Beyond Resistance, Beyond Assimilation: Reimagining Citizenship through Poetry

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Abstract

The members of the Miya community in Assam, India have been facing an exacerbated threat of statelessness. Among the emancipatory grassroots organizations that have emerged to defend the rights of the Miya community, is an aesthetic resistance movement, now recognized as the ‘Miya Poetry’ movement. The bulk of the movement’s work since its emergence in 2016 has been to call attention to the discriminations and human rights violations faced by the Miya people in citizenship contestation processes. Miya poetry has, on the one hand, received wide acceptance as a poetry of protest and resistance in artistic, academic, and liberal media circles, while on the other, its contributors have been frequently criminalized or questioned by the state for their political views. In this article, we argue that Miya poetry should be looked at beyond the frames of resistance and protest in order to understand its social work as a human-rights movement. These poems have the affective capacity to build resilience, to facilitate complex understandings of difference, and to reimagine equality, democratic values, and freedom from forced assimilation as integral to the idea of citizenship. We used innovative methods to form our data corpus, combining life history interviews with analyses of selected poems. We deployed thematic analysis to report our results. The findings will be useful not only for the poets and artists of different genres who seek to defend human rights, but more broadly for global human-rights practices that wish to actuate a deeper reflective engagement with art-based activisms.

Keywords: art-based resistance, citizenship, human rights, Miya Poetry, resilience

Our revolution will not need guns
Our revolution will not need dynamite
Our revolution will not run on national television
Our revolution will not be published

Rezwan Hussain

1. Introduction

It has been famously said that when injustice becomes the law, resistance becomes a duty. Nowhere does this statement ring truer than in the northeast-Indian state of Assam, a site where systemic and violent injustices against a specific religious community—the Miya Muslims—have become inscribed into law. As a contested border state, neighbour to Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan), Assam has been caught in the citizenship imbroglio
since India’s independence from the British rule in 1947, with its Muslim minorities in particular finding their basic access to the rights of citizens persistently questioned, and often stripped. We can recall, for instance, the massacre of Miya Muslims in the Nellie and adjoining villages in Morigaon district in 1983, where nearly two thousand people were killed under the pretext of the victims being ‘illegal immigrants’ from Bangladesh (Kimura 2013). Such violent events are by no means events of the past. Even today, Assam’s Miya Muslim inhabitants continue to be regarded as foreigners, and are subsequently subject to violent exclusions and deep-rooted forms of structural discrimination (Dutta 2021).

Broadly speaking, debates over citizenship rights and questions of immigration continue to remain urgent in post-colonial Assam, where persecutions and massacres of Miya Muslims as ‘illegal immigrants’ are a frequent and recurring socio-political concern (Siddique 2014). However, in the face of these historical injustices, resistances and counter movements have become an integral part of this community’s identity. Where legal exclusions, religious separatism, and exclusionary Hindutva politics have attempted to tear Assam’s Miya Muslim community apart, a continuously reconfiguring weave of resistances has emerged to help the community survive, to help its members access their basic rights and entitlements, and to build resilience. These resistances, as scholars such as Alam (2020), Dutta (2021) and others have enumerated, take on a number of forms and articulate different goals. For instance, several NGOs, community organizations and local collectives have emerged that offer pro-bono legal help, monetary help, education, and employment to disenfranchised persons (Alam 2020; Dutta 2021; Dutta, Azad, and Hussain 2021; Dutta et al. 2021). While many of these movements are as affectively grounded as they are pragmatic—in that they build on and garner support for their cause via appeals to the solidary emotional responses of fellow citizens—this article attends to one aspect of the multi-fold resistance that is built almost wholly on the affective: poetry.

Unlike the more organized grassroots movements, the role of poetry in resistance is often understood exclusively in an affective dimension, and subsequently, often challenged. What can poetry do after all, other than generate emotional response? Can it get people out of prisons, buy them health care, or provide employment? As we will show over the course of this article, where poetry plays a crucial role is in forging an identity for those who are stripped of one; reclaiming appropriate social description for persons where the genocidal consequences of inappropriate description are far too evident; and, most importantly, in reimagining forms of belonging and citizenship beyond what our current structures of communication deem possible. Over the course of this article, we examine the recent body of Miya poetry, and its role in enriching and strengthening the fabric of resistance cultures across Assam. We also look at how the corresponding social work of the Miya poets complements their poetic labour. Taken together, both their poetry and social work are powerful tools to reinvigorate the affective potential of human rights defence work. We argue that the poems articulate an imaginative and utopian dimension of democratic politics, asserting that prior to the very work (legal or bureaucratic) of building a state based on equality and human rights for everyone, comes the creative labour of imagining such a state.

