

Sketching the Khilonjia Musalman: Identity, Culture and Politics in the Assamese Muslim Community

Tanzim Masud

Research Scholar, Gauhati University

Abstract:

Muslim identity groups in Assam are multi-layered, where local socio-cultural and economic interactions produce multiple narratives of the same. Several groups of Muslims exist here like the Assamese Muslims, Barak valley Muslims, North Indian or Bihari Muslims and the Muslims of East Bengal origin or the *Miya*'s. Again these groups have further sub-divisions which are more local in nature. This paper focuses on the Assamese Muslims, also known as *Tholuwa Mussalman*, *Asomiya Mussalman* and *Khilonjia Mussalman*, which, apart from their united religious identity, contain several localized social, cultural and economic identities. The major division in this group is of *Goriya* Muslims, who purportedly are from upper Assam districts and *Moriya* Muslims, who are from the lower districts. Both these sections have been following a regular *othering* process with each other in customs, rituals and forms of socio-cultural repertoire like marriage. The paper aims to sketch an ethno-historical account of the community while arguing that their religious unities are dissolved under intra-regional differences in society and culture. On the other hand, it has been observed that their religious unities are closely aligned to their regional identity as 'Assamese' and have often played out in the identity politics of the region. In doing so, we borrow from an already growing historical discourse where authors have shifted from understandings of national and regional identities as meta-narratives and are re-emphasizing the identification of local collaborations and contestations.

Keywords: Ethno-History, *Khilonjia*, *Goriya*, *Moriya*, Othering

Introduction

Muslims in Assam are almost half its population; even then, they are far from a homogenous category here. The history of their arrival, according to current narratives, are placed as early as the 13th century and are often divided into categories of indigenous and migrants. Here, the *Axomiya Musalman* are regarded to be the indigenous and is composed of *the Gariya, Mariya* and, according to recent claims, also the “*Miya*”. Furthermore, it is also observed that there are other categories of Muslims that also reside in the state of Assam. These are Barak valley Muslims, the up-country Muslims who had migrated from UP, Bihar, or even as far away as Peshawar and Kabul, known as *Deshi*. The following paper will focus on the first category of Muslims in Assam, i.e. the indigenous Assamese Muslims or *Axomiya Musalmans*. The discussion will begin with a historical overview of this category, locating the community and the narratives that sound its nature and history. It will concern the historicity of the community and argue that there are greater differences based on the lay of the land and regional imageries. Next, the discussion will steer towards the socio-cultural patterns of the community while highlighting the intra-group differences and contestations and inter-group borrowings (between the Muslims and other communities in the state). Finally, the paper will argue how, in the recent political climate, plagued by questions of migration, the *migrant other* and state processes like the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), have affected the interlinkages of the Axomiya Muslim category with the larger Assamese community as well as its own internal configurations.

Authors (Bose&Jalal, Paul Brass, Liza Mitchell) in recent times have realised the heterogeneity of the Indian Muslims and the range of effects of local roots, regional affiliations and class and caste effects. These authors conclude that the Indian Nation is the culmination of various regional identities with the Indian Muslims, too, not constituting a single, monolithic or homogenous identity, and in fact, enveloping all the differentiating features that characterise Indian national society. The paper aims to follow a similar trajectory in locating the Axomiya Musalman category in Assam.

Historical Background

According to historical accounts and the popular narrative, the beginnings of Muslim settlement in Assam can be traced back to the thirteenth century as mentioned in the *Kanai*

BarashilBowaSil inscription found in North Guwahati issued after BakhtiyarKhilji's invasion referring to Muslims as 'turushka' (Saikia,2017). This armed movement was also followed by the trading groups, which led to new Muslim settlements in the Brahmaputra valley, especially in the Western part of Assam bordering Bengal. Consecutive census reports of 1891, 1901 also mention the '*Moriya*' Musalmmans, classified as a low-class Muslim Group which settled here in the 15th century. Yasmin Saikia (2017) traces the presence of Muslims in Assam Valley, especially to the Sufi *khanqahs* dating back to the thirteenth century and to references of

Muslims as *Yavanain* the *Vaishnava* literature of the sixteenth century. The prevalence of Muslims in Upper or Eastern Assam in the sixteenth century, especially in the royal capital, around modern-day Sibsagar, began from the rule of SuhungmungDihingia Raja (Saikia, 2017). According to Kar (1990), Ahom's invited Muslim professionals from Bengal to undertake architectural and other projects in Assam, leading to the proliferation of Muslims in the region. Kar(1990) states that Hindu and Muslim men from other parts of the country were invited by the Ahoms, especially skilled workers like artisans, accountants, weavers, scholars, saints etc. He further adds that Muslims were appointed by the Ahoms for interpreting and deciphering Persian documents, minting coins, carving inscriptions, weaving, tailoring, painting, carpentry.

