

# **Status of Muslims in Higher Education in Assam: With special reference to Goalpara, Darrang and Kamrup (Rural) Districts**

## **Introduction**

The Muslims of Assam have been in news for the issues over the nationality as per the National Register of Citizenship (NRC), their educational status too attracted equal space in almost all the newspapers. The largest minority community in the country is also the second largest religious community after the Hindus in Assam. Assam falls in the fifth position with 34.22% of Muslim population among all the Indian States. According to the recent reports of the All India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) 2017-18, the representation of Muslims in Higher Education in India is only 5%. Whereas for a state like Assam with a history of high Muslim proportion the image of Muslims in Higher Education is 13%, which otherwise remains far lower than SC (19.4) and ST (20.8) enrolment in the state. A significant part of the community is rural, and their main occupation has been agriculture and fisheries on the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. Muslims have been an essential part of the state from the historical times, among many other reasons, cross-country migration from Bangladesh may be an essential reason for the boasting Muslim population in the state. The paper focuses upon the educational performance of Muslims in Higher Education, as the figures may raise several eyebrows, but there is not much evidence and research upon such an under-representation of the community as compared to the other religious communities in the state. A primary level-data survey with the Muslim population of three districts of Assam, namely Kamrup (rural), Goalpara and Darrang, has been conducted upon the various reasons of under-representation in Higher Education.

## **Background of the study location**

The eldest among the seven sisters in the north-eastern region of India, the state Assam lies to the south of the Purvanchal Hills (Eastern Hills) of the Himalayas in the Brahmaputra and the Barak river Valley. The state is bordered by Arunachal Pradesh in its north, Nagaland and Manipur to its East and Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram and Bangladesh to its south. The total population of Assam is 31,205,576 number of persons, as per the Census of India 2011, making it the most populated state in the North-eastern extension of India. Out of the total population, 61.47% of the Population in Assam are Hindus, 34.22% Muslims, 3.74% Christian, and the rest 0.58% comprises of Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, other religious communities and religion not stated. Assam is home to the fifth largest Muslim population in India after Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar and Maharashtra (Census of India, 2011). Muslims are the second largest and the fastest growing community in Assam. The districts with high Muslim Population in Assam are Dhubri, Barpeta, Darrang, Hailakandi, Goalpara, Karimganj, Nagaon, Morigaon and Bongaigaon. Table 1 provides data upon the essential demographic characteristics and the status of the study population (Muslims) of the top 9 Districts with high Muslim Population in Assam. It is observable from the table that the above mentioned districts have high population size, and most of them stand above the state average

while sex ratio is concerned. In terms of population density, these nine districts remain far above the state's average population density of 398 persons per km. sq.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the top 9 Districts with high Muslim Population in Assam

District	Population	Muslim Population (%)	Population Density	Sex Ratio
Assam	31,205,576	34.22	398	958
Dhubri	1,949,258	79.67	896	953
Barpeta	1,693,622	70.74	742	953
Darrang	928,500	63.34	586	954
Hailakandi	659,296	60.31	497	951
Goalpara	1,008,183	57.52	553	964
Karimganj	1,228,686	56.36	679	963
Nagoan	2,823,768	55.36	711	962
Morigaon	957,423	52.56	617	967
Bongaigaon	738,804	50.22	676	966

Source: Computed from the Census of India, 2011

### Status of Education In Assam

As seen in the table 2 in 2011, the literacy rate of Assam was estimated to be 73.18% (78.81% male and 67.27% female). The literacy rate of Assam is slightly below the national average of 74.04%. It can be observed that these districts represent both lower literacy rates (excluding Karimganj and Hailakandi) as well as lower proportion of Graduate and above, than the state and the national average. Taking the Chars as one administrative unit, they come under 59 development blocks which account for 9.35% of Assam's total population can be seen to be the most illiterate population of India. The data says that there is a 2% decline in the Muslim OBC literacy rates from 2001 to 2011 census figure. The educational scenario of these Char islands with majority Muslim population is a separate subject of study altogether. According to the data provided by the Census District Handbook of 2011, the distribution of schools and colleges in the nine high Muslim dominant districts in Assam are as such –

