

Subaltern 'Poetry' as Resistance and Protest for Recognition and Self-Respect.

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On September 18, Nabina Das in a report in FirstPost writes “A different trend has taken over the current literary scene in Assam. What was once considered hate speech is now a proud badge a literary practitioner can wear. 'Miyah' (or, 'Miya') poetry and performance is the new trail being blazed by a group of young scholars, teachers and professionals. The common force between them is that they are poets and writers, and very angry. Commonly, Miyah refers to Bengali-origin Muslims of Assam, long a sordidly marginalized group².” This is perhaps the first couple of full reports to be reported about this new poetry movement in Assam. A group of young scholars, academics and activists came and joined hands together for this new movement. The word Miya is put upside down to protest and register anger over the years one is being discriminated of. Shalim M Hussain one of the key persons to initiate the movement in conversation with Aljazeera says “

"When you push people against the wall for too long, they might react in a violent way. If my community picks up guns, Assam will turn into Ashes”, echoing the last lines of his poem-
Beware!

I have nothing but anger in stock.

Keep away!

Or Turn to Ashes.³”

Who are the “Miyas”?

Gyanendra Pandey in his article titled “Can Muslim be an Indian” argues that there are two important components of making a nation. One is the core or the mainstream, and the other is

¹ Completed M.Phil from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

²<http://www.firstpost.com/living/for-better-or-verse-miyah-poetry-is-now-a-symbol-of-empowerment-for-muslims-in-assam-3007746.html>

³ Taken from

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/12/protest-poetry-assam-bengali-muslims-stand-161219094434005.html>

minorities who helps constructing the concept of the majorities. He then writes “.....Alongside this emerge notions of minorities, marginal communities, or elements, the fuzzy edges and grey areas around which the question of boundaries-geographical, social, and cultural-will be negotiated or fought over”. In our particular context also in terms of defining the “we” and “other”, Assamese nationalism makes Muslims of East-Bengal (now Bangladesh) the essential “outsider” among many other “potential outsiders”⁴. Indeed starting from the Assam Movement (1979-1985) till today Assamese middle leadership at times used the terms “*Miya*”, “*Bidekhi*” (foreigner), “*Bohiragoto*” (Outsider) to consolidate a “native” Assamese identity formation. In the entire process these Muslims or in a derogatory language “*Miyas*” are projected at the margin and a vulnerable category whose lives hardly matters. The other way around it can be said that the identity “*Miya*” becomes actually essential to construct the “mainstream” or insider of Assam or Assamese. There are many other communities who settled in Assam from colonial times due to different purposes of colonial administration. But among all of them “*Miyas*” are projected as potential outsiders who might become majority in the state and can alter the demography and culture of “native” Assamese speaker. Here evidently the selective discrimination of this particular community brings into the light the communal angle to term one as the other. It was reflected in the Assam Movement where an anti-foreigners movement horribly ended with selective targeting of Muslims and even killing of many of the native tribal in the hand of Middle class –caste Hindu leadership of Assam Movement.

The word “*Miya*” is often used to ridicule yet ordinarily refer to Muslims of East- Bengal Origin in Assam. It often reflects the “other” which is very much essential for the post 1950 emergence of Assamese Nationalism. *Miya* is an umbrella term which consists of different Bengali sublingual group who have migrated from East-Bengal to Assam. They include *Myemshingia*, *Dhakaiya*, *Chattgaiya*, *Sylethi* etc. The dominant formation of Assamese identity is being

⁴ Assam has been witnessing lot of migration from colonial time onwards. This includes people from Hindi Speaking states of Northern India, East Bengal (Now Bangladesh), West Bengal, Gorkhas from Nepal, Marwaris from western India etc.

questioned from the margin at various historical periods⁵. Again in a different way the whole idea of “Assamese” is contested as it is visible that except few tribes who are old inhabitants of Assam, others migrated to Assam starting from Ahoms⁶ to Tea Tribe Workers and People from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) at different times of history from 13th century onwards till 19th and early 20th Century. But among all the new migrant groups Muslims from East- Bengal occupies a significant number of population. They were initially brought as peasants through a system called line system⁷ and were restricted only certain places. The colonial logic for the enforced migration was that to cop up with the growing food demand it was essential to bring those hard working peasants from a “land scarce” province to “land abundance” province. Eventually the number of migrants from East Bengal kept on increasing and because their poor socio-economic situation population increased in a significant way. As Monirul Husain often put the point that “Any community in the world, which don't have a middle class, always produces more children”. It doesn't remain different for these peasants as well. Hence the myth containing that Muslims will become majority slowing overcoming the natives” circulated well among the local mass. It became an easy way of generating threat for “demographic invasion”, “Pollution of culture” etc. It was very skillfully used during Assam Movement which witnessed massive violence on the community.

