Islam in the Hill Areas of Northeast India

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I

Islam originated in Arab after the turn of the seventh century. In the subsequent centuries, it spread to Middle or Near East, lower Nile river delta, Mediterranean coast of North Africa, Western Sudan, North East Etopic dry plains, East African coast, Central Asia, South Asia and Iran, South East Asia, etc.

The complexity of studying the Muslims of the world in terms of hundreds of languages and ethnic groups may be simplified by identifying larger culture areas. Such a system assumes that ethnic groups within a single area will have some cultural commonality. To an extent this is feasible, especially where culture areas embrace a major linguistic area or encompass relatively simple physical environment (Weekes 1984). It is possible to identify nine culture areas in which most Muslims live. [Culture area here refers to a geographical area in which the inhabitants share most of the elements of culture such as language, ecological conditions, economic systems, socio-cultural and ideological systems.]

1. The dry lands of Southwest Asia, often called the Middle or Near East, is the heartland of Arab culture. Largely semiarid with mountains and plains, but fertile river valleys, it includes the countries of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey. Its people, almost totally Arab except for the Turks and Jewish Israelis, are largely rural, either as cultivators or nomads, but with strong and active urban populations in such cities as Beirut, Damascus, Amman, Baghdad, Mecca, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv-Yafo, Izmir, Istanbul and Ankara.

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2. The lower Nile River delta is the home of nearly 45 million Arabs who were once non-Arab Egyptians. The narrow inhabited area along the Nile has a population density exceeding 2,000 persons per square mile.

3. The Mediterranean coast of North Africa, called the 'Maghreb' in Arabic (sunset), hosts a culture composed of pre-Islamic traditions overlaid by Arab culture. The people, Arab and Berber, follow coastal living patterns as well as arid mountain and fertile valley life-styles.

4. The Arabs called the area to the South of the Maghreb *Sudan*, meaning "black". It is a 1000-mile-wide belt stretching 3000 miles from the Red Sea in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the West. The northern edge of the Sudan is desert, which becomes dryland plains (called Sahel) and, finally, forest in the South. Western Sudan was the site of the great empires of Mali and Songhay, whose people were converted to Islam by the Berbers and Arabs beginning in the ninth century. Central Sudan, around Lake Chad, is dominated by the Muslim Hausa and Kanuri, who farm the dry plains along the Niger River and northern Nigeria. Eastern Sudan is the dry plains area around the upper Nile in the Republic of Sudan in southern Egypt.

5. The northeast Ethiopic dry plains, forest and sea coast constitute a culture area of semi-sedentary Muslims who were converted to Islam by Arab armies and missionaries soon after the advent of Islam. The people include Afar, Somali, Tigre and Oromo (Galla), who are noted for their fiercely independent spirit.

6. The East African coast, forested and with numerous trading cities, is culturally heterogeneous. Arabs, Persians and many ethnic groups from South Asia settled here – some to intermarry with the native Bantu, others to establish endogamous societies.

7. The Central Asian steppes reflect a culture area whose people are primarily Turkic speakers. The highlands are dry and suitable to pastoralism, while the rivers and valleys support such famous Muslim cities as Samarkand and Tashkent. This is the land of the Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Tatars and Turkmen.

8. The great Aryan migrations of 2000 B.C. established a broad culture area reaching from Iran in the west to the border of Bengal (and beyond) in the east. The geographical area of South Asia embraces Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bengal, Assam, Northeastern

India, etc. It is a land of mountains and plains adaptive to both pastoralism and sedentary farming. The people speak languages of the Indo-Iranian family. Their cultures include elements of an occupational caste system (South Asia and Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Assam, Northeastern India).

9. Southeast Asia beginning with the rivers of Bengal is an area of rivers, forests, peninsulas and islands whose people have developed cultures based on wet rice farming and seafaring. Their conversion to Islam came later than in the western culture areas, and their religion is strongly syncretistic (hills and mountains of Northeastern India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and Malaysia).

The introduction of Islamic beliefs into different local societies involved radical socio-political changes, apart from the more personal aspects of conversion (Rigby 1966: 268). As Islam spread to various parts of the world, it gradually took over many elements and features of indigenous folk traditions. The presence of indigenous folk elements in the social life of various local Muslim communities is to some extent explainable in terms of proselytization of local populations into Islam. While examining the interrelationships between the Islamic doctrines and the local cultures that have become Islamized, G. Von Grunebaum (1955) states that there are different ways in which conflict, coexistence and interaction of the Islamic high culture and local cultures can be described. Anthropological and sociological studies on the spread of Islam have concerned themselves mainly with the problems of 'culture contact' or 'acculturation'.

