CHAPTER - 2

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2.1 Introduction

One noticeable result of the long-drawn contest between the Muslim powers of India and the rulers of the north-east was the gradual swelling of the Muslim population in the region through infiltration and conversion, thereby introducing Muslim constituents in the regional demography. In addition, Muslim religious institutions such as mosques, *dargahs* or shrines and Islamic seminaries, etc. further helped and contributed towards propagating the faith of Islam in the region. Subsequently, the Muslim population was strengthened especially, during the British colonial rule in the 19th century and early 20th century through fresh immigration.

Regions such as western Assam (especially Rangpur, Goalpara and Kamrup), Sylhet and Tripura Plain, which were subdued and controlled by the Muslims, ultimately became the strongholds of Muslim population. As per a census operation conducted as early as 1809 in Rangpur, the western part of Kamrup, had 1,536,000 Muslims as against 1,199,000 Hindus, out of the total population of 2,735,000. By 1872 the number of Muslims increased to 1,291,465, constituting about 60 per cent of the total population and forming the largest religious community in the region. In 1848, out of the total population of 3,87,775 of Kamrup district, Muslims constituted 35,863, whereas the population of the Hindus and the tribals stood at 2,76,038 and 75,826 respectively. According to the census enumeration (which accounted only for the adult population) of

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1872, in Koch Behar out of the total population of 176,396, Muslims constituted 48,086 (27 per cent) and Hindus, 127,928 (72 per cent).  

2.2 Infiltration of Muslims

The early growth of Muslim population could be attributed to the slow infiltration and settlement of Muslims in the western parts of Assam (Kamrup and Goalpara districts), Tripura Plain and Sylhet at different points of time along with the Muslim captives made by the local rulers. But, there are very few records available, which give account of the Muslim infiltration in the region. The earliest settlement of Muslims came up following Malik Yuzbak's campaign of Kamarupa in A.D. 1254-55, who after taking possession of the realm transformed it into a Muslim region by having the *kutbah* read in his name. Muslim infiltration also, probably, took place following Sultan Ghiyasuddin's occupation of the southern portions of the present districts of Kamrup and Goalpara in A.D. 1321-22.  

The Muslim population augmented further by the captives taken by the local rulers. After Tubrak's campaign of Assam in A.D. 1532, many Muslim soldiers taken captive by the Ahoms were later settled in different parts of the realm. Tradition has it that they were initially employed as cultivators, but having proved inept were next employed as woodcutters. Even this vocation, they could not pursue for long. They were then made grass-cutters for the royal elephants. Their ignorance for the trade was so much that they were left to their own. They then took to working in brass, an occupation that their descendants, known as *marias*, carry on up to these days.

Major Muslim inflow also occurred in western Assam in the wake of Mughal occupation of Koch Hajo from A.D. 1613 to 1667.

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5 Charles Stewart, *History of Bengal*, p. 58.
Frequent references to Gauhati and Hajo in the Persian chronicles and the *Buranjis* in relation to the Mughal-Ahom political relations indicate that the regions became important centres of military, civil, commercial, and cultural activities of the Mughals in the northeastern India. In fact, Hajo became a stronghold and the headquarter of the Mughals, and was the capital of the Mughal occupied Koch Hajo up till A.D. 1639, when it was transferred to Gauhati. It was during the viceroyalty of Shah Shuja (A.D. 1639-60) in Bengal that Hajo was renamed as Shujabad. During this period of Mughal occupation, military generals and nobles were conferred with fiefs or military *jagirs* in this region. For instance, after the occupation of Koch Hajo in A.D. 1613, Mukaram Khan, the governor of Koch Hajo, is known to have conferred lands to the Muslim notables, and even 10,000 to 12,000 *paiks* or foot-soldiers, who were requisitioned from Bengal, were also provided with land in return for their military services.\(^8\)

Besides, the Mughal soldiers posted in the region, in course of time, married local women and settled. The tradition of Muslims in north Lakhimpur and Jaipur suggests that the first Muslim colonists, who settled in the region, contracted matrimonial alliances with the women of the country, and made their homes in these two cantonments.\(^9\) It is also held that many of the soldiers of Mir Jumla stayed back after the campaign. The Muslim *nagarias* (townsfolk) of Kamrup district, mostly artisans, are believed to be the survivors of Mir Jumla's campaign of A.D. 1662.\(^10\)

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\(^8\) H. Blochmann (tr.), *Padishahnamah*, pp. 53-54; E. A. Gait, *A History of Assam*, pp. 63-67; *Baharistan-i-Gaibi*, vol. I, pp. 222-53. Some of the old suits brought to the British Government contain fragmentary information relating to Muslim settlement in the region. Many of the plaintiffs in the suits were Muslims who were descendants of *zamindars* and *chaudhuries* appointed by the Mughal *faujdars*. See E. A. Glazier, *A Report of the District of Rungpore*, Appendix-A (no. 2).