Assam movement, the production of Violence⁸ and writings of Resistance:

Amalendu Guha in his celebrated article “Little Nationalism turned Chauvinist: Assam's Anti-Foreigner's Movement 1979-80” comments about the movement as “The author concludes that the movement is national in form, chauvinist and undemocratic in content and proto-fascist in its

⁵ The formation of Assamese identity is alleged to be dominated by “Mainstream” and standardized Assamese language and culture. As a result many native tribes like Bodo, Rabha, Karbi, Dimasa etc. in recent time asserted their autonomous identity.

⁶ Ahoms (an ethnic community) came to Assam at 1228, established Kingdom and ruled till 1828 in Assam, until colonial rule was established.

⁷ Introduced first in 1920, it segregated the settlers from indigenous population by some strict demarcation of territory.

⁸ Paul Brass uses the term production of violence in his book “The Production of Hindu- Muslim Violence in Contemporary India”. He says these acts are enacted in three distinct phases, preparation/rehearsal, activation/enactment, and explanation/interpretation. Here, I use the term production because these violence were more of consciously produced on certain communities. The actual objective of the movement was sold to some greedy middle class Assamese leaders.

methods. It has two faces - one, non-violent and peaceful, turned towards Delhi; and the other, coercive and often violent, turned towards the dissident minorities.” These words perhaps reflects the way Assam Movement turned to a brutal and inhuman form just massacring of poor Bengali peasants bodies. It was horribly directed towards the Muslims in a fascist way. In many of the districts of upper Assam also communal tensions were reported where almost no Muslims is of Bengali Origin.

The Assam Movement witnessed significant violence on Muslims of Bengali origin. The whole anti-foreigners movement was directed just to target these Muslims significantly. Attacks and counters attack reports were reported in many parts of lower and central Assam. Many of the Bengali Origin Muslims died, lost houses and localities were burnt down. But among all the Massacres Nellie Massacre holds a significant importance as after this massacre only the identity consciousness and consolidation of “Miyas” across Assam took place. Nellie massacre happened in 1983 during Assam Movement (1979-85). Nellie is the name of a place located in the heart of Assam hardly 90 K.Ms away from the capital city of Assam, Guwahati. In this Massacare the local people including Assamese and tribes such as Tiwas, the Karbis, the Mishings, the Rabhas and the Koch attacked the East Bengal(now Bangladesh) origin Muslims (allegedly immigrants) where more than 3000 people got killed in a single day , although the government and other official source claims the number to be less than 2000. Most of the killed bodies were women and children as they couldn't run faster than the young men to cross the canal and save themselves (Hazarika, 2000). Assam Movement was a display of agitation against all outside immigrant group to Assam, particularly directed towards the poor Muslim peasants who migrated from East Bengal. The possible reason identified by Makiko Kimura in her study of Nellie massacre was that the Muslims of Nellie did not obey the Election Boycott call given by movement leadership under All Assam Students Union (AASU) and All Assam GanaSangramParishad (AAGSP). The agricultural expert Muslims were allegedly land intruders by first becoming tenant, sharecroppers and then owning the tribal lands. Rumors of girl abducting by the “immigrant” Muslim community from the native people were also one of the immediate reasons of violence (Kimura, 2003).

It was after this movement that voices of protests actually came from these peasants who hardly holds any agency to negotiate with the state. Many writings in protests and rage started coming out since then. Writings in vernacular medium particularly became as a tool to register protest. It included poetry, article, opinions etc. The whole idea of “Miya Poetry” has lot to do with these developments. However poems can be found as old as of 1939 also where a Poet narrates his experience being a residents of a char and a doubtful citizen. “The roots of this new genre lie in a 1939 poem titled “A Charuwa's Proposition” by MaulanaBande Ali. Although Ali did not use the word Miya, his poem is considered the first example of someone within the community asserting their identity” (Kumar, 2016).