1.1 A brief history of citizenship contestation in Assam

The contestation of citizenship started in Assam with the introduction of the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act in 1950, and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in 1951. Miya Muslims witnessed a large-scale riot, following which many of them were forced to flee to the newly created Pakistan (Hussain 1993). In the early years of the 1960s, the government of India initiated a scheme known as the Prevention of Infiltration of Pakistanis to India. Under that scheme, in the period between 1961 and 1969 as many as 192,079 people were forcefully evicted from their homes and deported (Hussain 1993). Multiple narratives of physical and structural violence and deportation against Muslims cast as ‘illegal immigrants’ emerged (Tiwari and Singh 2021; Sufian 2020). A later period of great agitation
started by a group of students against alleged foreigners, between 1979 and 1985, has been described as one of most important historical events in the contestation of citizenship and belonging in Assam. The students’ agitation initially began against the ‘bohiragoto’ which means the outsider, although the focus shifted to naming them ‘foreigners’ (Ahmed 2014). The leadership of the movement demanded detection, detention, and deportation of alleged foreigners. Large scale violence broke out across the state of Assam. In Nellie, several thousands of Muslims were hacked to death in broad daylight within a few hours (Kimura 2013).

In 1997, the election commission of India introduced yet another mechanism to contest citizenship called D voter that further compounded statelessness. More than 300,000 voters were marked ‘doubtful’ in the electoral roll, and their political rights were suspended (The Telegraph 2002). Subsequently, they were forced to prove their citizenship in the Foreigners’ Tribunal (FT). In the year 2005, the government decided to update the NRC of 1951. After five years of preparation and negotiation, a pilot project started. The updated NRC of 2019 has led to the exclusion of more than 1.9 million people and put them on the verge of being stateless. Though a number of Bengali Hindus and people from other marginalized communities have also been excluded from the NRC, the government’s corresponding amendment to India’s Citizenship Act ensures citizenship to the non-Muslims who were excluded. This effectively leaves only Muslims to face foreigners’ tribunals, detention, and possible deportation. In the post-NRC period, the government has also been demolishing the homes of thousands of Miya Muslims in Assam by brute force (Ashraf 2022).

1.2 The emergence of a community through poetry

The acceptance of the term ‘Miya’ as the name of Assam’s Muslim community is a fairly recent phenomenon. Though the literal meaning of the term ‘Miya’ is respectable, the term has been used in Assam in a pejorative manner to refer to members of the Bengal origin Muslim community. In official and unofficial lexicon, the community has been given many names like ‘Miya’ ‘immigrant’, ‘settler’, ‘Char-dweller’, ‘Char-Chapori community’, ‘East-Bengal origin’, ‘Bangladeshi origin’, ‘Neo-Assamese’, and ‘Jute community’, among others. Many of these names are historically inaccurate, and serve only to stereotype, stigmatize, and sometimes dehumanize its referents. Of these names, ‘Miya’ was the one most weaponized against the community in popular lexicon. However, it is through the Miya Poetry Movement that the label is reclaimed and re-signified as a sign of empowerment: a unique ‘Miya’ identity (Dutta 2021).

In April 2016, a teacher and poet, Hafiz Ahmed, adapted the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish’s famous poem, ‘Write Down, I Am an Arab’, and posted it on Facebook. Ahmed wrote:

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?

This poem went viral and other young poets started responding to him through poems. Shalim M. Hussain, a young poet and translator wrote a poem addressing Hafiz Ahmed ‘Nana I have written’, where he reciprocated in a poem, claiming the very Miya identity weaponized against the community. As time passed, more poets wrote in various languages and dialects, including many Miya dialects. The poetic exchange continued for days and
weeks, both reiterating the violence, suffering, and humiliation expressed by members of Assam’s Muslim community, and reclaiming the epithet ‘Miya’.

The poets thus assert a Miya identity and seek to historicize it, to generate an experiential history that could carve a space in language both for the decades of violence and hatred faced by the community, and for the Muslim community in the broader lexicon of Assamese identity (Das 2021). They articulate an aspiration to be regarded as dignified members of the greater Assamese society like many other smaller ethnic groups. Numerically, the Miya community is one of the largest communities in the state with an estimated 7-8 million people, with significant contributions to the economy of the state through agricultural production and the supply of cheap labour for many other emerging sectors.

The Miya Poetry Movement uses innovation and formal experimentation to reach its target audience. The poets of the movement have bypassed existing and established modes of knowledge production and established their own channels. For instance, they utilize social media instead of the existing mainstream media channels, which have a history of silencing voices from the community (Bhattacharya 2019; Bezboruah 2019). Despite its unconventional and informal modes of dissemination, the movement was successful in attracting widespread public attention both positively and negatively. The poems got attention from various stakeholders including media, academia, civil society, and state organs, among others. The local media reacted sharply and accused the poets and their associates of defaming Assamese society, which subsequently led to the filing of multiple police complaints against several poets, artists, and collaborators of the movement (Saha 2019). At the same time, the movement also received overwhelming support and solidarity both locally and across the nation (Newslaundry 2019).

In the evolving contrary dynamics between solidarity and antagonism, the Miya Poetry Movement has grown into one of the subcontinent’s most sustained artistic resistance movements of the 21st century. Over the years, it has also moved beyond written-word poetry, towards oral and audio-visual forms. Contributors of the Movement have made films (Badhwar 2019), posters and postcards (Hassan 2021), and sometimes staged performances and oral recitals (Amin 2020). The Movement has demonstrated the ways in which art can enable people to reflect critically on their communities and articulate the complex everyday socio-political realities that affect their lives (Desyllas 2014). In the context of citizenship contestation and statelessness, where the Movement is heavily invested, Rahman (2020) has argued that art-based activism can ‘humanise’ the problem through the production of empathy, which can subsequently be translated into action to address the vulnerabilities of those affected. The Miya Poetry Movement builds on this impulse through poems and other aesthetic forms of activism.

