EASTERN

The Muslims of ASSAM

Kasim Ali Ahmed

The Book

The Muslim of Assam is a first book of its own kind written by Dr. K.A. Ahmed. This book incorporates eleven chapters highlighting different aspects of the cultural life of the Muslims of Assam including the historical and socio-economic aspects.

This book is an attempt to portray the socio-cultural life of the Muslims of Assam in the folk level beginning with their advent into Assam. While the study encompasses the whole of Assam, it the dealt more particularly with Western Assam. Again, emphasis has been given on the erstwhile Goalpara district for an intensive study.

This book aims at imparting an understanding and creating awareness among the people regarding the identity of the Assamese Muslims, wherein the peaceful co-existence, mutual understanding, communal harmony, assimilation, cohesion and integration are fairly manifested.

About the Author

Kasim Ali Ahmed (1957) was graduated from Goalpara College, Goalpara with Honours in Assamese in 1979. He passed M.A. from Gauhati University in 1981 and obtained his Ph.D. Degree in the Dept. of Folklore Research, Gauhati University, Guwahati in 1995. He was a lecturer of Habraghat College, Krishnai from 2nd Sept., 1982 to 13th November, 1984, and also a lecturer of Mankachar College, Mankachar from 14th November, 1984 to 10th June 1985. He was a Selection Grade Lecturer and Head of the Department of Assamese in Shillong College, Shillong-3, and rendered his service from 11th June, 1985 to 2nd November, 2005 in the college. He rendered his service as the Principal of Habraghat College, Krishnai from 3rd November, 2005 to 2nd August, 2006. At present he is the Principal of Goalpara College, Goalpara since 3rd August, 2006. He is also associated with various socio-cultural activities in the society.

He has written a good number of articles both in English and Assamese which have been published in different Newspapers and Magazines. He has also written several books of high potentials with researchive materials. The books to his credit are :

1. Muslim Contribution to Assamese Culture.
2. Communalism in Indian Politics.
3. Popular Folk Songs of the Muslims of Assam.
4. The Muslim of Assam.
5. Fundamentals of Indian Society.
6. Folk Tales and Legends.
7. Status of Women in India.
8. A History of Goalpara District (in the press).

THE MUSLIMS OF ASSAM

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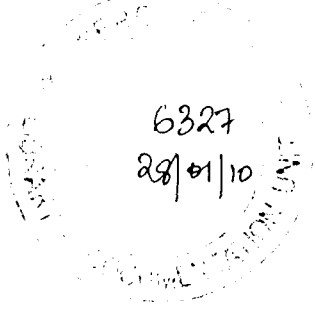

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION: MUSLIM SETTLEMENT IN ASSAM

A. INTRODUCTORY

India is a vast and populous country where centuries of racial fusion and cultural inter-mingling have endowed its multi-faceted society with an extreme richness of variety and colour in respect of religion, language, custom, tradition, costume, art and crafts etc. While Hinduism accounts for the majority of the population, the Muslims constitute the single largest religious minority community in secular and independent India. Their strength to the total population of this country is 13.4 per cent as per 2001 census report. They are an integral part of the Indian politico-economic and socio-cultural milieu. They are scattered and settled in all the states of India ranging from a high concentration of 65.85 per cent of the total population in Jammu and Kashmir to a low density of 1.23 per cent in Orissa.[1]

It appears that when two communities with different religions and cultures come into close contact, there is bound to develop a significant socio-cultural interaction. Obviously, the contact of the Muslims and the Hindus, which constitutes a landmark in Indian history and has significantly affected the political fabric of India, resulted in the development of a new synthetic culture. These two communities, although retaining their individual identities and separate religious norms have developed a spectrum of similarities in their socio-cultural life, and a mutual understanding of each other's raisond'etre. But it is well known that variation marks the

culture of India, and such variation is obvious from region to region which seems to have originated from different geographical features and divergent socio-cultural norms. This is true in respect of all the major religious communities. Although the Muslims of all over India have common religious identity, there is also considerable diversity amongst them relating to their socio-cultural sphere. Therefore, it appears that the folk-cultural life of the indigenous Muslims of Assam is somewhat different from the Muslims of Northern and Southern India.

The Muslims of Assam have been playing a very significant and positive role in the formation and development of the Assamese society and its composite culture. Being integrated by the various socio-economic factors, they are spread over the length and breadth of the State, particularly in the Brahmaputra valley which is the homeland of the Assamese culture. As a religious community they form the largest minority group in Assam, with a strength of 30.9 per cent of the total population.[2] Again, Assamese Muslims, like other Muslims in India reflect significant variations in terms of culture, caste, class, language, occupation, geographical distribution and ideology.[3] Despite their assimilation, association and co-existence with the Assamese Hindu neighbours, the Muslims of Assam in their own traditional way maintain a complete separate religious identity with a distinctive blend of similarities and diversities among themselves.

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 Assamese Muslims are well integrated and assimilated with the larger Assamese society due to various geographical and historical reasons.

