



Between Belonging and Exclusion: Identity, Stigma and Agency Among Miya Muslim Women in Assam

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a sociological analysis of an in-depth interview conducted with Advocate Sania Begum, a 33-year-old Muslim woman, politician, and legal practitioner residing in Assam, India. Drawing on theoretical frameworks including Erving Goffman's theory of stigma, Anthony Giddens' concept of reflexive identity, Pierre Bourdieu's notions of social capital and field, and intersectionality theory as developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the study examines how members of the Miya Muslim community navigate overlapping identities in a contested socio-political landscape. The findings reveal that the respondent experiences multi-layered discrimination rooted in her religious, ethnic, gendered, and regional identities. The term 'Miya,' originally a sub-caste designation, has been weaponized as a derogatory label, functioning as a stigmatizing tool that reinforces social hierarchies. Despite these structural constraints, the respondent demonstrates significant agency, advocating for women's rights, institutional reform, and community empowerment. The article contributes to on-going scholarly debates on minority belonging, patriarchal governance, and the politics of identity in Northeast India.

Keywords:

Miya Muslim identity, stigma, intersectionality, Assam, women's agency, NRC, social exclusion.

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INTRODUCTION

The state of Assam in Northeast India occupies a unique and contested sociological terrain, shaped by decades of ethnic conflict, demographic anxieties, and the politics of belonging. Within this landscape, the Miya Muslim community primarily descendants of Bengali-speaking Muslim migrants from erstwhile East Bengal has occupied a precarious social position, subject to persistent questions about their citizenship, legitimacy, and cultural authenticity (Baruah, 1999). The National Register of Citizens (NRC) process, completed in 2019, brought these tensions to the fore, raising urgent questions about who belongs and who does not (Hazarika, 2000).

This article is grounded in an in-depth interview with Advocate Sania Begum, a 33-year-old Muslim woman who is simultaneously an advocate, a politician, a daughter, an Assamese, and a Miya. Her narrative offers a rich sociological window into how individuals navigate intersecting identities in contexts marked by structural inequality, communal prejudice, and patriarchal norms. The interview data is analyzed through multiple theoretical lenses to illuminate the mechanisms of exclusion, strategies of resistance, and the politics of identity at play.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Goffman's Theory of Stigma

Erving Goffman (1963) conceptualized stigma as a deeply discrediting attribute that reduces an individual 'from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one' (p. 3). Stigma operates at the intersection of identity and social perception, functioning to exclude, demean, and subordinate. The term 'Miya,' as described by the respondent, exemplifies Goffman's notion of tribal stigma one rooted in ethnic and religious group membership, transmitted across generations, and used to mark an entire community as socially inferior. The respondent's observation that 'Miya' is deployed to demean and



humiliate Muslims in Assam aligns precisely with Goffman's analysis of how stigmatized identities are managed in everyday social interaction.

Intersectionality Theory

Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) framework of intersectionality posits that systems of oppression such as race, gender, class, and religion do not operate independently but interact to produce compounded and specific forms of disadvantage. Sania Begum's experiences of discrimination cannot be reduced to any single axis of identity. She reports facing exclusion as a woman, a Muslim, an Assamese in non-Assamese contexts, and a Miya in Assamese contexts. These overlapping marginalities produce a 'matrix of domination' (Collins, 1990) in which she is simultaneously hyper-visible as an 'Other' and rendered invisible in mainstream power structures. Intersectionality is therefore indispensable to understanding the layered nature of her subjugation and her equally layered resistance.

Giddens' Reflexive Identity and Structuration Theory

Anthony Giddens (1991) argues that in late modernity, identity is no longer a fixed ascriptive category but a reflexive project continuously constructed and reconstructed by individuals drawing on available social resources and narratives. The respondent's deliberate self-identification as 'first Indian, then Assamese, then Muslim' reflects a conscious, strategic ordering of identity that navigates competing loyalties and social pressures. This reflexive identity-work serves both as a mechanism of self-protection in hostile social environments and as an assertion of full citizenship. Giddens' (1984) structuration theory further illuminates how agents like Sania both are shaped by and actively reproduces and contest social structures, including patriarchal institutions and communal hierarchies.

Bourdieu's Field Theory and Social Capital

Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital networks of relationships that provide



access to resources is relevant to understanding the respondent's relative empowerment. Her education, legal practice, and political engagement constitute forms of cultural and social capital that partially buffer against the disadvantages of her stigmatized identity. However, Bourdieu's (1977) concept of the field also illuminates how patriarchal structures function as fields with their own rules, in which women like Sania must struggle to accumulate recognition and legitimacy. Her observation that men remain reluctant to accept women in leadership roles reflects what Bourdieu would call the symbolic violence embedded in the doxa of patriarchal social fields.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, interpretivist methodology, drawing on a single in-depth semi-structured interview as its primary data source. The interview consisted of twenty-four open-ended questions covering themes of identity, discrimination, education, gender, livelihood, development, and community aspirations. The respondent, Advocate Sania Begum (age 33), resides in an urban area of Assam and has been a permanent resident of the locality for approximately 70–80 years across family generations. Her professional background as an advocate and politician, combined with her membership in a joint Muslim family, makes her a particularly information-rich case study (Patton, 2002) for examining the interplay of identity politics and social structures in Assam.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to the interview transcript to identify recurring patterns and themes. These themes were then interpreted through the theoretical lenses outlined above. Ethical considerations include the preservation of the respondent's dignity and the recognition that her views represent one perspective within a broader, complex socio-political landscape.



FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The Politics of Identity: Being Indian, Assamese, and Miya

The respondent's self-identification hierarchy Indian first, Assamese second, Muslim third is a significant sociological datum. This ordering does not indicate a diminishment of any identity but rather a strategic presentation of self (Goffman, 1959) calibrated to assert citizenship and belonging in the face of on-going challenges to both. To claim Indian identity first is to pre-empt accusations of disloyalty or foreign origin that have historically been levelled against Miya Muslims in Assam (Baruah, 1999). Sociologically, this represents what Tajfel and Turner (1979) describe as an in-group identity strategy: affiliating with the highest-status, least-contested group membership (Indian national) before proceeding to more contested identities.

The respondent's account of being told, upon returning to Assam from Nagaland, that she was 'not truly Assamese because of her Miya identity' exemplifies what Wimmer (2008) terms boundary-making — the social process through which groups define who belongs and who does not. These boundaries are not fixed but are actively contested and re-drawn by social and political actors. The simultaneous rejection by multiple groups (not Assamese enough, too Assamese for Nagaland, the wrong kind of Muslim) illustrates the precarious positionality of the Miya subject in Indian social geography.

Stigma and the Weaponization of the Term 'Miya'

The respondent's analysis of the term 'Miya' is sophisticated and aligns with sociological understandings of ethnic labelling. She distinguishes between the term's original referent a subcaste or sub-group designation and its contemporary deployment as a derogatory label. This semantic shift is not accidental; it reflects the political economy of stigma production (Link & Phelan, 2001), in which dominant groups use labels to mark, separate, and discriminate against marginalized groups. Link and Phelan (2001) argue that stigma involves labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination



all of which the respondent describes in her account of how 'Miya' functions in Assamese public life.

The respondent further notes that political rhetoric has worsened these perceptions in recent years, a phenomenon Brass (1997) identifies as the 'institutionalization of riots' the deliberate manipulation of communal tensions by political actors for electoral advantage. The deployment of 'Miya' as a political weapon reflects what Hall (1990) calls 'the politics of recognition in reverse': rather than recognizing minority contributions, dominant discourse uses ethnic labels to enforce social subordination.

Patriarchy, Gender, and the Limits of Inclusion

Despite her professional accomplishments as an advocate and politician, the respondent articulates a persistent sense of exclusion from mainstream society due to patriarchal attitudes. This finding resonates with Walby's (1990) theorization of patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices through which men dominate women. The respondent's observation that men remain 'hesitant to accept women in leadership roles, regardless of abilities or qualifications' reflects the cultural dimension of patriarchy what Connell (1987) calls hegemonic masculinity which naturalizes male authority and renders female leadership culturally dissonant.

The respondent's personal account of her struggle to continue her education against her father's wishes is particularly illuminating. This micro-level conflict reflects macro-level structural patterns: the persistent devaluation of women's education and the subordination of women's aspirations to patriarchal family authority. Her emphasis on financial independence as a prerequisite for women's autonomy echoes feminist sociological arguments that economic agency is foundational to women's emancipation (Nussbaum, 2000). By achieving legal qualifications and earning income through advocacy and property rental, the respondent has partially escaped patriarchal economic dependency, enabling her political voice.



Citizenship, the NRC, and the Politics of Belonging

The respondent's awareness of and preparedness for the NRC possessing all required documents speaks to the heightened citizenship consciousness of Miya Muslim communities in Assam. For these communities, citizenship is not an assumed background condition of social life but an active, continuously contested status. This reflects what Yuval-Davis (2011) describes as 'the politics of belonging': the emotional and political struggles over where the boundaries of communities of belonging are placed. For Miya Muslims, belonging to the Indian nation-state must be documented, proved, and defended in ways not required of other citizens a form of differential citizenship that sociologists have linked to racial and ethnic discrimination (Isin & Wood, 1999).

The family's 70–80 year residence history, spanning three generations, would ordinarily constitute robust grounds for belonging. Yet their citizenship remains politically contested. This illustrates what Bauman (2004) describes as the condition of 'wasted lives' in liquid modernity populations rendered surplus or suspect by shifting national projects and demographic anxieties.

