

The Muslims of Assam---A critical study

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Abstract: *The penetration of Muslims into Assam from 12th century A.D. is one of the important chapters in the history of Assamese society. Assamese Muslims like other Muslims in India reflect significant variations in terms of culture, caste, class, language, occupation, geographical distribution and ideology which all become the basic components for the formation of boarder Assamese society. Various Muslim invasions, propagation and conversion, import of Muslims Artisans and learned men by the Ahom rulers, migrations and immigrations, etc, are the important factors for the origin and growth of the Muslims population in Assam. The Muslim population in Assam scattered in all the districts of Assam, with a high population of 70.45 percent of total population in Dhubri district and the lowest density of 1.48 percent in Dhemaji district as per 1991 census report. The Assamese Muslims, the Neo-Assamese Muslims, the Muslims of Cachar or the Barak valley, The Bihari or North-Indian Muslims living in Assam are the four major categories of the entire Muslim population in Assam.*

Keywords: *Assamese, Assam, formation, Muslims, migration, society Population,*

I. Introduction

The Muslims of Assam have been playing a very significant and positive role in the formation and development of Assamese society and their culture from ancient time to today. Being integrated by the various socio-economic and cultural factors, they are spread over the length and breadth of the state, particularly in the Brahmaputra valley which is the home land of the Assamese culture. The Muslims is the largest minority group in Assam, with strength of 30.9 percentage of the total population. Assamese Muslims like other Muslims in India reflect significant variations in terms of culture, caste, class, language, occupation, geographical distribution and ideology. The contemporary Assamese society is fundamentally a multi-religious, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-caste, multi-class and dominantly unilingual, composite and by and large a secular society. The Muslims are scattered in all the areas of Assam, with high concentration of 70.45 percent of total population in Dhubri district, western part of Assam and the lowest density of 1.48 percent in Dhemaji district as per the census report of 1991. The entire Muslim population of Assam can be classified into four major categories:- The Assamese Muslims, The Neo Assamese Muslim, The Muslims of Cachar or the Barak valley, The Bihari or North-Indian Muslims living in Assam. Rural and urban are the two broad socio-economic categories of the Muslim communities of Assam like other communities and about 95 percent of the total Muslim population of Assam living in the rural areas. Assam is a land of varieties of colorful culture because of different race and tribes lived in Assam from ancient times and all these tribe's custom, tradition, living style formed a peerless Assamese culture and society. Muslim community also became a part of this formation of Assamese society and culture after settled in the land of Assam. It is also true that the pure racial identity of the Assamese Muslims with the Arabians, Turks, Pathans and Mughals are no longer exists and they have taken roots and developed in the soil of Assam and brought up under the local traditional life-style and folkways.

II. Formation of the Muslim society in Assam

Formation of the Muslim society in Assam can clearly trace back to the last decade of the 12th century. Since then, this community has been evolved gradually over a very long stretch of time. Four different major factors contributed for the formation and development of Muslim society in Assam

Muslim Invasions of Assam (1206-1682)

Towards the close of the 12th century, Mahammad Ibne Bakhteyar, a military commander under Qutubuddin Aibak, the founder of the slave dynasty in India invaded Assam in 1206 A.D. According to Tabaqat Naseri, written by Minhaj Seraj, it was during this time that Assam for the first time came in contact with the Muslims. Thereafter began a series of Muslims invasion over a period of 475 years, which eventually culminated in the battle of Itakhuli that was fought between the Ahom and Mughal in 16 Although Muhammad Ibn Bakhtiyar khilji was defeated severely and most of his soldiers that, it can be presumed from that fact that some of the Muslims who survived their lives preferred to stay in Assam instead of going back with their defeated General. They may be regard as the first batch of Muslims settlers who decided to stay in Assam even

before the advent of the Ahoms to this land. Muhammad Ibn Bakhtiyar Khilji was guided to Assam by a local chief of this land, Ali Mech. It indicated that from this time or much earlier to it, the Muslims had established contact with Assam large section had accept this region as their home land. It is depicted in the account of Minhajuddin that the invasion of Malik Yuzbak Tugril Khan (1256-57) was mainly inspired by the desire of spreading the Islamic faith. It is also recorded in the history that Malik Yuzbak erected a mosque on the soil of the country celebrating his victory. It is mentioned in the Assam Buranji that the southern partition of the erstwhile district of Goalpara and Kamrup remained under the authority of the Gauda Sultan from the time of Ghiyassudin Bahadur shah's invasion of the south western part of the Brahmaputra valley in 1320-21, till the Kamata king Mriganko conquered the entire region to the east of the river Korataya sometime during 1397-1407, with the help of the Ahom monarch Sudangpha. The trade relation between Assam and Bengal might have flourished during the middle of the 15th century and some of the Muslims traders and travelers with other travelers from Bengal had entered and settled at last in western Assam.