Muslims in large number from Bengal also found their way into Assam in the wake of Moamaria rebellion. The rebellion by this Vaishnavite sect erupted during the reign of king Lakshmi Singh (A.D. 1769-80), and continued till the late 18th century. It destabilized the Ahom power to such an extent that the latter did not survive long after this disastrous event. The central power having thus been thrown into a state of confusion and disarray, the western frontier of the country became ill defended and open to intrusion. Consequently, large-scale migration from Bengal into Assam took place through unauthorized trade and commerce. Many of the Mughal ex-servicemen and the British sepoys also entered the country as marauders and subsequently settled in the region. The ferocity of these raiding hordes steadily increased to such a level that Niamatullah Subehdar, one of their leaders, occupied Gauhati for sometime. It was during this phase that large number of Muslims came and settled in Kamrup. Migration seems to have continued even after the region was finally taken over by the British. Though the migrants first settled in the districts of Kamrup and Goalpara, they gradually spread out into other parts of the Brahmaputra valley.

Moreover, as trade and commerce flourish between Bengal and Mughal occupied parts of north-east, people of different vocation including Muslim traders from Bengal entered and settled

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11 Moamaria, a Vaishnavite sect, whose adherents drawn from the lower Hindu castes, were residents of upper Assam. With the increasing influence of Hinduism on Rudra Singh (A.D. 1696-1715) his daughter-in-law, at the instigation of Sakta sect insulted the sudra mahant of the Moamaria, by causing his forehead to be smeared with the blood of an animal that had been sacrificed to Durga. Situation further worsened with Lakshmi Singh’s accession in A.D. 1769. Ultimately it led to a revolt. However, it was crushed only to rose again with the accession of Gaurinath Singh in A.D. 1780. In A.D. 1786, the rebels defeated the royal troops in several encounters and took the capital by storm. The king fled to Gauhati. The Matak rajya was established after the third and final Moamaria rebellion in the present Dibrugarh district of Assam. The rajya retained the hold till the British annexed it in 1839. See W. W. Hunter (ed.), Imperial Gazetteer of India, vol. VI, pp. 30-32.

12 *Tungkhungra Buranji*, p. 139.

in various parts of the region. Gauhati was the hub of trade and industries. Trade in Assam proper was predominantly in the hands of kaiya or marwari merchants, and Muslim dealers, who were largely from Dacca. The former were scattered throughout the length and breadth of the valley, while the latter generally confined their operations to the towns. In the Surma valley trade was in the hands of Muslim and Hindu traders.\textsuperscript{14} Even today many of the Muslims of Lakhimpur district claim their descent from boatmen and traders of Bengal who settled in the region.\textsuperscript{15}

Similar Muslim intrusions perhaps took place in the Tripura Plain, especially after the Mughals occupied the whole of the region in A.D. 1733, and during the 12-year rule of Shamser Gazi. However, British accounts accentuate the overwhelming presence of Muslims in the region largely due to the forced conversions made by the Muslim rulers.

The changes in the river system of the Bengal delta that occurred between the 12\textsuperscript{th} and the 16\textsuperscript{th} century resulting to linking up of the Ganges with the Padma river by the late 16\textsuperscript{th} century, as discussed in the foregoing, also perhaps accentuated the process of the inflow of the Muslims of Bengal eastward. The changes brought the main channel of the river into the interiors of eastern Bengal and with it parts of the Bengal delta also shifted eastward. As all human settlements have followed the swings of the streams, settlement pattern of the aforesaid area must have had undergone remarkable changes, pushing the Muslim population, which by then formed a major chunk of the population, eastward (towards western parts of Assam).

\textsuperscript{14} Report on the River-Borne Trade of the Province of Assam, 1881, Shillong, 1882, pp. 1-2. Trade between Assam and Bengal was carried on in 19\textsuperscript{th} century principally by the streamers plying between Calcutta and Dibrugarh on the Brahmaputra river, and between Calcutta, Sylhet, and Cachar on the Surma river. For details, see \textit{ibid.}, pp. 1-2.

