

# **The Migrant as Political Entrepreneur**

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## **Introduction**

This paper is a tentative study of how a person of East Bengali Muslim origin gained the hegemonic public eye, and has managed to turn it around towards his own end, with varying degrees of success. The paper will explore the complex negotiation between the subject of research of this paper as a ‘political entrepreneur’ and the enframing he has endured by dominant sections in the mass media as well as social media. We shall probe how he has deployed what may be described as becoming a ‘micro-celebrity’ while contending with an antagonistic media framing. The paper illustrates how such an individual performance of a marginalized ‘other’ attempts to ‘game’ the attention economies of online and offline public and its political implications. We have used recent works on the notion of ‘cringe’ cultural production and their usage by marginalized communities to better understand this phenomenon.

Muslims of East Bengali origin have very often been a subject of contention and ‘othering’ in politics in the state of Assam (Baruah, 1999). The caste-Hindu Assamese community and others have often labelled them as ‘illegal immigrants’ in the popular political discourse of the state, and ‘Bangladeshi Miya’ has taken on the role of an ethnic slur aimed at this community. The usage of such a frame to designate the community has been widespread, and public mural art has even depicted them as encroaching animals and insects to be eradicated<sup>1</sup>. While they have been coping with the discriminatory attitude in recent times there has been some assertion from the community. For instance, a group of young litterateurs from the community has sought to re-signify the term ‘Miya’ with positive connotations through their poetry that speaks of their lived experience of discrimination, animosity, displacement through land-erosion etc. (Das, 2021)

Before delving into the rest of the paper it is necessary to elaborate upon the central figure around whom the paper is built. Sukur Ali is from a socio-economically disadvantaged background from Dhubri district in Assam (which borders Bangladesh). In 2019, he stood for Lok Sabha elections from Dhubri

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<sup>1</sup> <https://scroll.in/article/1023979/from-outsiders-to-termites-and-infiltrators-how-bangladeshi-came-to-signify-hate-and-difference>

constituency at the age of 26 as an independent candidate<sup>2</sup>. He received a little over 9000 votes, but his media interviews and sound-bites garnered him quite a bit of fame (or infamy). The principal among these media clips is an interview to an Assamese news channel in which he speaks on the Prime Minister in English, which has been widely shared on social media handles in Assam and is usually labelled hilarious or funny. Although he seemed critical of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP during his media campaign of the 2019 elections, he became a ‘star campaigner’ for the BJP for the 2021 Assam legislative Assembly elections. During this phase as well, he garnered attention for his news interviews. He even made appearances with the Chief Ministerial candidate of the BJP, Himanta Bishwa Sharma. He has since started a YouTube based production channel, and his visits to various districts and life-events (such as his wedding) often make it to Assamese news channels. Media persons and ordinary citizens usually attempt to get sound-bites from him, hoping for more humorous content, while ordinary citizens mill around him for selfies and take videos of him speaking. He has been ‘roasted’<sup>3</sup> by social media personality and ‘influencer’ Carryminati as well, who is quite well-known across the Hindi-speaking part of the country<sup>4</sup>.

The data for this research has been collected from social media platforms – primarily YouTube and Facebook. Hashtags have emerged as a major methodological tool for data collection when it comes to research of online content (Dann, 2015; Rogers, 2015). We used the hashtag #sukurali to locate the content germane to our research on both these platforms.

### **Framing in the mass media**

Sukur Ali’s rise to prominence happened through electronic mass media, Assamese news channels to be precise. A lot of the user-generated content regarding him also feature clips copied and edited from the news clips of his interviews. This re-mediation, often negative and mocking, is then embellished with sound effects, graphics and commentary. The interview that is often found online was aired by the news channel Pratidin Time in 2020. It is his commentary in English on a variety of topics including the Prime Minister, the then Health Minister Himanta Bishwa Sharma’s handling of the Covid 19 pandemic etc. that is usually extracted<sup>5</sup>. Videos such as these often have views in the millions.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://myneta.info/loksabha2019/candidate.php?candidate\\_id=9081](https://myneta.info/loksabha2019/candidate.php?candidate_id=9081)

<sup>3</sup> In internet parlance, roasting is content where one person, usually a comedian, pokes fun and makes a mockery out of someone or something