The early history of Assamese Muslims, particularly their culture at the folk level is limited by the dearth of written materials. Perhaps, it is due to paucity of any established record that even the pioneers among the researchers in this field have been keeping

themselves away from the intensive study of the folk-culture and also precisely defining the Assamese Muslims. Since, much headway towards the unraveling of the history of the Assamese Muslims has not been made so far, consequently, the question as to who the Assamese Muslims are, and how, when and wherefrom they actually originated still remain to be authentically and satisfactorily unanswered. The currency of the term 'Assamese Muslim' itself suggests that such a specific community has been maintaining its entity and identity within the larger frame-work of the Indian society simultaneously pointing to the 'Assamese' affiliation on the one hand and Islamic affiliation on the other. Census principles might have also contributed to the definition of the 'Assamese Muslims' judging from its nomenclature. But the linguistic-cum- religious criteria for defining a community like the Assamese Muslims entails certain fundamental difficulties in regard to the identification of the mass of people who, in spite of certain commonness, encompass considerable diversities. It is, therefore, necessary to try to understand its origin and development in the light of historical analysis.

B. ORIGIN AND GROWTH OF THE MUSLIM POPULATION OF ASSAM

The origin of the Muslims of Assam can be clearly traced back to the last decade of the 12th century. Since then, this community has been evolved gradually over a very long stretch of time. However, the history of origin, growth and development of the Muslims of Assam can be attributed to four different major developments.

1. Various Muslim Invasions
2. Propagation and Conversion
3. Import of Muslim Artisans and Learned men by the Ahom rulers
4. Migration and Immigration

1. Various Muslim Invasions

In ancient times, Assam was an integral part of the once extensive kingdom of Prāgjyotisha, mentioned in the Rāmāyana, the Mahābhārata as well as in some principal Purānas. It is believed to have encompassed a large part of East-India, including most of Assam, North Bengal and also some portions of East Bengal (now in Bangladesh).[4] Subsequently, this region turned to be a major part of the kingdom of Prāgjyotisha, which later came to be known as Kāmarupa by the authority of Kālikā Purāna and the Yoginitantra till the beginning of the Ahom rule (1228 A.D.) in Eastern Assam and the end of the Koch rule in Western Assam. The old kingdom of Kāmarupa comprised the whole of North Bengal including Cooch Bihar, the Rangpur and Jalpāiguri districts of Bengal.[5] According to K.L. Barua, "The kingdom included not only Assam valley, but also parts of Northern and Western Bengal, parts of Bhutan, the Khasi and the Garo hills and the northern portions of the districts of Sylhet".[6] In the view of Gait, "It comprised roughly the Brahmaputra Valley, Bhutan, Rangpur and Koch Bihar".[7] It has been established that the western limit of the old kingdom of Kāmarupa was the Koratoyā, a river which rises in the extreme north-western part of Jalpāiguri district.

The old Kāmarupa was divided into four portions, viz. Kāmpith- from the Koratoyā to the Sonkosh, Ratnapith- from the Sonkosh to the Rupahi, Suvarnapith- from the Rupahi to the Bharāli, and Saumārpith- from the Bharāli to the Dikrong. Elsewhere, Ratnapith is said to have included the track between the Koratoyā and the Hānās, Kāmpith that between the Mānās and Silghāt and the south bank of the Brahmaputra, and Bhadrapith the corresponding portion of the south bank, while Saumārpith as before the most easternly track.[8]

The ancient kingdom of Kāmarupa, therefore, presents a compact homogeneous entity with similarities of climatic condition and cultural affinities. The political and cultural history of Assam presents also a very close relation between the component parts of

the different areas of the old kingdom of Kāmarupa. They were on several occasions, subsequent to the dismemberment of the old kingdom, brought together under a single political hegemony. The rulers of the separated territories were patrons of Assamese poets and authors.

The dissimilarity which can be noticed at present in the various groups of people is due mainly to their divergent political associations. Assam proper remained independent till 1826, while the other districts of old Kāmarupa were mostly under foreign domination. In any case, a few centuries of separate political dispensation was hardly able to relax the age-long ties and affinities which bound the people of Assam with the rest of Kāmarupa, the force of geography and ethnic similarities being stronger than transient influence of political associations.

Kāmarupa or old Assam came into contact with the Muslims for the first time in 1198 A.D., when a Turkish army led by Muhammad ibn Bakhtiyar Khilji conquered Bengal and overthrew Lakshman Sen (1169-1198), the last Sen king of Bengal. It has been recorded that during the reign of Lakshman Sen, western Kāmarupa was under his domination. The following copper plate inscription which was found in the Madhai town of Pabna district in East-Bengal (present Bangladesh) furnishes invaluable information in this regard. "Vikramavasikrita Kāmarupah" etc.[9]

Thus, this copper plate inscription corroborates the fact about the first contact of the Muslims with old Assam and it establishes their antiquity. After a few years of conquering North Bengal (Gauda) and west Bengal (Nadiyāh) in 1198 A.D., Muhammad ibn Bakhtiyar Khilji set out on a filibustering expedition to the North and invaded Kāmarupa with a view to conquer Tibet,[10] and this was actually the first Muslim invasion of Assam. But, he was defeated and most of his soldiers lost their lives due to unfavourable circumstances. H.C. Ray and N.K. Bhattasali also hold that the campaign led by Muhammad ibn Bakhtiyar Khilji in 1202 A.D. to Tibet was annihilated in Assam. This victorious

incident was inscribed on a stone boulder, known as 'kānāi barasi bowā sil', found in North-Guwahati in the following words, which seems to be of great significance.