2.3 Conversion of the Local Population

The Muslim rulers in the sub-continent, on the whole, adopted a general approach of neutrality to the problem of conversion largely as a reason of policy and genuine tolerance. Nonetheless, some of them exercised political persuasion from time to time with the assurance of immunity.\textsuperscript{16} As seen in the preceding chapter, the Muslim rulers who undertook campaigns to the north-east India never adopted a systemic policy of conversion besides some sporadic references at the individual level. One such instance is the conversion of a chief of the mech tribe, who after being vanquished by Muhammad Bhaktiyar Khalji, took to Islam and assumed the name of Ali Mech.\textsuperscript{17} He even guided Bhaktiyar on his Tibetan expedition. This, however, does not suggest by any account that other members of his tribe too had converted. Instead, it was a "conversion of convenience," as we find that after he returned to his tribe he either fell back to his old faith or failed to convince his tribesmen for Islam; even today the tribal people in that region profess their old faith. Fear occasionally dictated a timely acceptance of such offers and led to conversions, but they were usually momentary and ceased to be effective once the threat of the invaders retreated.

In fact, the Muslim rulers were either generally too engaged in their military expeditions to pay much regard to the affairs of religion, or paid more attention to the exaction of tribute than think of enforcing conversions. Moreover, they could not achieve any permanent conquest except in Sylhet and Tripura. And even here, we find no reference of any such policy having been implemented by them in the contemporary sources.

Indeed, by the time Muslims established their rule in Bengal, much of the Islamic missionary zeal and passion had abated in the hearts and minds of the Muslim rulers and military commanders.

\textsuperscript{16} Aziz Ahmad, \textit{Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment}, p. 82.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Tabaqat-i-Nasiri}, vol. I, p. 560.
Even if they patronized Islam, it was rather indirect, coming in the form of support to Muslim preachers and grants for establishing and maintaining religious institutions, with the latter being more or less an arrangement for the moving troops and their out-posts in the region. Islam was, more or less, left to itself, so far as the policy of the rulers was concerned. Hence, the conversions that took place from time to time were mainly at the instance of the itinerant saints.

In fact, many scholars today refute the very theory of Islam having been implanted in the Indian subcontinent by force and pressure. To quote S. M. Ikram:

The view that Islam propagated itself in India through the sword cannot be maintained; aside from other evidence, the very distribution of the Muslim population does not support it. If the spread of Islam has been due to the might of the Muslim kings, one would expect the largest proportion of Muslims in those areas which were the centres of Muslim political power (like Delhi, Lucknow, Ahmedabad, Ahmdnagar, Bijapur, etc.) this, however is not the case.  

Instead, Islam has gained its largest adherents at places in which its political power has been weakest, i.e. in the two extremes of the subcontinent – Bengal and north-western frontier. This is fairly clear evidence of the conversion being the work of Muslim religious preachers instead.

However, British writers, more often than not, subscribe to the theory that Islam won its numbers by pressure and force. Alauddin Husain Shah, the Nawab of Bengal, after defeating the ruler of Kamarupa in A.D. 1498 annexed the whole kingdom. His governor at Kamarupa, Sultan Ghiyasuddin, is said to have founded a Muslim colony in Hajo where he also established Muslim religious institutions, including a mosque now popular as Pao-Mecca on the summit of the Gaurachol hill (also known as Mukamara hill). He is

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further known to have made large land-grants for their maintenance and adopted extreme measures for converting the local populace.  

F. Buchanan, who attributes the large concentration of Muslims in Rangpur to the use of official pressure, has this to say:

Although the followers of the Kuran form the largest proportion of the inhabitants of this district, there is little reason to suppose that many of them are intruders. They seem in general, from their countenances, to be descendents of the original inhabitants, who have been converted in a great measure probably by the intolerance of the Mohammedan governors of Bengal. In the parts of the district, which were conquered by the Mughals, the original tribes have suffered less, for until the time of Aurangzeb; the princes of the house of Taimur were perfectly tolerant. In some parts, as in Battrishazari, the number of Musalmans seems to be owing to an increase of cultivation. The zamindar, on the establishment of a settled government, invited strangers to settle on his estates more accustomed to a settled life than his own tenants, who had long been in the habit of sulking from wood to wood; and his supply came chiefly from Dinajpur where most of the cultivators were Musalmans.

