

# Human Rights Violations Against Bengali-Speaking Muslims in Assam

BRIEFING NOTE

*A briefing note on continuing human rights violations against Bengali-speaking Muslims in India's Assam state.*

Briefing Note No. #2024/3

**SOUTHASIA  
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# Continuing Human Rights Violations against Bengali-Speaking Muslims in Assam

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This note highlights continuing serious human rights violations against Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam, particularly those reported since July 2024.

## 1. Arbitrary arrests of Bengali-speaking Muslims and detentions with the intent of deportation

- 1.1. On 30 August, Sanidul Hoque, a 20-year-old college-student was arrested 31 August 2024 for posting “objectionable” images of Hindu deities on his social media handles.<sup>1</sup> A day later, Altaf Hussain, a 31-year-old Bengali-speaking Muslim man, was arrested for uploading a protest song on YouTube critiquing the discriminatory treatment of Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam.<sup>2</sup>
- 1.2. On 2 September 2024, at least 28 individuals in Assam’s Barpeta district were summoned by the police on the pretext of signing documents, but were instead labelled as ‘declared foreigners’ and forcibly sent away from their families to the Matia transit camp in Goalpura district.<sup>3</sup> The Matia transit camp is a detention centre from where foreigners are to be deported. All 28 individuals are Bengali-speaking Muslims.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Forced evictions targeting Bengali-speaking Muslims

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<sup>1</sup> Declared foreigners, 28 in Assam sent to ‘transit camp’, The Hindu, 3 September 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/assam/declared-foreigners-28-in-assam-sent-to-transit-camp/article68600321.ece>; Barpeta Youth Arrested For Hurting Religious Sentiments On Social Media, Pratidin Time, 30 August 2024, <https://www.pratidintime.com/latest-assam-news-breaking-news-assam/barpeta/barpeta-youth-arrested-for-hurting-religious-sentiments-on-social-media/>.

<sup>2</sup> Declared foreigners, 28 in Assam sent to ‘transit camp’, The Hindu, 3 September 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/assam/declared-foreigners-28-in-assam-sent-to-transit-camp/article68600321.ece>; “Wounded Hindu sentiments”: Singer arrested in Assam for protest song about discrimination towards ‘Miya’ Muslims, Maktoob Media, 3 September 2024, <https://maktoobmedia.com/india/wounded-hindu-sentiments-singer-arrested-in-assam-for-protest-song-about-discrimination-towards-miya-muslims/>; Assam CM’s call to expel ‘Miya Muslims’ incites violence against Bengali speaking Muslim labourers, Citizens for Justice and Peace, 4 September 2024, <https://cjp.org.in/assam-cms-call-to-expel-miya-muslims-incites-violence-against-bengali-speaking-muslim-labourers/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ripped Apart: 28 Bengali Muslims detained as “Declared Foreigners” in Assam’s Barpeta district, Citizens for Justice and Peace, 5 September 2024, <https://cjp.org.in/ripped-apart-28-bengali-muslims-detained-as-declared-foreigners-in-assams-barpeta-district/>; Declared foreigners, 28 in Assam sent to ‘transit camp’, The Hindu, 3 September 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/assam/declared-foreigners-28-in-assam-sent-to-transit-camp/article68600321.ece>; Assam: 28 ‘declared foreigners’ Bengali Muslims detained, sent to transit camp, Deccan Herald, 2 September 2024, <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/assam/assam-28-declared-foreigners-bengali-muslims-detained-sent-to-transit-camp-3174082>.

<sup>4</sup> Ripped Apart: 28 Bengali Muslims detained as “Declared Foreigners” in Assam’s Barpeta district, Citizens for Justice and Peace, 5 September 2024, <https://cjp.org.in/ripped-apart-28-bengali-muslims-detained-as-declared-foreigners-in-assams-barpeta-district/>; Declared foreigners, 28 in Assam sent to ‘transit camp’, The Hindu, 3 September 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/assam/declared-foreigners-28-in-assam-sent-to-transit-camp/article68600321.ece>; Assam: 28 ‘declared foreigners’ Bengali Muslims detained, sent to transit camp, Deccan Herald, 2 September 2024, <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/assam/assam-28-declared-foreigners-bengali-muslims-detained-sent-to-transit-camp-3174082>.

