

# Assam Cabinet approves 'indigenous' status for five Muslim communities

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**In news**— Recently, the Assam Cabinet has approved the identification of five Assamese Muslim sub-groups as “indigenous” Assamese Muslim communities.

## Key updates-

- The five Muslim sub-groups accorded with indigenous status include- **Goriyas, Moriyas, Julhas, Deshis, and Syeds.**
- The status will ensure their development in health, cultural identity, education, financial inclusion, skill development and women empowerment.
- **Considered distinct from Bengali-speaking Muslims**, who have a history of migration from present-day Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) to Assam over centuries, **this group has often expressed the need for a separate identity.**
- Unlike Bengali-speaking Muslims who migrated from East Bengal and Bangladesh, **indigenous Assamese Muslims use Assamese as their mother tongue** and follow cultural traditions and festivities similar to Assamese Hindus.
- The decision came following the recommendations of a panel constituted by the Assam government in 2021 to discuss socio-economic issues concerning the Assamese Muslim community of the state.
- **Under the umbrella of the indigenous Assamese Muslim community fall three main groups:** the Goriyas, the Moriyas (from Upper Assam), and the Deshis (from Lower Assam).
- While the **Deshis are 13th-century converts from indigenous communities** such as Koch Rajbongshi and **Mech,**

**the Goriyas and Moriyas trace their lineage to converts as well as soldiers, artisans, etc.** who came to the region during the Ahom rule.

- **Smaller groups such as Julha Muslims also fall under this category.**

### **A brief npte on these sub gropus-**

These sub groups are **described in the report of a sub-committee on 'Cultural identity of indigenous Assamese Muslims' constituted by the state government in July 2021.** It was on the basis of the report of this committee, **headed by journalist and commentator Wasbir Hussain,** that the Cabinet took its decision on the five sub-groups.

Followin are the sub-groups mentioned in the report-

#### **DESHI:**

- Believed to be among the first batch of people in Assam to have embraced Islam, **Deshis trace their lineage to Ali Mech, a Koch-Rajbongshi chieftain** who converted to Islam during the **invasion of Bakhtiyar Khilji** around 1205 AD.

#### **SYED:**

- Sufi **preachers settled in Assam** at various times, the earliest by some accounts being Syed Badiuddin Shah Mada (Madan Pir) in 1497, and the best known being Syed Moinuddin Baghdadi (Azaan Pir or Azaan Fakir) around 1630.
- The Syed community comprises **descendants of their followers.**

#### **GORIYA:**

- In a series of attempted **invasions by the Mughals between 1615 and 1682,** the Ahom regime took several **soldiers** prisoner. **Many of these belonged to Gaur in**

**ancient Bengal, and hence got the name Goriya.**

- The report says that these people settled in Assam and married local women and gradually became a part of the Assamese society.
- It also mentions tribals/Hindus who converted to Islam during **Azaan Pir's time**; they too became subsequently known as Goriya.

#### **MORIYA:**

- These too are **descendants of prisoners of war, captured by the Ahoms** after an attempted **invasion by Turbak Khan** in the 16th century.
- They took to working in brass, an occupation which their descendants, who are known as Moriyas, carry on to this day.

#### **JULHA:**

- A small community, **originally from undivided Bihar, Odisha and West Bengal**, and believed to be **converts from Adivasis**.
- **They migrated to Assam in two phases: as weavers during the Ahom regime, and as tea garden workers** brought by British tea planters in the 19th century. **Julha is listed as an Minorities and Other Backward Classes (MOBC) in Assam.**
- **Prominent Assamese Muslims through history include the navy general Bagh Hazarika** who fought under the Ahom general Lachit Borphukan against Mughal invaders in 1671; Sir Syed Muhammad Saadulla, Assam's first prime minister during colonial rule; the 20th-century poet Syed Abdul Malik; and India's late President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed.

#### **Their population in Assam-**

- The census of 2011 counted 1.06 crore Muslims (34%) in Assam out of a population of 3.12 crore, but does not

record a break-up by ethnicity.

- The sub-committee report to the Assam government puts the current Muslim population at 1.18 crore, out of which it estimates the five “indigenous” groups at 42 lakh.
- That implies that out of every 3 Muslims in Assam, 1 is “indigenous”. Of these 42 lakh, the report estimates the Deshis at 20 lakh, and the Moriyas at 2 lakh.

### **Who are not “indigenous” as per the report?**

The definition leaves out at least one Muslim group with a long history in Assam. In south Assam’s Barak Valley, dominated by Bengali-speaking Hindus and Muslims, there is also a group called **Kachari Muslims, who trace their origins to the Kachari kingdom** (13th century to 1832). **They consider themselves distinct from the Muslims** who migrated from East Bengal.