It is significant to look at the profile and background of the Miya poets. Most of these poets are associated with work related to human rights activism, community mobilization, literary activism, and political activism, among others. Poet Hafiz Ahmed, one of the oldest Miya poets, is a teacher, mobilizing Miya youth towards literary work through the Char-Chapori Sahitya Parishad, a literary organization he has been leading for more than a decade. Kazi Sharowar Hussain, one of the Movement’s fiercest voices, is a community worker who runs a library for young children on a river island (Khalid 2018). Ashraful Hussain, a human rights activist turned politician, has a strong footing as a grassroots activist (Apoorvanand 2021). The primary author of this article, Abdul Kalam Azad, also one of the Miya poets and human rights defenders, has worked as a community mobilizer, documenting human rights abuse in the post-NRC period (Deb 2021). As such, the Miya poets share in a multiplicity of roles in the community, switching as need arises. For example, during a crisis like the pandemic or floods they take up the role of emergency workers (Dutta et al. 2021).

2. Problem statement and research gap

Several scholars, for example Foy et al. (2014) and Laszczkowski (2019), have attested to the key role that affectivity plays in resistance movements. Affectivity is generally
understood as an ‘elemental state’ generated by the intensive force of emotion. It is, simply put, a fundamental emotional response that precedes the workings of reason and cognition (Ott 2017). Affectivity in resistance movements, as the aforementioned theorists have argued, works by highlighting the element of the subjective in experiences of violence, thus playing a key role in translating understandings of social injustice to lived experience. Through affectivity and affective expression, resistance movements show how violence and inequality are felt and experienced in everyday life. Moreover, they play a crucial role in motivating people to resist inequality and to act in solidarity with those who are marginalized or disenfranchised. Some academics have suggested exploring affective dimensions of human rights pedagogy to deepen compassionate reflection on the needs of the marginalized (Hung 2014; McPherson and Mazza 2014). In the case of Miya poetry’s human rights praxis, the deployment of affectivity plays a central role. Indeed, for Miya poetry garnering the affective response of fellow citizens is crucial to its aesthetics. The poems in their intimate articulation of fury, grief, etc., contribute to the visceral emotive dimensions of resistance. Popular reception of their work confirms this (Gogoi 2019).

In its public reception, Miya poetry has been read mainly as protest poetry, as an ‘activist’ poetry of resistance. In this it is set in a primarily oppositional frame, presented as an explicit if not violent affront to the state and public relations within it (Andre and Kumar 2016). This approach has two dire consequences: on the one hand, in an increasingly policed and authoritarian state, the Miya poets have come to be viewed as terrorists and criminals, with many of the poets being subjected to harassment (on social media) and unlawful arrests. On the other hand, on a more liberal dimension, they are lauded as poets/prophets of a new resistance, overshadowing any other potential social contribution of their poetry. In this article, we pause and pose a question: what is the goal of the resistance these poems articulate? What social work do these poems hope to accomplish? Based on the premise that reading for resistance limits our understanding of the poems, we begin to ask: what comes after the act of resistance? What is the particular affective contribution of the poems to the emancipatory cause of defending the rights of the Miya community in Assam? To address these questions, we analyse poems and conduct life-history interviews with a number of poets with an emphasis on that aspect of poetry that ties closely to the emotional needs of the life of the community.

3. Methods

This current study is based on a qualitative research design, including life history interviews of poets and analyses of their poems. We aim to understand the goal of the poetry movement against a socio-political backdrop where the idea of citizenship is weaponized against persons of a particular religious and social identity. Though the Miya community has been facing discrimination and disenfranchisement throughout the post-colonial period, the last couple of years in the aftermath of the 2019 Citizenship (Amendment) Act have been especially eventful. The exacerbated levels of communal violence and persecution have intersected with and heavily influenced the personal lives of the Miya poets. These experiences fundamentally shape the affective expression of their poetry. In our aim to understand the broader relevance of Miya poetic expression in this turbulent socio-political context, we conduct life history interviews which offer crucial insights into how the personal, the aesthetic, and the political intersect (Adriansen 2012). The life history interview method is a useful tool to understand the variegated perceptions of Miya Poets on their own lives, their community (Goodson and Sikes 2001), and their desires for equal rights and social solidarity. Apart from the interviews, we also draw our analysis from the poems. Poems have been used by various researchers in various ways as a tool to investigate social issues (Szto, Furman, and Langer 2005). In fact, sociologist Richardson (1992) has examined how the intersections between history and poetry help effectively communicate ‘lived experience’.
Before outlining details of recruitment and data corpus (poetry), it would be wise to explain our positionality as researchers to help bring clarity to our methodological choices. The first author of this paper (the primary researcher) is one of the Miya poets, a human rights defender, and a doctoral candidate whose thesis examines statelessness and resilience in Assam, especially among the Miya community. The second author is also a doctoral candidate whose research focuses on the politics of poetry. The third author is the doctoral supervisor of the primary author.

An estimated 40 to 50 poets have been part of the Miya Poetry Movement since 2016, and the number has been increasing. It is important to mention that the representation of women in the Miya Poetry Movement is very limited. This could be because of the high prevalence of patriarchal practices due to which women’s access to education and the political sphere remains limited. However, despite limited representation, the women poets of the Movement have been successful in asserting their voice. Some of these poems have been included in our analysis.