British writers too maintain that Mughals carried out such persuasive conversions in Tripura Plain after Shujauddin Khan subjugated it in and around A.D. 1773. According to W. W. Hunter, conversion continued till the 19th century and the converts usually belonged to the lower Hindu castes, who either converted for their own well-being or were forced to convert. He writes:

... converts are almost limited to those Hindus who from some cause or another, have lost caste. The followers of the Prophet are nearly all the lowest class, and have adopted many Hindu customs. Muhammadans of this place are the descendants of the lower castes, who in times of the Muhammadan supremacy were either persuaded by interests, or compelled by violence, to relinquish their ancient religion.

Cases of such forced conversion also come from the local traditions. According to a popular tradition of nagar brahmans of

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20 H. Blochmann, Contributions to the Geography and History of Bengal (Muhammadan Period), op. cit., pp. 281-82. See also Riyaz-us-Salatin, p. 132. According to P. Gogoi, it was Husain Khan, the son of Husain Shah, who introduced settlement of Muslims in the vicinity of Hajo in Kamrup, started construction of the mosque on the Gaurachol hill, and is believed to have brought to Hajo a Muslim saint Ghiyasuddin Auiya for propagating Islam in the region. See P. Gogoi, The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms, p. 298.


23 Ibid., p. 495.
Siddhapur in the districts of Sylhet and Bankura (whose descendants are now known as boras), Muslim rulers during their occupation in the region used force to gain converts, and those who tried to maintain their faith were persecuted. Even at present, they retained to a certain extent the distinctive features of their community. Notably, the script used for writing the texts on subjects related with the Islam, is Nagari, though the language used is Bengali. The alphabets used are known as Sylhet Nagari and Musalman Nagari.24

But, it is noteworthy that these accounts and traditions are not corroborated by any of the contemporary or near contemporary accounts of the Muslim and indigenous chroniclers. Had there been any such case, it would have definitely found special mention in the Muslim chronicles, particularly as the writers of the time were careful to put on record any point of religious merit for their heroes.

Instead, the basic features of Islam i.e., the simplicity of its code of belief, its strict monotheism, egalitarian principles, 25 well-defined scriptures and traditions – which appeared as a revolutionary force to the aborigines, and even to the lower caste Hindus who were subdued by iniquitous social divisions and other disabilities – served as powerful incentives for voluntary conversions. An illustration in point is furnished by F. Buchanan:

To the votaries of Hindus the Muhammadan religion is more favourable, than that of the Brahmans, enabling them to procure a little animal food. A Moslem family is seldom so poor, but that on its solemn occasion it can afford to offer a fowl. But a Hindu, unless


25 It is worth noting that Susan Bayly, in her study of the history of Muslims in south India in the 18th and 19th century, observed that as against the egalitarian message of Islam the projection of Islam as a rich, dynamic and flexible religion, which was accommodative of the indigenous faith and worship played an important role in large-scale conversion. However, in the area of our study it is not corroborated by the facts at our disposal. See Susan Bayly, Saints, Goddesses and Kings, p. 13.
of the very dregs of impurity, can offer no animal of less value than a kid, and many families can never afford so expensive a sacrifice. 26

Instances of such voluntary conversions come from Koch Behar. According to Brian Hodgson:

In a word Visva Singh with all the people of condition apostatised to Hinduism; the country (Kamarupa) was renamed Bihar; the people Rajbansi; so that none but the low and mean of this race could longer tolerate the very name of Koch, and most of them being refused a descent status under the Hindu regime, yet infected like their betters, with the disposition to change, very wisely adopted Islam in preference to helol Hinduism. Thus the mass of the Koch people became Muhammadans. 27

There are also stray references of voluntary came from the upper sections of the society, some of who were impressed by the positive character of Islamic teachings, as they were “dissatisfied with the vagueness and subjectivity of the pantheistic system of thought.” 28 A notable instance of conversion comes from Lakhnauti where a brahman yogi by the name of Bhojar Brahma, originally from Kamrup, converted to Islam. He visited Lakhnauti during the time of Ali Mardan Khalji (A.D. 1210-13). He had a serious dialogue on diverse aspects of Islam with the qazi of the city, Qazi Ruknaldin al Samarqandi. The brahman yogi on being convinced of the truths of Islam subsequently converted. He gifted a Hindu yogic treatise, Amritkund (cistern of nectar), to the qazi. The qazi translated the work into Persian and Arabic, which became popular in the Sufi circles, especially in Chishti Silsilah. 29

