

Looking at the Diaspora in Miyah Poetry

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Abstract

This paper attempts to pick up on the elements of diaspora in the poetry written by the Miyah community, while also trying to understand their claim to be called Assamese, as their poetry has certain diasporic elements, while it simultaneously asks for inclusion. For this purpose, the poetry is looked at keeping in mind the community's history to help contextualize the voices of the community.

The themes present in Miyah poetry are reminiscent of the themes and topics commonly associated with diaspora. In its current usage, diaspora refers to “a scattered population whose origin lies in a separate geographical locale” (Ember, Ember and Skoggard 2004). This definition can include a variety of ‘diasporic’ groups while remaining distinctly separate from the understanding of migration, which focuses more on the movement of people rather than the dispersion of experiences and identities of people.

In the case of the Miyah community, there is no such desire to return to the homeland, but the community continues to assert its distinct identity, not as Bengalis, but as a distinct community within Assam, and with their history of migration and enduring discrimination, which exact definition of diaspora they fit into is hard to pinpoint as at different points of time the community matches different ideas of diaspora.

An analysis of some poems by prominent poets of the Miyah community, Shalim M. Hussain, Hafiz Ahmed and Khabir Ahmed endorses the claims made in this paper.

Keywords: Diaspora, Miyah Poetry, Migration

The word Miyah in Urdu means ‘gentleman’, but its sustained use has become an ethnic slur that in Assam is commonly associated with char chapori¹ dwelling Muslim immigrants from erstwhile Bengal or Bangladesh. This community, the Miyah community, pens down the experience of moving away, and the struggle of living in a society that views them as outsiders and would rather have them leave. The poems that are written by this community highlight the xenophobic atmosphere of the place they live in and protest against the discrimination and humiliation they are subjected. Many such immigrants, through their poetry, are reclaiming the title Miyah with pride. The oldest poem by this community, which talks of the difficulties and discrimination faced, is a poem called “Charuwar Ukti” (translated as A Charuwa’s² Proposition) written by Maulana Bande Ali in 1939. Until 2016 when Hafiz Ahmed posted the poem “Write Down ‘I am a Miyah’ on his Facebook page, Miyah poetry was written mostly in the char chapori dialect (whether this is a Bengali dialect or an Assamese dialect is debated by the indigenous and char chapori communities³).

Since this poetry came into social media, it has also been written in and translated to English, Assamese and other languages (Hussain 2016). The Facebook page *Itamugur*, has been instrumental in compiling, archiving and sharing Miyah poetry, in its original and translated versions, translating the

¹ Char Chapori refers to an area in Assam made up of floodplain sediments from Brahmaputra and its tributaries.

² Charuwa is the Assamese word that refers to the people living in char chapori regions of the Brahmaputra River.

³ The speakers of this dialect, presently, assert that over time their language has become more Assamese than Bengali as it once used to be. The reason being, for generations their children have been educated only at the local Assamese medium schools.

poetry where translations by the author weren't already available⁴.

In this paper, I attempt to look into the elements of the Diaspora in the poetry written by the Miyah community. As their poetry has certain elements of diaspora, while simultaneously asking for inclusion, I also try to understand the community's claim to be called Assamese. For this purpose, I look at this poetry keeping in mind the community's history to contextualise the voices of the community.

The themes present in Miyah poetry are reminiscent of the themes and topics commonly associated with the diaspora. In its current usage, diaspora refers to "a scattered population whose origin lies in a separate geographical locale" (Ember and Skoggard 2004). This definition can include a variety of 'diasporic' groups while remaining distinctly separate from the understanding of migration. The idea of migration focuses more on the movement of people rather than the dispersion of experiences and identities of people. While both, migration and diaspora include the crossing of borders, the former is more physical while the latter is more experiential and emotional. Agnieszka Weinar described the recent expansion of the context in which diaspora is used by claiming that, "a growing body of literature succeeded in reformulating the definition, framing diaspora as almost any population on the move and no longer referring to the specific context of their existence" (Rainer and Faist 2010:75). Shuval in his paper on *Diaspora Migration: Definitional Ambiguities and a Theoretical Paradigm* elaborates that the notion that a diaspora community desires to return to their homeland need not be present in all diasporas. He talks of how in its present metaphoric usage, the term diaspora also refers to many

