

Assamese Muslims: Cultural Roots and Contemporary Realities

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Abstract: *In Assam's socio-cultural landscape, Assamese Muslims occupy a unique position, blending Assamese and Islamic traditions. Their socio-cultural identity has evolved over centuries, influenced by migration, local assimilation and socio-political dynamics. Unlike Muslims in other parts of India, Assamese Muslims trace their origins to various sources, including Mughal-era soldiers, Sufi saints, and intermarriages with indigenous Assamese communities. This study begins by tracing the historical origins of Assamese Muslims, highlighting their significant role in the socio-cultural fabric of Assam. Despite their significant role in shaping Assam's culture and history, the socio-political identity of Assamese Muslims remains under-researched and is often misunderstood. The emergence of issues such as illegal migration, citizenship, and national security has led to a growing tendency to homogenise Assamese Muslims with immigrant Bengali-speaking Muslims, often overlooking the complexities of their historical and cultural integration. Therefore, the research problem lies in examining how these external narratives and internal socio-political dynamics have shaped the identity of Assamese Muslims and how these factors contribute to the challenges they face in the contemporary socio-political framework. The socio-political narrative of Assamese Muslims is closely tied to Assam's political history. The colonial era saw the introduction of immigrant Muslim communities, primarily from East Bengal, which significantly altered Assam's demographic landscape. This demographic shift gave rise to a complex dynamic between indigenous Assamese Muslims and immigrant East Bengal-origin Muslims, often leading to identity crises and socio-political tensions.*

Keywords: Assamese Muslims, Cultural Identity, Language, Socio-political, Migration

INTRODUCTION

The Muslim community in Assam is far from homogeneous, representing a complex mosaic of cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity. While Assamese Muslims share deep cultural and social ties with their Assamese-speaking Hindu neighbours, they also preserve a distinct Islamic identity shaped by centuries of local influence and historical experience. These differences are reflected in their cultural practices, caste distinctions, occupations, and dialects, illustrating the rich internal diversity within the community. Rather than being a single unified group, Muslims in Assam are categorised into multiple recognisable segments. Prof. Monirul Hussain, in his work *The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity* (1993), identifies four broad groups: (a) Asamiya Muslims who are integrated into Assamese culture; (b) Na-Asamiya Muslims who are more recent migrants or those retaining different cultural traits; (c) Muslims of the Barak Valley who are primarily Bengali-speaking; and (d) North Indian Muslims settled in Assam. Among these, Asamiya Muslims or Assamese Muslims have historically played a pivotal role in shaping the Assamese culture, language, and identity.

The Assamese Muslims, often known locally as *Khilonjia Musalman*, *Asomiya Musalman*, or *Tholua Musalman*, predominantly speak Assamese as their mother tongue. The term "Assamese Muslim" itself highlights a dual identity, reflecting their simultaneous connection to the Assamese socio-cultural fabric and their Islamic faith (Ahmed 2021). Socially, the Muslim population of Assam's Brahmaputra Valley is broadly divided into indigenous Muslims, who assimilated Assamese culture before the colonial period, and immigrant Muslims, who arrived later. Indigenous Muslims are the descendants of Mughal prisoners of war who settled permanently, medieval artisans and technicians invited by Ahom kings, Islamic preachers, and local converts to Islam during the medieval period (Dev & Lahiri, 1985; Hussain 1993). Historian Edward Gait observed that Assamese Muslims are "more Assamese and less Muslim" in cultural practice, underscoring their deep integration into Assamese society. He noted that many such Muslims, whose ancestors were prisoners or migrants from earlier eras, adopted Assamese language and customs so thoroughly that their Islamic identity became largely nominal (Gait 2022). Shahabuddin Talish, a 17th-century historian, similarly noted that these Muslims exhibited Assamese cultural patterns, with Islam being retained mainly as a religious formality (*The Telegraph*, 2004). Further clarifying this, Prof. Monirul Hussain defines Assamese Muslims (or *Tholua Musalman*) as those whose ancestors include Mughal and Pathan soldiers left behind after wars, artisans brought by Ahom rulers, Islamic missionaries, and local converts from the Ahom period onward. Their shared language, Assamese, and long historical presence distinguish them from later