Conceptualizing Miya Poetry:

Can poetry become a voice of protest? How does one articulate about an oppression which has to do with culture and legality and where one is projected as a “dirty”, “foreigner” and “unwanted” body? Often poetry acts as an agency for the most marginalized. We can see similar instances in cases of Dalit emancipatory poetry where one can refer to MeenaKandawaswamy’s work and many other Dalit emancipatory poems. At times these poets talks about experiences of marginality a Dalit subject, at times becomes outrageous on the oppressors and even denounces the whole system of caste by talking about alternatives. Often the central point here is that about “equality” or equal treatment as one urges to be considered as an equal human being while participating in every social sphere of life. The methodological similarity can be found in case of Miya poetry as well. In our particular context in Assam, Muslims of Bengali origin are often ridiculed and projected as dirty reminding them that they have migrated once from Bangladesh. They carry certain cultural attributes on their body like *Lungi*, *Dari*, (beard), *Tpoi* (skullcap) which are demonized by the Middle class Assamese population. Most of them are kept illiterate and remains very poor in terms of living conditions. Traditionally they live in *Char-Chapori* (river line) areas of Brahmaputra and are engaged deeply in agriculture and wage laborer. Their children have starting going to Assamese medium school and this process have resulted an Assimilation with the “Mainstream” culture. This leads to the production of conflict where the word “Miya” is used to refer to those Bengali origin Muslims and create an essential enemy of

Assamese culture. Since then the word Miya is used to ridicule oneself reminding one that he is not an “insider” and thus not considered to be Assamese. Shalim M Hussain, one of the founder of this poem Movement says “‘Miyah’ is used interchangeably used with the words ‘Bangladeshi’ and ‘illegal immigrant’, both of which are loaded with negative connotations of filth, uncouthness and barbarism. This group of insults, presupposes two things- either that the community for which the word is used is composed of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh or that the community consists of people who share some historical affinity with Bangladesh and hence cannot be considered to be completely Assamese”. This also bring the fundamental question of who is an Assamese.?

So how this form of poetry differ from the other Assamese poems that are already written? Hussain argues that first the word self identifies as Miya. He says many questions can be raised for choosing this particular word rather than “Char Chapori Muslims” as at times it looks one is denouncing his Assamese identity by calling oneself Miya. But he argues that it has a different meaning otherwise in mainstream India where one refers to Miya as a gentleman. It is only in Assam that it means a filthy Bangladeshi. He says these poems don’t call for a division of identity, but rather calls for larger and inclusive Assamese identity. It is almost evident here that there is a subversion of use of the word Miya here. The word which is used on *Char Chapori* Muslims to project as dirty, filthy, labor class are used by the same Muslims to normalize the term Miya in the “Mainstream” . It shows the effort of the poets to claim their equality by using the same abusive term Miya.

Contexts and Contents of the Poems:

The poems here intrinsically carries deeper meaning about their dilemmas to be a citizen of the state. At times these poems reflects the way they are projected within the larger society of Assam. They are doubted to illegal, dirty citizens. At the same time the middle class wants their bodies capable of working the entire on the field. They want their cheap labor. It is them who make this land of Assam green by their sweat. Yet their identity is just reduced to a mere

“Miya”. They can be killed , raped, murdered and used for vote bank purposes whenever required, but they cannot raise their voice. They have left their own culture and mother tongue by embracing the land of Assam; they call themselves *no-Akhomiya* . But the same claim is humiliated by the “Akhomiya” or Assamese nationalist sentiments by just terming term “illegal intruders”, thus dismissing it on single stigma of a “foreigner”.

The National Register of Citizens (NRC) plays a crucial role in terms of determining the citizenship in Assam and the up gradation of NRC has started in 2014. So the boundary here is March 25, 1971 when Bangladesh was created. Anyone coming after this date is not considered Indian. But Miyas are often doubted as “Bangladeshis”. Regarding this Hafiz Ahmed Writes:

“Write

Write Down

I am a Miya

My serial number in the NRC is 200543

I have two children

Another is coming

Next summer.

Will you hate him?

As you hate me?”

(Translated by Shalim M Hussain

<http://sunflowercollective.blogspot.in/2016/12/poems-miyah-poetry-series-curated-by.html>)

These are the opening stanzas of the poem which clearly tells the way the community is being stigmatized as producer of more children, living a barbaric life and as polluters of the mainstream culture. But he again begs to assert the identity being “Miya” in a proud way which normally people have looked down among themselves. He is emphasizing here on the legal number of NRC. It of course signifies a degraded body just asking for the validity within the territory. But he asserts that one cannot stop him the way he lives as he is also a legitimate citizen. Shalim M Hussain one of the founder of the movement says that it was first poem

published in a local daily and series of responses came to the poem. That is how the whole movement got started.

In a poem Written by Khabir Ahmed in 1985 goes by these lines:

“I beg to state that

I am a settler, a hated Miyah

Whatever be the case, my name is

Ismail Sheikh, Ramzan Ali or Majid Miyah

Subject- I am an Assamese Asomiya”

(Translated by Shalim M Hussain. First published on The Sunflower Collective Blog. Source <http://sunflowercollective.blogspot.in/2016/10/poems-miyah-poetry-series-translated-by.html>)

These are the Initial lines of the Poem “I Beg to State that (1985)”. The poem is just at end of Assam Movement which saw massacres and tortures on the community of Muslims of East Bengal. Poet here clearly tries to clarify whatever his cultural root or belongingness was, it is more the same. He or she is and “Ahomiya” or “Assamese” now. One might look down upon him on the basis of his name or identity. He is quite open about that by saying that he is a settler here and because he settled here for lifetime he must considered as Assamese.

