict. In realizing this goal, the principle of fraternity plays a key integrating role of achieving unity through the idea of citizenship and formation of political community, national identity and nationalism." (p. 156) He ends by the book by making an important statement: "Our future depends upon the political realization that the ethnic nationalism reimagining citizenship in a differential form is not only undemocratic but also loaded with dis-

crimination and failures on the part of the state in achieving wellbeing of its people.” (p. 164) The “demographic bogey of numbers” (p. 26) has led to a new kind of politics which is based on exclusion and anxieties. I must compliment Prof. Bhagat for raising this issue effectively. The centre in a petition in the Supreme Court of India on a petition against the detention of Rohingyas made a statement: “India cannot be the capital of illegal migrants across the world” and “the highest court cannot dictate to Government on its ties with other nation”. (p.64) But in a liberal perspective we must understand that law is only a dynamic human institution and no institution can ever be above the value of humanism. Looking at the past of India and present of the world politics, the proposal he puts before us, the proposal of fraternity and secularism in political matters is the only alternative before India though it is not easy to implement in one day. The state has to evolve a process by which refugees can hope for citizenship someday in the future, if not in the next five-ten years. We live in a multiethnic, multireligious world. I am happy that a demographer and geographer that Prof. Bhagat is, has raised issues about contesting citizenship in a multiethnic society. At the moment this is only a dream, however. Sane voices from all ethnic communities and religious groups have to come together to develop a model of citizenship rooted in rights and responsibilities. But before this happens the communal elements in all the religious groups must be identified and excluded and a new politics based on human interests rather than historical, empirical identities of India must be developed. Interestingly, this is what Prof. Binoy Kumar Sarkar and Mukerjee Radhakamal stressed in their writings on sociology in the first half of the twentieth century. Sarkar published a paper on Hindu theory of international relations in *American Political Science Review* in

1919. He defined Indian nationalism on the basis of Neeti Shashtras. To quote from the paper: “The doctrine of sarva-bhauma, as the concept of federal nationalism, imperial federation, or the universe state, is thus the keystone in the arch of the Hindu theory of sovereignty. The doctrine of unity and concord is the final contribution of neeti-shastras to the philosophy of the state.” Sarkar also stressed that the best of Hindu ideals hardly differ from the great ideals of other religions and civilizations. Intellectuals need to take a lead in deconstructing demographic anxieties and show a way to politicians. They have to make a beginning. Politicians will follow. In a democracy there is no alternative to negotiations, though no size fits all solution can be suggested for all parts of India and for all times. We have to be pragmatic. I notice a small inconsistency between the presumably Foucauldian position of state counting people for governmentality and the assumed sublime intentions of state. “The purpose of the census was not to incite rivalry among the religious communities but to understand them for governance as it had happened in colonial India or for identifying the disadvantaged groups among the religious communities to eradicate discriminatory practices in independent India. Nevertheless, the fall out of the enumeration in the democratic politics emerged inalienable.” (p. 53) One has to explain: Why did this fall out happen? To me, this happened because right from the beginning our political leadership promoted communalism. “Secular leaders” were not an exception to this. Gandhi also used communal sentiments for political purposes from time to time as per his convenience. Time has come when this must end. The concept of fraternity needs to be defined in a manner neutral to religion. Yes, the missionary secularism that closed eyes to existential realities to serve the political aims of secular elite has also done immense harm

to formation of universe state in India. An inter-religious communicative action is the only way. Finally, I should say that the book is very useful for all those demographers, sociologists, geographers and political scientists who are interested in political substratum of population issues in India. Original material on citizenship and related issues from different original sources on Acts and Rules informs the readers about the dynamics of citizenship

in India. For those not interested in the political part also there are extensive details regarding the history of census, and questions asked in the last census, NPR, and NRC. It is a noble contribution on the link between population and larger society and worth to be read by all teachers and students of population, history, sociology, economics, political science and geography.