Education, Access, and Structural Inequality

The respondent's account of educational access reflects a dual sociological reality. As an urban resident, she has experienced relatively unimpeded access to education; most members of her family hold graduate degrees. Yet she is acutely aware that this is not representative of the Miya Muslim community as a whole. Rural children, particularly girls, face infrastructural barriers flooding, inaccessible schools that compound the structural disadvantages of religious and ethnic minority status. Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural reproduction is applicable here: differential access to education reproduces and legitimates existing social hierarchies, disguising structural inequality as natural variation in individual outcomes.



The respondent's observation that girls generally have equal access to education up to the undergraduate level, but face increasing barriers beyond that point, reflects what sociologists have termed the 'glass ceiling' of educational aspiration (Archer et al., 2012). Marriage pressures, limited post-graduate opportunities, and patriarchal expectations converge to constrain women's advanced educational and professional trajectories within the community.

Development, Governance, and the Critique of Welfarism

The respondent articulates a substantive critique of prevailing development discourse that aligns with Amartya Sen's (1999) capabilities approach. She defines development not as infrastructural expansion but as the efficient functioning of public institutions a state in which citizens can rely on government schools, colleges, and hospitals without resorting to private alternatives. This conception of development is profoundly sociological: it centers on institutional quality, public trust, and equitable access rather than GDP or physical infrastructure alone.

Her critique of electoral welfarism government schemes that provide temporary financial assistance for political gain rather than long-term family upliftment resonates with Scott's (1985) analysis of political patronage in agrarian societies. Such schemes function to create dependency relationships that reproduce rather than challenge power imbalances. The respondent's insistence on investment in quality education as the foundation of genuine empowerment reflects a long-term developmental perspective that contrasts with short-term political logics.

Agency, Advocacy, and Visions for Change

Despite the structural constraints outlined above, the respondent demonstrates considerable agency in contesting these conditions. Her strong opposition to forced veiling, her critique of early marriage practices, and her advocacy for women's freedom in education, employment, and personal choices all reflect what Mahmood (2005)



describes as an agentic politics that operates from within, rather than simply against, religious and cultural structures. She does not reject her Muslim identity; rather, she insists on a progressive interpretation of that identity that is compatible with women's full participation in public life.

Her concerns about the high rate of child marriage in Hojai and her call for urgent social reform reflect an awareness of the relationship between early marriage and educational deprivation among young women in Muslim-majority communities. Sociological research consistently demonstrates that child marriage truncates girls' educational trajectories and reproductive autonomy (UNICEF, 2018; Delprato et al., 2015), reproducing cycles of poverty and gender inequality across generations.

The respondent's own life trajectory achieving legal qualifications, maintaining a career, engaging in political leadership, and earning independent income serves as both a personal narrative of resistance and a structural challenge to patriarchal and communal norms. In Giddens' (1991) terms, she exemplifies the reflexive project of self: actively constructing an identity that refuses to be wholly determined by ascribed characteristics or structural constraints.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of Advocate Sania Begum's interview reveals the profound interplay of structural constraints and individual agency in the lives of Miya Muslim women in Assam. Three overarching sociological insights emerge from this analysis.

First, identity in multiply marginalized communities is not singular or stable but is continuously negotiated across contexts, shaped by the demands of different social fields and the strategic imperatives of survival and dignity. The respondent's layered self-identification illustrates that individuals do not simply 'have' identities; they perform, contest, and reconstruct them in response to social pressures (Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1959).



Second, stigma and exclusion operate through multiple, reinforcing mechanisms: ethnic labelling, political rhetoric, institutional discrimination, and everyday social interaction. Addressing any one of these mechanisms in isolation is insufficient; what is required is a structural approach that recognizes their interconnection and mutual reinforcement.

Third, agency is possible but always constrained. The respondent's accomplishments are genuine and significant, but they are achievements against the grain of multiple structural disadvantages, not merely expressions of individual talent or determination. This underscores the continued relevance of structural sociological analysis even as we recognize the importance of individual agency.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the lived experience of a Miya Muslim woman in Assam through the intersecting lenses of stigma theory, intersectionality, structuration theory, and Bourdieuan field theory. The findings demonstrate that Miya Muslim women like Advocate Sania Begum inhabit a complex sociological space defined by multi-layered discrimination ethnic, religious, gendered, and regional yet demonstrate remarkable reflexive agency in navigating and contesting these constraints.

The study highlights the urgent need for sociological attention to minority communities in Northeast India, particularly at the nexus of religious identity, gender, and citizenship. Policy responses must move beyond short-term welfarism toward structural investments in education, institutional reform, and the creation of genuinely inclusive public spheres. Equally, the language of communal politics must be challenged at its roots: the weaponization of ethnic labels like 'Miya' represents not merely a question of semantics, but a mechanism of social domination with profound material and psychological consequences.

Future research should expand this inquiry through larger comparative studies across Miya Muslim communities in different districts of Assam, and should explicitly engage the voices of younger women navigating these identities in an increasingly digitally connected and politically charged environment.



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