A regular and systematic process of Muslim influx into Assam seems to have commenced since the reign of Niladhawaja's successors Chakradhwaja, the king of kamata. During the war of Hussain Shah with Nilambar the influx of Muslims continued with growing more intensity. It was actually during the period of Muslim occupation of the Kamrup and Goalpara region and particularly after the creation of the colony of the Afghan warriors in Hajo by Hussain Shah that a large number of Muslim could find an opportunity for the first time to settle in erstwhile district of Goalpara and Kamrup permanently.

The settlement of the Muslims in the eastern region of Assam started from 1530, when the Muslims army under Turbak invaded Assam and Ahom king Suhungmung defeated the Muslim invader and those who were taken as prisoners were settled in different parts of the state and they subsequently came to be known as the Mariyas. In this regard Edward Gait remarks that the Muslims who were taken as prisoners by Suhungmung were the earliest Muslim settlers in the eastern valley of the Brahmaputra.

During the 17th century the Islamic faith grew more intensity when a major part of western Assam was occupied by the Muslims and also established their court at Rangamati (near Gauripur) and Hajo (in Kamrup). Later on the Muslims settlers in those region stayed by freely mingling with the indigenous people. Again, the 2nd phase of the Muslims influx into the western part of Assam began with the Koch-Mughal alliance and these Muslim soldiers settled there and increased the Muslim population of Assam when the Koch-Hajo region fell under the Muslim power. Many Muslims serving in the fighting forces of the Mughal in Assam and employed in other activities might have poured into this region in continuous streams from different parts of the Mughal Empire to help the local Muslim authorities in the war and the civil administration besides trade and commerce. It is one of the important points that they had to marry non-Muslims from Assam due to absences of their wives. During the region of Ahom King Gadadhar Singha the last battle of Ahom-Mughal conflict broke out in 1682 where Mughal vacated Kamrupa in 1682 and retreated again to Rangamati and thus the long period of Assam's tedious warfare with the Muslim began in 1206 A.D., came to end.

The direct and indirect outcome of the intermittent wars and conflicts between the rulers of Assam and the Muslim power was really fruitful for the political and socio-cultural life of Assam in many ways. It helped to strengthen The Muslims population in Assam

Import of Muslim Artisans Learned men by the Ahom Rulers

Another important aspect for the growth of Muslim population in Assam is import of Muslim artisans and educated and skilled men by the Ahom rulers. A large numbers of Muslim artisans and learned men were brought by the Ahom Rulers and were appointed in various developments of the state during the medieval period. These people were mainly employed in the professions in which they possessed. Especially skills, like embroidery, engraving, wood carving, cannon casting, sword making and similar fine works. Muslim artisans and craftsmen belong to the Khanikar khel and under a superintendent known as Khanikar Barua. 'Nawab Deka' is a post in the Ahom court absolutely for talented Muslim nobles, carried a vast tract of revenue free land.

There are many instances where the Muslims and Hindus of Assam combined to resist a Muslim invader. These Muslims were assimilated into the Assamese society so deeply that the Ahom army included many Muslim soldiers and officers who fought against the Mughals in several battles including the historic battle of Sarighat in 1671. The Assamese buranjis provides us with ample evidence about the patriotism and influential high position of the Assamese Muslims as for examples Rupai Goriya, a Muslim officer of Ahom Court, Bagh Hazarika, the Muslim captain under Lachit Barphukan, Sardar Julfikar Barua, one of the martyrs of Assam's freedom's struggle which ended in 1858 etc. perhaps the full supports of our contention. Besides eight Muslims families said to have come to Assam and employed in different capacities and created some new avenues for prospective employment in various field like engraving, painting, tailoring, music, arts and architecture etc. These eight families are known as Parsi parbiya (Persian transcribers), Akbar kuliya, (the royal engraver), Khanikar, (masons and artisans), Silakutiya, (stone engraver), Guna katiya (makers of gold and silver thread), Negeriya (the player of neger), Darji (tailors), jala (weaver) Apart from the above Muslims families

there are some other Muslim professional groups, who were employed in different departments according to their capacity and skill, such as Kharghariya, Senchowa, Jalambata, Rajmistri khel etc. Thus Muslim community found a favourable atmosphere to assimilate with the broader Assamese Hindu Society and harmoniously amalgamated with the socio-cultural milieu.

