

Muslims in Assam And The Rest of India

The Indian state of Assam has become a grand laboratory for the ruling party of India, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), where it has put Muslims to the litmus test of a citizen verification campaign, before taking it to the national level. The extremist right BJP says it simply wants India to be cleaned of Bangladeshi migrants, but the ruling party uses it as a policy for the biggest minority of Indian Muslims. The toughest measures have focused on Assam, where about one-third of the population is Muslim. In the summer of 2019, a review of citizenship law left most of this poor and Muslim population, stateless. In the state of Assam only, nearly 2 million people have been disenfranchised, with no clarity as to what will happen to them. Things have started changing in other parts of India. In Bihar, the neighboring state of Assam, the government has asked people to report migrants in the state. The state's high court has recently demanded a detention center for the Muslim migrants invoking the importance of national interest. These developments in Assam, Bihar, and Bengal have put in danger the future of at least 50 million Muslims in these three states. BJP to please its Hindu vote bank has been promising an Assam-like citizenship verification campaign in these states.

"Narendra Modi and his ruling Bharatiya Janata Party have rallied their Hindu nationalist base in part by pressing initiatives that put the country's more than 200 million Muslims at a disadvantage. In December 2019, India passed an immigration law that fast-tracked citizenship for undocumented migrants from nearby countries as long as they were Hindu or one of five other religions, but not Muslim. Party leaders in a number of Indian states have pushed laws to ban religious conversion through marriage, using the term "love jihad" that leaves little doubt whom the measures are aimed at." (The New York Times, Sep 2021)[1]

Assam Issue

Miyas are the people who are actually the Muslims of East Bengal origin or they can be named as Asomiya Muslims having Bengali origin. This social group has the history of migration into Assam dating back to the mid-19th century and it continued till the first half of the 20th century. These Muslim migrants have assimilated with Asomiya culture and have adopted Asomiya as their identity and language. This adaptation has directly helped in keeping Asomiya as the language spoken by the majority of people in multilingual and heterogeneous Assam. After India's independence Miya community in Assam has witnessed large-scale persecution and othering at the hands of the majority powerful community. The regional academia has been labeling Miyas as illegal immigrants. The community is regularly being vilified as illegal encroachers and Bangladeshis. This social group has been facing killings with perpetrators enjoying full immunity in Assam. People belonging to Miya Muslim community were targeted in the name of the National Register of Citizens (NRC), infamous legislation by the Modi-led BJP in the Indian Parliament. Many of the people from minority groups were forcibly sent to detention camps, which has increased fear among the people. The attacks on the citizenship of Miya people includes the elderly, women and children have resulted in many hardships on the community with fear of forcible detentions. In this series of persecution measures taken by the government in Assam, eviction of this community is a new weapon to persecute this community.

"Assam's contemporary conflict, pitting largely Muslim Bengalis against the Hindu Assamese, is rooted in a centuries-old tale of migration and conflict. After establishing their rule in the early 1800s, the British encouraged Bengali immigration to administer the colony and bolster agricultural production. Throughout the early 20th century, Assam's Bengali population grew, and by the time the country was partitioned in 1947, it represented an electoral majority. However, partition severed Muslim strongholds from Assam, leaving the Assamese in control, and the Assamese quickly reasserting their primacy. In 1979 a 38% jump in registered voters over the preceding sixteen years led the All Assam Students Union (AASU) to call for illegal immigrants to be purged from voting rolls. In 1983, anti-immigrant tensions exploded as mobs of villagers burned Muslim homes and butchered some 4,000 Muslim residents. This prompted the 1985 Assam Accords, which sought to "detect, delete and deport all illegal foreigners." Agitation and sporadic violence continued through the 1990s and 2000s, ultimately leading India's Supreme Court to order the state to complete the NRC, as stipulated in the Assam Accords." [2]

The latest eviction drives Assam has been witnessing are targeting Muslims. These evictions in Assam have been executed without proper implementation of a rehabilitation plan for the victims. People in the state were served notices to vacate their properties at midnight and forced evictions the very next morning. In many of the cases, people even did not receive any notice.

“Interviews and a review of documents by The New York Times showed that many of the evicted residents were legal citizens of India with a right to live on the government-owned land. Instead, critics of the government say, the evictions appear to be part of a broader campaign by India’s ruling party against the country’s Muslim population.” (The New York Times, Sep 2021)^[3]

The mainstream media in India has been tight-lipped, which is the most unfortunate part of the story. It seems that Indian civil society lacks the moral courage to protest these merciless evictions, though being aware that this is simply an excuse being used by the state powers to leave thousands of people homeless and landless. The constitutional guarantees of equality for the Muslim minority in India have been raised to ground and dust. Furthermore, the collective failure of Indian society in the prevailing situation has broadened the Hindu-Muslim divide in the Indian state generally and Assam particularly. There are numberless people in Assam without Lands. Most of these landless people are Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). The IDPs are a creation of past instances of violence and other natural calamities. Successive governments in Assam instead of resolving the issue of landless people have been criminalizing them and these landless people belonging to the Muslim community are labeled as “illegal Bangladeshis”. Many people in eastern Assam think that lower Assam is full of Miyas. The political class of Assam is fuelling the prejudice to create a fertile ground for hatred to lure the Hindu voter both at the state and national level. This card has been played throughout the local and central elections for many years in India. The eviction drive in Assam needs to be examined in a broader political context of the Assam government under Himanta Biswa Sarma. The state government under the false pretext of removing encroachment has been targeting the state’s Muslim minority.

“Since before the 2021 Assembly elections in Assam, Sarma’s politics has involved a deliberate process of alienating and ‘othering’ the state’s Muslims. During the elections, Sarma had said that “the BJP doesn’t need Miya Muslim voters”, targeting Bengali origin Muslims in the state. In February, barely two months before the elections, he had also said that he is an ‘extremist in protecting Assam’s and India’s culture from illegal immigrants patronized by Badruddin Ajmal’s AIUDF’.”^[4]

The violence in Assam is not a new story. The event that marked the eviction drive on the Muslim villagers of Gorukhuti village that lies near Sipaghar town on September 23 last year is not unfamiliar to Assam. Assam government on this day evicted over 800 families from this village which is mostly populated by East Bengal-origin Muslims. This event reminds the Nellie massacre of 1983, in which more than 1,800 Muslims were butchered within a span of six hours. These events are just an example to elucidate the face of mass killings of minorities in post-independence India.

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[1] <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/17/world/asia/india-assam-muslim-evictions.html>

[2] <https://worldwithoutgenocide.org/genocides-and-conflicts/anti-muslim-actions-in-india/denial-of-bengali-muslim-citizen>

[3] <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/17/world/asia/india-assam-muslim-evictions.html>

[4] Eviction, State Violence and Hate. “A fact finding Report from Assam” August 2021 www.apcrindia.org (Association for Protection of Civil Rights)