Table 2: No. of Schools and Colleges, Literacy rate and Proportion of Graduate and above for Assam and the top 9 Districts with high Muslim Population in Assam -

District	No. of Schools	No. of Colleges	Literacy rate (%)	Graduate and above (%)
Assam	4862	554	73.18	3.24
Dhubri	275	48	58.34	1.76
Barpeta	253	31	63.81	0.06
Darrang	84	13	63.08	0.06
Hailakandi	70	4	74.33	0.07
Goalpara	198	9	67.37	0.04
Karimganj	100	18	78.22	0.05
Nagaon	371	56	72.37	0.08
Morigaon	117	12	68.03	0.05
Bongaigaon	130	16	69.74	0.15

Source: Computed from the District Census Handbook, C-9 series table, Census of India, 2011

The statistics provided by both the national level data platforms Census of India and All India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) show considerable differences in the spread of the number of institutions. This difference can be attributed to the methodology of data collection as well as the definition adopted

by the two platforms. Where the Census of India helps fetch the district level data, on the other hand, AISHE only provides data for the state level. As per the reports of the AISHE 2017-18, Assam has total 604 educational institutions for higher education, which includes Universities, Colleges and Stand Alone institutions, whereas the All India total accounts for 49964 educational institutions on the whole. Assam has a total of 21 Universities throughout the state, with 2 Central Universities, three institutes of national importance, ten state public universities, one open state university and five state private universities. According to the AISHE, the college statistics in Assam shows that there are 512 colleges, which calculates for 14 colleges per lakh population with an average enrolment per college being 983 students of the age group (18-23 years). There are 73 private colleges with 4.12% enrolment and 425 government colleges with 95.88% enrolment in Assam (based on Actual response). Table 3 provides the level-wise breakup of the registration into different levels of higher education in Assam and India. The highest proportion of students enrolled for under graduate level as for the year 2017-18. There have been enough studies upon the school (primary and secondary) education in almost all the states and union territories of the country, but studies upon higher education are limited.

Table 3: Level-wise enrolment of students in Higher Education for Assam and India, 2017-18

	PhD.	M.Phil.	Post Graduate	Under graduate	PG Diploma	Diploma	Certificate	Integrated	Grand Total
Assam	0.64	0.05	13.02	82.02	0.50	2.64	0.36	0.78	678344
India	0.44	0.09	11.23	79.19	0.64	7.39	0.48	0.53	36642378

Source: All India Survey of Higher Education, 2017-18

### **Role of Muslim Political Organisations in Assam**

The Muslims in Assam have faced discrimination and status deterioration for innumerable reasons since the pre-independence period that has directly or indirectly affected their educational performance. The differences between the two communities (Hindus-Muslims) widened during the days of the civil disobedience and non-co-operation movements of 1920's in Assam. These differences led to the formation of numerous Muslim organisations such as the formation of the Muslim Students Association (MSA) in 1919 that was declared in a Muslim Students Conference held in Guwahati; it included all the school as well as college going Muslim students of Assam. The association aimed towards helping students with financial aid, as well as develop the all-round personality of the students. The third session of the Muslim students conference was held at Gauhati in 1922. It laid stress on taking constructive programmes including setting up of Libraries and publishing newspapers and periodicals, establishing schools in every corner of Assam, and most importantly they emphasised on the importance of mother tongue in education. Hence the conference advised every Muslim student with excellent writing skills to translate at least one book to Assamese. The association also focused upon the promotion of women education and the vocational training courses to alleviate poverty in the community. Another students association, the Assam Satra Sanmilan, was also active that was functioning for the welfare of all the

students in Assam. However, the MSA felt the need to maintain a separate organisation to preserve the Islamic literature and culture. Hence they did not merge it with the larger organisation.