- 2.1. Arbitrary forced eviction drives targeting Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam continue. In June 2024, about 1,500 such families comprising about 8,000 individuals were evicted from homes in Silbhanga village where they have been living in for approximately four decades on the basis that they were “unauthorised encroachers” on land belonging to the Indian railways.<sup>5</sup> It is significant to note that the neighbouring residences of Hindu families which are also situated on land belonging to the railways were left untouched; almost all the houses that were demolished belonged to Bengali-speaking Muslim families.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Racist hate speech

- 3.1. Incidents of racist hate speech targeting Muslims, particularly Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam, have also continued. Assam’s media is brazenly anti-Muslim as well, with the Chief Minister of Assam, Himanta Biswa Sarma, being a frequent and key perpetrator of such speech<sup>7</sup>, including in the following instances:

3.1.1. CM Sarma has made bizarre accusations of Muslims in Assam engaging in different sorts of “jihad” (translated as “holy war”),<sup>8</sup> most recently levelling absurd accusations of “flood jihad” against University of Science and Technology Meghalaya (USTM) on the basis a hill in Meghalaya, bordering Assam was cut to construct the university. However, CM Sarma made it clear that his opposition stemmed from the identity of the proprietor and chancellor of USTM, Mahbulul Hoque, who is a Bengali-speaking Muslim Assamese – with CM Sarma also taking issue with dome-shaped “mosque-like” structures at the entrance of the USTM.<sup>9</sup>

3.1.2. On 15 August 2024, at an event to celebrate the Indian independence day, CM Sarma resorted to the oft-used and baseless right-wing fear-mongering tactic of asserting that there was an increase in the population of Muslims and that the balance with Hindu population was at risk.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In Assam, over a thousand Muslim families evicted from railway land – but not their Hindu neighbours, Scroll, 13 July 2024, <https://scroll.in/article/1070527/in-assam-over-a-thousand-muslim-families-evicted-from-railway-land-but-not-their-hindu-neighbours>; Assam land eviction: 1500 Muslim homes targeted, Temple spared, allege Morigaon residents, Muslim Mirror, 14 July 2024, <https://muslimmirror.com/eng/assam-land- eviction-1500-muslim-homes-targeted-temple-spared-allege-morigaon-residents/>.

<sup>6</sup> In Assam, over a thousand Muslim families evicted from railway land – but not their Hindu neighbours, Scroll, 13 July 2024, <https://scroll.in/article/1070527/in-assam-over-a-thousand-muslim-families-evicted-from-railway-land-but-not-their-hindu-neighbours>; Assam land eviction: 1500 Muslim homes targeted, Temple spared, allege Morigaon residents, Muslim Mirror, 14 July 2024, <https://muslimmirror.com/eng/assam-land- eviction-1500-muslim-homes-targeted-temple-spared-allege-morigaon-residents/>.

<sup>7</sup> As Bengali Muslims Flee Homes In Eastern Assam, The Chief Minister Ramps Up Familiar Islamophobic Rhetoric, Article 14, 3 September 2024, <https://article-14.com/post/as-bengali-muslims-flee-homes-in-eastern-assam-the-chief-minister-ramps-up-familiar-islamophobic-rhetoric-66d6826028898>.

<sup>8</sup> Love-land-fertiliser 'jihads': Himanta Biswa Sarma's anti-'miya' diatribe grows louder, Deccan Herald, 2 September 2024, <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/assam/love-land-fertiliser-jihads-himanta-biswa-sarmas-anti-miya-diatribe-grows-louder-3173112>.

<sup>9</sup> Constitutional Black Hole: Himanta Biswa Sarma's Assam, Where Muslim Rights Disappear, The Wire, 2 September 2024, <https://thewire.in/communalism/constitutional-black-hole-himanta-biswa-sarmas-assam-where-muslim-rights-disappear>; Assam CM Himanta Faces Pushback For 'Flood Jihad' Attack on University Ranked in Top 200, The Wire, 16 August 2024, [https://thewire.in/communalism/himanta-pushback-ustm-top-200-flood-jihad#google\\_vignette](https://thewire.in/communalism/himanta-pushback-ustm-top-200-flood-jihad#google_vignette).

<sup>10</sup> Assam threatened by demographic change, says Himanta Biswa Sarma, The Hindu, 15 August 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/assam/assam-threatened-by-demographic-change-says-himanta-biswa-sarma/article68528722.ece>.