migrant Muslim groups. In recognition of this distinct identity, the Assam government, on July 5, 2022, officially recognized five groups Syed, Gorias, Morias, Deshis, and Jolais as indigenous Assamese Muslims (The Hindu Bureau, 2022ss). Assamese Muslims have long been an integral part of Assam's social and cultural landscape. Historically, they have affirmed their place in Assamese society (Baruah, 1999). Still, many feel that their voices and lived realities are either ignored or blended into larger narratives that do not represent them fairly, particularly the conflation with Bengali-speaking Muslim migrants. This confusion has led to social and political marginalisation and, at times, a quiet struggle for recognition.

OBJECTIVES: The study is based on the following objectives-

1. This study aims to understand how Assamese Muslims define and experience their identity in present-day Assam.
2. To explore the impact of state policies and public perceptions on the socio-political inclusion of Assamese Muslims.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS: The study focuses on the following research questions-

1. How do Assamese Muslims describe and express their identities in everyday life and public spaces?
2. In what ways have political developments, such as the NRC, D-voter classification, and public discourse, influenced their sense of belonging and citizenship?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Baruah (1999) provides a thorough exploration of the political and social challenges faced by Assam, including the complexities of Assamese identity. He offers a historical perspective on the Assamese Muslim community's role in Assamese nationalism, emphasising their contributions to local social movements and the challenges they face in contemporary times.

Hussain (2017) critically examines the implications of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) on Assamese Muslims, particularly the disproportionate impact it has had on this community. His work discusses the existential crisis of citizenship faced by Assamese Muslims as a result of bureaucratic exercises intended to address migration. Hussain's research is valuable because it focuses specifically on the community's status under exclusionary policies.

Saikia (2020) examined the political representation of Assamese Muslims in local governance and the challenges they face within the larger Assamese political landscape. She underscores how the community is often sidelined in local political discourse and institutions, leading to a lack of political power and representation.

Zaman (2018) focuses specifically on the identity crisis faced by Assamese Muslims due to the NRC. He examines how the process has left many community members in a state of limbo, uncertain of their citizenship status, which consequently impacts their sense of identity. Zaman's work is important because it offers insight into how governmental actions like the NRC alter identity in real-time.

Choudhury (2015) explores the tension between Assamese Muslims and larger Assamese nationalist movements. He details how their identity is often defined

in opposition to both Bengali Muslim migrants and Hindu Assamese, positioning them as distinct groups. His work traces the history of Assamese Muslim identity and how it has been shaped by migration and local political movements.

Jalal (2014) provides a thorough historical account of Muslim identity in Assam, examining how colonial legacies and post-independence policies have shaped the community's social and political status. She emphasises the fluctuating nature of Muslim identity, especially in the face of Assamese nationalism and politicization of religion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, explains how individuals derive a sense of belonging and self-esteem from group membership. According to SIT, people must not only belong to a group but also see it as positively distinct from others to feel valued. This theory involves three key processes. First, social categorisation means that people classify themselves and others into groups based on shared traits such as religion, ethnicity, or language. This defines who is seen as "us" versus "them." Second, social identification occurs when individuals adopt the norms, values, and behaviours of their group, thereby strengthening their in-group identity. Finally, social comparison occurs when groups compare themselves to others, which can foster pride or conflict, depending on perceived status differences (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Although Assamese Muslims have long integrated Assamese cultural elements with their Islamic faith, they face persistent challenges to their identity and status in contemporary times.

Application of SIT to Assamese Muslims: Social categorisation: Defining the group Assamese Muslims represent a culturally rooted community that is distinct from other Muslim groups in India. However, dominant political narratives often group all Muslims in Assam together, ignoring the unique identity of indigenous Assamese Muslims and focusing on migration-related concerns.

Social Identification: Navigating a Dual Identity Assamese Muslims identify with both their regional (Assamese) and religious (Muslim) heritage, embracing local customs such as Bihu and the Assamese language.