The presence of Muslim groups further increased during the early seventeenth century(1638-39) when Kamrup, including Guwahati, became a part of the Mughal Empire under Emperor Shahjahan., bringing the Mughals in close proximity to the Ahoms, who were ruling over Eastern Assam, thus leading to cultural exchanges between the two groups. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, colonial surveys, especially the census, accounts for a little over 19,000 Muslims in the Brahmaputra Valley. In terms of culture and traditions, the *AxomiyaMusalman* being the earliest Muslim settlers of the region, remain very similar to the Hindus of the region and can also be said to have a syncretic association with the indigenous fabric. Yasmin Saikia (2017) observes that this group has 'become one' with all in Assam. In fact, in contemporary narratives of identity, various historical sources are employed to stress the 'belongingness' of the Axomiya Muslim. For example, ShihabuddinTalish's comment to describe the Muslims of Assam who accompanied Mir Jumlah during his invasion of Assam in 1662 is often cited in speeches, pamphlets and academic books:

“As for the Mussalmans who had been taken prisoner in former times and had chosen to marry here, their descendants act exactly in the manner of the Assamese, and have nothing of Islam except the name; their hearts are inclined far more towards mingling with the Assamese than towards association with Muslims. The Muhammadans who had come here from Islamic lands engaged in the performance of prayer and fasting, but were forbidden to chant the call to prayer or publicly recite the word of God” (Gait,1963,p. 153)

Furthermore, it is to be borne in mind that not all Muslims were outsiders; there were various sections of people from the indigenous origin who converted to Islam as well. Sufism propagated Islam to a great deal across the globe, leading to what is known as ‘soft’ conversions to Islam. According to Monirul Hussain(1987), even though Assam came in contact with Muslims in 1203, it is because of Saints like Shah Milan, also popularly known as Azan Fakeer, that a full-fledged ‘systematic’ propagation of Islam began in the 17th century. Azan Fakir, who came to the region from Baghdad in 1630, is known to have propagated the various tenets of Islam through devotional songs called *Zikirs and Zaris*, composed in the Assamese language, which may have attracted the masses towards Islam(Hussain,1987). The story of the conversion of a tribal man named Ali Mech during Khalji’s invasion is a case in point. However, it was not only the common people who converted to Islam but also the royalty, as in the case of the Kamataruler, Chakradhvaj (1455–1485), who converted to Islam after his defeat in the hands of Sultan BarbakShah, ruler of Gauda (Saikia,2017).

In contemporary narratives, the term *TholuaMusalman*, *KhilonjiaMusalmanis* has come to be ascribed to these early Muslim settlers of Eastern and Western Assam. This group of Muslims are native speakers of the Assamese language and are ‘traditionally’ also referred to as ‘*AxomiyaMusalman*’. Furthermore, there is considerable overlapping of caste, language and regional identities that have pervaded into conventional Islamic tenets. Apart from the normal Shia-Sunni divisions, historical sources and accounts of several authors throw out groups like the Gariya, Mariya, Miyan, Sheikhs, Sayyids, etc. These divisions have acquired new meanings in post-colonial Assam, and even in tracing structured historical narratives of migration from mainland India, categorical stress on their “*Axomiyaness*” is seen not only in works of Muslim writers but also their Hindu counterparts. Writings of several early Assamese Muslim writers in Assam Valley signify this trend. As early as 1917, when the first

Assam Sahitya Sabha meeting was held, a significant topic of discussion was *the Contribution of Muslims to Assamese literature* (Annals of ASS, Maheshwar Neog, 1976).

From the nineteenth and the early twentieth large scale influx of Muslims from various districts of Bengal such as Mymensingh, Pabna, Bogra, and Rangpur due to the new colonial policies that encouraged migration. New settlements in the Nowgong district and in the chars of Barpeta and Mongoldoi were encouraged in the early twentieth century in order to increase the land under cultivation (Saikia,2017). It is this group of people who came to be known as Na Axomiya or New Assamese; however, terms like *PamuaMusalman* (the farming Muslims), *CharuaMusalman* (the Muslims of river islands or banks seasonally submerged into river waters), *MianMusalman* and *MymensinghiaMusalman* is also ascribed to this group (Hussain,1987, pp 3). Over the passage of time and with the politics of polarization, this group of ‘Bengali Muslims’ came to be identified as ‘illegal immigrants’ or ‘Miyas’ which is a ‘stereotypification’. Monirul Hussain noted in 1987 that this group of ‘immigrant Muslims’ had taken up the Assamese language to integrate themselves with the Assamese society. He further adds that although the older generation is bi-lingual, the newer generation remains largely unilingual speaking in Assamese. The sections of *Miyan*, who arrived in the early 20th century, also identify themselves as Assamese, with the president of the Char Chapari Sahitya Sabha commenting that they call themselves Bengali Origin Assamese Muslims and are different from Bengali Muslims, who are still migrating from erstwhile East Bengal areas. And therefore, the rapidly growing population of this particular group has been a major concern for the *AxomiyaMusalman* identity and Assamese identity at large and is also reflected in the politics of the region.