Simultaneously the Provincial Muslim League was also formed on 28<sup>th</sup> January 1928. Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, the freedom struggle saw a new face where all the communities joined hands for the common cause, even though minor communal feelings had crept into the people's minds. Communal tension raised its ugly head within the student community over petty issues like Saraswati Puja and Banday Mataram. The Slogan of Banday Mataram often evoked resentment among the Muslims in the Brahmaputra as well as the Surma valleys ( Bhuyan, A.C, 1978, P-50-52). On 5<sup>th</sup> March 1939 another Muslim student organisation was born, the Assam Provincial Muslim Students Federation (APMSF). The APMSF was directly or indirectly affected by the ideas of the Muslim League. Politics was gradually creeping into the students union, which later led the students to support the Two Nation Theory as well as the Civil Disobedience movement.

After the partition of the country, the Muslim Politics in India changed abruptly. Post-independence the Muslim League was banned in Assam that led to the fragmentation of the collaborative organisations to become voiceless. That was when the All Assam Minorities Students Union (AAMSU) was launched in the year 1979 that catered the needs of the Minority students in Assam, and majorly the Muslims. During the period of the Assam Movement (1979-85) launched by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and All Asom Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) the Muslims of Assam were unnecessarily harassed on the false plea of Bangladeshi nationals. The AASU activists burnt many Muslim houses to ashes during 1983, because of the fact that the Muslims participated in the elections boycotted by the AASU and the AAGSP demanding deletion of foreign names from the voter list before elections are held which led to the rise in Muslim agitation. Meanwhile, the AASU and the AAGSP launched a movement known as the Assam movement in 1979 against the foreigners, though at the beginning their movement was directed against the 'outsiders' of Assam. But due to certain obvious reasons, the word 'outsiders' was replaced by the word 'foreigners'. Thus, it was seen that during the movement, the Muslims were harassed in the name of foreigners. So, to protect the minorities, linguistic and religious sub-divisions, from the onslaughts of the movement activists, a youth organization of the minorities, namely, the 'All Assam Minorities Juba Parishad' (AAMYJ) was formed simultaneously at Jaleswar on 31<sup>st</sup> March 1980. Both the AAMSU and the AAMYJ both focused upon the educational development of the Muslims and other minorities by providing financial support. In 1982, another national students organisation with the name, Students Islamic Organisation of India (SIO) was formed with a branch in every state. The forum focused upon strengthening the teachings of the Quran among the illiterate and impoverished, uneducated Muslims all over India.

After a bloody violence led election on the 15 August 1985, the Assam Accord was signed between the central and the state Governments on one hand, and the AASU and AAGSP leaders on the other. The

Muslim leaders of Assam felt humiliated for not being made a party to the Assam Accord, making the Muslims feel anti-national. In such a situation the Muslims felt that they needed their platform and hence the United Minorities Front of Assam (UMFA), was formed in Hojai, a dominant Muslim town in Assam. The UMFA tirelessly worked for the community to bring equality and secularity in the state till the 2001 elections, but education was still missing from their agenda.

To guide the various non-political Minorities organizations, the All Assam Minorities Intelligentsia Forum (AAMIF) was formed in 2002 at a Conference held in Haji Mussafir Khan, Gauhati. The UMFA weakened towards the end of Tarun Gogoi's political tenure, hence the birth of a new political party the Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF) was born in 2006. The AUDF worked towards the National register of citizens, recognition of 'D' voters, Char areas development programme, flood problem of Assam, etc.

It is a fact that there have been several Muslim students associations right from the pre-independence period till the current educational era. The aim of all the student associations have been to promote and support the students financially as well as motivate them to acquire knowledge. But it is also true that the organisations could not maintain safe distance from communal politics in the state. The organisations were revived from time to time but it could not help the educational development of the students, leading to the under-representation of Muslim students in education and especially in Higher Education.