Social Comparison: The socio-political position of Assamese Muslims is shaped by comparisons with other groups, primarily with the East Bengal-origin Muslims. Due to stereotyping and marginalisation, Indigenous Assamese Muslims are often conflated with immigrant Muslims, leading to social exclusion.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted for this study is a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of the study. Multi-stage sampling method is used to select participants. Three districts of Assam, namely, Sivasagar, Jorhat, and Golaghat, were selected. In Sivasagar, the selected development blocks are the Sivasagar Development Block and Demow Development Block, and the selected villages are Baliaghat and Nitai-Pukhuri. In Jorhat, the selected blocks were the Jorhat Development Block (Baghchung) and Central Jorhat Development Block, with the villages of Charaibahi and Kakojan-Bongaon (Chipahikhola). In Golaghat, the Golaghat Central Development Block and Golaghat East Development Block were selected, and the villages chosen

were Kacharihat and Raidangia. Thirty households were selected from each village.

FINDINGS:

Table 1. How do you identify yourself in terms of your religious, linguistic and ethnic background?

District	Identity Preferences		
	Assamese Muslims	Assamese	Muslims
Sivasagar	100% (1 st)	Nil	Nil
Jorhat	100% (1 st)	Nil	Nil
Golaghat	97% (1 st)	3% (2nd)	Nil

Source: Field Study

The data from the Sivasagar, Jorhat, and Golaghat districts show that Assamese Muslims overwhelmingly identify themselves as “Assamese Muslims”, with 100% in Sivasagar and Jorhat and 97% in Golaghat selecting this as their first preference. No respondents chose “Muslims” alone as any preference, and only a small 3% in Golaghat identified “Assamese” as their second preference. This indicates a strong and unified sense of identity that blends both religious and regional cultural elements. The slight variation in Golaghat suggests that some individuals emphasise ethnic or linguistic identity separately, possibly due to local social or political influences; however, the community predominantly embraces a combined Assamese Muslim identity.

Table 2. Do you attend any regional Assamese festivals or occasions?

District	Yes (%)	No (%)
Sivasagar	100	Nil
Jorhat	100	Nil
Golaghat	100	Nil

Source: Field Study

The data show that all households in the study area actively participate in Assam’s regional festivals, reflecting Assamese Muslims’ strong integration into Assamese culture. Local cultural groups organise Bihu celebrations in Raidangia Gaon, Golaghat. In Kacharihat, attending *Bhagawat Path* (devotional recitations) illustrates the shared religious practices that transcend traditional group boundaries. A notable example of deep cultural integration is the Daullah family of Sivasagar, who have been involved in Durga Puja at the historic Devi Doul temple since the Ahom era. Their continuing role in the festival, including receiving traditional offerings from the temple committee, highlights the blending of Assamese Muslim identity with cultural and religious traditions.

Table 3. Do you feel that state policies (such as the NRC and CAA) have affected your sense of security as an Assamese Muslim?

District	Yes (%)	No (%)
Sivasagar	88	12
Jorhat	91	9
Golaghat	85	15

Source: Field Study

In all three districts, a significant majority of respondents expressed that policies like the NRC and CAA have negatively impacted their sense of security. Many feared being wrongly excluded or targeted despite being culturally Assamese and legally Indian. This high percentage reflects the anxiety and feelings of exclusion induced by

these policies. While collecting the data they have mentioned that they are in support of genuine and correct NRC list so that illegally migrated people can be identified and deported accordingly, but at the same time they have shared the negative experiences as they were also considered under the same umbrella with the East- Bengal origin Muslims.

Table 4. Have you or your family faced difficulties in document verification during the NRC?

District	Yes (%)	No (%)
Sivasagar	63	37
Jorhat	70	30
Golaghat	58	42

Source: Field Study

A significant portion of respondents, ranging from 58% in Golaghat to 70% in Jorhat, faced notable challenges during the National Register of Citizens (NRC) verification process, with many pointing to inconsistencies in legacy data, such as mismatched names, spelling errors, or missing ancestral records, which became major obstacles in proving their citizenship. This was especially burdensome for elderly members who either lacked formal education or access to old documents. In particular, women were disproportionately affected, as their names often changed after marriage, and their linkage to parental records was more difficult to establish. A total of 63% of respondents from the Sivasagar district mentioned that the lack of proper awareness regarding the complex process of filling up the family tree from to prove the authenticity of their ancestral origin was the biggest challenge.

