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## THE ROLE OF ASSAMESE MUSLIMS IN INDIA'S FREEDOM STRUGGLE: HISTORICAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

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### Abstract

This paper examines the historical role of the Muslim community of Assam in India's freedom struggle and situates it against their contemporary struggles for identity and belonging. Far from being passive bystanders, Assamese Muslims actively participated in anti-colonial resistance, from the Revolt of 1857 and the Patharughat peasant uprising to the Khilafat, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India movements. Leaders such as Maulana Mohammad Tayebullah, Abdul Matlib Mazumdar, and Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed not only mobilized masses but also resisted the Muslim League's bid to include Assam in Pakistan, ensuring the state's integration into independent India. At the grassroots, Muslim peasants, artisans, students, and women contributed significantly to nationalist movements. However, despite these sacrifices, Assamese Muslims today face identity-based challenges, including evictions, detentions, and cultural suppression. The paper argues that acknowledging their historical contributions is essential for fostering unity, diversity, and harmony in contemporary Assam, reaffirming the plural values of India's freedom struggle.

**Keywords:** Assam, Muslims, Freedom Struggle, Discrimination, Diversity

### INTRODUCTION

The Muslim community of Assam occupies a distinctive position in the socio-cultural and political fabric of the state. Unlike other regions of India, where Muslims may often be associated with a relatively homogeneous cultural background, the Muslims of Assam represent a mosaic of histories, ethnicities, and traditions. Their origins are diverse: indigenous Assamese Muslims, who trace their lineage back to conversions during the Ahom kingdom and interactions with Mughal forces; immigrant Muslims from Bengal, who migrated during the colonial period to cultivate fertile lands along the Brahmaputra; and smaller groups of Muslims who arrived as artisans, soldiers, and traders (Ahmed, 2019). This diversity has shaped the plural character of Assamese society, where Muslims have contributed richly to agriculture, literature, folk traditions, and linguistic development, while simultaneously preserving distinct cultural and religious practices.

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Muslims had become deeply integrated into Assam's socio-political life. They worked as farmers, teachers, traders, clerics, and local leaders, actively engaging in public debates about education, political reform, and economic development. The introduction of Western education by the British, alongside the rise of organizations such as the Assam Provincial Congress Committee, the Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind, and the Assam Provincial Muslim League, offered Assamese Muslims new platforms to articulate their aspirations (Baruah, 2020). For many, the nationalist struggle became not just an opportunity to resist colonial domination but also a stage to assert their rightful place in Assam's social and political future.

This participation was not without complexities. The freedom struggle coincided with the emergence of religiously polarized politics, particularly after the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan in the 1940s. Assamese Muslims faced a dual challenge: on the one hand, they resisted colonial exploitation and joined mass movements led by Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian National Congress; on the other, they rejected attempts to divide Assam along communal lines. Leaders such as Maulana Mohammad Tayebullah, Abdul Matlib Mazumdar, and Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed played crucial roles in ensuring Assam remained part of India during Partition (Sharma, 2018). At the grassroots, countless Muslim peasants, students, and artisans bore the brunt of colonial repression, contributing to the nationalist struggle in tangible ways.

Despite these sacrifices, contemporary times reveal a paradox. The same community that fought valiantly for India's independence often finds its identity questioned in present-day Assam. From forced evictions and arbitrary tribunals to mob violence and cultural suppression, Muslims of Assam have increasingly faced stigmatization as "outsiders" or "illegal immigrants." This paper therefore seeks to examine both the historical contributions of Assamese Muslims to India's freedom struggle and their contemporary struggles for identity and belonging, ultimately arguing that remembering their role is essential for fostering unity, diversity, and harmony in today's Assam.

## **PRESENT SITUATION OF MUSLIMS OF ASSAM**

### **Forced Displacements and Evictions**

One of the most visible markers of the contemporary plight of Muslims in Assam is the large-scale demolition of homes and forced evictions. In July 2025, just months before the state elections, the Assam government demolished more than 3,400 houses—most of them belonging to Bengali-speaking Muslims. While officials justified the move as a campaign against "illegal immigrants," human rights groups revealed that many of the affected families possessed valid Indian citizenship documents (Reuters, 2025). These demolitions displaced thousands overnight, rendering families homeless and vulnerable. Reports further suggested that in certain cases, Indian Muslims were forcibly deported to Bangladesh, often at gunpoint, raising alarm about unlawful state practices (The Guardian, 2025). For those affected,

eviction represented not merely a loss of shelter but a profound assault on dignity, belonging, and the right to live securely in one's homeland.