Sāke turagayugmese madhumāsatrayodase,
Kāmarupam samāgatya turuskāh ksayamāyayuh.

(On the thirteenth of Chaitra in the Saka year 1127 i.e., corresponding to the 7th March 1206 A.D., the Turks coming into Kāmarupa were destroyed).[11]

Although Muhammad ibn Bakhtiyar Khilji was defeated severely and most of his soldiers died, it can be conjectured from the fact that some of the Muslims who survived their lives preferred to stay in Assam in stead of going back with their defeated general.[12] They may be regarded as the first batch of Muslim settlers who decided to stay in Assam even before the advent of the Ahoms to this land. In this regard the name of 'Ali Mech', a local chief of Kāmarupa who guided Muhammad ibn Bakhtiyar Khilji in his expedition[13] is very much significant. It indicates that from this time or even much earlier to it, the Muslims had established contact with Assam and a considerable section had accept this region as their homeland. It has been stated that the Muslim religious preachers like pir, fakir ulemā, darvesh etc., came to Assam much earlier i.e., between 11th and 12th centuries.[14]

From the account of Minhajuddin it is clear that the invasion of Malik Yuzbak Tughril Khan (1256-57) was mainly inspired by the desire of spreading the Islamic faith. "The reading of the Khutbā and Friday religious services were instituted in Kāmarupa and the sign of the people of Islam appeared there.[15] It is also recorded in the history that Malik Yuzbak erected a mosque on the soil of this country celebrating his victory.[16] According to Assam buranji[17] the southern portion of the erstwhile district of Goalpara and Kamrup remained under the authority of the Gauda Sultan from the time of Ghiyasuddin Bahadur Shah's invasion of the south-western part of the Brahmaputra Valley in 1320-21, till the Kamatā king Mriganko conquered the entire region to the east of the river

Koratoyā sometime during 1397-1407, with the help of the Ahom monarch Sudangpha. Even after this event and till the death of the Khen king Niladhwaja, in the middle of the 15th century, we find no evidence of any protracted conflict between the two powers. Therefore, it appears that trade and commerce between Bengal and Assam might have flourished during this period and it is therefore possible that people of different vocations, including some of the Muslim traders and travellers from Bengal had entered and settled at least in Western Assam.[18]

A regular and systematic process of Muslim influx into Assam seems to have commenced since the reign of Niladhwaja's successor Chakradhwaja, the king of Kamatā, who having fought a prolong war with the invading army of Gauda Sultan Barbak Shah in Kamatā, and finally sued for peace and adopted the Islamic faith. During the war of Hussain Shah with Nilambara, who followed Chakradhwaja, and after the conquest of the greater part of Kamatā and Kamrup region by the former, the influx of Muslims continued with growing more intensity, till the Ahom king Suhungmung wrested back these regions from the possession of Gauda Sultan in the third decade of the sixteenth century. 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 Muslims could find an opportunity for the first time to settle in the erstwhile district of Goalpara and Kamrup permanently. Even after the Ahoms had recovered the entire territory of Western Kāmarupa upto the river Koratoyā, a sizeable section of those Muslim settlers in these two districts appears to have stayed there in harmony with the indigenous people, and thus finally composed the pith of the Muslim population of Assam.[19] The settlement of the Muslims in the eastern region of Assam began from 1530, when the Muslim army under Turbak invaded Assam, and the 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 Moriyās.[20] Edward Gait also is of the view that the Muslims who were taken as prisoners by Suhungmung were the earliest Muslim settlers in the eastern valley of the Brahmaputra valley. They came to be known as Moriyā.[21]

During the 17th century a major part of Western Assam was occupied by the Muslims. The Nawābs held their court at Rangāmāti (near Gauripur) and Hajo (in Kamrup) and the influence of the Islamic faith grew more intensity. But on the break up of the Mughal empire the Muslims in Assam were cut off from their co-religionists and a substantial number of those Muslims settlers in these regions appears to have stayed here by freely mingling with the indigenous people. Besides these, the second phase of the Muslim influx into the western part of Assam began with the Koch-Mughal alliance and it seems to have reached its highest point during the Mughal rule in the Koch-Hajo region (1613-67).[22] In 1616, Mukarram Khan, the governor of the newly acquired territory of Koch-Hajo, is said to have brought 10,000 to 12,000 well- equipped infantry under several Muslim nobles to settle here in order to ensure the imperial hold permanently over the region.[23] Thus for the second time after a century of the conquest of Hussain Shah, the Koch-Hajo region fell under the Muslim power. These Muslim soldiers settled there and increased the Muslim population of Assam.