Several anthropological and sociological studies in culture contact between Islam and various local communities and cultural traditions, in parts of the world, have demonstrated the extent of Muslim influence on various spheres of social life of the traditional cultures and the patterns of adoption and assimilation of Islamic elements by the traditional cultures. Religious and cultural syncretism is a worldwide phenomenon arising out of culture contact. The interrelated aspects of this phenomenon are culture change, reinterpretation, assimilation, etc. the concept of syncretism was originally proposed by Herskovits (1938) when he observed the extensive blending of African tribal religious meaning and Christian forms among the New World Negro cultures. Syncretism refers to the combination and blending of elements from different cultural and religious traditions. This is a general feature of the development of cultural and religious systems over time, as they absorb

and reinterpret elements drawn from other traditions with which they are in contact (Smith 1968). Some of these studies have also referred to a 'syncretism' between Islamic and traditional customs and rituals (Geertz 1965, Greenberg 1941,1946, Lewis 1966, Rigby 1966, Weekes 1984). Such syncretism is also discernible in Northeast India in general and Assam in particular (Ali 2006:141-49).

II

The process of the spread of Islam to various parts of North-East India and Assam started as early as the thirteenth century. This region came into contact with the Muslims when expeditions were undertaken by a number of Muslim invaders. Between 1206 A.D. and 1662 A.D. several expeditions were made by different Muslim invaders to this region. Every Muslim invasion contributed a little towards the strengthening and propagation of Islamic faith in this region. Migrations of the Muslims into different parts of Northeastern India at various times and conversion of local people to Islam are some of the primary factors responsible for the growth of Muslim population and the formation of a number of discrete Muslim communities in the region.[1]

The spread of Islam (since 1206), Sikhism (since 1668) and Christianity (since 1826) along with the people coming from outside the region resulted in acculturation among these religions and the different local societies. In the process, conversion of groups of local peoples to these religions took place and also these religions gradually took over many elements and features of indigenous folk traditions.

Islam among Khasis and Garos

Khasis came into contact with Muslims around the 17th century. Muslims paid occasional visits to the Khasi hills as wanderers, traders, fortune tellers, hunters and in other capacities. In the course of time these Muslims adopted Khasi customs. In some places of the Khasi hills, some Muslims were even honoured with chieftainship (Mathur 1975: 122-32). The Syiems of Mawiong are believed to have descended from four migrant Muslim families. The Muslims of Sylhet made repeated efforts to invade Khasi hills.

Historical evidences show that Khasis maintained some trade relationships with the Mughal emperors through their viceroys at Murshidabad. During and after the British rule, a number of Muslims from Kabul, Kashmir, Punjab, Jaipur, Allahabad, Madras, Calicut, Lucknow, Banaras, Chapra,

Gauhati, Nagaon, Cachar, Sylhet and Dhaka migrated to Shillong and settled there for trade and commerce. Many of them married Khasi women. Thus, there is the presence of a group of Muslim Khasis within the tribe, which is the result of marriage between Muslim males and Khasi women. It has been observed that children born out of the union between a Muslim father and a Khasi mother are considered Muslims as far as their religion is concerned. But for all practical purposes they are treated as Khasi. Bareh (1967: 392) is of the opinion that the decorations of the graves of Khasi chiefs have been influenced by the decorations of the *taziya* of Muslims. [*Taziya* is a model or representation of the shrines of Hassan and Hussain, sons of Ali, cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad.]

Clan among Garos is known as *chatchi* and there are five known exogamous clans among them. They are Sangma, Marak, Momin, Shira and Areng. Some scholars are of the opinion that originally Garos had two matri-moieties – Sangma and Marak and that at a later stage Momin and other *chatchi* came into existence. It is generally believed that the Momin *chatchi* originated from the union of a Muslim man and a Garo woman (Roy Burman and Thukral 1970: 80).

Islam in Naga Hills

Azan Fakir, who was the chief force of consolidation of Islam in Assam valleys in the 17th century, also undertook missionary work for the propagation of Islam in parts of present-day Nagaland. He also asked one of his associates, Saleh Saheb, to stay in the Naga hills to undertake propagation work. The descendants of Saleh Saheb have come to be known as Parbatia Dewan – literally the 'Chief of the Hill' (Bhuyan 1975: 181, Sarkar 1972: 70).

During the early part of the 20th century, a Muslim from Bengal, Keramat Ali, undertook works to propagate the faith of Islam in the foothills of Naga Hills. However, the spread of Islam in Nagaland did not result in the emergence of a clearly identifiable tribal Muslim community in this hilly region.

The Manipuri Muslims

Muslims constitute 6.99 per cent of the total population in Manipur. A large number of Muslims from undivided Bengal entered this region through the western boundary at different historical times and settled there.