- 3.1.3. On 25 August 2024, CM Sarma baselessly linked crime against women in parts of the state to migration, calling it “part of a large encroachment strategy”, and alleging that culprits “scare families and then grab their lands”.<sup>11</sup>
- 3.1.4. On 27 August 2024, in the Assam State Assembly, CM Sarma clearly stated that based on his ideology, he would “take sides” against Bengali-speaking Muslims, whom he referred to as ‘Miya Muslims’.<sup>12</sup> He used the fear-mongering tactic of raising the right-wing conspiracy theory that Muslims would take over the country, in this case that he would protect the state of Assam from being taken over by ‘Miya Muslims’.<sup>13</sup>
- 3.2. This type of hate-filled rhetoric in CM Sarma’s speeches has been linked with multiple instances of threats and physical attacks by non-state actors against Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam in late August and early September 2024.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4. Attacks by non-state actors

- 4.1. Further to CM Sarma’s comments and following the gang-rape of a 14-year-old girl in Assam on 22 August 2024, wherein one of the three accused persons is a Bengali-speaking Muslim, there has been an increased movement by non-state actors to drive out Bengali-speaking Muslims from the area.<sup>15</sup> The accused person died a day after he was taken for interrogation by the police. Members of the All Tai Ahom

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<sup>11</sup> Himanta Sarma Links Crime Against Women In Assam To "Large Encroachment Strategy", NDTV, 25 August 2024, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/himanta-sarma-links-crime-against-women-in-assam-to-large-encroachment-strategy-6413647>.

<sup>12</sup> I will take sides, won't let 'Miya' Muslims take over Assam: Himanta, The Hindu, 27 August 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/assam/i-will-take-sides-wont-let-miya-muslims-take-over-assam-himanta/article68572076.ece>; Will take sides, won't let Miya Muslims take over Assam: Himanta Biswa Sarma, The Indian Express, 28 August 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/assam-cm-himanta-biswa-sarma-wont-let-miya-muslims-take-over-9535569/>.

<sup>13</sup> I will take sides, won't let 'Miya' Muslims take over Assam: Himanta, The Hindu, 27 August 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/assam/i-will-take-sides-wont-let-miya-muslims-take-over-assam-himanta/article68572076.ece>; Will take sides, won't let Miya Muslims take over Assam: Himanta Biswa Sarma, The Indian Express, 28 August 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/assam-cm-himanta-biswa-sarma-wont-let-miya-muslims-take-over-9535569/>.

<sup>14</sup> 'Beaten, Humiliated': As 15 Muslim Men Are Attacked, Opposition Connects Crime to CM Himanta, The Wire, 30 August 2024, <https://thewire.in/communalism/himanta-biswa-sarma-assam-muslim-hate-speech>; BJP trying to recreate 2002 Gujarat episodes in Assam, claims Opposition MLA Akhil Gogoi, Scroll, 26 August 2024, <https://scroll.in/latest/1072471/bjp-trying-to-recreate-2002-gujarat-episodes-in-assam-claims-opposition-mla-akhil-gogoi>; Assam CM's call to expel 'Miya Muslims' incites violence against Bengali speaking Muslim labourers, Citizens for Justice and Peace, 4 September 2024, <https://cjp.org.in/assam-cms-call-to-expel-miya-muslims-incites-violence-against-bengali-speaking-muslim-labourers/>.

<sup>15</sup> BJP trying to recreate 2002 Gujarat episodes in Assam, claims Opposition MLA Akhil Gogoi, Scroll, 26 August 2024, <https://scroll.in/latest/1072471/bjp-trying-to-recreate-2002-gujarat-episodes-in-assam-claims-opposition-mla-akhil-gogoi>; Amid calls for 'Bangladeshis' to leave, Assam's tense Sivasagar district struggles to keep the peace, The Indian Express, 27 August 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/bangladeshis-to-leave-assams-sivasagar-struggles-9534842/>; Minor girl gang rape sparks anti-Bangladeshi sentiment in upper Assam, The New Indian Express, 27 August 2024, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2024/Aug/27/minor-girl-gang-rape-sparks-anti-bangladeshi-sentiment-in-upper-assam>; Assam CM's call to expel 'Miya Muslims' incites violence against Bengali speaking Muslim labourers, Citizens for Justice and Peace, 4 September 2024, <https://cjp.org.in/assam-cms-call-to-expel-miya-muslims-incites-violence-against-bengali-speaking-muslim-labourers/>.