Propagation and conversion

Minhajuddin tells us that the Koch and Mech people were the inhabitants of the western part of the old kingdom of Kamrupa. This show that with the first political contact of Assam with Muslim powers, the Islamic faith found its way into this lands through the process of conversation. It can be assumed that the influence of Islam on the people of east Bengal and western Kamrupa was felt to some extent since few centuries back before the invasion of Muhammad Ibn Baktiyar Khiliji. Most of the historians acknowledged that there existing several trade routes connecting India with China and South East Asia through Kamrupa in ancient times. Some historians believe that this route was known as Rajgarh Ali which remnants can be seen in Arunachal Pradesh. Therefore, it appears that the land of China and Kamrupa, and perhaps its routes was known to the Muslim world from the very ancient times. Bhajan, a Brahman converting into Islam in the early part of 13th century when Alberuni visited India. These adequately proved that the impact of Islam in North Bengal and Kamrupa kingdom was noticed much earlier than the first Muslim invasion of Assam.

The accounts of King Ratnadhwaaja pala of the Chutiya Kingdom show and Deodhai Assam Buranji indicate that this King of the Chutiya Kingdom established friendly relations with the Sultans of Gauda. It is mentioned that during the reign of Sukaranka, the successor of Arimatta, Ghiyasuddin Bahadur Shah conquered the kingdom of Kamrupa and including western part of the Brahmaputra valley.

Many Muslim saints had entered Assam and some of them came with invading army at different historical times. Some of them settled in the country, while other might have returned after a short stay. Shah Miah, popularly known as Azan Fakir was one of the saint who came to Assam in 1630 and through the preaching of him, a large section of the indigenous population was converted into Islam. Most of the Ahom rulers patronized many ways in Assam. Again establishment of Madrasa schools, mosques, dargahs, mazars, etc. tremendously helped to growth Muslim population of Assam that the great majority of persons professing the Islamic faith in Assam are as in Eastern Bengal, local converts from the lower castes and aboriginal tribes who on conversion described themselves as Sheikh. Gait also mentioned that a good numbers of Muslims in Assam, especially in western Assam have designed themselves as Sheikh and many of their ancestors appear to have been early local converts, as manifested through their physical features, manners and customs.

The Imperial Gazetteers of India, vol.-1 refers to the converts Muslims of Assam who were as ignorant of Islam as the Hinduism. ‘Some of them have never heard of Muhammad, some regard him as a person corresponding in their system of religion to Rama or Lakshmana of Hindus. The Quran is hardly read even in Bengali and in the original Arabic at all, many of those who have heard it cannot tell who wrote it.....’ Again in the administrative enumeration of 1891, some converts Muslims of Assam were labeled as the Koch caste among the Hindus. Hunter refers to those people as Musalman Koch.

Migration and immigration

A substantial numbers of Muslim migrated into Assam and settled down permanently during the period of the wars and conflicts between Ahoms and Mughal. About one-fourth of the total of 176,109 Muslim population in the whole districts of Assam valley were fresh migrants into this country during the hectic days of the internal dissensions which ended with the Burmese invasions during the early period of British rule. Large scale migration from the neighboring districts of East Bengal may be said to have actually began after restored of normal life of the state from the beginning of the British rule in Assam. Though the migrants first settled in the undivided Kamrup and Goalpara districts, they gradually spread out into the other parts of the Brahmaputra valley. A considerable numbers of the people of Muslim migrations during the period from 1872 to 1881, as it shown in the following tables.

District	1872	1881
Garó plains	4120
Goalpara	89,916	102,773
Kamrupa	45,823	50,305
Darrang	13,859	14677
Nagaon	10,066	11,486
Sibsagar	12,619	15,179
Lakhimpur	3826	5804
Total	176,109	204,344

It appears likely that during the later period of the 19th century and early part of the 20th century a sizable no of Muslims of peasant’s community had migrated to Assam and settled in the Char areas in Assam, especially in the erstwhile districts of Goalpara and Kamrup. From the census of 1921, it comes to our knowledge Goalpara

and Kamrup. From the census of 1921, it comes to our knowledge that in the whole of Assam, 258000 people migrated from East Bengal, particularly from the districts of Mymensing and Rangpur and all of them are cultivators. According to D.P.Baruah, ' The flow of immigrants of Goalpara district from Mymensing, pabna, Bagra, and Rangpur were district of East Bengal began during the decade of 1901-11 and settled on char lands of Goalpara.

After 1974, a large number of people both Hindu and Muslims of poor and oppressed sections migrated to other parts of Assam from Sylhet in search of better life and opportunity and they were known as Sylatei or Sylheti in Assam, most of them settled in Barak valley. It is also necessary to mention that a small quantum of the Muslim population of Assam is immigrant, who had penetrated into Assam from East Pakistan or Bangladesh after Independence. This immigration took place because of unsettled condition in their native land. Regarding the growth of Muslim population in Assam, S.K.Bhuyan remarks- "The nucleus of the present Muslim population of Assam was formed during the period of Assam Muslim conflicts, the main stock being strengthened from time to time by fresh immigration and conversion."