## **Methodology**

The study has been conducted in Kamrup (rural), Goalpara and Darrang districts of Assam. The study locations have been chosen purposefully keeping the characteristics of the districts in consideration, where Goalpara and Darrang fall into the list of top 9 districts with high Muslim population, and Kamrup (rural) portrays the rural picture with more clarity. The selection is also based upon the convenience and reach of the organisation into the districts.

The Methodology of the study is mainly qualitative that includes personal interviews with Muslim students (College going Youth). The interviews were done with the prior consent of the interviewees. A detailed discussion with the respondents of the questionnaire revealed several inferences that can be related with other general notions of the underrepresentation. The tool for the interview includes both the open-ended as well as close-ended questions. Where the questions mainly focused upon the problems faced by Muslim students in getting admission in good schools/colleges, issues related to security and identity, awareness of scholarships and programmes, etc. A total of 33 students were interviewed that were selected with the help of random sampling technique.

## **Inferences from the data**

The team interacted with the three groups of respondents, and separate views were collected from each of them. The youth (college-going group) provided basic real-time problems and struggles of attaining higher education. The inferences gathered from the interviews taken from the students -

### **1. Distance from Residence and Access to services**

As seen in the other study locations where distance plays as an important factor for the under-representation. Here both the schools and colleges fall into the range that is accessible and easily reachable by the respondents. Where schools are concerned, all the respondents of the survey preferred to attend schools within the range of 0-5 km. Regardless of the type of school such as government/private, co-education/all girls/all boys, the enrolment of the students in schools were mainly focused upon the distance factor.

As far as college enrolment of the students are concerned among the 33 respondents 16 preferred to study within the range of 0-1 km, 11 students preferred to study within 0-5 km, and the rest 6 studied within the range of 6-10 km distance from their home. The students enrolment in colleges spreads from the centre to the outer range resembling somewhat to the pattern of the Central Place Theory. As far as availability and access is concerned, the availability of schools and colleges in these areas is quite reasonable to cover the population of the area. As per the AISHE, there are total 73 Private colleges and 425 Government colleges in Assam. Distance also plays an important role in the attainment of Higher education. Many respondents indicated towards the point that the Universities which are located at a distance of more than 50 km, are mostly inaccessible, and the reasons sited for the same are financial problems if needed to commute regularly or stay at hostels at the location. Many do not pursue higher education due to the overhead cost involved in attainment.

### **2. Family Size and Economic Status**

The Total Fertility Rates (TFR) in Assam saw a phenomenal change from a very high TFR in 2001 to medium rates in 2011, i.e., 5.1 to 3.1. Ghosh (2018) in his working paper, classifies the TFRs among the Hindus and Muslims in the districts of Assam. It was observed that 96.3% Hindu dominated districts were seen in the first range i.e. (less than or equal to 2.1) and only 22.2% of Muslims dominated districts in the first range. As the classes goes on, increasing the percentage of Muslim dominated districts in the higher TFR classes also goes on increasing. Districts Goalpara and Darrang also record for high TFRs at 3.5aAnd Kamrup (Rural) TFR=3 (Annual Health Survey, 2011-12). The Muslim families usually have larger family size than the other religious groups. Larger family size with less number of earning members leads to poverty and poor access to services. A majority of respondents in the survey also responded that due to financial problems and large family size, the breadwinner is usually unable to support all the children for education. Many of them said that due to poor financial conditions, most of

them are unable to continue for higher education. Even though the respondents showed some interest in continuing for higher education, many said that their parents would be happier if they helped them financially by working alongside them.

### **3. Lack of Opportunity and Mentality of the People**

Muslims in Assam are mostly concentrated in the rural parts of the state, where the flow of information is slower than the urban areas. The respondents stated that it is a general thinking in the region that Muslims do not get any opportunities due to their religious identity. Hence the flow of motivation also gets limited; many students lose motivation to study as they see many educated persons working in odd jobs or small businesses. It was seen that some of the respondents knew about the scholarships for Higher Education. Not many students have received the scholarships. It was observed that the Minority Scholarship was the only one famously known and received form of financial aid in the regions.

