

**Bengali Muslims in Assam and ‘Miyah’ Poetry:
Walking on the Shifting Terrains of ‘Na-Asamiya’ and
‘Infiltrator’**

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The Northeast Indian state of Assam has a very long and complex history of migration, whether it be Santhals from the Chhotanagpur plateau to work in the tea plantations under the British administration, the Marwaris from Rajasthan for trade, or the Bengalis from erstwhile East Bengal, now Bangladesh, as farm hands or agricultural labourers and farmers. This has led to a complicated demography in the state. Even after it became a state in British India and decades after its formation as a state within Independent India, Assam struggles with the question of ‘who is an Assamese’. This struggle has led to much turbulence in the state in the form of language movements. As the movements turned more vitriolic, communities such as the Bengalis and Nepalese began to be targeted as outsiders. Attacks on the Bengalis, and especially on the Bengali Muslim peasantry, sharpened. Factors like ethnicity, ancestry, land ownership, and economic and political issues, both local and national, intertwined to arrive at the image of the Bengali Muslim migrant as an infiltrator. The Bengali Muslim communities had migrated to the state under the aegis of the British administration as early as the 1920s and 30s to provide cheap labour as farmhands and cultivators on the silt banks and low-lying areas of the state where the indigenous Assamese would not venture. The hatred towards them may have been founded on an earlier history of migration into the state of the educated caste-Hindu Bengalis as administrative assistants to the British. However absurd it may be to conflate the Bengali Muslim peasant with this earlier figure of the Bengali *babu* (clerk), it has certainly gone politically unchallenged.

This paper traces the root of the conflict between the language of the educated migrant and the migrant labourer, that is, Bengali, and that of the indigenous in Assam. It seeks to understand the antipathy of the Assamese towards the Bengali language and how the image of the caste-Hindu Bengali migrant interlinked with that of the Muslim Bengali rural migrant over the years to arrive at the figure of the Muslim Bengali infiltrator. It explores how language is used as a medium to seek assimilation when there is a lack of representation of the migrant community in the mainstream literature of the state. This lack is now addressed with the new generation of the community having begun to use

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their own language/dialects to represent themselves and assert their right of belonging as subtle acts of resistance. I explore this through two poems, 'Ei Biplob Tv te Dehabo na' (YouTube 2016) and 'Hei Desh Amaar, Ami Hei Desher Na' (YouTube 2016).

The Historical Context

Prior to the 1870s, Assam and Bengal, with their similar cultures and languages, were treated as the same province. Bengali was the language of courts and government offices in Assam until 1783. After the Partition of 1874, Bengal began to see itself as a separate unit. The rise of Bengali nationalism during the 1905 Bengal Partition vehemently emphasised the differences between the two communities and this led to the antipathy towards the Bengalis in Assam that prevails even today. Bodhisattva Kar (2011) depicts the beginning of the chasm. Lord Curzon's territorial redistribution scheme of 1905 rearranged the administrative units of Madras, Central Provinces, and Assam and Bengal. The so-called Bengal Partition divided Bengal into two, with Bengal, Bihar and Orissa clubbed as one province and Eastern Bengal and Assam as another. The Bengali upper middle class erupted in protestation. For them it was a ploy to divide 'the indivisible Bengali nation' (Kar 2011, 45). The new province of eastern Bengal and Assam was announced on 19 July 1905. It embraced the Chief Commissionership of Assam, the divisions of Chittagong, Dhaka and Rajshahi, and the districts of Hill Tripura and Malda (45). The Bengali Hindus were a religious minority in the new province and a linguistic minority in the old. However, their angst was directed more at the fact that they were clubbed together with the 'savage Assamese' (45). Bengali society cringed at the idea of being governed by the administration in Assam, hurting Assamese sentiment.

Kar notes that according to an issue of *Dhaka Prakash*, for the highly cultured Bengalis to be 'thrown into social combination with the naked barbarians of Assam and be brought under the rule of despotic Assam officials' was offensive (45). Some said that the Assamese had become unfit to deal with the civilised Bengalis after dealing with the Garos and Nagas, Akas and other 'savages' (45) while others opined that Assam had 'no respectable history, was a malarious terrain with an unhealthy, cheerless climate, a land of evil magic and wicked charms and a free zone for savage head-hunters and immoral opium eaters' (47). Kar cites from *Charu Mihir* to observe that the Bengalis believed they were different from the Assamese in origin, race and language, and that their language would suffer great deterioration by contact with the Assamese language (51). The anti-Partition upper middle class of urban Calcutta even saw it as degrading for Dhaka, Chittagong, Sylhet and other districts, which had been until then regarded with much 'disapproval, condemnation and lampooning' (49) and were derogatorily referred to as 'Bangal', to be included within the province.