### **Bureaucratic Harassment through Citizenship Verification**

Another layer of exclusion comes through bureaucratic harassment under Assam's National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the workings of Foreigners' Tribunals. These institutions, ostensibly designed to identify undocumented migrants, have disproportionately targeted Muslims, particularly those of Bengali origin. Even recognized "indigenous" Muslim communities have not been spared. In July 2025, for example, families of Desi Muslims—who had been voting since 1985—received notices branding them as "suspected foreigners." Many of those targeted were impoverished farmers or widows lacking the extensive documentation demanded by the state, such as birth and marriage certificates (Scroll.in, 2022). The fear of being declared a foreigner has created an atmosphere of constant anxiety, with entire families living under the looming threat of detention or deportation.

### **Mob Violence and Ethnic Intimidation**

Alongside state actions, Assamese Muslims also face growing incidents of mob violence and vigilante intimidation. In Hojai, two Muslim youths were brutally beaten in public while celebrating with friends, an assault widely recognized as communal in nature. In Baksa district, a young ice-cream vendor named Babidul Islam was attacked by a group who not only robbed him of his earnings but also demanded he "prove" his citizenship (Sentinel Assam, 2023; Maktoob Media, 2023). Similar incidents in Bishnupally and other areas reflect a pattern where ordinary Muslims are harassed in everyday life, with their identity and citizenship questioned in degrading and violent ways.

### **Ultimatums and Accusations by Nationalist Groups**

The activities of hardline nationalist groups further exacerbate tensions. In 2024, several organizations in Upper Assam issued ultimatums demanding that "Miya Muslims"—a pejorative for Bengali-origin Muslims—vacate the region. These demands followed a criminal incident involving a minor, which was opportunistically used to demonize the community as a whole. The ultimatum was backed by rallies and online campaigns, intensifying fear among Muslim families who had lived in Assam for generations. Around the same period, 28 Muslims were declared "foreigners" by Foreigners' Tribunals and detained in the Matia detention camp in Barpeta, often on the basis of arbitrary decisions lacking transparency (Outlook India, 2024; The Wire, 2024; Sabrang India, 2024).

### **Evictions and Dispossession of Property**

Dispossession of property has become another recurring theme. In September 2021, more than 5,000 Bengali-speaking Muslims were evicted from their homes in Darrang district, with demolitions extending to mosques and madrassas. Officials cited "removal of encroachment," yet human rights groups argued the policy disproportionately targeted Muslims while sparing other groups (Outlook India,

2022). For the victims, eviction represented the destruction not only of homes but also of community networks and cultural life.

### **Suppression of Cultural Expression**

Cultural suppression has also been evident. In 2022, a small community-led Miya Museum in Goalpara, showcasing traditional artefacts like lungis, hand-fans, and agricultural tools, was sealed by state authorities. Officials alleged misuse of housing facilities under government schemes, but the move followed inflammatory political remarks branding Miya culture as alien to Assamese identity (The Diplomat, 2022). For the community, the closure was symbolic of broader efforts to delegitimize and erase their cultural expressions.

### **Profiling in Labour and Student Circles**

Finally, Muslims in Assam have been increasingly profiled in labour and student spaces. In June 2025, the Muslim Students Union of Assam (MSUA) condemned the government's "push-back" policy, which resulted in harassment and expulsion of Muslims despite their possession of valid documents. Similarly, the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) accused authorities of detaining Muslims arbitrarily on mere suspicion of being "illegal immigrants," despite their possession of Aadhaar, voter IDs, and ration cards (The Meghalayan Express, 2025; The New Indian Express, 2025). Such profiling has created a pervasive sense of insecurity among Muslims working in agriculture, labour-intensive industries, and higher education.

Taken together, these experiences illustrate the precarious situation of Assam's Muslims today, where their belonging is persistently questioned despite their deep historical roots and sacrifices for the nation.

## **CONTRIBUTION OF MUSLIMS OF ASSAM IN INDIA'S FREEDOM STRUGGLE**

Notwithstanding the present circumstances, the Muslim community of Assam has played an immense role in India's freedom struggle in general and for the state of Assam since colonial days. History shows equal devotion and contribution as other communities to the country as a whole.

### **Early Resistance: 1857 and Beyond**

Although Assam was geographically distant from the epicenters of the 1857 Revolt, it did not remain untouched by anti-colonial uprisings. Muslims in Assam contributed significantly to these early stirrings of resistance. Bahadur Gaonburah (Sheikh Bahadil), a respected village headman from Titabor, lent his influence to mobilize locals against colonial policies and supported leaders like Maniram Dewan. He was arrested and deported to the notorious Cellular Jail in the Andamans, where he endured years of suffering before returning to Assam (Northeast Bullet, 2022). Similarly, Sheikh Formud Ali, a tailor and musician, mobilized public sentiment in Jorhat, only to be deported to the Andamans for 14 years.

Muslims also joined agrarian uprisings later in the century. During the Patharughat uprising of 1894, Muslim peasants joined Hindu counterparts to protest exorbitant land taxes. When British police opened fire on protestors, dozens were killed, highlighting the communal unity of Assamese peasants against colonial oppression (Hazarika, 2016). These episodes established Muslims as critical actors in Assam's anti-colonial resistance long before the 20th century.