Between January and October 2021, the primary researcher recruited six fellow Miya poets using purposive sampling. The poets were invited based on their engagement with the Movement in terms of their writing, and engagement with human rights defence in their community. He obtained informed consent from the poets and explained the probable personal risk involved during the interview and post publication. All the poets granted permission to publish their real names while disseminating the research findings. Two interviews were conducted in person and four interviews were conducted online using the Zoom app. Each interview lasted between one to two hours. The interviews were recorded, transcribed in Miya dialect, and translated verbatim into the English language. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), a ‘step by step guide’ of thematic analysis was followed. The primary author shared the initial codes with the second and third authors.

Similarly, the second author analysed 40 poems by 20 poets. These poems were translated from the Miya dialect by Shalim M Hussain, and permission was acquired to reprint substantial excerpts in this article. For the poems, similarly, a ‘step by step guide’ of thematic analysis was followed. The second author generated the code list and shared it with the two other researchers, after which final codes were generated. The writing of this article was undertaken by the first two authors, with regular guidance and conceptual support from the third author.

4. Results
We have organized the results in two parts. In the first part we present a thematic analysis of the selected poems. In the second part, we analyse the life history interviews with the poets and present our analysis thematically. The combination of the analyses of both poems and interview transcripts help develop deeper understanding of the role of the Movement in Assam today.

4.1 Poems
In analysing 40 poems, we found several interconnected themes taking centre stage. These include the following: identity (the violence of ‘being identified as’); confronting violence; resilience through self-identification; and an appeal to a common humanity beyond ethnic and religious separatism. In what follows, we elaborate on each of these themes, while emphasizing the complex interconnections between them.

4.1.1 Identity formation as the basis of human rights
A consistent thematic concern across poems by different poets is the question of identity, and two key aspects thereof: self-identification and the issue of being subjected to a particular identity, both of which converge to reveal how identity is not something that is subjectively imagined or claimed. Rather, identity comes to be formed intersubjectively, in
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concert with others: I come to become who I am in relation to how others see me. Identity is thus a fundamentally social construct, and as we see through the poems, it is a core determinant of whether or not basic human rights are accessible to persons of particular identities. Furthermore, the structures of a given society afford certain kinds of and limits to identity formation.

For instance, the opening lines of the poem ‘Write down, I am a Miya’ by Hafiz Ahmed,

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?

As these lines show us, the identity of a ‘Miya’ carries a certain set of social and legal meanings, and is made possible only by this interconnected web of meanings: an outsider with an NRC number, and yet hated by the society around them.

In ‘Nana I Have Written’ by Shalim M. Hussain, the notion of ‘Miya’ identity as a thing given by law (or the absence of a law committed to justice for all) is made explicit:

Nana I have written attested countersigned
And been verified by a public notary
That I am a Miya

In ‘My Mother’ by Rehna Sultana,

I was dropped on your lap my mother
Just as my father, grandfather, great-grandfather
And yet you detest me, my mother,
For who I am.
Yes, I was dropped on your lap as a cursed Miyah, my mother.

In these lines, it becomes clear that in circumstances of state-sanctioned oppression, identity is an act of violence; it is a curse; it is that which dehumanizes, subsequently justifying a denial of basic rights.

The following lines from the poem ‘Quit India, ’83, Basbari’ Ashraful Hussain makes even more explicit the implications of being identified as Miya.

My days pass in fear and uncertainty
Like a common criminal
Lost to dignity, lost to justice.
Who I am is my crime
What I am is what I look like
And my crime of language is what makes me stateless.

It is important to note that all of the above examples also carry a moment of self-identification. The speakers in the poems are unable to simply refuse the identity that is cast upon them. Instead, they acknowledge how the self is implicated. The following sections will elaborate in more detail how this self-identification can be transfigured as empowerment.
4.1.2 Confronting violence and human rights infringements

If Miya identity, as seen above, is constituted by an act of violence, the poems take in hand the imperative to confront this violence. In the context of the systemic exclusion of Assam’s Miya Muslim community, the poems seek to counteract the violence of identity by adopting at times the very language of violence used against the community. The following poems are examples of poetic violence—as resistance—inflicted upon language and those structures of communication that permit violence and its subsequent erasure from collective memory.

In the poem ‘Write down, I am a Miya’ by Hafiz Ahmed:

Your torture
Has burnt my body black
Reddened my eyes with fire.
Beware!
I have nothing but anger in stock.
Keep away!
Or
Turn to Ashes.

Yet, this violence upon language that seeks to challenge the Miya communities ‘crime of language’ comes forth with a fundamental difference: it seeks to defend Miya identity and reclaim it. It seeks to find a balance between an unethical violence—as in the state’s genocidal impulses—and an ethical violence (through language) that seeks to counter and redress the former.

For instance, the poem ‘Our Revolution’ by Rezwan Hussain:

But don’t they say: Patience has its limits
Broken snails can cut through flesh
Even we can turn revolutionaries
Our revolution will not need guns
Our revolution will not need dynamite
Our revolution will not run on national television
Our revolution will not be published
On no walls will our revolution be painted
In red and blue clenched fists
Yet our revolution will singe, burn
Reduce your souls to ashes.