Political leaders of Assam like Manik Chandra Barua, in turn, pointed out that when Sir George Campbell had introduced Assamese as the language of the people of Assam,

the Bengalis had protested then that Assamese was a mere offshoot of Bengali (50). Jagannath Baruah observed that when the appointments in the services of Assam were claimed by Bengalis, it was claimed that the two languages were one and the two people were one, but now those same people were condemning the Assamese as savages (51). Thus, such a change of heart of the Bengalis in asserting their supremacy over a community they had claimed as their own in opportune moments shaped the Assamese bitterness towards them. This bitterness lasted to eventually find expression in resentment towards all Bengali speakers irrespective of religion and region. This shaped the political and personal sentiments in Assamese–Bengali relations, and became one of the basic components in the language movements in Assam post-Independence.

The movements in post-Independence Assam aimed at erasing the non-Assamese constituent in the state, whether it be language or people. This becomes complicated in view of the fact that immigration has been a persistent phenomenon in the history of the state. Some of the largest groups of migrants include the Santhals from the Chhotanagpur plateau who came to work in the British tea plantations, Marwaris from Rajasthan, and Biharis and Bengalis from East Bengal. This has definitely influenced the ‘demographic composition’ of the state (Murayama 2006, 1354). Amalendu Guha points out that in the nineteenth century, the Assamese middle class welcomed the large-scale immigration that brought in productive labour and skills (cited in Murayama 2006, 1355). Scholar Sanjoy Hazarika (2000) gives a picture of how immigration began taking a life of its own after the Mohammad Sadullah-led Muslim League, under the Land Settlement Policy of 1945 allowed immigrants to settle in government lands; this became a problem after India’s Partition in 1947.

Partition caused several hundred thousand people from lower Assam to be displaced to East Pakistan. As Monirul Hussain writes, the Jawaharlal Nehru–Liaquat Ali pact of 1950 assured the migrants a safe return home and many came back (Hussain 2000, 4519). However, after the 1962 Indo-China war, demands arose to push back these ‘Pakistani infiltrators’ from Assam. The Assam government started a massive manhunt for Pakistani nationals in Assam which led to actual and potential threats of deportation and displacement of the rural Muslim peasantry, particularly the Na-Asamiya or ‘New Assamese’ Muslims, throughout the Brahmaputra valley (4519). In 1960, the language movement in Assam demanded that Assamese be made the official language, ignoring the presence of other tribal and non-tribal languages. It was vehemently opposed by the tribes and the Hindu Bengalis of the Barak Valley. The year 1972 again saw a movement that demanded making Assamese the medium of instruction at the graduate level in addition to English. Both the movements led to phases of violence aimed mostly at Hindu Bengalis (4520). Towards the end of the 1970s began the ‘Assam agitation’ that was initially aimed at outsiders but later specifically turned against foreign infiltrators. The definition of the ‘infiltrator’ at first encompassed the Hindu Bengalis, Na-Asamiya Muslims, Nepalis and those Assamese who did not support the movement (4520). But

this gradually changed to mean chiefly the Na-Asamiya, that is, the Bengali Muslim peasantry.

Monirul Hussain (1993) observes that ‘outsiders’ was a very vague category especially owing to the generations of migration to the state, and the movement initially could not garner much support from the masses. In 1978, the Chief Election Commissioner, S.L. Shakhdar, declared that the electoral rolls in some states of northeast India included large numbers of foreign nationals. The leaders of the Assam agitation assumed that the northeast state referred to was Assam and changed their target from ‘outsiders’ to the alleged foreign nationals. The Assamese masses embraced this development to begin supporting the movement (Hussain 1993, 102-103). They ‘sincerely felt that the continuous immigration from neighbouring countries to Assam and their inclusion in the electoral rolls would endanger their distinct identity as a nationality as well as the sovereignty of India’ (103). The inflated number of foreign nationals in the electoral rolls gave rise to ‘a very strong fear psychosis among a large section of the Asamiya middle class and the rural rich’ (104).