Table 5. Do you believe that your identity as an Assamese Muslim is fairly represented in state politics?

District	Yes (%)	No (%)
Sivasagar	22	78
Jorhat	18	82
Golaghat	25	75

Source: Field Study

Most respondents, ranging from 75% in Golaghat to 82% in Jorhat, expressed a strong sense of political underrepresentation. They felt that their distinct identity as Assamese Muslims was frequently overshadowed by broader Muslim categorisations in political discourse. Consequently, their specific cultural, social, and economic concerns remain largely unaddressed in policymaking and electoral promises.

Table 6. Have you experienced discrimination in government offices or institutions because of your identity?

District	Yes (%)	No (%)
Sivasagar	42	58
Jorhat	49	51
Golaghat	37	63

Source: Field Study

Experiences of discrimination were uneven across districts, with the highest incidence reported in Jorhat (49%). Respondents reported facing subtle yet persistent forms of bias, especially during interactions with government offices. These include bureaucratic delays, excessive document scrutiny, and dismissive attitudes from officials.

Table 7. Do you think public perceptions of Assamese Muslims have changed in recent years?

District	Yes (%)	No (%)
Sivasagar	52	48
Jorhat	58	42
Golaghat	46	54

Source: Field Study

In the study area, the majority of respondents highlighted a noticeable shift in public perception, attributing it largely to negative media portrayal and divisive political rhetoric. In Jorhat, 82% reported a rise in societal suspicion toward Assamese Muslims despite their deep-rooted cultural presence and historical contributions to the state. Many felt that they were unfairly viewed through the lens of religion alone, rather than as integral members of the indigenous Assamese community. In the Sivasagar district, 76% responded similarly, while mentioning that in recent years, they are identified only as a religious group. Likewise, in the Golaghat district, 70% of the respondents agreed with the changing perceptions of the community in contemporary times despite their roots in the region even before the colonial administration.

Table 8. Have you or anyone in your community been wrongly identified as a 'Bangladeshi' despite being Assamese?

District	Yes (%)	No (%)
Sivasagar	76	24
Jorhat	82	18
Golaghat	70	30

Source: Field Study

A concerning number of respondents, especially in Jorhat (58%), shared their experiences or knowledge of wrongful identity accusations. Such stigmatisation has contributed to feelings of alienation and mistrust, especially among younger generations. Respondents emphasized that this misidentification not only hurts their social acceptance but also undermines their rightful place in the broader Assamese community. This recurring issue of wrongful identification reflects the deep-rooted problem of stereotyping within public perception and administrative frameworks.

Table 9. Are you satisfied with the government's recognition of Assamese Muslims as an indigenous community?

District	Yes (%)	No (%)
Sivasagar	88	12
Jorhat	91	9
Golaghat	93	7

Source: Field Study

The table data show that the recognition provided by the state government has not completely satisfied the needs of Assamese Muslims. Although the positive response was higher in all the selected districts, the respondents mentioned that the government had provided only indigenous status and no specific government facilities to the community, unlike the other indigenous communities of Assam. During the field study, they also mentioned that a proper census should be conducted to identify the number of Assamese Muslims in the state and valid official documents should be provided to them. It would not only help to maintain their unique identity from the immigrant

East Bengal origin Muslims but also help to enjoy the indigenous status in the true sense.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals that Assamese Muslims maintain a strong cultural identity rooted in the Assamese language and traditions but face significant challenges in the contemporary socio-political framework. State policies, such as the NRC and CAA, have heightened feelings of insecurity and exclusion, while public perceptions often conflate them with immigrant Muslims, undermining their distinctiveness. Despite their active cultural participation and long-standing ties to Assam, many respondents reported political underrepresentation and discrimination in bureaucratic processes. This complex interplay of cultural affirmation and political marginalisation underscores the urgent need for nuanced and inclusive governance. The mere recognition of indigenous identity for Assamese Muslims is not sufficient to address the issues of the community; proper documentation and other government facilities should be equally provided to them by the government.

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