He then writes

“.....Sometime in the last century I lost

My address in the storms of the Padma

A merchant’s boat found me drifting and dropped me here

Since then I have held close to my heart this land, this earth

And began a new journey of discovery

From Sadiya to Dhubri...

Since that day

I have flattened the red hills

Chopped forests into cities, rolled earth into bricks

From bricks built monuments

Laid stones on the earth, burnt my body black with peat

Swam rivers, stood on the bank

And dammed floods

Irrigated crops with my blood and sweat.....”

(Translated by Shalim M Hussain,

Source:

<http://sunflowercollective.blogspot.in/2016/10/poems-miyah-poetry-series-translated-by.html>)

Here as the poem goes he says how his body's sweat made Assam into a greenfield and how he lost his ancestral belongingness in the land of Assam. He asserts and reasserting how he has the right to be Akhomiya. He narrates how from nowhere fighting with the flood they have started cultivating. Is not that the criteria still to be an Assamese? His labor only made cities and towns and buildings growing. Somewhere he carries a huge discontent that even after sacrificing all efforts to show his love for Assam he is not considered Assamese and hence he reasserts again that he is an Akhomiya.

Abdul Kalam Azad works closely in *Char Chapori* Areas and he has established a NGO called “Jhai Foundation” for the betterment of the people of that region who are called to be Miyas. He says verbal abuses were normal part of his life as he was growing up. Many of the poems brings a humorous approach in terms of highlighting the socio economic condition of this people. He it become very interesting to see how “humiliating conditions/ objects of everyday life” becomes a tools of assertion. Here the fun humiliating one's living condition in terms of certain living attributes are subverted to criticize the people who makes mockery of their existential condition. Azad he says the poetry is a mean to “really translate the anger of the community”.

“When people call us Miya or Bangladeshi, there are limited options to fight back, because the state does not protect us,” he says, referring to an incident from 2016 where a Muslim member of

the state assembly was reportedly called a “Bangladeshi” in a derogatory way during a session.⁹ He closely works with Shalim M Hussain who translated almost all the poems from local dialects to English. One of the Hussain’s poem states:

“Now see me rise
From flood waters
Float over landslides
March through sand and marsh and snakes
Break the earth
's will draw trenches with spades
Crawl through fields of rice and diarrhoea and sugarcane
And a 10 percent literacy rate
See me shrug my shoulders curl my hair
Read two lines of poetry one formula of math
Read confusion when the bullies call me Bangladeshi
And tell my revolutionary heart
But I am a Miya”

So what then Miya poem wants to assert? Shalim M Hussain on a personal conversation says “of course it refers to Protest”. It is the long time agony that a Miya carries out on his or her mind. It obviously registers protest against degradation of a “Miya “body at a human level. The treatment with these Muslims bodies has something to with degrading treatment. As TalalAsad points out in his article “on Torture, or Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment” that “the modern history of "torture" is not only a record of the progressive prohibition of cruel, inhuman and degrading practices. It is also part of a more complex story of the modern secular concept of what it means to be truly human”. Within a humanitarian and legal discourse of citizenship the Miyas are never

⁹ Taken from

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/12/protest-poetry-assam-bengali-muslims-stand-161219094434005.html>

treated as equal, but as second class citizens. The life and aspiration of a second class citizen thus of course becomes subordinate to the idea of the problematic discourse of “nativity”.

Hence Miya Poems are emancipatory in practice, a protest with the approach. It liberates the stigmatized and dirty body within the visual range of mainstream Assamese or “Akhomiya”. The bodies are both ways dirty whether it is a female body of dark skinned, skinny household worker who walk 10 K.Ms from home to work or may be a rickshaw puller whose sweat comes out of the torn shirt. It may be the black body with *dari* and *topi* which burns itself the entire day at a construction site. Those bodies may be of a starving family residing on a riverside on a tent starving for food as their home is first destroyed by catastrophic flood and then by government eviction, as their lives doesn't matter. Miya poems teaches and tells us to liberate these subordination. It shows the way to protest, tell one to raise voice and to be proud of what they are. They tell “this world is made by us, we are not a foreigner here but just as genuine as anyone else”. We will be Miya, we are proud to be Miya because we know are no less Akhomiya.

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