Shifting meaning of the Na-Asamiya

The shift in the definition of the foreign national to mean the Na-Asamiya was influenced by the changing political scenario as well as the definitions of the citizen in a larger context, that is, the Indian nation. Sujata Ramachandran’s (1999) work shows how religion became a decisive factor in the Hindu Right’s approach to the concept of nation. The right-wing believes that a Hindu crossing the border is not an infiltrator but someone returning home after being a victim of Islamic extremism in Bangladesh while the Muslim is in search of benefits. Greater antipathy towards the Muslim migrant than towards the Hindu migrant is reflective of the ‘Hindu cause’, which necessarily establishes ‘the symbolic boundaries of inclusion and belonging; Muslim citizens and infiltrators are often positioned outside the imagined nation’ (Ramachandran 1999, 244–45). As the movement leaders started to gradually lose support amongst the national political parties, the Hindu right-wing began to befriend them. On the other hand, counter movements trying to strengthen the minorities were also at play. Monirul Hussain explains how the Rashtriya Swyamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Jamat-Islami Hind (JIH) created a nexus in communalising Hindus and Muslims. The RSS propagated that ‘the Muslims were silently invading Assam to make it a part of the Islamic world’ and therefore they should be marked as infiltrators and deported from Assam while the Hindus should be allowed to stay back as refugees. The JIH, too, began ‘poisoning the minds of the Muslim readers’ through their publications (Hussain 1993, 132). Even though the RSS differed from the official position of the leadership of the movement, they became a political ally of the leadership.

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For the Na-Asamiya, the transition from migrant to infiltrator, thus, was a result of the juxtaposition of the religious and linguistic identities influenced by electoral politics despite their efforts at assimilating with the host Assamese society. While the Bengali Hindus had a distinct linguistic as well as religious identity, the Bengali Muslims had adopted the Assamese language as their own and reported it as their mother tongue during the census surveys of 1970s (Mishra 1999, 1264–1279). It was because of this adoption of the Assamese language by the Bengali Muslim peasants that Assamese was recorded as the language of the majority in the state. This was seen as an attempt at assimilation with the Assamese host society. The Bengali Muslims would also send their children to the schools where Assamese was the medium of instruction (1266). Their efforts at assimilation earned them the term Na-Asamiya (pronounced Noh-oxomiya) or new Assamese. In spite of this, the various language movements in Assam over the decades began targeting them as the infiltrator community in the state.

The process of assimilation did find support in the Assam Sahitya Sabha (ASS), the state literary association. The ASS held its annual session in 2002 in Kalgachia in Barpeta district, an area dominated by Bengali Muslim immigrants (Kimura 2003). It was a conscious decision to make the Bengali Muslims feel more included. ASS was one of the most influential organisations in the 1960s and 70s, and had actively advocated for Assamese as the official language and the medium of instruction. This change in stance towards the linguistic and religious minorities was an attempt to build a greater Assamese nationality that does not exclude the people whose mother tongue is not Assamese.

Despite the literary association’s efforts towards assimilation, the community finds itself unrepresented in the literature of the state. The Nellie massacre was one of the worst incidents of mass violence in post-independent India, yet it finds no mention in the mainstream literature of the country or even the state.¹ Another massacre at Chawlkhowa Chapori² remains even lesser known than the Nellie massacre. A collection of short stories, *Pora Gaont Pohila Bohag* (First Spring in the Burnt Village) by Syed Abdul Malik (2001) is the only work of literature that refers to the Nellie massacre and the violence perpetrated on the community during the Assam agitation. Malik had to face the ire of the supporters of the Assam agitation for speaking against the atrocities meted out to different sections during the movement, as he mentions in the preface to the collection. However, this lack of representation in literature is gradually being addressed through poems by the new generation of the Na-Asamiya community.

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1. On February 18, 1983, Nellie, a rural area in central Assam, witnessed an incident of large-scale violence and killing. Nearly two thousand Muslim peasants of East Bengal origin were killed in a single day in an attack perpetrated by the residents of the area’ (Kimura 2013, 1).
 2. Chawlkhowa Chapori in Darrang district in Assam where the Bengali Muslim population was attacked on 15 February, 1983 and several died (see Sharma, Diganta. 2012. *Chawlkhowa 1983*. Jorhat: Ekalabya Prakashan).

Shunning the traditional ways of reaching out to audiences, these youth are finding expression through newer media like YouTube and Facebook in the form of poems which have come to be identified as ‘Miyah poetry’.

A Re-emerging Poetry

According to Shalim M. Hussain, Miyah poetry owes its beginning to Dr Hafiz Ahmed’s poem, ‘Write down I am a Miyah’, written in the context of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) which he posted on his Facebook page on 29 April 2016 (Hussain 2016c).³ It quickly spread on social media. Within a week of the post, twelve other poets joined in with their own poems asserting their Miyah identity; these poems came to be termed Miyah poetry.