Deciphering the Axomiya Muslim: Intra-Group Divisions and Socio-Cultural Practices

Muslims in Assam are far from a being homogenous category and can (at least) be divided into four main groups, each having a different identity and relation with the Assamese society at large. It includes the Assamese Muslims, also known as *Goriya*, *Moriya*, *Tholua*, *KhilonjiaMusalman*, the Bengali Muslims from Barrak valley, the *Desi* Muslims who had migrated from UP, Bihar, and even as far away as Peshawar and Kabul, and at last, the immigrant or so-called Bangladeshis also popularly known as the *Miyas*. The following section will discuss the primary categories observed amongst the Assamese Muslim today, i.e. the *Goriya or MoriyaMusalman*.

Goriya is a generic term used for the Assamese Muslims. There is no consensus among scholars regarding the origin of the word *Goriya*, while Gait believes that the term signifies the introduction of Islam by the early invaders from Gaura or Gaur, the Muslim capital of Bengal (Gait, 1963), some have the opinion that the term signified the professions of the early Muslims in Assam, while according to popular beliefs the term is used for the Muslims as they eat beef or *goru*. Another group of Muslims known as *Moriyas* grew rapidly in the Goalpara district under the reign of Hussain Shah, the king of Gaur(1493). It is believed that the term *Moriyas* used for early Muslim settlers in Nowgong probably because of the fact that they were engaged in metal ware production that required beating and hammering (*maar*) (Roushan,2016). The *Moriyas* claim their descent from the early Pathans who came to Assam during its invasion by Turbak in 1532, i.e. they claim to be the descendants of the Pathan army who accompanied Turbak during the invasion of Assam and were taken as prisoners of war by the Ahoms or those who had decided to stay back on their own.

Both the *Goriyas* and *Mariyas* are well assimilated in the Assamese socio-cultural fabric and are put under the umbrella of *AxomiyaMusalman* along with the *Goriyas* per the modern-day culturo-political narrative. This group of Muslims are considered to be the earliest Muslims settlers and include descendants of Muslim/Pathan/Mughal soldiers who stayed back on their own or were held back as prisoners of war, the North Indian technicians and artisans brought by the Ahom kings, medieval Islamic preachers/ saints and the local converts to Islam during the medieval Ahom period(cited in Hussain).

As mentioned in the previous section, various overlapping identities define the *Axomiya Musalmans*. Ethnographic and documental sources have shown that the caste system too had an influence on the Assamese Muslims that has split up the category into caste-like groups such as Syed's, Sheikhs, *Moriyas* etc. The Syed's claim to be the descendants of Prophet Muhammad and claim their descent from Azan Fakir, the Medieval Sufi saint who came to Assam in the Seventeenth century. On the contrary, Edward Gait (1963) believes that most of the Syed's in Assam were of indigenous origin and were not related to the Syed's of Arabia. The Syed's generally use the prefix of *syed/syeda* along with their first name and consider themselves to be *bamuns/ brahmins* among the Assamese Muslims thus, claiming their superiority over both the Sheikhs and *Moriyas*. The second group, called Sheikhs, are believed to be indigenous converts to Islam. According to Gait, some Sheikhs who were able to earn status in the society declared themselves as Syed's during the colonial period.

The *Moriyas*, considered to be the descendants of Mughal soldiers captured during the Mughal invasion of Assam in 1532, who, along with the *Goriyas*, constitute the *AxomiyaMusalman* category, is also considered to be a different caste and are put at a lower position than the Syed's and Sheikhs. It must be born in mind that '*Goriya*' has become more of a generic term for the Assamese Muslims over time and is not considered a different caste unlike the *Moriyas*. However, each of this group has their own in-group identity that was seen up until recent times, in non-existent marriage relations between the two groups of *Gariyas* and *Mariyas*. Although, interviews conducted in the urban areas of Guwahati and Nowgong reveal inter-group marriages are happening.

It is to be noted that apart from the restriction on inter-marriage, there is no other rigid restriction followed by these groups, such as ban on inter-dining or social interaction. However, a certain "othering", especially of the *Mariyas* by the *Gariyas* is observed in the perpetuation of certain myths and stereotypes. One such myth, popular among the *Goriyas*, is; '*Moriya bure basonbojaikajia kore*', or *Moriyas* beat utensils while fighting, which may have percolated down from the fact that the *Moriyas* used to work in metal ware production and beating metals was a part of their job.[1] But today, it signifies their lower position in society as ill-mannered and without etiquettes. Thus, the *AxomiyaMusalman* category in itself is diversified or pluralistic in nature, and, interestingly while the different groups within the category have their own socio-cultural identity. This, in turn, also shoulders differences and boundaries during political mobilizations.