The circumstances that led to the conversion and translation of the work has been described as:

There was in Hind an authentic book well known among the philosophers and learned men named, Amritkund i.e. 'the cistern of nectar.' When the Muslim conquered cities of Hind and the banner

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of Islam was flown there, the news reached Kamrup, the extreme territory of Hind where lived its learned men and philosophers; and one of them came out to hold discussions with the learned divines of Islam. His name was Bhojar Brahmin, the yogi... He reached Lakhnauti in Bengal during the regime of Sultan 'Ali Mardan, entered the mosque on Friday and enquired about the Muslim divines. The people pointed out to him the abode of the Qadi Rukruddin of Samarqand. The yogi asked him, 'Who is your prophet?' 'Muhammad, the apostle of God, (Peace be on Him)' was the reply. The yogi then asked, 'is he the same prophet who said about the soul it is by the order of the lord.' 'Yes, you are right,' the qadi affirmed. The yogi embraced Islam and learned Islamic sciences to such an extent that the Muslim divines permitted him to pronounce legal decisions. The yogi then presented his book to the qadi (God's mercy on Him) who admired it and practised the science of yoga so much so that he reached the yogi's stage. Then he translated the book into Persian and from Persian into Arabic.30

Around this time, and probably influenced by Bhojar Brahman, another brahmin from Kamrup, by the name Ambhavanath, also converted to Islam. Nothing more is known about this brahman and the circumstances that led to his conversion.31 There is also a tradition that a king of the koch tribe also embraced Islam at the instance of Shah Sultan Rumi, a resident of Madanpur in Mymensingh district.32

The rapid increase of Muslim population in some parts of north-east is also explained by the superior fecundity of the community. The native Muslims of Sylhet when inquired by the census enumerators about the high growth rate of their population explained that conversion had very little to do with the growth as there was no organised propaganda of the faith, and the few converts were low caste Hindus who intermarried with Muslims of the opposite sex. The higher rate of increase was rather attributed to higher fecundity, which in turn was due to superior physical vigour and dietary nourishment, and to the absence of restrictions on

30 As quoted in Abdul Karim, op. cit., pp. 62-65. Amritkund, written originally in Sanskrit, is a treatise on yoga philosophy dealing with its practical application to human beings. The book has 10 chapters and 50 verses. It also gives the modus operandi along with certain ascetic exercises to help the ascetics in achieving spiritual upliftment. See ibid., p. 62.


32 Ibid., p. 784.
widow remarriage, to lesser inequality in the age of the husband and wife, and to some extends, to the greater prevalence of polygamy.33

2.4 Role of Muslim Saints

That there existed in the north-east definite missionary efforts is attested by the numerous local traditions and dargahs of preachers that mushroomed far and wide in the region. These are still honoured, and are annually visited by hundreds of pilgrims. It will hardly be an exaggeration to state that there is no town or village where saints did not come and settle. It was, thus, the individual efforts of the Muslim preachers, which must have contributed to the further expansion of Islam among the local population. Though, it must have been a slow and gradual process.

Unfortunately we have scanty information about the activities of these saints, as most of their followers or disciples left no proper hagiography. Of the several of the preachers, little is known beyond their names, the sphere of their labour, or acts of miraculous feats performed by some of the preachers. Unfortunately, names of many of the saints have hardly come down to us. Whatever meagre information we get is either through local traditions (folklores) or the few literary texts available, especially mulfazat (speeches and sayings of saints), and the epigraphic remains. Thus, it is difficult to examine their veracity or fit them into any definite chronology. These sources, though often present genuine history, still need to be handled with care, as the history of the lives of some of these saints are thickly overlaid with pious and supernatural accretions. Thus, the facts and fictions are so closely interwoven that it becomes difficult to extract the former from the latter. Moreover, many of the dargahs that has stood for centuries are also in a dilapidated state, while many others, which lie near the banks of the Brahmaputra and other rivers in the region, have been swept away by its strong currents over the years. Since there is general dearth of information,

wherever there is any available detail regarding the preachers, this has been given at length.