The present day Manipuri Muslims (known as Pangans) are believed to be the descendants of the Bengali immigrants and war captives who had

come to this region in the beginning of the 17th century. These Muslims, some of who married Meitei women, in the course of time formed a distinct community. Among the Manipuri Muslims the traditional clans are still in existence. It has been reported that in a village called Prompat in the Imphal valley, the Muslim householders belong to 11 *sagai* or clans namely, Ipham, Kulaibaum, Koijing, Wang, Bogi, Yumikhaibaum, Mogjai, Chesham, Moinam and Phisubaum (Siddiqui 1990).

Influence of Islam on Bodo Kacharis and Rabhas

The Bodo Kacharis, who constitute an important plains tribe of Assam, observe various ceremonies and festivals connected with birth, death, marriage and agricultural activities. Baisagu and Kherai are the two important festivals of Bodo Kacharis. Baisagu is a spring time festival and Kherai is a religious annual community festival. During the Kherai festival they worship and offer sacrifice to a number of gods and goddesses. One of these gods is called 'Nawab Badshah' or Muslim God by Bodo Kacharis. At the time of offering sacrifice to this god, the priest wears a *dhoti* in the fashion of a *lungi* and the sacrifice is made by facing west. While sacrificing the cock, the priest utters the word *Bismillah* – in the name of Allah (Narjee 1966: 249).

As in the case of Bodo Kacharis, some influence of Islam is also discernible among Rabhas – another plains tribe of Assam. Rabhas celebrate Baikho and Khoksi festivals annually with the intension of propitiating Baikho, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. The Rabhas of Baida area in south Goalpara sacrifice a cock in the name of 'Sainnas Thakur' – one of the gods of Baikho. During the sacrifice, like Bodo Kacharis, a Rabha priest faces west, wears a *dhoti* in the fashion of a *lungi* and utters the word *Bismillah*.

Matriliny and Islam

Matriliny is rare among Muslims and presents an interesting problem of anthropological and sociological studies. Studies on the coexistence and interaction of Islam, which is essentially patrilineal, and various matrilineal societies have been undertaken by a number of scholars (D'Souza 1976: 141-67, Dube 1969, Kutty 1972, Weekes 1984). Many of these studies have dealt with the problems of adjustment and accommodation between apparently incompatible principles.

It appears that one of the most significant aspects of Islam-tribal contact situations in Northeast India is the contact between Islam and the

matrilineal tribal societies. It has already been pointed out earlier that in Northeast India, the matrilineal Garos and Khasis have come into contact with Islam. Of these two groups the influence of Islam is clearly discernible in the latter. The socio-cultural life of the Muslim Khasis exhibits a mixture of the principles of Islam and matriliny. The children born out of marriages between Muslims and Khasi women are of two categories: one follows the Khasi tribal tradition and the other follows tribal Islam. The pattern of family, kinship, marriage, inheritance and residence of the Muslim Khasis clearly indicate a compromise between Islam and matriliny (Mathur 1975: 122-32).

Among Khasis, the youngest daughter (*khadduh*) is the custodian of the ancestral house, traditions and religion (*ka bat ia ka niam*). However, among the Muslim Khasis, the youngest daughter neither enjoys any special rights and privileges nor has any religious duty to perform. With regard to inheritance unlike the tribal and Christian Khasis, the youngest daughter among the Muslim Khasis is treated as equal with her sisters. Contrary to matrilocal Khasi custom, the tendency among the Muslim Khasis is to leave the family of orientation after marriage. A majority of the Muslim Khasis reckons the descent through the female line and use Muslim surnames along with maternal clan titles. The Khasis are exogamous and Muslim–Khasi kinship alliances have not remarkably affected the clan organization of the Muslim Khasis.

The preceding discussion indicates that the introduction of Islamic beliefs into different tribal societies of Northeast India did not result radical socio-cultural changes. The tribals of the region who have embraced Islam have organized their way of life primarily according to the dictates of their tribal traditions. At the same time one also notices that various elements from both tribal and Islamic traditions coexist within the same socio-cultural framework of the tribals. Thus, a kind of 'syncretism' between Islamic and tribal customs and rituals has taken place. The socio-cultural life of many of the tribals who have come under the influence of Islam is guided more by their tribal traditions than by Islamic tradition.

Note

1. The sign of Islam appeared in Northeastern India after the invasion made by Malik Yuzbak in 1257. Yuzbak, for the first time, erected a mosque in Assam to celebrate his victory. Following this, a number of mosques were constructed in Assam by different Muslim invaders. It may be noted here that the ruins of a very old mosque have been found at Kimin in Arunachal Pradesh (*Tindiniya Agradoot,*1999).

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