The *AxomiyaMusalmans*, however, have a a higher position in the social hierarchy of the Assamese society, not only because they are well assimilated within the Assamese socio-cultural fabric but also because they are mostly educated (in comparison to *Miyan*) and are attached with occupations and trades that largely falls under 'non-cultivating' category and has contributed to their economic affluence. The 'immigrant'/ *Na-Axomiya/Miyan* category of Muslims, on the hand, have largely been uneducated, engaged with agriculture or other menial jobs that have led to its low status in the social hierarchy, although there is the rise of a nascent category of 'new urban middle-class' within the *Miyas*. Theotherization of the immigrant Muslims by the *AxomiyaMusalman* is common as the *AxomiyaMusalman* feels that a close relationship with a *Miyan* may put his/her identity in question. As a result, what we see is limited social interaction between these two categories and marked absence of

matrimonial relations between the two categories, even though both the categories are followers of the same faith.

The Assamese Muslims have retained many of the customs and rituals of the indigenous Assamese culture, which maybe because of the fact that a good fraction of them were actually indigenous converts or because most of the early Muslim settlers, be it the Muslim soldiers or the artisans, or technicians did not bring their wives with them which led them to marry local Non-Muslim woman (Gait, 1984, as cited in Hussain, 1987). The syncretism of the Assamese society is still also reflected by the fact that even Azan Fakir, who popularized zikr's in Assam, is believed to have married a high-status Ahom woman. The early census reports also throws light on the co-existence and the interaction between the Islamic traditions and the local indigenous traditions in the colonial Assamese society. According to the Census report of 1881, the Muslim converts in Assam were ignorant of their Islamic faith. While some had not even heard of Prophet Muhammad, others associated him with the Hindu God Rama (Census, 1905).

Gait (1963) further adds that the Assamese Hindu converts to Islam could not completely cut them off from the earlier Hindu social life and retained various Hindu norms such as restrictions on inter-dining or inter-marrying outside one's own caste. Muslims in Assam, thus, adhered to their Islamic faith only in a marginal way in the nineteenth century, and there was rarely any difference between the social life of an Assamese Hindu and a Muslim until the later part of the nineteenth century.

As shall be observed, from the author's own ethnographical observations in the districts of Jorhat, Sibsagar, Nagaon and Dibrugarh, Assamese Muslims have many points of similarity in terms of their socio-cultural identity with that of the Assamese Hindus as due to a constant interaction/assimilation between the Islamic traditions and the Assamese folk traditions. The marriage customs, child-birth rituals, death and post-death rituals of the Assamese Muslims remain a combination of Islamic and indigenous folk tradition or the majoritarian tradition in these districts.

MarriageRituals: The custom of '*juron*', for instance, is observed by both the Assamese Muslims and Hindus alike with the only difference being that the application of vermilion or '*sindoor*' on the would be bride's forehead by the mother or a close relative in terms of the Assamese Hindus is skipped by the Assamese Muslims. However, both the Assamese

Muslim and the Hindu bride is presented with clothes, ornaments, cosmetics, mirror etc. alike. Again the marriage songs sung during the marriage known as *Biyanaam* is widespread among the Assamese Muslims, similar to their Hindu counterparts. The indigenous practices of providing the basic household objects like furniture or electronics with the bride are followed throughout the Assam valley, including the Assamese Muslims, although the Islamic custom of '*mahr*' or '*mauharana*' where the bride is paid in terms of money or other possessions by the groom is retained by the Assamese Muslims. Another custom known as *Athmongolais* also observed by the Assamese Muslims and Hindus alike in which the bride and groom invited over for a feast to the bride's parents home on the eight day of marriage. Both the groups avoid marriages in the months of *Puh*(December, January), *Chot*(March/April), *Bhado* (August/September) and *Kati* (October/November), while Assamese Muslims also avoid marriages in the holy month of *Ramzan*. Cousin/Kin marriages common in the Islamic world are not common among the Goriyas in the present times; however, the Moriyas have retained this practice to some extent.

Birthing and Death Rituals: The first child of a married Assamese Muslim or a Hindu girl is always born at the girl's maternal home, and a common ceremony called *bajoloioluais* celebrated in which the newborn baby is brought out in the courtyard after the detachment of the navel cord. The similarity in rituals and customs of the Assamese Hindus and the Muslims can also be seen in the post-death rituals; for instance, as per Islamic rituals, the post-mortuary rite is to be performed on the fortieth day after death; however, Assamese Muslims additionally perform the post mortuary rites on the third, seventh and the tenth day similar to the Assamese Hindus. The traditional Assamese dress called *mekhela chador* is worn by the Assamese Muslim and Hindu women alike and is a common link between the two communities.

Traditional Festivals: The harvest festival of *Bihu* is celebrated by the Assamese Muslims like their other religious counterparts reflecting upon the affinity and the syncretic culture of the Assamese society. Even though the *AxomiyaMusalaman*, like their co-religionists, remain adherents of the Islamic faith and observe the five pillars of Islam, the influence of local indigenous traditions on their social life is quite significant, which is evident in the regional syncretic variations of their customs and rituals. Here, *AxomiyaMusalman* category refers to both the *Goriyas* and the *Moriyas*.