The constant reference to Guwahati and Hajo in the Persian chronicles and the Assamese buranjis in their account of the Ahom-Mughal political and other relations which began from 1613, indicate that these two places became important centres of military, civil, commercial and cultural activities of the Muslims in North-Eastern India after the annexation of Koch-Hajo to the Mughal Empire. Therefore, it seems possible that a large number of Muslims of different vocations freely moved to this region and settled there permanently from that time. But this inflow of the Muslims to Koch-Hajo appears to have increased during the Ahom-Mughal conflicts which culminated in the intermittent wars from 1614 to

1682. 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.[24] It is important to note here that the Muslims obviously did not bring their wives with them. Therefore, they had to marry non-Muslim women from Assam.[25]

In 1679, Nawāb Mansur Khan occupied Kāmarupa which was surrendered by Laluk Barphukan for his selfish gains. But King Gadadhar Singha dispatched a large army against Mansur Khan, the Mughal governor of the territory. After several losing scuffles, the Mughals vacated Kāmarupa in 1682, and retreated again to Rangamati.[26] This event certainly has its great significance in the history of Assam, because with this threat of the Mughals, the Muslim invasions of this country disappeared forever and thus the long period of Assam's tedious warfare with the Muslims which began in 1202 A.D., came to an end.

The Ahom-Mughal contact covering a little over 125 years, forms only the last phase of the entire period of 484 years (from 1198 to 1682) of the country's diverse political relations with the Muslim powers of India. Although the Muslims (Turk, Pathan and Mughal) invaded Assam and Kāmarupa-Kamatā about nineteen times, but they could not establish permanent hold in entire Assam. It was only for ten months during 1662-63, that Mir Jumla remained in possession of the Ahom capital. Thus, it appears that the wars and conflicts of the Ahoms with the Muslims during the whole period helped the dispersal of the Muslim population from the western part of Assam to its eastern region in a steady and regulated manner. Besides this, after the Ahom conquest of the whole of the undivided districts of Kamrup and the eastern part of Goalpara upto the river Mānās, those Muslims who settled in this region permanently became Ahom subjects and therefore, their movements being unrestricted; they might have gradually spread over the entire eastern region of the Brahmaputra valley.

The conflicts of the Ahoms with the Muslims have been recorded for all ages in Persian chronicles. The descriptions are made more valuable by the light they throw on the social and political condition of Assam in those days. The most comprehensive account of Assam is given by the Fāthiyāh-i-Ibriyāh compiled by Shihabuddin Talish, who accompanied Mir Jumla's expedition to Assam in 1662. This contemporary account by Shihabuddin gives us a fair idea about the quality and content of social life of the local Muslims. He writes:"As for the Musalmāns who had been taken prisoner in former times and had chosen to marry here, their descendants act exactly in the manner of the Assamese, and have nothing of Islam except the name; their hearts are inclined far more towards mingling with the Assamese than towards association with Muslims..."[27]

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 Muslim population in Assam. Nevertheless, it was during this time that the Assamese enjoyed the most nourishing effects of the contact with the Muslims, specially the Mughals, in their socio-cultural as well as in the political life through different types of cultural exchanges, trade and commerce.

2. Propagation and Conversion

Minhajuddin, however, tells us that the Koch and the Mech tribes of the territory to the east of Gauda displayed their appreciation of Islam so much so that one of their chiefs named Ali Mech even adopted the faith from Muhammad ibn Bakhtiyar Khilji [28] as early as 1198 A.D. These Koch and Mech people were the inhabitants of the western part of the old kingdom of Kāmarupa. This shows that with the first political contact of Assam with Muslim powers, the Islamic faith found its way into this land through the process of conversion.

There is no proper evidence of the existence of Islam in Assam before the invasion of Muhammad ibn Bakhtiyar Khilji. On the other hand, it can be assumed that the influence of Islam on the people of east Bengal and western Kāmarupa was felt to some extent since few centuries back, before the first Muslim contact with Assam.[29] It is acknowledged by the historians that there existed several trade routes connecting India with China and South- East Asia through Kāmarupa in ancient times. The communication of Assam with the tribes of Saka or Bāhlik, Tājik and Turky of central Asia in commercial level was prevalent long time before the coming of the Islamic faith in Assam. There was an ancient route from the Gangā valley of North-India to South-China through Assam. This route stretched and touched even central Asia from the Gangā valley through the Khyber Pass. According to some historians, this route was known as Rājgarh Ali which is in ruins and only some remnants of it can be seen in Arunachal Pradesh. The local tradition about the ruins of an ancient route which is still found about twelve miles north of the Charduār in the erstwhile Darrang district states that the ruins are a part of the Rājgarh Ali which in old times reached China through Parasurām Kunda.[30] Therefore, it appears that the land of China and Kāmarupa, and perhaps its route was known to the Muslim world from the very ancient times.[31] It should be noted here that after Alberuni who visited India in 1030 A.D., Ruknal-din-Samaqandi was said to have claimed of converting a Brahman named Bhajan into Islam during his visit to Lakhnauti in the early part of 13th century.[32] These sources adequately prove that the impact of Islam in Gauda (North-Bengal) and Kāmarupa kingdom was noticed much earlier than the first Muslim invasion of Assam. Had there been not a good existence of Islam in Kāmarupa, how was Ali Mech inspired towards the Islamic faith and converted into Islam?