⁴ All the poems I refer to in this paper can be found on the *Itamugur* facebook page.

communities of migrants that have not been exiled but may have been forced to migrate due to political crises, natural disasters, pogroms, oppressive regimes, economic instability and other similar distressing conditions. Often in such cases, the immigrant community wishes to integrate into the host land and does not have any desire to return to their homeland. What differentiates diaspora migration from other forms of migration is that such communities may hold on to certain elements of their culture, like their language or sense of heritage, and in some cases a sense of attachment to their homeland (Shuval 2000). In his paper *The Jewish Diaspora in a Comparative and Theoretical Perspective* (2005), William Safran discusses the idea of diaspora as that of minority identity with “an awareness of multilocality”, attempting to preserve their collective identities. He elaborates on how transnational migration is not a prerequisite for the diaspora. Brubaker also seems to reiterate similar ideas as he suggests, “Diasporas have been seen to result from the migration of borders over people, and not simply from that of people over borders”. Thus providing more insight into this idea of diaspora that does not have to cross international borders (Bodo 2010).

In the case of the Miyah community, there is no such desire to return to the homeland. The community continues to assert its distinct identity, not as Bengalis, but as a community within Assam. With the community’s history of migration and enduring discrimination, which exact definition of diaspora they fit into, is hard to pinpoint as at different points of time the community matches different ideas of diaspora.

Identity

Khabir Ahmed was the first poet to use the term ‘Miyah’ to refer to himself in poetry. He does so in the poem “I Beg to State That” (1985), through the line “I am a settler, a hated Miyah.” The term ‘Miyah’ has been used as an insult,

interchangeably with other terms like ‘Bangladeshi’ and ‘illegal immigrant’, both emphasising the fact that this community does not really belong in Assam. The community seems to have, in spite of this negative connotation of otherness, actively embraced ‘Miyah’ as their identity. This can be observed in the popular response that followed Hafiz Ahmed posting his poem “Write Down I am Miyah” on Facebook. This poem received a great deal of attention on the first day of being posted and led to a chain of poems all asserting the Miyah identity. As many as 12 poems were written in response to this within a week. One of the first poems to be written in response to this was Shalim M. Hussain’s poem “Nana I Have Written.” The char chapori community of Assam had at that point brought its protest online, and through poetry demanded that their ‘Miyah’ identity be respected, for Miyah was how they chose to be known. (Hussain16). In the poem “Don’t Insult Me As a Miyah” (2017), Abdur Rahim writes,

Don’t Insult me as Miyah
Anymore
I am ashamed to
Introduce myself
As Miyah no more.

While we see the Miyah community embracing their identity with respect, we are also made aware of the way this community is perceived as the ‘other’ by the “indigenous Assamese” community. A lot of Miyah poetry has been composed on this otherness as well. Maulana Bande Ali starts his poem “A Charuwa’s Proposition” with the lines,

Some say Bengal is my birthplace
And gloat in this bitter accusation.

These lines refer to how the Miyah community, according to the “some” referred to in the poem, can not belong ~~there~~ in

Assam, as their roots lay elsewhere. Maulana Ali resists such ideas as he goes on to explain his identity,

I am not a charuwa, not a pamua⁵
We have also become Asomiya

Miyah community asks the Assamese to recognize them as their own, no longer as the “settlers” or “foreigners”. Another assertion of identity often found in Miyah poetry is one that goes against the tag of “neo-Assamese”, an example of this would be Chan Miyah’s “I Don’t Know My Name Today” (2017).

Don’t call me a Bangladeshi
I don’t need your barbs
Don’t condescend with ‘Neo-Assamese’
Give me nothing
But what I own.