Shalim M. Hussain, one of the most well-known faces of the group, notes that it is not a new trend but has become more visible owing to the internet. While the first traceable poem by a poet from the Miyah community is Maulana Bande Ali’s ‘Charuar Ukti’ (Expression of a Char Dweller) (*char* means silt banks, *charua* means a silt-bank dweller) written in 1939, the first assertion of the identity in print can be traced to ‘Bineeto Nibadan ei je’ (I Beg to State That) by Khabir Ahmed in 1985 in response to the violence during the Assam agitation. Till September 2016, besides Hussain, then a research scholar at Jamia Millia Islamia, few of the others who comprised the group were Aman Wadud, an advocate and civil rights activist, Shahjahan Ali Ahmad, a student leader, Sultan Mahmud Mirdha, journalist and web and graphic designer, and Abdul Kalam Azad, secretary of Jhai Foundation, an NGO working in the *chars* of Barpeta, Assam. Hussain contends that Miyah identity is built on self-determination but the markers of ‘Miyahness’ are not self-chosen. Azad believes that using the abusive term Miyah would not help them ‘socially, economically or even politically’ (Das 2016), but would certainly help them address stories of pain which have been ignored for ages by society at large. The use of this term helps build a political identity for the users that empowers and enables their voice for this identity.

‘Miyah’ is an address of reverence in Urdu, which has become a scornful reference to the Bengali Muslim community in Assam.⁴ Hussain writes that choosing Miyah instead

3. During the Census of 1951, a National Register of Citizens (NRC) was prepared under a directive of the Ministry of Home Affairs by copying out in registers the census documents containing information on relevant particulars of each and every person enumerated. The Citizenship (Registration of Citizen & Issue of National Identity Cards) Rules, 2003, was amended in 2009 to put the necessary legislative framework in place for updating of the NRC which was to be carried out by taking into account the names of persons included in NRC 1951, the electoral rolls prior to March 24 (midnight) 1971, and their descendants, along with other supporting documents (see Government of Assam 2015).
4. ‘Miyah’ seems to be a derogatory term of address for Muslims in certain other states such as Gujarat as well, as seen in the movie *Firaaq* (2008) at 1.28.38 and 1.29.48 mins.

of *char chapori* Muslim, the more politically correct term used earlier, was deliberate. He believes that words do not have intrinsic meanings. They have ‘connotative meanings’ which change from context to context. Further, by using the word ‘Miyah’, the poets are trying to make ‘an educated Assamese class, well-versed in either Assamese or English ... confront a word they themselves might have used in private but which they are too bashful to use in public ... we know it will initiate debate’ (Hussain 2016c, Web). Simultaneously, Abdul Kalam Azad believes that Miyah, considered a derogatory term, ‘will hit most and will hit directly at their heart’ (Das 2016). The poems are meant to shake a complacent society; they seek to urge it to confront the humiliation it has meted out to a whole community for a long time and start a dialogue that is overdue.

Although the Bengali Muslim community has different factions within itself, such as ‘Daccaiya’ and ‘Sylhettia’, ‘Miyah’ has primarily come to refer to those from Mymensingh. The language of these poems can be said to be a variant of Bengali. Many also call it Bhatiali. However, Azad does not agree for many of the Miyah poets write in English as well as Assamese (Das 2016). Shalim Hussain prefers not to use a term for the language used; according to him, this would push the poets into the language/dialect trap they are trying to escape. He says that they are writing in the dialect they speak at home and use among themselves in their everyday life (Hussain 2016c). It is this everydayness that the poems try to depict, whether it be the wearing of the lungi without being marked out for it, or the difficulties in their daily existence in contrast to the melodrama of the daily soaps, for instance.

A Social Media Poetry

The second phase of this poetic movement consists of videos on YouTube. The YouTube channel of the ‘Miyah’ poets is called Itamugur, curated by Azad, Hussain and photographer and aspiring filmmaker Kazi Neel. Itamugur is a symbolism that Miyah literature has adopted. Hussain explains that *itamugur* is a heavy wooden mallet used in agriculture and construction that is strong enough to cause cracks when struck on a very hard surface. ‘Our mothers and fathers broke the rock-solid earth with *itamugurs* and softened it for agriculture’ (Das 2016). He adds that they have carried metaphorical *itamugurs* to schools, colleges and workplaces.