The accounts of king Ratnadhwajapala of the Chutiyā kingdom show that during the first half of 13th century the Islamic faith and culture could claim the appreciation even from the people of the

Chutiyā kingdom in the far eastern region of Kāmarupa. The Deodhāi Assam Buranji records that this king of the Chutiyā kingdom established friendly relations with the Sultan of Gauda.[33] During the reign of Sukarangka, the successor of Arimatta, Ghiyasuddin Bahadur Shah conquered the kingdom of Kāmarupa including the north-western part of the Brahmaputra valley. It seems that long before this time Hazarat Ghiyasuddin Auliyā (1257-58) settled in the country and began to preach Islam, and the expansion of the suzerainty of Sultan Ghiyasuddin over this part of the country might have supplied fresh incentive to the saint in his task.

The propagation of Islam in India was secured by way of conversion, application of force by Muslim ruling power, or by the teaching and persuasion of missionaries. Persuasion might have played a much greater part than force.[34] The bulk of the converts belonged to low Hindu castes who suffered from severe social inequality in Hinduism. These converts changed their faith from Hinduism to Islam but could not completely wean themselves away from the Hindu social life. These converts retained much of the traditional Hindu restrictions on social intercourse including ban on marriage outside one's caste or interdining.[35]

It was in fact only after the Mughal conquest of the whole region of western Kāmarupa or Koch-Hajo upto the river Barnadi in the east in 1613, that Muslim culture and the Islamic faith received some incentive to grow there. But it is doubtful if any large scale conversion of the native people took place since the influence of neo-Vaishnavism was still running high in the country. On the other hand, the Mughal emperors of that time were not religious bigots to enthuse force conversion in a conquered territory. Apart from this, they were completely overwhelmed by the prolonged and difficult wars with the Ahoms and thus they had little chance of turning their attention towards the propagation of Islamic faith and culture in a systematic way.

Many Muslim saints had entered Assam and some of them came with the invading Muslim army at different historical times.

Some of these saints settled in the country, while others might have returned after a short stay. There are many Muslim holy places, i.e., makāms, dargāhs and khānkāhs scattered in the Assam valley which are associated with the names of the many saints, pirs and fakirs, like the Dargāh of Azan Pir, Dargāh of Sawal Pir, Māzār of Bagā Fakir, Dargāh of Sāleh Pir etc., located in Upper Assam, and the Dargāh of Ghiyasuddin Auliyā or Powā makkāh, Dargāh of Garigaon, Dargāh of Dakaidal, the Māzār of Khorāsāni Pir, and the famous Dargāh of Pānch Pir etc., situated in Lower Assam. The consolidation of Islam in the eastern region of Assam valley dates from the early part of the 17th century. A Muslim saint named Shah Milan, popularly known as Azan Fakir who came to Assam in the 1630, was the chief source of this consolidation. Azan Fakir composed Zikirs and Jāris, devotional songs embodying the teachings of Islam. Through the preaching of Azan Fakir, as well as through those of the other preachers who followed him, a large section of the indigenous population was converted into Islam. The overall political, social, economic, religious and cultural conditions of Assam during the Ahom rule were favourable for the spread of Islam and the settlement of the Muslims in Assam. The Muslim preachers were patronized in many ways by the Ahom rulers to engage in the missionary work to propagate Islamic faith in Assam.[36] They even financed some preachers to go to Makkāh in order to perform Hajj and pray for the prosperity of the kingdom and the king. The Ahom kings also granted tax-free land to such preachers and their institutions. They also did not interfere in the management and functioning of the Madrassa, the traditional Muslim educational institutions and mosques which had emerged with the gradual growth of the Muslim population in Assam. According to Dr. Bhuyan, 12 and more than 20 Madrassas were functioning at Gauhati and the capital Sivasagar (Rangpur) respectively during the reign of the Ahom king Rajeswar Singha (1751-1769).[37]

Commenting on the growth of the Muslim population of Assam Gait writes 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 the process of conversion did not occur in the country until later dates.[38] In fact, there was no large scale conversion of the native people in Assam and converts did not form the major bulk of the Muslim population. But, it is also quite apparent from the fact that a good number of the Muslims in Assam, especially in Western Assam have designated 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 absence of the rigid caste system and religious intolerance in medieval Assam was the unique character of its society. But a loose form of caste system prevailed in Assam. Mention may be made here that in November, 1821, when the Burmese soldiers had given a premonition of their future dealings by plundering and destroying a number of villages in Assam including Habraghat pargana[39] of Western Assam, many people became homeless and fled indiscriminately out of fear, and some of the Hindus and aboriginal tribes took shelter in many Muslim houses. After the restoration of peace, these people were not accepted by their families and co-religionists because of their close contact and inter dining with the Muslim people. Thus, such Hindus were compelled to embrace the Islamic faith. In this way, a section of local converts also led to the gradual growth of Muslim population in Assam. Due to the outcome of this process, many split families can still be seen in Western Assam, where some of the members belong to the Hindu community and others professing Islam.[40] In such circumstances, only religion can differentiate them, but the mode of socio-cultural life including customs and tradition, the pattern of behaviour of both the Hindu and Muslim communities remained almost the same till the few decades back.