These lines assert that the ‘Neo-Assamese’ identity isn’t a compromise that the community shall accept. They ask not for charity but for a dignified human identity and recognition of their historical presence in Assam. The concept “na-Axomiya Mymensinghia”, (meaning Neo-Assamese from Mymensingh), originally was proposed by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala in 1951 when the Miyah communities from the “char chaporis” began to identify themselves as Assamese.⁶ This idea suggests that this community could be Assamese too, but that they could only be a different, new sort of Assamese, identified as those who came from Mymensingh (now a district in Bangladesh). What the community identifies with is an important theme in the poetry as it asserts a sense of self that refuses to be put down any more. At the same time, that identity acknowledges

⁵ Pamua in Assamese means settler.

⁶ Jyoti Prasad Agarwala was a famous mid-twentieth century figure in the Assamese Public Sphere.

the differentiation. With this dual appeal, Miyah poetry makes a case for the community to be included in the Assamese identity as they are. By simultaneously identifying as Miyah and as an Assamese, it proposes that these two identities are not mutually exclusive.

Belongingness

Through their poetry, the Miyah community justifies their claim to be considered equal inhabitants of Assam. By counting generations since their resettlement during partition, they argue that their roots go deep enough into the history of Assam. By extending their roles and jobs in the Assamese society, they establish the reasons to identify as Assamese.

Some of these Miyah poems talk of the migration of the community into Assam, of how they lost their address sometime in the last century in a storm on the river (Ahmed 1985) or of how their parents had to leave their home and their countries years and years ago (Ali 1939). Both of these poems talk of the dear land they now live in and how they have become like the land. Maulana Bande Ali's poem "A Charuwa's Proposition" also points out how the Miyah community is finding its own place in Assam, revelling in its prosperity and making the land both their home and sanctuary, as they claim their identities and ask for equality.

We have also become Asomiya
Of Assam's land and air, of Assam's language
We have become equal claimants.
If Assamese dies, so do we.

He then goes on to ask why they would ever let their language die. He does this by expressing how strongly he feels for the land that he lives in and by showing us how he is making the place his and wishes to see the place make him part of it as well. Ali's poem is, especially, important in understanding the

Miyah sentiment because of the time it was written. It was written in 1939 before India even gained independence. It is a testament to the fact that even in the pre-independence period, in 1939, at least part of this community had already begun to call Assam their home, their own. It is only natural that this desire to belong to the place strengthens as time passes by, and more and more of those who migrated to the land also start seeing it as home.

Khabir Ahmed in his poem “I Beg to State That” gives us a description of the life that the char chapori people have lived over the years, through the experiences of their work. They’ve laboured in the paddy fields, bowing to nothing but their crop and their own sweat, as they ploughed the land and etched their devotion to it. They’ve flattened hills and chopped forests, they’ve provided the labour that built cities and monuments as their skin burnt in the sun. Hafiz Ahmed and Rezwan Hussain’s poems also do the same as they write about the service jobs that the char chapori community takes up such as driving, pulling rickshaws, plumbing and washing, and continually making the lives of others easier while they continue to suffer. A lot of Miyah poetry makes references to the occupations of the Miyah community and the roles they play in the Assamese society, as if listing out their labour would help justify their claim to belong to Assam and its society. Despite this strong desire to call this land “home”, their growing sentiments for it, and their labour and contributions to the land and its people, the relentless discrimination they face denies them the feeling of belonging.

Discrimination

The Miyah community, though take up the most menial jobs, carry out labouring tasks and perform various works necessary for the upkeep of the society, they are denied all the rights and not recognised as members of the society. Time and again they

are asked to leave Assam. Even after decades of having lived in that place, they are still seen as settlers and outsiders.

Shalim M. Hussain in his poem “Nana I Have Written” writes about the ignorance and illiteracy in the community. He shows how such plight is directly influenced by the disadvantages and denials the community have been subjected to. The average literacy rate in the Char regions is around 15% and 68% of the population is below the poverty line. The lack of basic amenities, and the threat of the raging river eroding a substantial amount of land every year force the people to relocate every few years (Sarma 2015).

Hafiz Ahmed’s poem “Write Down I Am Miyah” demonstrates the extent of the disadvantages the Miyah community is subjected to. To begin with, they are denied their basic rights like voting.