Let us take an example to better understand the syncretism of culture in Assamese society. PurnandharRajkonwar or Probhu is a guru of the famous MaibelaAshram in Sibsagar. The mention of Probhu is important because, in him, we find an existing example of the coexistence of the Islamic traditions as well as the local Hindu traditions and also the fact that it is not only the Muslims in Assam who are heavily influenced by the local indigenous traditions but also the Assamese Hindus who have been influenced directly or indirectly by the Islamic traditions. Now, Probhu, for instance, believes in the combination of the philosophical methods of *Mukti* and *Fana'i*.e. is the combination of the Hindu philosophical method with that of the Sufi/ Islamic philosophical method. Further, according to Probhu, he follows both these paths in his personal life. Probhu's deep knowledge of Islam comes from his association with a Sufi Saint called Nasrullah Chishti, who came to Sibsagar in 1971. Probhu states that Nasrullah was a disciple of the famous Chishti Saint Sheikh Moinuddin Chishti. He was working as a teacher when he met Nasrullah and felt a spiritual connection to him. Nasrullah, over time-shifted into Probhu's home and stayed with Probhu's family till 1977 when finally, he retired into a Muslim village. Nevertheless, the association of Proud with Nasrullah left a deep impact on him forever. (Saikia,2017)

In Probhu's words;

“The truth is inside us and it is only known to the creator, our *Khuda*. When *qayamat*(judgment day) will happen, *Khuda*will receive us. Those who search for unity with Him and togetherness in humanity will be welcomed. I learned this from Nasrullah.” (Saikia, 2017, p. 121)

Probhu and Nasrullah went beyond the prejudices of one's Hindu or Muslim identity and cultivated a blended identity. Today, Probhu is as much a Muslim as he is a Hindu. He believes and propagates the blended ideologies of both the religions in the Maibela Ashram in Sibsagar, shining upon the syncretic or '*xanmiloni*' culture of the Assamese society. Another such case exemplifying the syncretic culture of Assam is that of Imran Shah, who is a teacher, poet, novelist and the ex-president of the Assam Sahitya Sabha. Imran Shah is an Assamese Muslim, and he, like most Assamese Muslims, stresses on his Assamese identity as much as his Muslim identity, which may have led him to his Hindu pen name Ishan Dutta that he had used for his poetry, published in *Ramdhenu*. His literature is very critical of all kinds of religious fundamentalism and throws light on the fused traditions of the Hindu and Muslim world in Sibsagar. He sees his mother as a representative of the fused Assamese

Muslim culture. He recollects that his mother would wake up early in the morning and do her wadu for the Faznamaz, and after offering her prayers to Allah, she would wear the Assamese traditional *rihamekhela chador* woven by herself and move towards the *paakghor* to prepare *jalpan* that included traditional Assamese *komulsawal* (soft rice) with *doi* (yoghurt) and *gur* (cane sugar). Imran Shah's mother deep religious values as well as her Assamese sensibilities of donning the traditional Assamese *rihamekhela chador* right after her prayers or her preparing traditional *jalpan* for breakfast throws light on the blended or fused identity of his Muslim household (Saikia, 2017). Hence, there is a deep sense of attachment and belongingness of an Assamese Muslim towards his/her Khilonjia/ indigenous identity as said by Imran Shah, 'We are part of Assam and Assam is richer because of the Muslims contribution in all aspects of life.' (Saikia, 2017).

The region of Assam in itself is quite diverse and has a pluralistic cultural identity. The region is known as 'Shankar-Azaan or dexh', i.e. the land of Shankardev and Azan Fakir. However, even with the evidences of syncretism we find in the discussion above, the inauguration of violence politics of identity from the twentieth century has led to an identity crisis of the *Axomiya Musalmans*, the impact of which is twofold, while on one hand, political parties have sprung up giving a united representation to the various groups within the *Axomiya Muslim* category, paving the way for unity amongst the different groups, on the other hand, a section of the Assamese Muslims have begun to feel dis-connected with both their Muslim as well as Assamese identity.

Migration, Demography, Politics and its impact on the *Axomiya Musalman* identity

The state of Assam has had a very strong anti-immigrant/outsider sentimentality since independence which dominates the politics of the state. Immigration, indeed is seen as a threat to the identity and culture of the Assamese society by both the Assamese Muslims and Hindus alike. However, ancestors of almost everyone who considers oneself to be a *Khati Axomiya* today have also migrated to the region at one point or the other. Misra (2016) notes that it is only during the later part of the Ahom rule that an amalgamation of *Axomiya jati* or Assamese Nationality had formed, which had largely to do with the process of Aryanisation with the emergence and the consolidation of Ahom rule in the Brahmaputra valley. Nonetheless, immigration of people from Bengal was not voluntary and was rather prompted by the Colonial government and then by the Congress. While most Bengali Hindus served the