The Imperial Gazatteer of India, Vol.-I refers to the convert 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 Qur'an 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..." During the isolation of the converts from learned Muslims, they used to borrow Hindu customs and manners, and again when the learned Muslim reappeared the converts were introduced to the doctrines of Islam.[41] In the administrative enumeration of 1891, some convert Muslims of Assam were labeled as the Koch caste among the Hindus. This was because in spite of their newly adopted faith, they still retained many non-Islamic customs and practices. Hunter refers to these people as Musalmān Koch.[42]

3. Import of Muslim Artisans and Learned men by the Ahom Rulers

A large number of Muslim artisans and learned men were brought by the Ahom rulers and were appointed in various departments of the State during the medieval period. These Muslims were mainly employed in the professions in which they possessed special skill; like-embroidery, engraving, wood carving, cannon-casting, sword-making and similar fine works. Muslim artisans and craftsmen were incorporated in the *Khanikar Khel* or the guild of artisans under a superintendent known as *Khanikar Barua*. Muslim ladies have still retained their skill in artistic weaving.[43]

There existed a post like *Nawāb Dekā* in Ahom court, which appears to have been completely different form and higher than that of Barua and Hazarika. Probably the post was equivalent to the rank of Phukan. Its very name suggests that it was meant absolutely for talented Muslim nobles. It is also learnt from Mill's report that there was only one post of *Nawāb Dekā* in the Ahom kingdom and it carried a vast tract of revenue free land or land of

honour.[44] According to a local tradition, the first Nawāb who came to settle in Assam hailed from Delhi, and he came here along with two of his sons.[45] But a ballad which is still heard among certain section of the descendants of the Assamese Nawāb families relates that there were seven Nawābs in Assam.[46] The office of Uzirs seems to have been open to Hindus and Muslims alike and they enjoyed revenue free land from the king. Apart from the Uzirs, there were twelve *Musalmān Dewāns*. They were also granted vast tracts of revenue free land.[47] They all seems to have been heads of the institution of Islamic culture and religion in the State. Besides these, in different civil and military departments of the government there were many Muslim officials holding post not only of Boras, Saikias or Hazarikas, but also of Baruas, the highest post open to non-Ahoms in the earlier period of the Ahom rule.[48]

The exigency of situations arising from the intermittent wars and conflicts with the Muslim power (Mughal) required the Ahom kings to utilize the talents and skills of some of the Muslim war captives and imported artisans to increase and intensify the country's defence potential according to the need of the time. In order to secure sincere services from these Muslim captives and imported personnel in such work, the Ahoms might have tried to win their heart by extending to them amenities and treatment as offered to the indigenous people. As a result of this, a respected class of Musalmān soon sprang up in the country. The descendants of these Muslim settlers of Assam having later displayed their true love and patriotism for the country of their adoption, not only commended confidence of the Assamese royalty in particular and people in general, but also secured high position in life and society; and thus, they became the source of inspiration to those of their co-religionists who entered Assam in subsequent periods to accept this land as their home.[49]

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 Sarāighāt in 1671. One of the reasons behind the successful resistance against the mighty Mughal army was that the Ahom army had many sincere Muslims as officers and soldiers who had knowledge of the Mughal warfare. The Assamese buranjis provide us with ample evidence about the patriotism and influential high position of the Assamese Muslims. The accounts of the influence of Rupāi Goriyā, a Muslim officer of the royal arsenal of the Ahom king, the glorious career of Bagh Hazarika, the Muslim captain under the Ahom general Lachit Barphukan, and the family history of Sardār Julfikār Barua alias Bahadur Gaonburha, one of the martyrs of Assam's freedom struggle which ended in 1858, will perhaps the sufficient evidence in support of our contention. Here we would like to place one more example: Shah Hussain Khan and Ramjan Khan held the post of *Hilaidāri Barua* or officer commending in the artillery forces of the Ahom army, and Shah Ramjan Khan was said to have fought bitterly for the suzerain Chandrakanta Singha against the Burmese invader and had fallen in the thick of the battle.[50]

During the reign of king Rudra Singha (1696-1714) eight Muslim families said to have come to Assam with their respective professions and skills, and were employed in different capacities. These Muslims created some new avenues for prospective employment in various fields, like- engraving, painting, tailoring, music, art and architecture etc., in our country. They are- (1) *Pārsi Parhiyā* (Persian transcribers), (2) *Akharkatiyā* (the royal engraver), (3) *Khanikar* (masons and artisans), (4) *Silākutiyā* (Stone engraver), (5) *Gunākatiyā* (Makers of gold and silver thread), (6) *Negeriyā* (the player of negera), (7) *Darji* (Tailors) and (8) *Jolā* (Weaver).[51]