The poem, which makes a case for Miya anger and points to its fundamental difference, hints at a revolution in language, a revolution that seeks to counter the violent exclusions of society, by reclaiming through poetry the empowerment of description and the claim to collective resistance.

Take also, the lines from ‘My Son has Learnt to Cuss like the City’ by Siraj Khan:

O mister snake charmer
How long will you slither and slide
My son goes to college now
He has learnt to cuss like the city
He knows little but he knows well
The sweet twists and the sweet turns of poetry.

Poetry, as these lines show, offers a way to reclaim violence and turn it against its perpetrators. This reclamation is made possible in language which is used to strategically
differentiate between two kinds of violence. It is employed with the aim of obtaining appropriate social description to challenge the historical excesses of Islamophobia in Assam and its allied structural/discursive oppression.

4.1.3 Building resilience through self-identification

The poetic confrontation of violence that the poems evince is not a matter of violence for violence’s sake. The violence in and upon language serves a function: to make possible the continued survival of the Miya community despite the odds. In other words, to build resilience. The confrontation enacted by the poems makes room for alternative forms of self-identification. The writers use poetic expression not just to assert an identity, but also to create a means of understanding who the ‘Miya’ are by articulating this community’s distinctive experiences of life in Assamese (and Indian) society. They emphasize the importance of self-understanding—who we are—by historicizing the experiences of the community and stressing the importance of the participation of different identities in a democracy. Excerpts from the following poems exemplify this:

In ‘Write down, I am a Miya’ by Hafiz Ahmed:

Write
I am a Miya
I turn waste, marshy lands
To green paddy fields
To feed you.
I carry bricks
To build your buildings
Drive your car
For your comfort
Clean your drain
To keep you healthy.
I have always been
In your service
And yet
you are dissatisfied!

In ‘Our Revolution’ by Rezwan Hussain:

Patiently we will continue to build
Your mansions, roads, bridges
Patiently we will keep pulling your tired, fat,
Sweaty bodies in cycle rickshaws
We will polish your marble floors
Until they sparkle
Beat your dirty clothes
Until they are white
We will plump you up with fresh fruits and vegetables
And when you come visiting us in Tapajuli char,
We will offer you not just milk
But fresh cream

In ‘I am Still a Miyah’ by Shahjahan Ali Ahmed:

Mine is the story of
A burning bone-crunching sun
My manhood the cautionary tale
Of bent shoulders
And the pricking of salted thorns
Mine is the story of
‘Grow more food’, man-eaters
Cholera, diarrhoea
And a fragrant revolution scattered by
My fathers
In a forest of thorns
Mine is a story of heroes.
Mine is the sacrificial offering of ‘61
Of blood screaming through
The binds of history

These lines historicize the significant contribution of the Miya community to the economic, agricultural, and cultural development of the state over the years. In doing so, they appeal to contemporary readers not to forget these contributions or reduce personhood just to a religious identity. The lines also particularize the specific contribution of the Miya community; they particularize and positively differentiate the specific role this community has played in the history of the state. They seem to say: we are all different, yet we are all a part of the same precisely because of our differences and our reliance on each other.

4.1.4 Appeal to a common humanity: dignity and human rights

While a key function of an affective poetics of identity is to emphasize the value of difference in a democratic society, a further crucial function is to create space in language for empathetic identification, with an appeal to our common humanity.

In the poem ‘A Charuwa Youth vs The People’ by Hafiz Ahmed, we see the following lines:

Milord
Yes, we are brothers
He and I
Brothers from the same family.
Yet kokai is so bent
On being king
That he disproves
Blood relations.
Milord
Contrary to his claims
I am not his step-brother
Mother and son
Were not separated
When I was born

The poem begins with the formal technique of an apostrophe, an invocation; a direct address in this case to a legal authority (Milord) that has the power to sanction judgements and inscribe belonging and identity. The speaker of the poem claims, through apostrophe, metaphorical enaction, and synecdoche, that indeed a violent differentiation and separatism have been falsely inscribed into interpersonal and inter-community relations; the result of ‘vile whispers’ and ‘muddled heads’.
In ‘My Son has Learnt to Cuss like the City’ by Siraj Khan:

They ask, ‘Oi, what is your jati?’
How do I tell them that my jati is man
That we are Hindu or Musalman
Until the earth makes us one.

In these lines we see the coming together of difference and commonality as the beginnings of an egalitarian society.

Similarly, in ‘My Mother’, Rehna Sultana writes:

Open your lips
Tell these sons of the earth
That we are all bothers.

And ‘I am Still a Miyah’ by Shahjahan Ali Ahmed reads:

I am the one under the fool’s cap
Standing in line with dumb cattle
I am a painting of heritage
Hung in a stable
Because though the bottles look different
The wine is yet the same

In these lines, a link between affective poetic expression and solidarity at the level of being human is explicitly forged. Self-identification and a sense of community are by no means incommensurable, these poems tell us. Through an affective use of language, the poems appeal to everyone’s imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers, as brothers/sisters, as part of the same human community. In this, the poems appeal for an end to violence and separatism based on identity. A true political community will only come about when inter-community differences are not eliminated, but when they become secondary to what is after all common between us. If at the deepest level of my-self, there is something that resonates to the presence of this same thing in others, then poetry is that element that can help us access this deep commonality.