Colonial government in eminent administrative posts were not ready to give off their distinctive Bengali identity, the Bengali Muslims, who were largely an agricultural group, were quick to accommodate themselves within the Assamese society by declaring Assamese as their mother tongue (Misra, 2016). They also integrated themselves into the socio-cultural fabric of the Assamese society taking up the traditional values of the region. These Bengali Muslims were brought to the region for various political reasons from time to time, for instance, Fakaruddin Ali Ahmed, is said to have brought in poor Muslim families from an agricultural background to Assam from erstwhile East Bengal in the 1960's (Dev & Lahiri, 1985). The immigration of the Bengali Muslims contributed largely to the development of agriculture in the region and economy as a whole. This section of Assamese-speaking immigrant Muslims were accepted by various Assamese organisations if not by the society as a whole, as Neo-Muslims or *NaAxomiya*. The leaders of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, which is the state's foremost socio-literary organisation promoting the culture and literature of Assam, have time and again condemned those who refer to the immigrant Muslim population as 'Mias' or 'Na Asamiya' and stressed on the need to accept them as part of the larger Assamese society. The president of the Assam Sahitya Sabha in 1996, proclaimed that the immigrant Muslims were in fact more patriotic in terms of Assamese linguistic nationalism as the immigrants believed in educating their children in the Assamese while Khati Axomiyas sent their children to English- medium schools (Misra, 2016).

However, the growing population of this particular category of Muslims over the years and its role in determining electoral politics have been given a communal colour by the right-wing political parties and other fringe groups to polarize the people in the region. The political sloganeering of AASU and AGP in the 1980s that led to a vehement narrative against the Bangladeshi Muslims accusing them of polluting the Assamese culture is a case in point (Saikia, 2017). Districts, like Karimganj, Hailakandi Dhubri, and Barpeta, that share the border or are closer to the border with Bangladesh, have seen the highest growth of the Muslim population in the recent years, which has led to the popular belief that the cause of the demographic trend is the persistent illegal migration from Bangladesh, which is not always the case. Sometimes the tag of '*Bangladeshi*' or '*Miyan*' is given to genuine citizens as well. Take, for example the case of Merapani, situated on the Assam-Nagaland border. *Aaji*, a local newspaper in the early 2000s identified a newly settled group of Muslims in Merapani as *Bangladeshi* / illegal immigrants and the local people too quickly accepted the narrative put forth by the newspaper. But, when an activist author named Ismail Hossain

visited Merapani , he discovered that these suspected ‘Bangladeshis’ were actually not illegal immigrants but were inhabitants of the char areas of Morigaon, Nagaon, Barpeta and Nalbari, many of whom had come to these districts before 1947 and were forced to shift to Merapani due to loss of land and livelihood due to ecological shift, and were given the tag of ‘Bangladeshi’(Saikia, 2017). The annual floods in Assam are common, the floods not only lead to loss of life, land and livelihood for the poor peasants but also identity, and the Muslim peasant, in this case is the most vulnerable of all.

The ethno-nationalist Assam Movement of the 1980s, is one of the most famous movements in post-colonial India that took up the cause of indigenous *Axomiya* and was directed against the illegal immigrants. However, some scholars like H.N. Rafiabadi (1988) believe that the Movement was prompted by Hindu chauvinism and alienated the *Axomiya Musalmans* of the region. Yasmin Saikia (2017), too, believes that the movement was highly religious in its connotation. According to H.N. Rafiabadi (1988), the Assam movement was nothing but a plan of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) to victimize and marginalize the vulnerable Muslim minorities of the region. He states that the Movement started off as a mass agitation against the infiltration of foreigners/illegal immigrants, particularly the Bengalis into the state of Assam. The immigrant Bengalis were accused of not only destroying the cultural identity of Assam but also being a serious threat to the indigenous people of Assam on both political and economic fronts. The indigenous tribal people and the Muslims of Assam were part of the Agitation in the beginning. However, the movement took a communal turn with the involvement of the RSS and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad that took away the democratic and Gandhian base from Movement and saffronized the genuine mass agitation affecting both the agitation and the Accord. The intrusion of these communal forces into the movement led to the alienation of both the *Axomiya Musalmans* and the indigenous tribals of the region. Over the course of agitation, the movement came to be represented by not Assamese as a whole but by the upper caste Assamese who dominated the movement and actively participated in the Accord negotiations leading to decisions that were completely oblivious of the demands of the tribals or *Axomiya Musalmans* of the region and were mostly tilted towards the gains of the upper caste. It was mostly the Muslims, including the indigenous Muslims in the villages, who became the sufferers of the RSS ambush, while the upper caste Assamese sunk themselves in the newly found hegemonic power. The Nellie massacre killing thousands of Muslims, including children of not only Bengali Muslims but also the *Axomiya Muslim* revealed the true character of the movement. The movement that began as a

secular one, that stood for the cause of the *Khilonjia* irrespective of religion was supported by the Hindus and Muslims of the region alike but the movement lost its direction and adopted a saffron robe leading to the disappointment and estrangement of the Muslims and completely detached the *Khilonjia Muslims* from the movement. Rafiabadi adds;