The primary functions of the branch of the *Pārsi Parhiyā* or Persian transcribers were to transcribe, interpret and explore all possible implication of matters contain in the Persian documents received from foreign capitals like Delhi and Dacca. The head of

Pārsi Parhiyā branch was generally appointed from among the Muslims in the Ahom government and his post had the provision of vast tracks of revenue free land. The very nature of their duties suggests that the *Pārsi Parhiyās* had to perform highly responsible work in government matters and were probably attached to the royal confidential department. Apart from these duties, they were also engaged probably in the teaching the language to other officials, whose function called for some knowledge of Persian language.[52]

The *Akhar katiyās* or royal engravers were engaged in the task of inscribing royal orders on metal sheets and stone slabs. Obviously, their duties called for much care and responsibility. The head of this branch was probably called as Barua. There are still several Muslim families in Golaghat area who claim to be the descendants of the Muslim nobles who were appointed as Baruas in this branch at different times by different Ahom kings.

The highest number of Muslims was perhaps employed in various capacities in the guilds of the masons and artisans called *Khanikar Khel.* This guild of masons and artisans were placed in charge of a Phukan called *Changrung Phukan.* The main functions of this department were the construction and repairing of buildings. It was perhaps as a result of the employment of Muslims in various capacities in the department that some influence of Islamic art and architecture can be traced in the buildings in some of the temples of Assam of the Ahom period.

The *Silākutiyās* or stone engravers were engaged in the decorative work on stone slabs to be inserted on masonry construction and also in the carving out of designs and patterns on the walls and panels of the building. Muslims are also said to have been employed as *Gunākatiyās* or makers of gold and silver thread for weaving and knitting of gold laces and brocade for different types of clothes. *Kingkhāp* is one of such cloth which has been popular among the Assamese ladies. Because of extra-ordinary skill for playing the *Negerā*, a musical instrument, Ahom king had brought

the *Negeriyā* family all the way from Northern India to Assam and this family too had earned a good reputation for playing this musical instrument.

In the guilds of *Darji* (tailors) and weavers called Jolās, a good number of Muslims were employed in different capacities. The *Darji* or tailoring profession belonged to the Muslim community only and it was the Muslims who brought this profession for the first time to Assam during the reign of the Ahom kings. The main function of the *Jolās* or weaver was to manufacture yarns from the staples of cotton supplied to them for the royal looms. Besides this, they were also said to have been employed for making fringes of clothes.[53] There are still many Muslim villages in Assam which are popularly known as *Jolā Goriyāgāon*. It seems that the term *Jolā* comes from the word *Julāhā*, which in all probability was carried into Assam by the Muslim weavers and spinners.

Apart from the above Muslim families there were some other Muslim professional groups, who were employed in different departments according to their capacity and skill, by the Ahom rulers. Such as-(a) *Khārghariyā*, (b) *Senchowā*, (c) *Jalambatā*, (d) *Rājmistri khel* etc. The Muslims in the guild of *Khārghariyā*, were employed as officer-in-charge of the military store house containing arms and ammunitions. The *Sen chowā* or falconers, a small professional group whose duty was to train up hawks to entertain the Ahom kings by falconry. The *Jalambatās* were engaged in the work of making string or cord of various types and designs. While the primary function of the branch of *Rājmistri* or masonries were to make brick and construct pucca houses and buildings. In this regard the name of Ghansamuddin Musalmān is worth-mentioning, who constructed the famous Talātal ghar of Rangpur. This *Talātal ghar* (chateau of terraced houses) was erected during the reign of King Rudra Singha. But Ghansamuddin was killed because of his knowledge relating to the secret path of *Talātal ghar*.

However, the number of Muslims employed in course of time in various departments including defence and civil, appears to have

grown sufficiently large, and this may perhaps mean that all of them were not freshly imported. Many of them were certainly from among the war prisoners, and as they displayed their skill in certain types of work, they were granted the same status as the indigenous people, and were employed in the government departments with other imported Muslim artisans and learned men. Even today there is a large number of Assamese Muslims in Upper Assam, who like other sections of the people of the State, use the surnames Barua, Hazarika, Saikia, Bora, Barbora etc., which signify that their forefathers were once holding these high offices in the Ahom Government.

It is learnt from the Deodhāi Asam Buranji that before the great battle of Sarāighāt, Momai Tamuli Barbarua, the father of Lachit Barphukan, with a view to forming a model and progressive village, had brought two families from each of *Goriyā* and *Moriyā*, and rehabilitated among other different Hindu communities in the same village. These Goriyā and Moriyā families belonged to the Muslim community. However, it appears that during that time Muslims found a favourable atmosphere to assimilate with the broader Assamese Hindu society and harmoniously amalgamated with the socio-cultural milieu.