Itamugur as a YouTube page had 101 subscribers till October 3 2018. The first video, ‘Ei Biplob TVte Dehabo Na’ (This Revolution Will Not Be Televised), was uploaded on 27 August 2016, the second poem, ‘Hei Desh Aamaar, Ami Hei Desher Na’ (That Land is Mine, I am Not of That Land), on 20 September 2016, and the next two videos after a period of one year. There are a total of six poems uploaded on the channel. While the first three videos garnered an average view of about 1,500, the later ones have fewer views: 735, 335, and 149 respectively. The higher views for the first three videos must have accumulated over time while also owing to the novelty of the genre and the good press during the initial period. At the same time, the likes and comments

expressed are very low (39 likes, 1 dislike and 6 comments; 52 likes, 4 dislikes and 3 comments; and 61 likes and 9 comments for the first three videos respectively).

This paper analyses the first two videos on the channel. As one listens to the poems it becomes evident that the poets are clear who their audience is. They are addressing an audience who do not need explanation about the context. The audience is constructed through specific degrees of shared knowledge. The process of meaning making in the poems is based on this shared knowledge of the generations of stories of oppression. The poets invariably identify themselves with the *charuas* and the *char* lands without any ambiguity, and the accent and dialect locate themselves as well as constitute and establish their identity. The credits of the videos of the poems reveal that it is a small group of people who interchange the roles of producer, translator, editor, and so on amongst themselves for the videos. This gives us an idea about the modest budget of the effort. This may have restricted the promotion and circulation of the videos beyond a niche audience. However, the first poem emphatically underscores the explicit embrace of the smallness of reach and rejection of other commercial media.

Shalim M. Hussain's poem 'Ei Biplob TVte Dehabo Na' is an adaptation of Gil Scott Heron's 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised' (1970) with the same title in translation. It narrates how the world of representation is caught up in reporting and glamorising trivialities while failing to capture the darkness in which the community dwells, unaccepted and unsung. Hussain recites the poem onscreen while Kazi Neel and Abdul Kalam Azad assist as cameraman and production manager respectively. While Hussain smiles when he begins reciting, his smile gives way to a more sombre and gradually slightly angry expression as the poem begins to derisively list the televised daily soaps, the movies, the songs and so on which never bother to talk about this community. The forty-line poem begins with the sentence '*Ei Biplob TVte Dehabo na, geda*', which can be translated as 'This revolution will not be televised, boy'. This line is the refrain in the poem, also beginning each stanza, thereby connecting them. The repetition tends to impart a rhythm to the non-rhyming scheme of the poem which can be seen as a deliberate attempt to move away from a pattern to a freer verse.

The poem begins with a warning that the listener/audience will not be able to escape the repercussions of the revolution. This revolution will not be sponsored by any capitalist or political entity; neither will it feature models or film stars in all their glamour. This revolution will not dwell on how dead bodies of children were laid in the paddy fields nor will their bloated bellies arouse the concern of anyone to report the news to the world. This revolution will not linger on stories of popular daily soaps, recreation of historical love stories, or the attire of social workers. It will not be sung about by any popular artist or entice anyone with advertisements. This revolution will not have any commercial breaks nor will it have reruns. This revolution will not be televised, it will be live.

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The poem lists all things popular yet trivial, commercial yet mundane, capitalist and glamorous and seemingly cheerful. However, interspersed amongst this is the reporting of a massacre where corpses of children lie in the fields unattended. This casual insertion of the scene of the massacre brushes against a deep history of violence against the community. It scratches the surface and moves on to list other trivialities: ‘*Bojhena se bojhena, Tapur-Tupur, Sasural Simar ka*’, songs from Bengali soaps and a Hindi daily soap. The poem is clever in its multiple references to the daily soaps, commercials and culturally popular representations in the media today, in its subtle yet strong criticism of their popularity, while pointing to the contrasting abject neglect of something as intense and historic as the massacres of Nellie and Chawlkhowa Chapori. It evokes the popular usage of photographs of children lying dead with bloated bellies by the media once in a while to rake up memories of the massacre while never dwelling on the root causes of such tragedies.

The poem places the massacre at the middle of the narrative, not towards the end for a dramatic conclusion or complaint. Just before the poem concludes is a promise or assurance: ‘*Ei biplob tumar buke aagoon nischoy jalabo*’ (This revolution will surely ignite the fire in your chest). The gradually building tempo of the poem channels itself in this sentence to arrive at the dramatic conclusion. The drama of the poem lies in the repetition towards the end to claim:

Dehabo na, dehabo na, dehabo na
Ei biplob repeate dehabo na
Ei Biplob cholbo live

(Will not be televised, will not be televised, will not be televised / This revolution
will not have repeat telecast / This revolution will be live)

The emphasis on ‘live’ winds up the poem. It stresses the finality of the assertion that the struggle of the community is a live uprising, a challenge that the audience needs to be prepared for. The casual reference to the Nellie and Chawlkhowa Chapori massacres questions if the community can lay claim to a space—of existence and representation—amidst all the fun and fanfare of a mercenary society.