4.2 Interviews
The analysis of the life history interviews reveals three major themes connecting the Miya poets’ variegated imagination about citizenship. They imagine equality, democratic values, and freedom from forced assimilation as integral to the idea of citizenship. In the following sections we elaborate on these themes.

4.2.1 Equality—political, societal and economic
The idea of equality in citizenship and its absence in the lives of Miya people is powerfully articulated by the poets. They dream of a society where the members of their and other marginalized and oppressed communities would be regarded as equal stakeholders in all walks of society. They feel that there are constant efforts to make the members of their community internalize feelings of inferiority, and thus silently accept unequal treatment in their daily lives.

They want us to feel inferior to them. They want us to suffer from an inferiority complex so that we agree to everything they ask us to do, so that they can use us as they want. Nature hasn’t made us differently, the constitution doesn’t suggest us to be treated
differently, despite being all of us equal, the hegemonic group wants to create an artificial difference and hierarchy

Abdur Rahim

They further articulate different types of inequality faced by them and others in their community, in the political, societal and economic spheres of their lives. Poet Ashraful Hussain laments:

The people from the Miya community are discriminated against in various government schemes and policies. Their legitimate rights over land are challenged. Their citizenship is questioned to take away their strength for resistance and resilience

Ashraful Hussain

The Miya poets are also well-aware of the conditions of other marginalized communities in Assam, and the idea of mutual solidarity in the fight for equality becomes an important consideration. The Adivasis, who were brought to Assam by the British colonial administration as indentured labour to work in the tea gardens, or the indigenous tribal groups like Bodo, Mishing, Rabha, Karbi, Dimasa among others, also face oppression and discrimination. However, the poets realize that the inequality faced by the Miya community is more layered and severe because of their religious identity which leads to their very citizenship being questioned. Poet Aman Ali argues that while a shared experience of marginalization should help in forging intercommunity solidarities, the exacerbated levels of hatred against the Muslim community have an adverse effect on such solidarities. Those who stand with the Miya community also face violence and ostracization within their communities.

Ali shared a story of a college professor who was subjected to humiliation and physical violence. On his way to college, one of his young female students slapped him in full public view. Ali says,

If the professor would have been speaking for the rights of any marginalized communities of Assam other than Miya, his student wouldn’t dare to physically abuse him. Even if such an incident would have happened, the society would have reacted very strongly.

Aman Ali

The Miya Muslim community is facing economic inequality in terms of land ownership, access to market, access to equal opportunity among others. For the poets, the experience of inequality, subordination, and oppression, and the apathy of others in society has forced them to take shelter in poetry and write. Poet Shalim M. Hussain emphasizes that the Miya poems are neither slogan nor charters of demands; these poems are laments, monologues, and sometimes conversations within the community regarding the inequality and dehumanizing treatment.

Poet Abdur Rahim also echoes this sentiment. He suggests that the Miya poets resolve to minimize inequality through their poetry. As an attempt to create solidarity, they feel that they should tell their stories, especially to those who do not simply dismiss them as inferior. In fact, poetry has helped them take forward their appeal to the ‘third person’ and facilitated significant public debate around the issues of inequality and injustice. However, the broader Assamese society is not yet in a position to understand their lament and hear their stories of suffering. Instead, the poets have been accused of defaming Assamese society as xenophobic, and have been questioned on public forums like newspapers, television and social media platforms.

Abdur Rahim sees it as a clear societal inequality; he argues:

If we were treated equally, how come no one is concerned about the injustices committed against our community and when we start speaking about the injustices, how can the dominant community force us to be silent? When police cases were filed, I thought, if
police arrest me for writing poems, there is nothing to be ashamed of, I am not a thief or dacoit but a poet. The world would know what kind of society we are living in, where this level of injustice would happen and we wouldn’t even be allowed to scream.

Abdur Rahim

4.2.2 Democratic citizenship

The uprising of Miya poetry in the latter half of the 2010s was mostly driven by the citizenship contestation processes, especially the national register of citizens (NRC). Every Miya poet we interviewed has, in one way or another, been affected by the citizenship contestation processes. Kazi Neel’s father was marked as a D voter and his citizenship was suspended for more than two decades. Neel has grown up seeing father in hiding from police in the fear of detention. Rehna Sultana was targeted by both state and non-state actors for supporting the members of her community during the NRC updating process. Shalim M. Hussain and his entire family was asked to attend a hearing in a far-flung area within short notice. Aman Ali was also asked to attend a hearing to get his name included in the NRC. Someone filed a frivolous objection against the inclusion of one of his family members in the draft NRC. One of Abdur Rahim’s family members is still marked as a D voter. In the light of these violations, the Miya poets take on the task of imagining an ideal citizenship. In their interviews, they reveal a detailed philosophizing of the subject, spread over a wide arena of theoretical approaches. We find three major approaches to citizenship, these can be marked as a) a naturalist approach, b) an internationalist approach and c) a constitutional approach. In the following sections, we depict these approaches in terms of the poets’ expressions.

Naturalist Approach.