Lack of opportunities for the Muslim youth due to the religious identity is partially created in the mentality of the people. There are many other reasons for this under-representation, especially for women. Parents believe that their wards may get involved into unproductive friendship and adult relationships with the opposite sex. Women are usually not allowed to travel to far away locations and study higher education, mainly for the above reason.

A Teacher from the South Salmara District provides an overall view of the Muslims of the backward districts of Assam. The village Boro Kazir has a population size of 1000-1200, in around 200 Households. The village has a Muslim majority where the students turnout in higher education is around 15%. The reasons cited for the under-representation are similar to almost all the above reasons stated. It can be observed that the persons who have attained higher education are from the families that are financially good or whose parents are teachers. The students currently attaining higher education are mostly second or third generation learners. There are no government colleges in the district. Only 1-2% families that are economically poor have achieved or sent their wards for higher education. There are no colleges in the district that provide Science and Commerce streams, the students have to travel to nearby districts to opt for these streams. The students who do not travel outside the district due to reasons like financial problems, social issues, etc, end up studying Arts. There are not much opportunities in the arts stream in the district. There are lesser number of schools and colleges as well as the distance plays in important role in achievement of Higher Education.

The second group of interviewees were alumni's of higher education; the alumni's mostly blamed the governments both at the state and the national level for neglecting the development of the minority community. They raised the issue of financial incapability, lack of awareness, motivation and knowledge about scholarships among the people. Many of the alumni's faced financial problems during their journey and with some financial help through scholarships, they could achieve their goal. They also blame the community people for the under-representation as "they only focus upon survival and do not work for surplus or development".

A total of 9 interviews were conducted with Professionals that included, five educationists, three social workers and 1 Maulana from the Kamrup (Rural) district of Assam. The experts showed concern over the under-representation problem as well as the root cause of the issue. According to the experts, the infrastructural support by the government, such as schools and colleges are lesser in number, due to which the distance factor acts as a barrier in attainment of education. The experts believe it is a dual responsibility of the community, political leaders as well as the government to create awareness regarding the under-representation of Muslims in Higher Education. Almost everyone expressed the need of setting up good higher education colleges in the North-East India, They emphasised on the need of setting strong civil society organisation in the Muslim areas where the parents along with students would attend workshops and counselling programmes about the importance of Higher Education. They also said that there is a great need to provide reservation to the community to help them bring in par with the other communities.

### **Summary**

The study was conducted on the Muslims of the three districts of Assam, namely Kamrup (rural), Goalpara and Darrang to understand the underlying causes of under-representation in Higher Education. The study included interviews with the Students (currently college going), Alumni's (professionals) and experts (CSO leaders, Social Workers, Educationists). Through the study, we have tried to understand the problems and issues with the help of first hand experience of the interviewees. For a state like Assam with a the fifth largest Muslim population in the country and huge history of leadership in the freedom struggle the under-representation in higher education for an important part of the religious group is saddening. Numerous Muslim Students unions were formed right from the 1920's with the agenda to support and motivate the Muslim students for higher education by providing financial support and guidance, but they unwantedly ended up into the communal politics. The communal politics in the unions overshadowed the development agendas leading them to decline gradually.

The base of educational development, i.e., schools, are very less as compared to the density of population, especially in the Muslim dominated districts. The same has been proved by the secondary data sources such as the Census of India and All India Survey of Higher Education as well. The college concentration is equally less in number as the schools. Distance from the residence plays as an important



factor, where the students that are financially weak do not prefer staying in Hostels, Rented places to complete education. A majority of the students answered that they are unaware of Financial aid and want to pursue higher education, but due to poor economic condition, they are joining their family in workforce. The students who go for higher education either belong to the wealthy families or the family with some educated elders that may guide the students. Educational status of the second largest community in Assam is in a poor state that needs great attention from the government as well as from awareness from within the community to help lead the community towards development.