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7V2wvvg4dk> (the video is laden with expletives in Hindi)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-MkaSInje4>



But as has been mentioned earlier, he had been in the media's limelight since 2019. His coverage by major news channels often involved a cornucopia of background music, slow motion montages of him walking etc. Such 'dramatization' and 'eventalization' has become common in vernacular news channels, aimed at evoking affect and attention (Moffitt, 2016). Thus, coverage of Sukur Ali's visit to a location (where he purportedly seeks to conduct the shooting of scenes for a movie inspired by Bangladesh's 'viral sensation' Hero Alam) begins with a line from Salman Khan's film 'Dabang' playing in the background ('*swagat nahi karoge hamara*'). The entire coverage by Prag News has a sardonic commentary with a sarcastic tone by the journalist, with lines such as '*nobody could recognize the diamond among the stones*' (referring to his Lok Sabha defeat)<sup>6</sup>. Prag News also covered his defeat in a college students' union election in Gauripur town of Dhubri in 2019 where he is seen breaking down into tears<sup>7</sup>. The coverage also has interviews of students who stated that they did not consider him to be a serious candidate and more of a 'joker'. The stylistic components used by the mass media coverage were certainly drawn from the larger memetic cache – background music, laugh tracks, sound effects - and seem to be aimed at increasing 'shareability' (Jenkins et al., 2013).

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3FBSUo\\_eE8&t=5s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3FBSUo_eE8&t=5s)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXjNczx6300>



#pragnews #sukurali #elections

## Sukur Ali lost... once again! | Cries in front of camera



Prag News ✓  
1.76M subscribers

SUBSCRIBE



#pragnews #sukurali #heroalom

## Dhubri's Sukur Ali to make "Hero Alom" inspired movie!! | Speaks on political future

Such coverage continued after Sukur Ali changed his political stand and switched to supporting the BJP. He immediately seemed to have caught the eye of party given his public persona and he was classified as a ‘star campaigner’. His meeting with the Chief Minister was also the cause of much hilarity and was widely transmitted, where he is made to don a *jaapi* and carry a *bota*. He appears clueless while the Chief Minister directs him on what to do, while gently chiding him<sup>8</sup>.



Sukur Ali meet Hemant Biswas Sharma | Sukur ali viral video |

Sukur Ali’s framing in the news media and social media did not change, however, after he became a ‘star campaigner’. His primary attraction remained that of a clownish figure who attracted crowds. News channels interviewed him whenever possible on the campaign trail and he did not come out looking good after them. When questioned about the names of India’s President and BJP cabinet ministers of Assam he was unable to answer<sup>9</sup>. Yet his visits before the 2021 legislative elections drew massive crowds who came to record his speeches and his interviews. Political figures could not draw the same crowds, as the journalists covering these events themselves stated.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XKcujCmqySU>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TFIwKJ5NVk&t=1s>