A section of the poets believe that this world is the gift of nature, and citizenship is a matter of natural belonging. They oppose the idea of artificial borders and caging people within a boundary constructed by hegemonic politics. They imagine a world where people would be allowed to work and settle as per their will and capacity. Their imagination is driven by their immense confidence in the capacity of hard work and resilience of human life. They believe that people should not be discriminated against on the basis of identity; they should be allowed to look for food, shelter and other basic needs anywhere in the world. The borders and restrictions enabled by the current citizenship regime facilitate the construction of superior citizens and inferior citizens. Abdur Rahim argues that the dominant group maintains its superiority not only through sincere hard work and progress, but also by putting down the marginalized group/s with administrative restrictions and other means of graded citizenship.

Internationalist Approach.

Poet Aman Ali’s idea of citizenship comes from a strong political belief in internationalism. In his writings, he delves into the citizenship issues of the Miya community, the challenges they’ve faced in the citizenship contestation processes, and even writes powerful poems depicting the historical oppression and violence meted out against the members of the Miya community. However, when it comes to talking about his idea of citizenship, he insists that his thoughts and imagination can’t be restricted by the boundaries of religion, ethnicity, or the nation state. He dreams of uniting the members of the Miya community with proletarian internationalism.

Constitutional Approach.

A large section of the poets we interviewed align themselves with the concept of citizenship through jus soli or citizenship by birth. They emphasize that being born on the land, water, or sky of this country, should be enough to be recognized as its citizen. Their argument is
built upon the premise of the Indian constitution. The liberal principle of *jus soli* or acquiring ‘citizenship by birth’ or the ‘right of the soil’, was originally the jurisprudential premise of India’s first citizenship legislation (the Citizenship Act of 1955). However, over the years, the idea of citizenship envisaged by the founding fathers of the Indian constitution has been eroded and gradually shifted from *jus soli* to *jus sanguinis*. The latest citizenship amendment Act of 2019 has been the biggest blow to the *jus soli* idea of citizenship. As the poet Ashraful notes:

> the latest amendment to the citizenship Act provides opportunity to citizenship to minority refugees from neighbouring countries except Muslims. This is contradictory to the idea of citizenship enshrined in the constitution of India.
>
> Ashraful Hussain

### 4.2.3 The contradictions of assimilation

By the virtue of equal and democratic citizenship, the Miya poets touched upon another practical aspect of citizenship: the right to oppose the idea of forced assimilation. Their citizenship, they suggest, has been indelibly premised upon a reductive and imposed notion of assimilation, where the members of the community are forced to renounce their unique identity markers, their language, and their faith, in order to be marginally accepted. As the poets reveal, in the pre-independent era, that is before the transition of the country into a democratic set up, the forefathers of today’s Miya poets tried to assimilate with the dominant societal norms. But in the later part of the history, when India became independent, the Miya Muslims in Assam were forced to renounce their language and identity to save themselves from violence. Ever since, the debate over assimilation has been ongoing. The poets argue that democracy doesn’t have a space for forced assimilation. In a democracy everyone ought to have equal freedom to practice their own way of life.

Poet Aman Ali says:

> For the last one hundred and fifty years the discussion on assimilation has been going on. Which can’t be achieved through domination. More than assimilation we need to understand the importance of diversity. We must understand that we can achieve unity even when being diverse.
>
> Aman Ali

He illustrates with an example: the way a mainstream Assamese person speaks, the way he wears his attire, his food habits, his artifacts, his songs, everything, has a unique cultural character. Adopting or mimicking everything would not only be impossible but would also undermine his uniqueness. There is diversity in the way of life, and difference in the means of production and economics of every community. One can learn how to sing a Bihu song but it is difficult to sing a Bihu while sailing a boat from one village to another through the river. The boatman will definitely tend to sing a Bhatiali instead of Bihu.

Aman Ali argues:

> In the name of assimilation, the folk songs of the community can’t be abandoned; that would be a great loss for both Miya community and Assamese nationalism. The reason is: there is a need to enrich the composite culture of Assam.
>
> Aman Ali

However, there is an allegation that the cultural and linguistic elements of the Miya community have been corrupting the dominant Assamese culture. Ali argues that the notion of
corrupting a culture is problematic because Assamese culture is by definition a mixed culture, a whole comprised of the interaction of innumerable distinct elements.

The poets emphasize that the Miya Poetry Movement has helped to counter forced assimilation. For instance, Shalim M. Hussain says that the use of Miya dialect and representation of Miya cultural artifacts in the poems is a strong counter mechanism against forced assimilation. Hussain further says that Miya poetry has started an inward conversation within the community which is inherently against the idea of forced assimilation.

5. Discussion

In this article we have tried to understand Miya poetry beyond the frames of resistance and protest, in connection with the ongoing citizenship crisis in Assam and the imminent threat of statelessness faced by the people from the Miya community. The poems, as we have seen, engage with complex, emotional experiences of violence and marginalization. In this, they are capable of creating affective responses among the readers. The interviews with the poets complement the poetic and provide the opportunity to seek clarification of some of the crucial questions which one encounters while reading the poems. The poets, as we’ve seen, recognize the poems as tools to advance their activism for equality, freedom, and the defence of human rights, while also revealing that the poems can express more than other forms of communication could. In thinking of Miya poetry in concert with the poets’ distinctive perspectives, we can begin to substantiate the key characteristics of their poetic activism, and the broader aims of this diverse and ever-growing body of work.