Interestingly, the question of spatiality is addressed through the poems’ renunciation of traditional media. The mainstream media is caught up with trivialities so these new generation poets use virtual spaces—social media such as Facebook and YouTube—to raise their concerns. As Edward Kessler observes, social media can be said to be the constituent of the third phase of digital media. He defines social media as ‘the use of ‘web-based and mobile technologies to turn into an interactive dialogue’ (Kessler 2013, 26) As he lists and annotates the various examples of ‘modern technology’ such as Wikipedia and the Google search engine (which had been launched only about a decade before he wrote his article), Kessler observes the exponential number of users and

visitors these two technologies had garnered. He lists the three phases of what he calls the evolution of the internet: one-to-one connections such as emails in the 1980s, one-to-many connections such as webpages in the 1990s, and finally many-to-many connections in the 2000s such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. Kessler observes that in social media ‘the control has moved from website owners (dominant in the 1990s) to website users (dominant today)’ (27). This, according to him, has made it a ‘connection tool’ rather than a ‘communication tool’, enabling affiliation, interest group formation and solidarity in ways that do not conform to existing social groups or geographical locations. He believes this ‘demonstrates the challenge to traditional hierarches’ (28).

In the way that Miyah poetry is using YouTube and Facebook, it clearly imagines social media as a political space, with liberatory promise. In an article on the utopia that is social media, Albrecht Hofheinz quotes Wael Ghonim, a Google activist in the Middle East and a Facebook activist: ‘If you want to liberate a society, just give them the internet’ (Hofheinz 2011, 23). While explaining the debate between critics and supporters of the power of the internet or social media, Hofheinz remarks that social media is a significant tool ‘that changes the dynamics of what’s going on on the ground’ (28). E. Gabriella Coleman affirms that ‘digital media have cultivated new modes of communication and selfhood; reorganized social perceptions and forms of self-awareness; and established collective interests, institutions, and life projects’ (Coleman 2010, 490).

Digital space provides the requisite medium to ‘demonstrate the challenge to traditional hierarchies’ (Kessler 2013, 28), and aids in attempts to ‘liberate a society’ (Hofheinz 2011, 23) and to produce, consume, dream and fight (Coleman 2010, 489). In recent years, social media such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and others have become more accessible with newer smartphone technologies and reduced internet connection tariffs. It has revolutionised the means of communication, especially for the younger generation. It has created a space that also allows more liberty of expression and existence and, thereby, a more democratic platform. Thus, Hussain’s poem advocates breaking the stereotype of traditional media to find representation in newer modes that have become part of the everyday and are more economically accessible as well as viable.

The question of the everyday is brought to the fore intensely in Kazi Neel’s poem, ‘Hei Desh Aamaar, Ami Hei Desher Na’ (That Land is Mine, I am Not of That Land), translated into English by Shalim M. Hussain. The poem enunciates the politics, power play and hatred the community has to face every day. The violence of facing it every day becomes equivalent to the execution of the Nellie massacre of 1983. This poem is more vocal than the first. Similar to the earlier poem, it too has a list, albeit a different one—the list of wrongs done. It starts with the declaration that this land has marked the poet’s ancestors as alien, killed his brothers and raped his sisters. This land has never given him shelter

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against hunger, rights as a human being, or the freedom to be one. In this land, ‘A Miyah is sub-human’. This poem, too, mentions the Nellie massacre, but more explicitly:

*Je deshe amago lasher por lash kubiya kaita nodite bashiya dey,
Je deshe 83 te manush maira halar betara jollader moton ullas nrityo nache*
(The land where limb after limb is chopped
And sent afloat on the river
Where in ’83 the executioners danced
A shameless
Grisly dance of celebration)

The poem points out that the land where the migrant’s ‘home and hearth is uprooted’ and ‘heritage is negated’, where people conspire to keep him in darkness, where his blood flows cheap, his appeals fall on deaf ears, migrants’ deaths become political issues, and people ‘gamble with my daughter’s honour’, to that land the migrant owes no allegiance.

