

THE ASSAMESE MUSLIM SOCIAL STRUCTURE STUDY IN A GOALPARA VILLAGE

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ABSTRACT

SUBMITTED IN FULFILMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

To



NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY
SHILLONG
1988

The Muslims are India's second major religious group with 61,418,269 persons, which forms 11.21% to the total population. They form a part and parcel of the larger Indian community. The Indian Muslim society is a bi-product of the cross-fertilization of Islamic Great Tradition and Indo-Islamic Little tradition. Thus, in case, one decides to uncover the various aspects of Indian social structure, the Muslims constitute a significant constituent. However, sociological research on the life of this group of Indians is limited, as few analytical studies have been conducted so far.

The country's North Eastern region is not only geographically isolated, but it is academically neglected too. Assam, in the country's North East is the reservoir of the country's second largest Muslim population, only next to Jammu and Kashmir. According to the 1971 Census, in Assam, Muslims constitute 24.56% to the total population. 91.18% of the total population is rural dwellers engaged in agriculture and allied activities. Hence, it is imperative to undertake a study on the rural Assamese Muslim society.

The Muslim society in Assam is isomorphic in nature. It is composed of (a) Assamese speaking Muslims (b) Bengali speaking Muslims (c) Hindustani speaking Muslims. The Assamese Muslims are distributed throughout the Brahmaputra Valley. The District of Goalpara with 42.25% Muslims (according to 1971 Census) to the total population accounts for the highest Muslim population among the Valley districts. Being the Western frontier district of Assam, from where the Muslims came to the State, Goalpara occupies a significant position in terms of Muslim contact and Muslim settlement. It came into recorded Muslim contacts early in 1205 A.D., when Bakhtiar Khilji intruded upon. Conversion of tribals during that period has been sociologically significant.

The village of Dakaidol, selected for the present study, is situated 10 kilometers South East to the Goalpara town. It consists of three hamlets. The middle hamlet with 50 households forms the Assamese Muslim society. The other two hamlets are inhabited by the flood affected Char (river islets) dwellers (immigrant Bengali Muslims from Mymensingh), who were allotted land in original Dakaidol in the year 1953 and 1963 respectively. Being bound up by the objectives of the study primary data were collected from the 50 households in the middle hamlet. Interview technique and quasi-participant observation were used as supplementary

techniques. In order to understand the levels of relationship between the indigenous and immigrant Muslims, fifty households were selected and studied, from the other two hamlets. The households were selected through simple random sampling method. Staying overnight in the village had to be avoided. I stayed in the Goalpara town, used to reach the village in the morning and return before nightfall. Data were collected in January 1986.

Usually an Indian village yields to analysis through the 'caste' model. The Indian Muslim societies too have been studied through the 'caste' model, because though Islamic principle prescribes for egalitarianism, yet at the behavioural level Muslims seem to be governed by some of the 'caste' principles. As 'caste' among the Muslims is a borrowed phenomenon so its application is flexible. In Assam, 'caste' had never been rigid due to various humanitarian traditions as Vaishnavism and Islamism etc. As such caste among the Muslims could not be rigid.

Social and economic stratification in the original Muslim society operated simultaneously. Such divisions synchronized well with the 'class' model. Thus, 'caste' and 'class' were inseparable. In fact the caste model (based on

the idea of functional interdependence) was used by the Western thinkers to understand the 'immutable' Indian villages. 'Class' model has been used by them to study Western society which is viewed as changing and progressing. As a British legacy Indian villages have been studied by many Indian scholars by applying the 'caste' model. But this is not the proper approach to the study of Indian villages where 'caste' and 'class' are inseparable. K.L. Sharma suggests to go for 'class point of view of caste' and 'caste point of view of class' for the study of Indian villages from the empirical point of view. In the village Dakaidol (middle hamlet) centering the revenue-free land Syed and Sheikh formed a caste-class hierarchy. Changes generated in the social structure due to the changes in the land relations. Thus, class relation was more important.

The traditional village economy was self-sufficient. Every woman irrespective of social ranking knew the art of spinning and weaving. Members of each family knew the art of fishing, carpentry, animal rearing besides agriculture. Washermen as an occupational caste group also did not exist.

Though initially the Syed land owners were priests and kept themselves away from actual cultivation yet

gradually their claim to superiority was questioned by the Sheikh, who were actual cultivators in the leased-in-land of the Syeds. Today, unlike in the past, the Syeds are plough cultivators. Syed-Sheikh distinction on the basis of social gradation and economic relation has been bridged beyond recognition. Due to such a socio-economic relation, the Syeds played a dominant role in terms of power relations too. Power, authority and influence are intertwined with their general i.e., socio-economic status. The Syeds being the landowners and preachers of Islam could also take an upperhand in the power structure of the village.

The British brought a transformation by taking away the land rights of the Syeds. The first serious repercussion was visible in land alienation. This change in the economic relation brought about changes in the socio-political relations too. Now, land alienation and natural calamities replaced the self-sufficient economy to scarcity and poverty. Poverty has given rise to some non-agricultural occupations. Agriculture remains the primary occupation for 88 percent of the respondents, whereas occupations such as carpentry, tailoring etc., have turned to be the primary occupations for 12 percent of the villagers. A significant feature of this subsistence economy is the existence of uneconomic

holdings which are not suitable for paddy cultivation but ideal for kitchen gardens only. The subsistence economy gives rise to categories of workers but they are devoid of awareness or class consciousness. They are kisans (small farmers), Adhiars (share-croppers) and Bhumihin mazdoors (landless labourers). However, this division can be made only at the conceptual level. The boundary of each category cannot be determined for all the time. Division of the residential plot and agricultural field in each family is due to the break down of the village self-sufficiency. Though the kinship bond is gradually becoming loose, yet kins stand together as a first support in any kind of distress. For e.g. marriage of a daughter requires money. Dowry is commonly understood to be non-existent in Assam. However, the study has shown that dowry takes the form of Joutuk. In order to fulfil that, the bride's father enters into indebtedness primarily to kinsmen.

Religion is an important means of order maintenance and social control. Data were collected to understand group formation and leadership pattern. The Vice-president of the now dissolved Village Panchayat was identified as influential due to his spokespersonship while the care-taker of the Dakaidol shrine was considered influential due to his

religiocity. So we understand that by and large the middle hamlet Dakaidol is a faction-free social organism.

Geographically and politically the three hamlets make the village Dakaidol, but there is no solidarity as a single unit. The indigenous Assamese Muslims express their resentment against free mixing with the immigrant Muslims. That became evident when it was recorded that only 4 percent of the divorced husbands and widowers had brought their second wives from the immigrant community. The members of the latter group do not hesitate to give their daughters in marriage even to a married man of middle hamlet. However, such marriages are not appreciated by the residents of the middle hamlet. It may be predicted that the immigrant Muslims will strive to merge with the indigenous Muslims more vigorously. But the Assamese antagonism to the Bhatias (Bengali Muslim immigrants) may help in maintaining distance between the two.

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