MIYA POETRY IN ASSAM

The anguish of a people fighting for recognition



op-ed for The Daily Star about the controversial drive for citizenship screening in India's Assam, involving the "illegal" Bengaliorigin Muslims, drew considerable attention from the

readers, with a particular curiosity about the Miya (also spelled Miyah) poetry used to assert the identity and rights of the people as settlers and citizens of India. While Hindu nationalists led by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) want to weed out what they call Bengali "infiltrators" and "termites," the crisis indeed revived a genre of protest poetry among the Bengalispeaking Muslims in Assam. The Miya poetry has now become a tool for social movement there, highlighting the plight of the Bengalispeaking Muslims who are unfairly labelled

by the Assamese media as Bangladeshis.

What is Miya poetry?

Miya poetry is a genre of poems written primarily by Assamese Muslims of Bengali heritage in their native dialect. They are typically confrontational in nature and provide graphic accounts of the stigma and humiliation rooted in the "Miya" identity. Miya, which literally means a respectable gentleman in Urdu, is used as a slur to brand the Bengali-origin or Bengali Muslim settlers in a riverine wasteland in Assam known as Char Chapori in the Brahmaputra plains. They include descendants of people who migrated in the past from various districts of then East Bengal to Assam.

The slur has now been reclaimed by a generation of poets who call themselves and their style of poetry "Miya." The Miya poets have found new expressions through their

poetry to speak out against the abuse and injustices meted out to their community, the violent discrimination against the settlers' Muslim communities over the last century as witnessed during the Nellie Massacre in 1983, and finally, the recent fall-out from the National Register of Citizens (NRC) exercise in the state.

Today, Miya poetry is an umbrella term for young poets from within and outside of the Bengali-origin Assamese Muslim community. Among them are Kazi Sharwar, Shahjahan Ali Ahmed, Shalim M Hussain, Rehna Sultana, Abdur Rahim, to name a few. Miya poetry is usually written in Assamese with Char Chapori dialect and then translated into English and other regional dialects. The writings of the Miya poets are all about human rights, identity and the question of citizenship in the wake of the NRC.

Glimpses of anger and humiliation The early work of this genre dates back to 1939, to a poem written by Moulana Bande Ali. However, Kabir Ahmed's "I beg to State That", written in the aftermath of the Nellie Massacre, is considered as the true beginning of Miya poetry in which he screamed in

indignation:

"I beg to state that/I am a settler, a hated Miyah/Whatever may be the case, my name is/Ismail Sheikh, Ramzan Ali or Majid Miyah/Subject - I am an Assamese Asomiya/I have many things to say/Stories older than Assamese folktales/Stories older than the blood/Following through your vein/... I beg to state that I am a /Settler, a dirty Miyah/ Whatever be the case, my name/Is Kabir Ahmed or Mijanur Miyah/Subject- I am an Assamese Asomiya/Sometime in the last century, I lost/My address in the storm of the Padma/A merchant's boat found me drifting and dropped me here/Since then I have held close to my heart this land, this earth/And began a journey of discovery..." (translated by Shalim M Hussain)



Muslim men display their National Register of Citizens (NRC) forms in Assam.

In 2016, Dr Hafiz Ahmed, president of the Char Chapori Sahitya Parishad, a school teacher and a prominent Miya poet, wrote a very powerful piece titled "Write Down I am a Miya" within the context of the NRC exercise in Assam. The poem paints a bitter tale of the second-class treatment of Miya people in Assam, who are often called

"Write/Write Down/I am a Miya/My serial number in the NRC is 200543/I have two children/Another is coming next summer/Will you hate him, as you hate me/... Write Down I am a Miyah/A citizen of a democratic, secular Republic/Without any right/My mother has been made a D voter/Though her parents are Indian/... Write Down I am a Miyah/Living on the

"foreigners" in their own land.

Brahmaputra/Tolerating your torture/My body has turned black/My eyes red with fire/ Be Aware!/I have nothing but anger in stock/ Keep way!/Or Turn to Ashes." (National Herald, July 12, 2019).

Reactions to Miya poetry

The controversy surrounding Miya poetry took a new turn after a group of Miya poets uploaded on social media a video of a reading of "Write Down I am a Miya". This took place on the backdrop of the publication of the final NRC list in July. On the basis of a complaint filed by a local journalist named Pranabjit Doloi, the Assam Police registered an FIR against ten Miya poets and activists, including Dr Hafiz Ahmed, for criminal conspiracy and spreading messages for social disharmony.

The complainant alleged that the poem paints the Assamese people as "xenophobic." Another allegation is that the Miya poetry is an insult and threat to Assamese language since it uses local dialects.

The Miya poets condemned the allegation as baseless and wilful misreading of the poems. A large number of Miya poems are also written in Assamese, some in English and Hindi, and a handful in local dialects. Four of the ten accused in the FIR are finishing PhDs in Assamese language and literature. Dr Hafiz Ahmed is an acclaimed Assamese writer, propagator of Assamese language and literature and public scholar. The controversy around Miya poetry and the NRC are an indication that Assam is turning against itself and its own people.

Violence in Assam and beyond Violent protests have erupted in Assam,

West Bengal, Delhi and many other parts of India over the controversial Citizenship Amendment Bill turned into law recently, excluding the Muslims. Prior to that, in Assam, the NRC left out 1.9 million people unable to prove their status in the state prior to 1971, leaving them to face possible deportation. After the citizenship bill was passed in parliament, the United Nations has voiced concern that the new law is "fundamentally discriminatory in nature" and called for it to be reviewed. In view of the ongoing violence, the Japanese prime minister has postponed his trip to Assam for a scheduled summit with the Indian prime minister. Bangladesh's foreign minister and home minister have also cancelled their trips to India. The violence in Assam is likely to continue unless the rights of the Bengali Assamese are duly recognised by the state of Assam and India.