“The RSS policy on Assam was spelt out at a meeting of the organization's National Council at Nagpur, where it was resolved that the identity of different groups in the State of Assam could be preserved only if Assam remained predominantly Hindu. Voice was raised that the Hindus in Assam were reduced to a minority by both infiltration and proselytization. The resolution sympathized with the Assamese and those Hindu refugees whose interests had been harmed by undefined or ill-defined concepts of identity, sub-nation and foreign nationals. The RSS council regretted that Hindu refugees settled in Assam in 1950 had been dubbed as foreigners.”(1988, p. 13)

The All Assam Student's Union that spear-headed the movement turned into a political party called the Assam Gana Parishad and won the elections in 1985, banking upon the primary agenda of detecting and deporting the illegal Bangladeshi immigrants. However, in the ten years that the AGP was in power, many Indian Muslims were branded as illegal immigrants or Bangladeshi and were deported. The eviction and deportation of Muslims were further escalated with the onset of the Assam Accord. For example, in 1986, a sizeable proportion of Bengali Muslims was ejected from the Brahmaputra valley. Among them were people invited by the Ahoms and the colonial government to settle in Assam or some who had voted in at least the last four elections. Interestingly, many of them also had land documents of lands that were lost to the annual floods, some dating as early as 1932 (Rafiabadi, 1986). One such report of state-sponsored harassment is was published in a Kolkata Journal, named 'Point-Counter Point'. According to the report (1986), the Kaligaon Police, as directed by the S.P of Darrang on April 1986, arrested a man called Khaliq Rahman along with his children Rafique (15), Khadeja (4) and Khaleda (4 months) under the suspicion of being illegal immigrants. But when a body of United Minorities Front visited the village, they learned that the family arrested, besides other original documents, also had land documents since 1932, and the adults of the family had been voting from 1952-1985. Another such example comes from the Kohiramari area, which in July 1986 was announced as a Forest Reserve area rendering thousands of people homeless, who were mainly Muslims. With more than 30,000

acres of land being declared as forest area, 3134 families were evicted from Korihamari alone, while from Banghamosi and Kalachar another 1500 families were declared as infringers and were asked to vacate their lands. The same happened in Barakat and Nalbari districts as well (Sentinel Assam, 1986). In this way, the state devised a system that targeted and victimized the Muslims, even the genuine citizens of the country and the *Khilonjia Musalmans* in an undemocratic manner. The complete estrangement of the Muslims from the outset of the Assam Movement affected the syncretic culture of the Assamese society. The barbarity of the Government reached its peak when even M.P.'s I.A.S officers were declared illegal immigrants and were harassed along with their families. Syed Abdul Malik, Arif Ali and Dr. Maidul Islam Bora and their family members were charged as Bangladeshis in the 1990s. Syed Abdul Malik was an ex M.P, the ex-president of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, and his forefathers were freedom fighters, Arif Ali was the ex-chairman of the Assam Public Service Commission, while Dr. Maidul Islam Bora was also an ex-president of the Assam Sahitya Sabha and his forefathers were given the title Bora by the Ahoms (Sentinel Assam, 1986). Since these men were famous personalities, such offensive raids of the Assam Police on the basis of 'suspicion' caught the public attention. But by then, many innocent Muslim families had already suffered at the hands of the government or what can be called a state-sponsored harassment.

The IMDT Act was passed by the Parliament in December 1983 that sought to establish Tribunals for determination of the illegal migrants. The Act was applicable only in the Indian state of Assam, but when the Act was being passed in the Parliament, there was no member representing Assam in the Lok Sabha, since elections could not be held in Assam in 1980 due to the Assam agitation. In the other Indian states, the detection of 'outsiders' is done under the Foreigners Act 1946. The main difference between the IMDT Act and Foreigners Act is that while under the Foreigners Act, the onus of proving the nationality falls on the accused, under the IMDT Act, it falls on the complainant. And, it was this particular provision of the IMDT Act that put the responsibility of proving the nationality of the accused on the complainant which was controversial. Finally, the Act was struck down by the Supreme Court in July 2005 as unconstitutional. According to the Opposition, the Act was a hogwash and a mere tool to delay the determination and deportation of the illegal Bangladeshi migrants, encouraging vote bank politics in the region. The repeal of the Act led to fury among the immigrant Muslim population in Assam who blamed the Congress government in the state and the centre for not being able to safeguard the minority interests. It was

Badaruddin Ajmal, the president of Assam unit of Jamiat, who rose to the situation and took the lead to form a new political party at this point. In October 2005, thirteen Muslim organizations of the region came together to form a new political party, the AUDF, with Ajmal as the president. The party's main motto was to safeguard the protect the interests of the downtrodden in the Assamese society. In February 2009, three years after its formation, the AUDF became a National party. Thus, the repeal of the IMDT Act provided the centre stage to AIUDF to dominate Muslim politics in the region. Although the party enjoys no popularity among the Muslims of Upper Assam, it got its support base from majority of the Muslims in the lower Assam districts and the Barak valley. Therefore, AIUDF mainly contests elections from the Lower Assam districts of the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak valley, where a sizeable immigrant Muslim population or *Na-Axomiyas* are concentrated.