Students' Union have reportedly sent ultimatums and issued threats to Bengali-speaking Muslims to vacate rented houses.<sup>16</sup>

- 4.2. On 24 August 2024, a group of about 20 unidentified men attacked 15 Bengali-speaking Muslim men working at a construction site in Upper Assam, and forced them to leave Upper Assam within an hour.<sup>17</sup> The attackers filmed the attack and released it online,<sup>18</sup> showing the victims being beaten on their bare backs, threatened and forced to kneel on the ground while holding their ears and chanting Assamese slogans.<sup>19</sup> Opposition parties have alleged that the inciting speeches by CM Sarma, highlighted above, played a role in triggering and facilitating this attack.<sup>20</sup>
- 4.3. In early September 2024, two Bengali-speaking Muslim men, an ice cream seller and a bamboo trader, were assaulted in connection with the same demands to vacate the region.<sup>21</sup> The ice cream seller was attacked by a group of five men, who also abused him, stole his money and attempted to strangulate him. The bamboo trader was beaten late in the evening, with repeated demands to leave the area.<sup>22</sup>
- 4.4. Local activists estimate that between 100 to 1,000 Bengali-speaking Muslims fled their homes in eastern Assam due to such attacks and threats.<sup>23</sup>

## 5. Repeal of Customary and Personal laws

- 5.1. As highlighted previously, in February 2024, the Assam government had repealed the Assam Muslim Marriages and Divorces Registration Act, 1935 with the purported aim of curbing child marriages among Muslims in the state. Further, on 28 August 2024, the Assam Legislative Assembly passed the Assam Compulsory Registration of Muslim Marriages and Divorces Bill, 2024, taking away the ability of Muslim registrars or kazis across the state to register marriages. It is relevant to note that child marriage is not a problem restricted to Muslims in India.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, child marriage is already outlawed under a central law called the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006. Further, the objective of curbing child marriages could also have

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<sup>16</sup> BJP trying to recreate 2002 Gujarat episodes in Assam, claims Opposition MLA Akhil Gogoi, Scroll, 26 August 2024, <https://scroll.in/latest/1072471/bjp-trying-to-recreate-2002-gujarat-episodes-in-assam-claims-opposition-mla-akhil-gogoi>.

<sup>17</sup> 'Beaten, Humiliated': As 15 Muslim Men Are Attacked, Opposition Connects Crime to CM Himanta, The Wire, 30 August 2024, <https://thewire.in/communalism/himanta-biswa-sarma-assam-muslim-hate-speech>; Miya Muslim labourers assaulted, forced to leave Upper Assam as CM Himanta Biswa Sarma fuels ethnic tensions, Maktoob Media, 30 August 2024, <https://maktoobmedia.com/india/miya-muslim-labourers-assaulted-forced-to-leave-upper-assam-as-cm-himanta-biswa-sarma-fuels-ethnic-tensions/>.

<sup>18</sup> <https://x.com/HateDetectors/status/1828754554822746584>.

<sup>19</sup> Miya Muslim labourers assaulted, forced to leave Upper Assam as CM Himanta Biswa Sarma fuels ethnic tensions, Maktoob Media, 30 August 2024, <https://maktoobmedia.com/india/miya-muslim-labourers-assaulted-forced-to-leave-upper-assam-as-cm-himanta-biswa-sarma-fuels-ethnic-tensions/>.

<sup>20</sup> Constitutional Black Hole: Himanta Biswa Sarma's Assam, Where Muslim Rights Disappear, The Wire, 2 September 2024, <https://thewire.in/communalism/constitutional-black-hole-himanta-biswa-sarmas-assam-where-muslim-rights-disappear>; 'Beaten, Humiliated': As 15 Muslim Men Are Attacked, Opposition Connects Crime to CM Himanta, The Wire, 30 August 2024, <https://thewire.in/communalism/himanta-biswa-sarma-assam-muslim-hate-speech>.

<sup>21</sup> Two Miya Muslims attacked in Assam's Baksa district amid ethnic tensions, Maktoob Media, 5 September 2024, <https://maktoobmedia.com/features/two-miya-muslims-attacked-in-assams-baksa-district-amid-ethnic-tensions/>.