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International Migrants Day

Social cohesion is key to reaping the benefits of migration

ODAY, the number of global migrant workers stands at 272 million, and around 48 percent are women. These hard-working men and women play a vital and much-needed role in the global economy. Not only do they benefit the countries where they work but they arguably contribute even more to their homelands by sending back billions of dollars each year.

In 2018, Bangladesh became one of the top 10 remittance-receiving countries, with more than USD 15.5 billion remitted. As we mark the International Migrants Day (IMD) 2019, it is worth remembering the valuable contributions of migrants.

Every year in Bangladesh, over two million people enter the job market. National development plans and policy statements emphasise the importance of creating employment opportunities for all. But the domestic labour market can only provide a limited number of new formal jobs. Consequently, migration has become an important livelihood option for many Bangladeshis. Over the years, it has also become increasingly recognised as a driver for development.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which lay out the development agenda of the next decade, address the role of migration in the development process and the associated challenges. Goal 10 focuses on reducing inequalities within and among countries and highlights the need to look beyond negative depictions of migration in policymaking and the media. Other SDGs call for cultural diversity, nondiscrimination and the prevention of violence in migration governance and ensuring decent work.

To strengthen migration governance, protect the rights and promote the welfare of migrant workers, the government of Bangladesh enacted the Overseas Employment and Migrants Act (OEMA) 2013 and Overseas Employment and Migrants Management Rules 2017. It also enacted the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act 2012, the Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy 2016 and the Wage Earners' Welfare Act 2018. Bangladesh is also a party to the Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers.

The government had a leading role in shaping the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2018. The Compact calls on member states to cooperate internationally to facilitate safe and orderly migration through regular channels.

Despite widespread agreement among Bangladeshis about the general direction of national and global migration governance, significant challenges remain. These include the challenges posed by irregular migration and human trafficking; cultural, economic and emotional integration challenges abroad; and the struggle to reintegrate when migrants return home.

A key element in coping with these challenges and reducing the marginalisation of migrants—both abroad and after they return home—is social cohesion. The general aim of social cohesion action is to ensure that all people in a country, without discrimination and on an equal footing,

is to become a reality for Bangladeshi migrants.

The relationship between migrants and communities is a part of the migration continuum. Living in a new environment requires migrants to adapt to new cultures, social values, and customs. The extent to which migrants will, in turn, be progressively included in the society of their destination country also depends on the capacity of the receiving community to adapt and accept them.

The state, civil society organisations, development partners, media and communities can all play a significant role in protecting migrants' rights, empowering them and generating social cohesion by adopting a "whole

need to be empowered, to have access to justice and to legal redress if they have experienced violations of their rights as migrant workers. In countries of destination, simple measures such as having access to mobile phone and being able to call upon their embassies at any moment will make a difference. Women who experience gender-based violence are not only immediately affected, they often get impacted by much longer-term conditions such as PTSD that take a toll physically and emotionally when they have returned home. They need social services and other support to address this.

These approaches incorporate recognition of human dignity and the rights of migrants to co-exist with host



have access to fundamental social and economic rights so that they can feel part of, and willingly contribute to, the community and society.

The GCM's Objective 16, "Empower migrants and societies to realise full inclusion and social cohesion", highlights the importance of comprehensive and coherent policy approaches across sectors based on partnerships to ensure the social and economic inclusion of migrants.

As states have reaffirmed the centrality of social cohesion by making it a standalone GCM objective, its effective implementation in the next decade will require a concerted effort at global, regional, national and local levels if social cohesion at home and abroad

of government" and "whole of society" approach to the integration of migrants. The government has pledged to improve pre-departure information and better regulate the process that places financial burdens on migrant workers before they even leave the country. The state can also ensure that diplomatic representations in the countries of destination are able to provide appropriate services to migrant workers when they need it. We are encouraged to learn about some recent initiatives in this regard.

Particularly, for women migrant workers, additional measures are critical at home and abroad as they are at risk of experiencing gender-based violence, discrimination and abuse. Women

communities. They embrace diversity and evidence-based interventions, while rejecting perception-based prejudices.

STAR FILE PHOTO

As we mark the International Migrants Day, it is incumbent upon all stakeholders—nationally and internationally—to bring the Global Compact to life. We must protect the rights and the lives of migrant workers and ensure that migration works for all.

This is a joint statement made by Mia Seppo, UN Resident Coordinator in Bangladesh; Giorgi Gigauri, Chief of Mission, IOM Bangladesh; Tuomo Poutiainen, Country Director, ILO; Steven Corliss, Country Representative, UNHCR; Shoko Ishikawa, Country Representative, UN WOMEN; Sudipto Mukerjee, Resident Representative, UNDP Bangladesh; Asa Britta Torkelsson, Representative, UNFPA; Tomoo Hozumi, Representative, UNICEF; Sergey Kapinos, Representative, UNODC Regional Office for South Asia.

ON THIS DAY **IN HISTORY**



DECEMBER 18, 1865 Slavery abolished in

the United States

On this day in 1865, by proclamation of the US secretary of state, the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, outlawing slavery, officially entered into force, having been ratified by the requisite states on December 6.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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