Seen together with the life-history interviews, we can see that the poems do more than articulate resistance or protest. Insofar as the poems do the work of resistance, they do not do so for resistance’s sake. Rather, they are engaged in an emancipatory project of reclaiming their rights as citizens in a systematically unjust state. They are, furthermore, deeply invested in reimagining a more equitable form of democratic citizenship that respects difference (be it of individuals, communities, or religious identities) without seeking to merely eliminate or assimilate it.

Scholarly explorations of similar identity-based emancipatory poetic movements, for example the Negritude movement of the 1930s (Bird 2019), and the Black Arts Movement in 1960s USA—which played a catalytic role in the American Civil Rights movement—have shown how the resistances articulated in poetry are intricately linked to a utopian desire for freedom, equal rights, and equal representation in socio-economic-political systems (Smethurst 2018). Each in their own specific contexts, the Negritude and the Black Arts movements have played crucial emancipatory roles in destabilizing colonial and racist hierarchies that subordinate non-White and non-European forms of cultural production to dominant White Eurocentric norms. In championing strong and at times violently differentiated forms ‘cultural nationalism’ through a reflective politics of identity, these movements have provided lasting frameworks for valuing the uniqueness of black or non-Western cultural production without assimilating their differences, or reducing them to subordinate positions in the colonial binary.

In a similar vein, in taking on the issue of identity, the Miya poets reject a desire for inclusion through assimilation; rather, they express the desire for a genuine intersubjective political plurality; for a community that acknowledges and values difference and distinct perspectives on the world—where even irreconcilable differences or ideological distance, for example, do not need to compromise solidarity and living with each other (Nadkarni 2022). In this regard, a pertinent aim of most of the poetry is to reimagine the very structures of democratic society and citizenship. The Miya poets are engaged in their community not just as poets but also as human rights defenders who seek to uphold the universal human rights of their fellow community members. They challenge the dehumanization and ‘less than human’ image of their community through writing, performing, translating poetry, and also by mobilizing and encouraging their community to narrate their human story
of suffering and injustice to arouse empathy and solidarity. They do it not only through their poems but also by their actions, for example, in their often-voluntary work with the affected community as social workers and emergency workers. (Dutta et al 2021).

Through poetry, the Miya poets have begun carving out new narratives of empowerment (Das 2016). For the first time the young generation from the community has begun using art and literature to oppose oppression, voice daily struggles (Bezboruah 2019), and advance their human rights activism (Andre and Kumar 2016). The poems seek to re/construct collective memory, question the absence of the Miya story in the literary narrative of the nation, and affirm Miya persons’ rights as human beings (Bhattacharjee 2019). Most importantly, they have sought an intersectional solidarity. As Hassan (2021) further argues, ‘Miya poetry often creates solidarity between different oppressed and exploited groups, charting a revolutionary rhythm across cultures, space, and time’.

Miya poetry demonstrates that the work of poetry in society is to obtain appropriate description and social acknowledgement for disenfranchised persons. The Miya Poetry Movement has played a significant pragmatic role in solidarity building within the community, motivating people to support each other during the onslaught of the NRC and through the disenfranchising processes of citizenship contestation. For instance, hundreds of young volunteers support the poorly lettered. Through poetry, the writers not only creatively and intensely express emancipatory desires, they also have the ability to challenge oppressive social systems and structures that cause suffering to marginalized communities, and find creative solutions to social problems (Tucker-Raymond, Rosario-Ramos, and Rosario 2011). Their writing has demonstrated the ability to promote individual self-reflection towards building and articulating community experience (Jocson 2005). The Miya poetic project has thus been one that rigorously emphasizes the responsibility of the writer to constantly renew language, push its boundaries and force it to break its ideological binds; to ‘destroy the static’, the constant interference created by dominant power structures (Crawford 2013: 103). As the poet-theorist Bruce Andrews argues, an important aspect of poetic politics is radical dissent, the act of rewriting the ‘social body’ (Andrews 2013: 21). Such writing, which facilitates a reorganizing of the structures that organize us, is also a form of reading and interpreting: it is a form of social literacy, a way of ‘orienting our praxis and re-envisioning the social contract’ (Crawford 2013: 102–3). The social responsibility of the poet in questioning and resisting the binds of language is thus an ethical one, situated within the larger project of ‘what ... it means to be human’ (Woods 2002: 2).

6. Conclusion
In this article we have seen how the Miya Poetry Movement has given voice to one of the least literate and most disenfranchised communities in Assam. The poems have gone beyond resistance to affectively reimagine new forms of democratic citizenship. The Miya Poetry Movement makes an innovative affective and conceptual contribution to the ongoing citizenship debate in India by giving voice to subjective experiences of disenfranchisement. In a world poised on the brink of unprecedented crises of statelessness and refugees, the reimagination of citizenship articulated by the poets gives a fresh perspective to understanding difference, and the role these differences play in the making of democratic societies. We hope these findings will be valuable to poets, human rights defenders, activists, and other stakeholders who are involved in social justice and emancipatory projects, especially in the resource poor global south. This article opens avenues for new research that focuses on the intersections of citizenship rights and art-based resistance.

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