<sup>22</sup> Two Miya Muslims attacked in Assam's Baksa district amid ethnic tensions, Maktoob Media, 5 September 2024, <https://maktoobmedia.com/features/two-miya-muslims-attacked-in-assams-baksa-district-amid-ethnic-tensions/>.

<sup>23</sup> As Bengali Muslims Flee Homes In Eastern Assam, The Chief Minister Ramps Up Familiar Islamophobic Rhetoric, Article 14, 3 September 2024, <https://article-14.com/post/as-bengali-muslims-flee-homes-in-eastern-assam-the-chief-minister-ramps-up-familiar-islamophobic-rhetoric-66d6826028898>.

<sup>24</sup> Devanik Saha, 84% Of 12 Million Married Children Under 10 Are Hindus, IndiaSpend, 11 June 2016, available at: <https://www.indiaspend.com/84-of-12-million-married-children-under-10-are-hindus-82446/>.

been achieved simply by amending the relevant provisions in the law to include the age limits, as required. Instead, the registration of marriages between two Muslims has now been made complicated and difficult, as in the case of inter-religious marriages under the Special Marriage Act.<sup>25</sup>

## 6. Declared intent to introduce discriminatory laws and policies

- 6.1. On 4 August 2024, CM Sarma stated the government's intention to introduce a law against "love jihad" with life imprisonment as the penalty.<sup>26</sup> "Love jihad" is a baseless Hindu right-wing conspiracy theory alleging that Muslim men coerce Hindu women into converting to Islam by luring them into romantic relationship.
- 6.2. On the same day, he also announced the intent to introduce a policy to limit government jobs in Assam to persons born in Assam.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, he said that that state would introduce measures to restrict the sale of land to Muslims, making government consent necessary for land transactions between Hindus and Muslims.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Will curb land sale to Muslims, law soon for life term in 'love jihad' cases: CM Himanta Biswa Sarma, The Indian Express, 5 August 2024, [https://indianexpress.com/article/india/assam-law-love-jihad-domicile-policy-govt-jobs-himanta-biswa-sarma-9494734/?ref=newlist\\_hp](https://indianexpress.com/article/india/assam-law-love-jihad-domicile-policy-govt-jobs-himanta-biswa-sarma-9494734/?ref=newlist_hp); Assam to get domicile policy soon, only those born in state to get govt jobs: CM Himanta Biswa Sarma, The Times of India, 4 August 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/assam-to-get-domicile-policy-only-those-born-in-state-to-get-govt-jobs-cm-himanta-biswa-sarma/articleshow/112266432.cms>.

<sup>27</sup> Will curb land sale to Muslims, law soon for life term in 'love jihad' cases: CM Himanta Biswa Sarma, The Indian Express, 5 August 2024, [https://indianexpress.com/article/india/assam-law-love-jihad-domicile-policy-govt-jobs-himanta-biswa-sarma-9494734/?ref=newlist\\_hp](https://indianexpress.com/article/india/assam-law-love-jihad-domicile-policy-govt-jobs-himanta-biswa-sarma-9494734/?ref=newlist_hp); Assam to get domicile policy soon, only those born in state to get govt jobs: CM Himanta Biswa Sarma, The Times of India, 4 August 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/assam-to-get-domicile-policy-only-those-born-in-state-to-get-govt-jobs-cm-himanta-biswa-sarma/articleshow/112266432.cms>.

<sup>28</sup> Will curb land sale to Muslims, law soon for life term in 'love jihad' cases: CM Himanta Biswa Sarma, The Indian Express, 5 August 2024, [https://indianexpress.com/article/india/assam-law-love-jihad-domicile-policy-govt-jobs-himanta-biswa-sarma-9494734/?ref=newlist\\_hp](https://indianexpress.com/article/india/assam-law-love-jihad-domicile-policy-govt-jobs-himanta-biswa-sarma-9494734/?ref=newlist_hp); Assam to get domicile policy soon, only those born in state to get govt jobs: CM Himanta Biswa Sarma, The Times of India, 4 August 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/assam-to-get-domicile-policy-only-those-born-in-state-to-get-govt-jobs-cm-himanta-biswa-sarma/articleshow/112266432.cms>.



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