These Muslim preachers were known by various appellations—depending upon their spiritual bend and activities—pirs, gazis, fakirs, etc. Sufis came to be known as pirs in the popular phraseology, and were known for their pious ways and moral preaching.\(^{34}\) They were known to have possessed special spiritual powers and acted as an intermediary between men and God, which made them able to communicate with God and to perform miracles. Only through their guidance, it was believed, can God be found. Many followers of piri cult speak of their need for a guide to instruct them in holy ways. Others visited the piri in times of particular need: sickness, economic crisis, marital problems, and so on, bringing material offerings (sirni) such as sacrificial meat, sweetmeat, etc. The piri usually responded to request for help with tawiz (amulets), and mantra (blessing with holy power). It was because of these healing powers (karamat) that votaries of devotees, cutting across class, caste, religion, etc., flocked to these pirs and their dargahs. Gazis or religious warriors were those who achieved sainthood in the course of noble and valiant missionary campaigns. Fakirs were the product of the interaction between Sufism and Vaishnavism. In mystic terminology fakir means a person who “lives for the Lord alone.” Total rejection of private property and resignation to the will of God (tawakkul) were considered essential for a fakir. But in popular parlance the term fakir was used for a poor man, a pauper or a beggar. They paid less heed to the rules of Shariat (Islamic law) and depended more on contemplative mysticism.

Many such Muslim preachers, “endowed with piety and religious zeal,” as T. Titus opines, were “frequently men of learning,

\(^{34}\) According to some scholars, Pirism was regarded as a form of Sufism that developed from the 16\(^{th}\) century, which was influenced by Hindu Yogism and Tantricism. Technically, the word piri means a spiritual guide and it was popular in eastern India, especially Bengal. For a detailed discussion on Pirism, see Syed Muzaffar-ud-Din Nadvi, Pirism, (Corrupted Sufism), Islamic Culture, vol. X (Jul. 1935).
who, through their own personal interest in the spread of Islam, and inspired with a divine call, had contented to wander from place to place and gathered disciples.\textsuperscript{35} These Muslim divines, through their missionary zeal, spiritual and thaumaturgic powers, prudence, and above all, learning and generosity, won the hearts of the local masses. They, in course of time, became deified, and played an important role in the religious life of the people in the region.

Missionary and proselytising activities were further boosted up by the prevailing social conditions of life among the Hindus. Unlike in mainland India in the north-east they met with a loose variant of Hinduism. Moreover, in the interior parts of north-east it appears that in the early part of medieval period the aborigines had been, on the whole, less integrated with or even exposed to Hinduism. In fact, Hinduism came to north-east very late; though it once existed in the ancient period.\textsuperscript{36} Hence, the Muslim missionaries were invited with open arms by the low castes Hindus – despised and condemned by the small number of upper castes – and the teeming mass of aborigines, who were yet to be fully Hinduised.

Many of the preachers accompanied the Muslim troops during their campaigns towards north-east, while scores of them arrived on their own, from far and wide. It had been the tradition and obligation, for Muslim rulers of medieval India to patronize these Muslim preachers. This they did through taking them in their

\textsuperscript{35} M. T. Titus, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 42.

\textsuperscript{36} Hinduism became the state religion of the Ahoms during the reign of Rudra Singh (A.D. 1696-1714). Before the advent of Hinduism, they had a religion, which P. Gogoi calls Tantricism, a mixture of Mahayana Buddhism and Jhesavadi schools, which was free of caste-barriers. So, there was frequent intermarriage among Ahoms and non-Ahoms. Hinduism was introduced in Manipur as a state religion by Garib Niwaz (A.D. 1709-48).

Hinduism as practiced by the aborigines of north-east was qualitatively different from that of mainland India. It was less rigid or ‘incomplete,’ which probably was due to certain historical factors: the peripheral position of the region, different material conditions, relatively late immigration of the Aryans, the non-caste rulers, and multiplicity of social and ethnic elements in the region. Interactions and influences of all these factors contributed towards relative ‘looseness’ of the religion. For details, see P. Gogoi, \textit{Tai-Ahom Religion and Custom}, p. 64; H. K. Barpujari (ed.), \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 245-51; S. N. Parrat, \textit{The Religion of Manipur}. 

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campaigns, granting stipends, or making presents of money or provisions for their maintenance.