My mother a D voter,
Though her parents are Indian

Their right to vote is ‘disputed’⁷. On rare occasions, when they are able to prove they belong to India, their identity is declared ‘dubious’. In the same poem, Hafiz Ahmed goes on to illustrate the aversion that the indigenous people have for the Miyah community. He asks if they will hate his children as they hate him. He also draws images of oppression the community has faced. Some lost their lives and those who survived are filled with rage. Khabir Ahmed’s “I Beg to State That” talks of this discrimination and the persecution that followed in the lines,

On a burning night in ‘83
My nation stood on the black hearths of Nellie and screamed

⁷ A D voter is one whose voter status is doubtful or dubious. In the poem Ahmed uses the term ‘disputed’ as the matter depends on the citizenship dispute.

The clouds caught fire at Mukalmua and Rupohi, Juria,
Saya Daka, Pakhi Daka- homes of the Miyahs
Burnt like cemeteries

He refers to the Nellie massacre that took place on the 18th of February, 1983 that was aimed at the Miyah community and was meant to create fear. Entire settlements were burned and thousands⁸ lost their lives or their homes. This massacre was carried out as some of the “locals” took offence of the fact that the names of the “illegal Bangladeshi immigrants”⁹ were included in the electoral roll for the by-election held after the death of an MP in 1979. This caused such outrage that the election was unable to take place till 1983. The massacre took place 4 days after the election was held. An important point to note here is that nearly 30% of the population in these regions consisted of Bengali Hindus who migrated to the state during partition, but no objection was taken to their names being included. (Uddin)

In '85 a gang of gamblers auctioned me
On the floor of the Assembly.

In the above lines from the same poem, Khabir Ahmed reminds us of the Assam Accord that was proposed by the Central Government promising the removal of all Bangladeshi immigrants post-1971, in order to silence the Assam Agitation¹⁰. The issue with this arrangement was that it wasn't

⁸ The Nellie massacre according to official records claimed the lives of over 2,191 people from 14 villages in central Assam. Unofficial records claim that more than 10,000 lives were lost.

⁹ Though most of these were the successive generations of those who migrated to India much before Partition, these people however were still considered illegal immigrants, foreigners and settlers.

¹⁰ The Assam Agitation (1979-1985) also known as the Assam movement was led by the All Assam Students Union against illegal immigrants in the state, and their being given the right to vote.

possible to be accurate in such a task. Moreover, there were many who had migrated to Assam before 1971 but could not produce adequate documentation. Consequently, those people were also included in the list to be removed. The accord, thereby, became a threat to most of the Miyah community that had settled much before 1971 as well.

The line “I see everyone has a history of journey...” from Kazi Neel’s poem “Digging a Grave” (2019) expresses the sentiment of the community well. We see the community tell us how they came to Assam many years ago, and we see them asking why even after all this time they are still seen as outsiders. At some point in the past, each community which is local had also migrated. Every community has migrated to where they are, some came first, and some afterwards. The poem makes us think H how long must one stay in a place before they are allowed to call a place their home? Diaspora communities need not exist forever; they can and do at times integrate with the locals as time passes, and as the host land becomes more important to them than the homeland. The Miyah community is seen as diaspora by those around them but through their poetry, they seem to be taking a stand for their own identity. Shalim M. Hussain, one of the forerunners of the Miyah poetry movement, in his poem “Poetry Will Belong” (2019) writes,

Poetry will learn its aukaat
Ma kasam, poetry will belong.

He did not write this poem specifically in the context of Miyah poetry, he says he wrote it to give voice to the idea that “sometimes one language or one set of sensibilities drawn from one culture are not sufficient to portray what the multilingual, multicultural poet wants to depict.” He believes that writing poetry has helped the Miyah community as it has given them a “sense of self” through community expression.

Hussain goes on to say that “The ideas promoted through Miyah poetry inspire more poems and in due course of time a situation is created where Miyah poetry is all around us. Beyond that poetry has a very limited function. Miyah poetry belongs in the world we live in because it exists. The only thing necessary is to promote it” (Hussain 2020). Poetry is part of a solution for the community as its existence is what has given them the attention their experiences deserved.

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