### **Participation in Mass Movements**

#### ***Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements (1919–1924)***

The Khilafat Movement, initially pan-Islamic in scope, merged with Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement and found resonance in Assam. Muslim clerics, teachers, and youth actively mobilized, encouraging boycotts of British goods, courts, and schools. Many Muslim students abandoned colonial institutions to join swadeshi schools established by Congress committees. Leaders like Maulana Mohammad Tayebullah left professional careers to dedicate themselves fully to nationalist politics (TwoCircles.net, 2015).

#### ***Civil Disobedience and Quit India Movements (1930s–1940s)***

The Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34) saw Muslim leaders like Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed openly defying colonial laws by organizing satyagrahas and tax protests. Arrested multiple times, Ahmed's leadership cemented Muslim involvement in Gandhian movements. During the Quit India Movement of 1942, Muslims in Guwahati, Silchar, and Dibrugarh actively participated in strikes, processions, and underground resistance, despite heavy police repression. Leaders such as Tayebullah and Mazumdar were central in sustaining momentum, while grassroots participation by Muslim peasants and students revealed the depth of nationalist sentiment within the community (Baruah, 2020).

### **Muslim Political Leadership in Assam**

The political leadership of Assamese Muslims was instrumental in shaping the state's nationalist trajectory.

- Maulana Mohammad Tayebullah served as General Secretary and later President of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee, spending nearly seven years in prison between 1921 and 1946. On 15 August 1947, he hoisted the tricolour at Judge's Field, Guwahati, symbolizing Assam's entry into independent India (Northeast Bullet, 2022).
- Abdul Matlib Mazumdar, a stalwart of the Barak Valley, invited leaders like Nehru and Subhas Bose to Assam, energizing Muslim participation. His 1946 election victory against the Muslim League thwarted attempts to include southern Assam in Pakistan (Ahmed, 2019).
- Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, later India's fifth President, worked closely with Gopinath Bordoloi, serving as Finance and Revenue Minister in 1938. His

agrarian reforms benefited peasants, and his repeated imprisonments affirmed his nationalist credentials.

- Grassroots leaders like Maulana Abdul Jalil Choudhury and Ahmed Ali Badarpuri mobilized Muslim clerics and peasants, while freedom fighters like Nabab Sahidur Rahman, who joined the INA and died in Rangoon, embodied Muslim sacrifices on the battlefield.

### **Resisting Partition and the Muslim League**

Perhaps the most defining contribution of Assamese Muslims was their firm rejection of the Muslim League's demand to include Assam in Pakistan. During the Sylhet referendum of 1947, leaders like Tayebullah and Mazumdar campaigned vigorously to keep Assam within India. Their stance reflected not only political pragmatism but also cultural belonging, as Muslims of Assam had long integrated into Assamese society through language and traditions (Sharma, 2018). Their resistance safeguarded Assam's territorial integrity and ensured its future as part of secular India.

### **Role of Women and Grassroots Activists**

Muslim women, though often overlooked in mainstream histories, also played critical roles. Safiunnessa of Nagaon was exiled for her nationalist activities. Women across Assam organized community kitchens, hid activists, and spread messages of defiance. At the grassroots, Muslim peasants joined tax protests, students boycotted colonial schools, and artisans resisted British goods. These collective acts underscored that independence was not merely an elite struggle but one embraced by the wider Muslim community.

### **CONCLUSION**

The historical contributions of Assamese Muslims to India's freedom struggle remain a powerful testament to the deep-rooted belonging in the land. From Bahadur Gaonburah and Formud Ali in the Revolt of 1857, to national leaders like Tayebullah, Mazumdar, and Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, and countless unnamed peasants, artisans, students, and women, Muslims of Assam stood shoulder to shoulder with Hindus and other communities in dismantling colonial rule. They resisted not only foreign domination but also the divisive politics of Partition, ensuring that Assam remained part of a plural and secular India.

Yet, the irony of the present cannot be ignored. The same community that sacrificed for India's independence continues to face suspicion, displacement, and stigmatization in contemporary Assam. From eviction drives and tribunal harassment to mob violence and cultural suppression, Muslims are repeatedly asked to "prove" their belonging. Such erasures of history and denial of dignity betray the foundational ideals of the freedom movement.

It is therefore imperative for Assam and India to reassert the values of unity in diversity that guided the independence struggle. Recognizing the Muslim community's historic contributions should serve as a bridge to heal divides and

counteract suspicion. Just as Muslims, Hindus, and others once fought together for freedom, today's society must reaffirm inclusivity and fraternity. By honoring the shared sacrifices of the past, Assam can chart a future rooted in mutual respect, cultural pride, and social cohesion—ensuring that the spirit of the freedom struggle continues to guide the destiny of a united India.

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