The video of the poem has black text with a white background. A male voice narrates the text written in the Assamese script, reading out in its distinct accent immediately identifiable as ‘Miyah’. Translations to English accompany the text that is read out. The sparseness of the video accentuates the voice that changes in intensity with every pronunciation. It is only the dramatics of the voice that takes the listener through the pain, and persuades her to relate to and identify with it. The tonality of the voice has layers of meaning not visible on the page. Every time the voice repeats the refrain, ‘*Hei desh amar, ami Hei desher na*’, it changes meaning. *Desh* begins to have multiple implications, although it is repeatedly translated as ‘land’ on screen. In a certain sentence *desh* is also translated as ‘earth’. However, as the narrative builds up, it begins to expand to include more meanings: home, homeland, country and nation. *Desh* does not remain the physical piece of land but the people in it, the politics of it and the history of it. The community that does not find its place in the history, while being suspected of being foreigners or, rather, ‘infiltrators’, finds a small voice of representation in this poem.

The repeated refrain, ‘*Hei desh amaar, aami hei desher na*’, reminds one of the Bengali poet Nabarun Bhattacharya’s poem, ‘*Ei Mrityu Uppotokka Amar Desh na*’ (This Valley of Death is Not My Country) (1983) written at the height of the Naxal movement in Bengal in the 1960s–70s. When Bhattacharya politically renounces the country as not his when the country becomes a death valley, juxtaposed with Kazi Neel’s poem, one cannot but realise that Bhattacharya’s ‘I’ can do so because he has a valid citizenship and a claim to a nation that has never been questioned. In contrast, the ‘I’ in the poem by Kazi Neel has no such powers. ‘This land’ does not grant him a similar political position or vocabulary as Bhattacharya to renounce. It is the impossibility of disowning what one does not yet have that becomes acute here. This ‘*desh*’ is not his. For

Bhattacharya, the country is not a distant reality as he refers to it as '*ei*', 'this land.' For Kazi Neel it becomes distant as he refers to it as '*hei desh*', 'that land.' The homeland, already an imaginary category, becomes further illusive and elusive.

The claim to land is retrospectively taken away from the 'I' of the poem. The father of the speaker is declared a foreigner. The ancestry is in question. He cannot lay a claim to the land as that of his ancestors. This land cannot be claimed as his '*bhita*' (Neel 2016). Dipesh Chakrabarty explains the word *bhita* in connection with the word *udvastu*, the Bengali word for a refugee (Chakrabarty 1995, 114). '*Vastu*', he says, is the Sanskrit word of Vedic origin for 'home'. He cites Monier Williams who has defined it as 'the site or foundation of a house' among other things. In Bengali it is often combined with the word *bhita*, a word derived from the Sanskrit word *bhitti*, meaning 'foundation'. The idea of 'foundation' is then tied to the idea of male ancestry so that the combined word *vastubhita* reinforces the association between paternal filiation and the connection of one's dwelling with the conception of foundation, where one's permanent home is. Similarly, *bhita* is also used along with *bari*, which again refers to where one's ancestors have lived for generations (114). Thus, when the poet says that he is evicted from his '*bhita-bari*' in the Bengali text, it is translated as 'home and hearth is [*sic*] uprooted'. The speaker in the poem finds himself without his foundation. While a closer translation to the word '*uched*' used in the poem would be 'eviction', eviction indicates a temporary condition wherein one may be reinstated; the word used in translation onscreen is 'uprooted', which signifies a more permanent dislocation. Further, the word '*astitva*' which means 'existence' is translated as 'heritage'. This 'mistranslation', however, offers a reading of the poem: that foundation, rootedness, and existence all intertwine to rest on a history of identity that has become a question of a destroyed heritage. The burden of dislocation and contested citizenship, which has become intrinsic from one generation to another, peeps out between the translations and mistranslations.

The generational imagination becomes more pronounced when one considers how the speaker enumerates his family's fate. His father has been declared an alien, his sister is gang-raped, his son is killed, and all are subject to politics while no one pays for his blood flowing. Or is it that no one can be held responsible for he deserves no justice for his blood? Is it blood? Before the meaning of this blood flowing is resolved, the speaker laments over the country as a place 'Where they play politics with my son's coffin', and a heart-breaking helplessness comes to the fore. The son of the 'I' is already dead; it is a foregone fact; his death is not even worth stopping by to be noted. The 'I' laments, instead, the difficulty of giving his son a proper burial. As the voice is pronouncedly male, the women are evoked only through the idea of kinship wherein their gendered bodies are subjected to sexual violence.