III. Classification of the Muslims of Assam:

The entire Muslim population of Assam can be classified into four major categories. These are as follows-

The Assamese Muslims

Asamiya Musalman (Assamese Muslims), Asami or Thalu Musalman (native or indigenous Muslims), Goriya are the first category of the Muslims of Assam. Their mother tongue is Assamese. This category of Muslims are scattered in all the districts of the Brahmaputra valley and they were the first settler of Muslims in Assam.

The Neo-Assamese Muslims

Na Asamiya Musalman (Neo-Assamese Muslims) is known as second category of the Muslims in Assam. In Assam, they are also known as Bhatiya Musalman (Muslims of downstream), Mymensingiya Musalman (Muslims migrated from Rangpur, Sylhet and the Mymensing districts of East Bengal or present Bangladesh), Charua Musalman(The Muslims of river basin), Pamua Musalman(the farming Muslims) and Miya Musalman. These Muslims are comparatively new entrants in the emerging Assamese society and numerically they are the single largest group among the Muslims of Assam. The demographic strength of the Na Asamiya Musalman would be roughly about 18 percent of the total population of Assam. This category of Muslims migrated into Assam from the later part of the 19th century to the first half of the 20th century. Besides this, a small portion of this category who entered into Assam after independence also led to the gradual growth of this Muslims population. This Muslims have made determined efforts to assimilate into the larger Assamese society by adopting the Assamese language as their mother tongue.

The Muslims of Cachar or the Barak valley

The third category of Muslims live in the present district of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi in the Barak valley which is geographically separated from mainland Assam or the Brahmaputra valley. The erstwhile Cachar district of Barak valley is now predominately a Bengali speaking region. The Muslims started settling down in Cachar, particularly in Badarpur area much earlier than 1745, even before the shifting of capital to the plain area. Besides, the Muslims settlement in the western part of Badarpur began from the first half of 14th century. Upendra Guha says in his ' Kacharer Itribritta' that during the reign of Kachari King, most of the distinguished persons were belonged to Muslim community. In fact since 18th century the Muslims migrated to Cachar or Barak valley from the neighboring districts of East Bengal which was a long and continuous process but their migration was more intensive during the British Colonial period. They gradually assimilated and integrated with the indigenous people And the language of this area's Muslims is Bengali like other community of this locality.

The Bihari or North-Indian Muslims living in Assam

-The last category of Bihari or North-Indian Muslims who migrated to Assam in search of livelihood during the later periods of British colonialism and after independence, mainly from the state of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. They are mainly engaged in the occupations of butchers, barbers, tailors, carpenters, washer-men, quilt-makers etc. Another occupation has recently emerged- that of rethreading, vulcanizing and repairing of automobile tires and tubes and some of this group opened various types of shops like restaurants, grocery, stationary etc. Their mother tongue is either Hindi or Urdu. This group of Muslims in Assam has, so far, been assimilated neither with the indigenous Assamese Muslims nor with the larger Assamese society. Thus, the

Muslims of Assam are four distinct historically evolved group of community who attributed to form a broader Assamese society.

IV. Conclusion

-We have come to the conclusion of our study. It is necessary to state the major conclusion that The immigration and migration of Muslim population in the Assam valley in the 13th century one of the important dimension in the history of Assam. These Muslim settlers had made this land their permanent home, assimilated with the local people, adopted Assamese as their mother tongue, accepted local habits and customs as their own and identified themselves as Assamese with the local people, and through this process they have enriched the socio-cultural life of the total stock.

Another important aspect that should be worth mentioning that the Muslim of Assam valley brought with them some Mughal culture and also Persian and Arabic literatures penetrates spontaneously which enrich Assamese culture and also neo-Assamese Society.

It have been seen during the Ahom period that a sustainable numbers of Muslim people were engaged in various artistic works, such as tailors, transcribers, painters, engravers, etc, under khanikar Baruah, as a result socio-cultural and economically Assam become rich and rich.

Establishment of historic mosques, dargahs, mazars, in various plac hes of Ahessam also proved that Assam became richer and healthier with the establishment of Assamese Muslim society in the Brahmaputra valley. Finally I would like to concluded that many Muslim soldiers and officers who fought against the Mughals in several battles including the historic battles of Saraighat in 1671 and it was one of the important fact that the Mughals were defeated because of the active participation of Muslim soldiers in the battles like Bagh Hazarika, sardar Julfikar Barua, Ramjan khan etc. So it can be argued that the Muslims of Assam are an inseparable and integral part of the contemporary Assamese political and socio-cultural milieu.

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