Interestingly, the party in the elections of 2006, 2011 and 2016 even failed to find candidates to contest in many of its seats in the sevenupper Assam districts of Golaghat, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji, the home of many '*Axomiya Musalmans*' or the indigenous Assamese Muslims. The party showed significant growth in its initial years from 2006-2011. It was mainly the 'soft hindutva' of Tarun Gogoi's Congress that made AIUDF as a party relevant in the politics of Assam. However, when AIUDF emerged as the main opposition party in the 2011 assembly elections in Assam, the indigenous *Axomiya*, including the *Axomiya Musalmans* were becoming conscious as for the *Khilonjia Axomiya* AIUDF remained a party that represented the immigrant population of Assam or the *Miyans*. In the meantime, the opportunity was taken by the Hindu organizations to gain popularity in the region during this situation which in turn led to the popularity of the Bharatiya Janata Party in the region, and also it forming government in 2016. AIUDF, on the other hand, had mostly remained dead from 2011-2016. But with BJP forming the government in 2016 and its hard-core Hindutva politics, AIUDF is gaining its relevance in Assam's politics again (Nath, 2019). Even the *Axomiya Musalmans* who did not consider AIUDF as a party representing the *Khilonjia Musalmans*, with BJP's Hindutva politics coming to the front edge of every aspect of policy making ,are now turning towards the AIUDF in order to safeguard their 'Muslim identity'.

The National Register of Citizens in Assam which is called 'xenophobic' by many, aimed at detecting and deporting the illegal immigrants, excluded 19 lakhs people from citizenship in its final list. Although 7 lakh Hindus are excluded in the final list of NRC, they could now be

granted Indian Citizenship in six years according to the Citizenship Amendment Act passed in December 2020, in other words the so called Hindu Bangladeshis who had lived in Assam without any proper documentation could now get Citizenship of India on the basis of their religion. The Act had further added to the fear and the grievances of the Muslims in Assam and the rest of India as it grants citizenship to all the other religious communities but the Muslims, which is not only discriminatory against the Muslims but also violates their right to equality. The recognition of Assam as a Hindu majority state after Independence completely changed the course of History in the Post-colonial period. On one hand, it unleashed atrocities and barbarities on the Bengali Muslims in Assam, who have been largely reduced to the ‘illegal’, *Bangladeshi immigrant* category, and on the other hand, it pushed the *Axomiya Musalmans* to the margins in the conflict between the Bengali Muslims and the *Axomiya* Hindus. Another new development is the use of the indigenous tribals against both *Axomiya* and Bengali Muslims, which was prevalent during the course of Assam agitation and can also be seen today with the election of Sarbananda Sonowal, a plains tribe Kachari, by the BJP as the Chief Minister of the State (Saikia, 2017). The *Axomiya Musalmans* are deeply connected to their *Axomiya* identity, but the politics of the region, especially from the 1980s, as seen from the discussion above, had led to the marginalization of this particular category and its transfiguration as an enemy or an alien (Saikia 2017). The Assam movement, the deportation policy adopted by the AGP, the implementation of the NRC and now the CAA all have made the *Axomiya Musalmans* not only vulnerable but also insecure about their *Axomiya* identity.

Concluding Remarks:

In the discussions above, the author in the first part of the article has attempted to bring about the historical narratives regarding the different groups of Muslims i.e. the *Axomiya Musalmans*, on the basis of both the historical and popular accounts. In the second part of the article, the author has tried to describe the affinity of the *Axomiya Musalmans* with the *Axomiya* folk culture and its impact on the various rituals and customs performed by them like *juron*, *athmongla*, *biyanaam* etc. The various in-group identities of the *Axomiya Musalmans* or the percolation of the Hindu caste system giving rise to categories like *Syeds*, *Sheikhs* and *Moriyas*, with the *Syeds* being at the top of the hierarchy tracing its descent from Azan Fakir, the *Sheikhs* or the indigenous converts being second in the hierarchy and the *Moriyas* or those whose ancestors accompanied Malik Turbak during the invasion of

Assam in 1532 or whose ancestors worked in metal ware production being at the bottom of the hierarchy had also been discussed in this part. The author had also tried to throw light on the syncretism or the 'xanmiloni' culture, as Yasmin Saikia calls it, of the Assamese society with the examples of people like Purnandar Rajkonwar and Imran Shah. The third and the last part describes the politics of migration in the region and the issue of 'illegal immigration' dominating the State's politics since independence. The Assam Movement that started off as a secular anti Bangladeshi movement adopting a communal colour in due course of the movement with its association with the communal forces like RSS and VHP and becoming largely an anti-Muslim agenda has also been discussed in this part. Furthermore, the ten years long rule of the Assam Gana Parishad and its atrocities and barbarities on the Muslims branding them as 'illegal immigrants' or 'Bangladeshi' is also highlighted in this part. At last, the NRC and the CAA and its implications on the larger 'Axomiya Musalman' identity has been discussed.

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