4. Migration and Immigration

Already it has been mentioned that during the intermittent wars and conflicts between the rulers of Assam and the Muslim power of India, a substantial number of Muslims migrated into Assam and settled down permanently. This migration took place at different times, enhancing the strength of the local Muslim population in Assam. About one-fourth of the total of 176,109 Muslim population in the whole districts of Assam valley as shown by the census report of 1872, were fresh migrants into this country during the hectic days of the internal dissensions which ended with the Burmese invasion during the early period of British rule.[54] After the onset of British occupation, when normal life of the State

was restored, there opened ample employment and trade avenues in the State and as a result, large scale migration from the neighbouring districts of East-Bengal, viz. Rangpur, Sylhet, Dacca and Mymensing may be said to have actually begun. The annexation of Assam to British India took place in 1826, though the final subjugation of its people was achieved only after 1858, when their freedom struggle under the leadership of Moniram Dewan had ended.[55] However, the migration seems to have continued even after Assam was finally annexed to British India. Though the migrants first settled in the undivided Kamrup and Goalpara districts, they gradually spread out into other parts of the Brahmaputra valley. A look at the 1872 and 1881 census of Assam reveals some characteristic patterns of the Muslim population of the Assam valley. This signifies a considerable number of Muslim migrations during this decade, as it is shown in the following table.

The number of Muslims in the Assam valley in different Districts in 1872 and 1881.[56]

Districts	1872	1881
1. Garo Plains	.....	4,120
2. Goalpara	89,916	102,773
3. Kamrup	45,823	50,305
4. Darrang	13,859	14,677
5. Nagaon	10,066	11,486
6. Sibsagar	12,619	15,179
7. Lakhimpur	3,826	5,804
Total	176,109	204,344

It appears likely that during the later period of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century a sizeable number of Muslims of peasant community had migrated to Assam and settled in different parts of this region. It should be noted here that although there was availability of land in Assam, geographically it was almost negative. Therefore, the British government, the Muslim League, and some other the then prominent Hindu leaders of Assam were

in favour of such large scale migration. Their objective was to bring about the prosperity of the region by increasing the agricultural production and the standard of living. In 1910-12, a substantial number of Muslim peasants migrated from East Bengal (Present Bangladesh) and settled in the char (river basins) areas in Assam, especially in the erstwhile districts of Goalpara and Kamrup. From the census of 1921, it comes to our knowledge that in the whole of Assam 2,58,000 people migrated from East Bengal, particularly from the districts of Mymensing and Rangpur, and all of them were cultivators. According to D.P. Barooah, "The flow of immigrants to Goalpara district from Mymensing, Pabna, Bogra and Rangpur district of East Bengal began during the decade 1901-11, and settled on char lands of Goalpara. During the decade the population of the district increases by 30 per cent whereas its increase in earlier decades was 2 per cent in 1891-1901 and 1.4 per cent in 1881-91... However, most of these immigrants settled in Goalpara district, only a few went outside the district...By 1921 larger batches of immigrants came and their movements extended far up to the Assam valley, and colonies of immigrants formed an appreciable element of the population in all the plain districts of Assam. An idea of the extent of migrations can be had from the figures of those born in Bengal but settled in Goalpara district. Their number stood at 77,000 in 1911, 1,51,000 in 1921, and 1,70,000 in 1931, and a great majority of whom i.e., 34,000; 78,000 and 80,000 respectively alone came from the Mymensing district."[57] Here, it is needless to say that these Muslims were laborious and within a few years they had brought a revolutionary change in the field of Assamese traditional agricultural system.

The British government conducted the administration of Assam from the Bengal till 1974, and in the same year Assam was created into a separate province including the thickly Muslim populated district of Sylhet under the Judicial Commissioner of Assam. This Sylhet district remained with Assam for several decades. Obviously, 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. These migrants are known as *Sylheti* or *Sylhetiyā* (both Hindus and Muslims) in Assam, and most of them are settled permanently in Barāk valley, i.e., the erstwhile Cachar district.

Barring this, the census of the population of the Kamrup District taken sometime before1854, shows that there were 23,490 Muslims in the district,[58] in 1872, their numerical strength in the district swelled to 45,823.[59] This number excluded those Muslims who had migrated from there to the eastern region. Peterov observes that their migration to Assam was especially considerable during 1901-1911.[60] In fact; this was of course, an internal migration of the oppressed peasant community from one part of the country to another part in search of better life and opportunity.

So far as the immigration is concerned, it is also worth-mentioning 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 conditions in their native land. Besides this, slow infiltration of Muslims into different parts of Assam at various decades is among the factors responsible for the growth of Muslim population in Assam. Nevertheless, regarding the growth and development of the Muslim population in Assam, the remarks of S.K. Bhuyan is worth-mentioning. He says, "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."[61]

In the light of the above discussion, we may come to this conclusion that the Muslim population of Assam, whose origin dates back to the last decade of 12th century, was not evolved within a century. It was rather a composition of slow and spasmodic process which occurred during a very long period of time i.e., since 1198 A.D. 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. Hence, these Muslims of Assam have reasonably been considered as the *Thaluā Musalmān* (Native or Indigenous Muslims) or the Assamese Muslims.

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