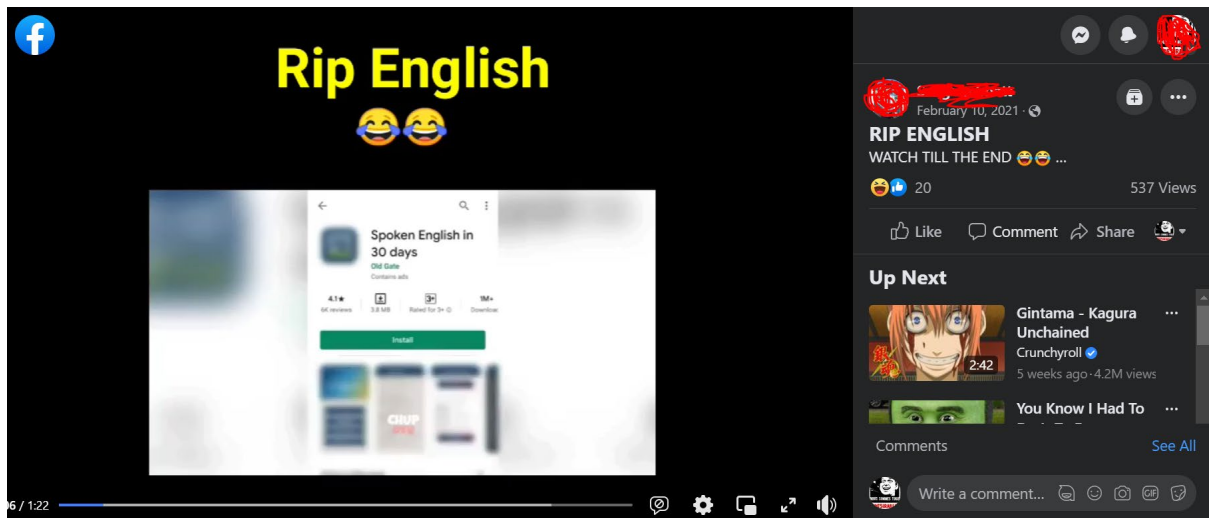
#SukurAliENGLISH #SukurAliFunnyVideo

Sukur Ali Funny video Knowledge Of Sukur Ali BJP campaigner No Knowledge No Entry Sukur Ali English

### Framing in user-generated content

The content relating to Sukur Ali that users generated by mixing and mashing content from various sources often had stylistic elements such as seen in the image below. Rip is meant to indicate the ‘death of English’, metaphorically providing a cue commonly used on social media platforms that the manner in which the language was deployed by Mr. Ali is ripe for mockery and humour. It has also been made part of compilations of people speaking ‘bad’ or ‘improper’ English or making faux pas.

ও আই কি English 🤪 || Sukur Ali Rip English #Roast ||  
#Assamese\_Roast\_Video || TRBA



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/SanGam384/videos/128715469123203/>

YouTube content creators, too, tried to cash in and often interviewed him in English or Hindi, hoping to get higher ‘clicks’ and ‘views’. These were then remediated and transmitted further.



Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/100063788466956/videos/272951487289216>

The memes on Sukur Ali are of a similar vein. The focus lies on his physical appearance, his ‘funny’ English and his lack of knowledge.



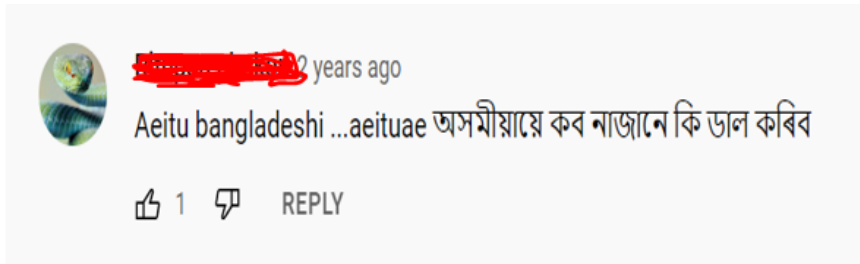
Text caption (top): Life has become like Sukur Ali's English

Text caption (bottom): Neither can I myself (Sukur Ali) understand it, nor can anyone else

### **Framing in user-generated comments**

A few of the comments left below the videos reveal considerable animosity towards Muslims of East Bengali origin. Some of these comments are outright offensive, while others are pointed and snide in the discriminatory rhetoric. 'Miya' is used as a pejorative referent in such comments, and we found outright accusations of 'Bangladeshi' too. Sukur Ali's heavily accented Assamese leads to further suspicions about his nationality.



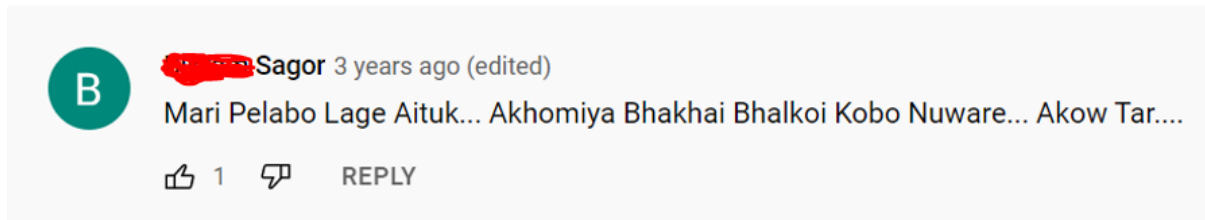


In the comment thread above, one person calls him a Bangladeshi, and that he cannot even speak Assamese. One commenter exhorts him to make his Hero Alom inspired movie in Bangladesh, while yet another expresses doubt whether Dhuburi district even falls in Assam (implying it is Bangladeshi, especially as a border district).