The poem underlines how everydayness is questioned. The narrator is targeted for wearing the checked lungi (sarong or loincloth) and the skullcap. The checked lungi, which is not limited to the community, has strangely become an identity mark for the

men of the community. This is exhibited with pride when the singer Monu Miya, in one of the videos of the song ‘Jobab Batashe Ure’—an adaptation of Bob Dylan’s (1963) song ‘Blowing in the Wind’—is shown wearing a lungi (YouTube 2016). The camera seems to have made a conscious decision to declare the dress of the singer. Such image making of a community can be understood in the context of ongoing debates sparked by Ramachandra Guha’s response to a piece by Harsh Mander (2018) in the *Indian Express* when he says that a burka represents ‘the most reactionary, antediluvian aspects of the faith’ while being similar to a trident (Guha 2018). Here the dress of a community is equalised with a weapon, which amounts to questioning the mere visibility of the community in a secular nation.

Whether one belongs or not is complicated and the title of the poem captures this. The poet in ‘Hei Desh’ may refuse to belong to the land that denies him an identity and right to belong, but while he is aware of the identity that is rightfully his, he does not have the political language to assert it. He challenges the identity of a rootless immigrant that is assigned to him, rejects the slurs, insinuations and power politics that make him ‘wander’, ‘confused as a beast’. The poem neither finds nor intends to seek any closure, as in the first poem discussed above. It is a conscious rant against injustices meted out to the community, an assertion of the speaker’s angst as a Miyah citizen.

Renouncing society’s non-acceptance, both the poems have an underlying sense of rebellion. Choosing the internet as the medium can be seen as an expression of this. ‘Ei Biplob’ challenges the normative representations the world is caught up with to arrive at a point where the representation of the community’s difficult existence is a resistance in itself. ‘Hei desh’ refuses to belong to the ‘*desh*’, to a nationality, or adhere to an identity the state seems to impose upon the poet. Each poem claims a space of its own, geographical as well as social. In the process, they embrace the derogatory term ‘Miyah’ and use it with pride to refer to themselves.

The other word that identifies this community is ‘*pomua*’. ‘*Pomua*’ is derived from the word ‘*paam*’, meaning farm, alluding to the fact that the community was chiefly brought over, or came over, to work in the farms. The community prides itself on being the farmers of the state, the suppliers of rice, for clearing dense jungles and venturing where no one had gone before. This pride is evident in Rezwan Hussain’s poem ‘Amago Biplob’ (YouTube 2016), translated as ‘Our Revolution’, where the poet says despite all the verbal and physical slurs thrown at the community, its members carry on working as daily labourers, suppliers of vegetables, rickshaw pullers, silently constructing the foundations on which rest the modern lives of the host society. Some day when the perseverance breaks down, the poet asserts that there will be a silent revolution that will disrupt the lives of the host society. This poem, too, expresses the grief of a neglected community that is preparing itself to claim a place of its own. Repeated references to a possible revolution hint at the angry desperation of a community to burst into a war to assert their right to belong to the society.

Conclusion

This paper takes into account the trajectory of the relations between the Assamese and Bengalis as they become hostile to one another in Assam over the years. This influences the identity-making process of the Bengali Muslim or Na-Asamiya migrant community, which, through the superimposition of identities, has gradually attained the position of the ‘infiltrator’ in the state. When the community was named Na-Asamiya, it was a gesture of affection and acknowledgement of their efforts at assimilating into the cultural life of the host Assamese. Oxforddictionaries.com defines assimilation as ‘the absorption and integration of people, ideas, or culture into a wider society or culture’ and ‘the process of becoming similar to something’. Ironically, the example given for the use of the word is: ‘You shouldn’t expect immigrants to assimilate into an alien culture immediately.’ For the Na-Asamiyas, efforts at becoming similar to the Assamese society began with the usage of language. Although they did not give up their own language, they did accept the Assamese language in various ways and explicitly too. Critics may view these efforts as trying to appease the majoritarian Assamese society. The initial acceptance, which was already paternalistic in many ways, gradually eroded as various language movements erupted into the scene and Na-Asamiyas gradually gave way to the mocking ‘Miyah’. Even referring to them as the ‘migrant community’, as this paper does in many places, disassociates the community from citizenship in the state. It constantly harks back to the fact that they have different roots; hence, the journey to becoming the ‘infiltrator’ is justified.

The majoritarian Assamese society’s fear of the Bengali Muslim ‘migrant’ figure usurping its space and identity is refuted when the new generation Bengali Muslim ‘migrant’ challenges the space allotted to them. As the poems show, the new generation of poets from the community have begun to own up to its identity—linguistic, geographic and visual—with a pride that stands as a subtle resistance. They do not want the ‘process of becoming similar to something’ any more. They would rather speak unapologetically in their own language. They do not seek a homogenised absorption into the majoritarian Assamese society but would rather be different, proud and resilient.

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