In this thread, one commenter uses 'Miya kid' as a slur against him, while others engage in phonetic wordplay to call him 'kukur', the Assamese word for dog, since 'kukur' sounds phonetically very similar to Sukur. This is a recurring

theme across many comment threads. The comment below wishes for Sukur Ali to be killed, presumably for his temerity to stand for elections in Assam while being unable to speak Assamese ‘correctly’.



Some commenters pin-point the pronunciation errors Sukur Ali makes while speaking Assamese. They point towards his pronunciation of the Assamese word is ‘*bhanga*’ (to break) as ‘*banga*’, while talking about estuaries breaking and causing floods. Due to his video with Himanta Bishwa Sharma and role as ‘*star campaigner*’, some have also referred to him as ‘*Mama*’s’ (Sharma’s sobriquet in Assam) ‘*Miya bhagin*’ (nephew).



## Analysis

In the section above, we have discussed the language of othering and slurs deployed against Sukur Ali that have been drawn based on prevailing ideas of ethnic belonging in Assam. However, a lot of the comments in the YouTube videos of news media coverage one sees Ali being referred to as a ‘*pagol*’, crazy, and somebody who is lacking in intellectual acuity i.e. an idiot. In fact, a majority of the comments are in this vein. This provides us a clue to his subsequent ‘viral’ fame and accruing of publicity.

Content on the internet that has performances of non-proficient cultural markers such as accents, language, bodily gesture etc. that deprecates the subject themselves have always been very popular (Goriunova, 2013). When such content is sourced from individuals or groups from marginalized communities (in this case, a Muslim youth who is of East Bengali extraction in Assam) the

emotive reaction of mockery, cynicism and outright hatred is accentuated. Performances that are considered 'idiotic' are widely transmitted through digital networks, gaining ever more attention and emotional investment with each circuitous loop. The economies of emotion and attention are linked here, as the spectator/viewer/user feels a visceral desire to react to such content (Khalikova and Fish, 2016). We've already seen how the news coverage blurs the line between electronic news media and online user-generated memetic media through the stylistic components being used. Such elements are exaggerated when they are re-mediated, often in a hostile manner, by ordinary users who subscribe to hegemonic discourses of identity. All of this is done to maximize the 'eyeballs' or attention that such content can grab.

Visibility is key to online ecologies, and this applies to the political field as well. Sukur Ali has garnered quite a bit of visibility through his video interviews and speeches. While it is not possible at this juncture to say whether this was intentional or not due to lack of data, Ali has turned the adverse publicity he has received into a political career even without electoral success. He has used the platform he has received from byte-hungry news outlets to speak of erosion and floods, an issue that plagues much of the region. He has also lent his support for the argument that there is a need of a museum that showcases the culture of the Bengali Muslim community. Such political entrepreneurship has also been seen in other regions of the world, where insurgent political upstarts with minimum resources utilize the affordances of social media platforms. It disrupts the dominance of hegemonic dominant groups over political discourses and narratives (Sorensen, 2018). In this case, Sukur Ali's very appearance and utterance, while being mocked and reviled, are transgressive in nature, as members of his social strata are usually excluded from media and public spaces.

The humour in this case is not always neutral, of course, as there are subjects who are laughing and subjects that are considered abject, objects of mockery. The participatory structure of the content's framing is such that it includes certain spectators to join in the humour, while others might feel excluded (Shifman, 2014). Ryan Milner and Wendy Phillips mobilize existing scholarship on humour to argue that even humorous content that is ironic and playful (as many memes are) often lead to the creation of an 'us' that is laughing and a 'them' that does not, or a 'them' that is the butt of the joke, and that this is often determined by socio-economic and historical factors (Milner, 2016) (Phillips, 2015). The exclusionary push is more pronounced in certain cases, as we have seen in the section above with slurs of negative stereotyping. In a lot of comments one finds references to excerpts of Sukur Ali's words, such

as ‘I am the politics 2021...’ or his statements in Assamese (such as the one discussed in the previous section regarding floods caused by dams that had broken down). This is a partial citation, that leaves enough room for tonalities other than the original statement to be interpreted. These comments parody the original by taking up a very critical, mocking or cynical tone towards the original utterance (Shifman, 2014).

The orientation of mockery towards Sukur Ali’s lack of proficiency in English and Hindi are not, perhaps, unique to Assam. It even reached national social media personalities such as Carryminati, who is known for his vicious, expletive laden ‘roasts’ of content that is often classified as ‘cringe’. There are other similar social media platform groups around the world that deal exclusively with ‘cringe’ content, that allows the spectators the pleasure of watching the content and distancing themselves from behaviour considered deviant or disgusting (Lewis et al., 2021). The brunt of the labelling as ‘cringe’<sup>10</sup> in India has a history of being aimed at those that belong marginalized sections, and caste and class are often major determinants in such cases. This was evidenced in the reaction of the well-heeled middle- and upper-class and caste reactions to content created by rural and disadvantaged users on the short video platform TikTok, which has since been banned by the government for security reasons (TikTok is owned by a Chinese company) (Verma, 2021). However, as the overt and sly reactions of ‘Bangladeshi’, ‘miya’ etc. show, there is an element of ethno-linguistic animosity here, and content such as this makes it easier to bring tensions to the fore. The supposed ‘cringe’ here allows the spectator to disavow the ‘other’ as the other, as not being part of the whole, as a means of shoring up the contentious, fractious, nebulous definition of an Assamese (one of the most cited clauses of the Assam Accord).

All of this humour and mockery at his expense has, however, not deterred Ali from continuing to make public appearances, or giving interviews in Hindi and English (which continues to be ‘bad’ or lacking in proficiency). As mentioned above, he can attract quite large crowds during election campaigns, something even seasoned politicians fail to do. His ‘idiotic’ performances have led to him becoming a ‘micro-celebrity’ on the internet and to an extent in electronic news media in Assam. Individuals that have acquired such status usually have a ‘niche’ audience, which in this case are largely spectating consumers from Assam (Marwick, 2013). With each cycle of transmission and reaction, the public persona of Sukur Ali becomes more widespread. He has attempted to turn the negative publicity he has received on its head. Ever since his

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<sup>10</sup> In internet parlance, ‘cringe’ is a signifier that causes disgust and embarrassment in the viewer, often at the action or speech of the individual or group being viewed

electioneering days, Sukur Ali has been working on his desire to pursue acting and film-making. He has a YouTube channel named ‘Sukur Ali Productions’ with nearly 27,000 followers<sup>11</sup>. The channel hosts music videos and short films made by Sukur Ali and his crew, mostly inspired by Bollywood gangster flicks.



## Conclusion

The paper has attempted to analyze Sukur Ali’s negotiation with the hegemonic gaze of caste Hindu Assamese society as a Bengali Muslim in Assam. His actions can be understood as a form of ‘phaneric’ assertion, a concept coined by Houston Baker. Baker positions his concept contra ‘minstrelsy’, as a chest-beating, unapologetic assertion of one’s identity to secure a place in a society dominated by another, hegemonic demographic (Baker Jr., 2013). This assertion of one’s role might be in the register of a stereotype vis-à-vis one’s accent, mannerisms, clothing etc. Sukur Ali continues ahead with his media interviews in spite of adverse reactions, reactions fuelled, perhaps, by a fear of ‘mimicry’ of dominant sections, where the supposed migrant/’outsider’/’*bohiragoto*’ is performing in an idiom that is ‘almost but not quite’, an idiom that takes its place in the public sphere (Bhaba, 1984). As we have seen, his

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/c/SukurAliProduction>

‘entrepreneurship’ has led to some results, as he has now received some recognition in political and media circles, and has also taken on roles for political parties as a ‘star campaigner’, all the while working on a parallel career as a content creator for YouTube. Ali’s assertion, though in a different register, is part of a larger body of political-cultural work from the Bengali Muslim community in Assam that seeks to establish themselves as legitimate parts of the *body politic* of Assam.

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