During the Muslim rule of medieval times, generally and more often Muslim saints followed the conquering armies. It was especially true in north India, and in Bengal. It is worth noting that in the 13th and early 14th century thousands of Muslim theologians, saints, and missionaries who fled to India from Iran and Central Asia to escape the Mongol terror found their way to Bengal. During the rule of the independent kings and especially under Sultan Shams-u-din Ilyas Shah (A.D. 1342-57) scores of theologians and saints arrived in Bengal who were patronized and granted rent-free lands by the rulers. They, under the protection of the sovereignty, liberally indulged in proselytising activities. They even penetrated in the remote areas of eastern Bengal and managed to spread Islam far and wide. A number of the saints maintained academics and madrasahs and opened new Islamic centres e.g. Bihar Sahrif, Satgawn, Pandwah (Firuzabad), and Sunargawn, which not only became the abode of Muslim saints and centres of Islamic learning, but also doubled up as administrative headquarters. It was due to the organisation of these cities that Muslim authority could be wielded in this vast region.

Like the imperial Muslim rulers, the local Muslim rulers of the north-eastern region – known for their secularism and catholicity – too patronized the Muslim saints and extended the expected largesse to them. They were granted pir-pal lands (revenue-free lands),

37 *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, vol. II, pp. 869-86.
39 The lands granted by the Ahom rulers to temples, religious institutions, and pious men of learning in lower Assam were known as *nisfkhajeraj* or half-revenue paying estates, which was different from *khiraj* or full-revenue paying estates. In due course of time these lands were held revenue-free, and the grantees were called *lakhirajdars*. These lands were classified as *debottar, dharmottar,* and *brahmottar*. Land-grants to temples were *debottar* lands. Land grants to the spiritual heads of *sattras* or monasteries and other religions institutions were called *dharmottar* lands. Lands granted to *brahmins* were called *brahmottar* lands. *Pir-pal* land was probably included in
presented stipends, granted money for the maintenance of their shrines, and were in several cases, attached to the royal court. In A.D. 1760, Rajesvar Singh (A.D. 1751-69), the Ahom king, issued a copper plate in the name of one Ajana Khandakar, granting land and 11 families of paiks (those who rendered specific duties under the Ahom administration) for offering regular services to a holy place of the Muslims called Bibir Mukam. The land so granted was situated in the Bajali area now located in the Barpeta district. In another grant, made by king Lakshmi Singh (A.D. 1769-80) on 27th September A.D. 1780, it was laid down that an Assamese Muslim by the name Hazi Faqir, probably a men of learning, of the guild of farsi-parhias (Persian translators), would be granted revenue-free lands in Kamrup together with the necessary number of servitors, as well as the perquisites of the dargahs of Shah Madar in Bausi Parganah, Shah Fakir in Bernagar Parganah, and one-fourth share of the Bar-Mukam at Hajo. The grant further laid down that:

Anwar Hazi Faqir Parsi-Parhia will enjoy the above in perpetuity, down to the days of his sons, grandsons and their descendants on the male line, wishing for the welfare of the king. He will also be the head of the above-mentioned muqams and maintain his religion thereby.

In the Ahom court many Muslim religious pontiffs were attached along with the Hindu priest. They were employed to pray for the welfare of their benefactor. J. P. Wade, who stayed in Assam from A.D. 1792-94 observed:

A Musalman of the name of Newas was gooroo-general of his persuasion in Assam from about the time of Roodur Singha. He had numerous attendants. He dressed in high Musalman fashion. He resided at or near the capital and frequented the durbar and the swargdaos (kings) used to dispatch him to pray at Hadjoo (Hajo)

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40 H. K. Barpujari (ed.), op. cit., p. 244.

41 Annals of Delhi Badshahate, p. 15. The grant was embodied in a royal farman inscribed on a copper-plate. King Lakshmi Singh had a conversation with Anwar Faqir, who had his pilgrimage to Mecca, and being pleased by the conversation the former granted the revenue-free lands. See ibid.
after the Musalman fashion for their prosperity. He was usually succeeded by his nearest relations... (sic) 42

Thus, being in such a favourable condition many of the Muslim saints adopted the region as their homeland. Moreover, they had no restriction in moving from one place to another.

Sheikh Shah Jalal or Shah Jalal Mujarrid Yamani was the earliest of the Muslim saints to have entered the eastern frontier of India. There are conflicting accounts regarding the identity and origin of this saint. Moreover, there has always been a controversy about the origin and death of Shah Jalal and also whether Ibn Battuta, who had visited the mountains of Kamrup to get the blessings of the renowned saint, had the privilege of meeting Shah Jalal Mujarrid or Jalal-ud-Din Tabrizi. 43 Ibn Battuta refers to Shah Jalal at times as Tabrizi and at others as Shirazi, which is neither corroborated by the local traditions nor by his biography, Suhayl-i-Yaman. The discrepancies in the writing of Ibn Battuta may have been due to the fact that he later supposedly rewrote his manuscripts – which were stolen by some thugs – on the basis of what he remembered. Ibn Battuta describes the visit thus:

I set out from Sudkawan (Satgawn) from the mountains of Kamaru (Kamrup), a month's journey from there. This is a vast range of mountains extending to China and also to the land of Thubbat (Tibet), where the musk deer are. The inhabitants of this range resemble the Turks; they possess great endurance, and their value as slaves is many times greater than a slave of any other nationality. They are famous for their magical practices. My purpose in travelling to these mountains was to meet a notable saint who lives there, namely, Shaykh Jalal al-Din of Tabriz. At a distance of two day's journey from his abode I was met by four disciples, who told me that the Shaykh had said to the darwishes who were with him. 'The traveller from the west has come to you; go out to welcome him.' He had no knowledge whatever about me, but this had been revealed to him. I went with them to the Shaykh and arrived at his hermitages, situated outside the cave. There is no

42 As quoted in S. K. Bhuyan, Studies in the History of Assam, p. 140. Swardeo (Swara-dev) is the brahmanical version of chaopha, meaning heavenly kings. In the Buranjis also the Ahom kings are referred to as Swargdeos.

43 For details, see C. B. Palermo, "Geography of Ibn Batuta's Indian Travels," The Indian Antiquary, vol. III (Aug. 1874); P. N. Ghosh (ed.), Ibn Batutah's Account of Bengal, pp. 7-17; F. A. Qadri, "Shaykh Jalal-al-din Mujarrad (d. 1340 A.D.) and the Annexation of Sylhet to the Muslim Kingdom of Bengal," PNEIHA, 10th Session, Shillong (1989).
cultivated land there, but the inhabitants of the country, both Muslim and infidel, come to visit him, bringing gifts and presents, and the darwishes and travellers live on these offerings. The Shaykh however limits himself to a single cow, with whose milk he breaks his fast every ten days. It was by his labours that the people of these mountains became converted to Islam, and that was the reason for his setting amongst them. When I came into his presence he rose to great me and embraced me. He asked to me about my native land and my travels, and when I had given him an account of them he said to me 'You are the traveller of the Arabs.' Those of his disciples who were there said 'And the non-Arabs too, O our master.' 'And of the non-Arab too' he repeated, 'so show him honour.' They then took me to the hermitage and gave me hospitality for three days.44

Shah Jalal-al-Din Tabrizi died in A.D. 1244 and his shrine is in Gaur whereas Ibn Battuta is known to have visited and met Shah Jalal at his khanqah (hermitage) in A.D. 1345. It is further said that the Shah Jalal whom he met died soon afterwards as he came to know of his demise from Sheikh Burhanuddin Shahgarji the following year (A.D. 1346) while he was in China. This discrepancy in the year Shah Jalal-al-Din Tabrizi died and the year Ibn Battuta is known to have met the saint by the same name (A.D. 1345) may be explained by the fact that the Shah Jalal whom Ibn Battuta met on

44 Ibn Battuta, Travels of Ibn Battuta, pp. 268-69. Sultan Fakhruddin Abul Muzaffar Mubarak Shah then ruled Bengal. He was the first of the independent Muslim kings of Bengal. Malik Ali Mufariks killed him in A.D. 1335.

45 Shah Jalal Tabrizi was a disciple of Shaikh Said Tabrizi. After extensive travelling he joined Shaikh Shahabuddin and became the latter's khalifa or chief disciple. He was a close friend of Khwaja Qutubuddin and Shaikh Bahauddin Shaikh Najmuddin. The later at the time was the Shaikh-ul-Islam of Delhi, who bore ill-feeling towards Shah Jalal Tabrizi, and made false accusations against his piety and character. Hence Shah Jalal Tabrizi retired to Bengal. It is believed that he lays buried at the port of Deomahal (Maldive).

A Shine associated to the saint is at Pandua in the district of Maldah and is even today a place of pilgrimage. In the past, everyone who visited the shrine was offered free food for three days. The servants there provided the pilgrims, either with cooked food, or with rice, pulses, salt, oil, meat and tobacco according to their social status. And every year in the month of shab-i-barat a fair was held which was attended by lakhs of people from distances of 15 and 20 days' journey.

The fatiha (death anniversary) of the saint was celebrated in the month of Rajab each year, and pilgrims of all sorts assembled at the shrine from the 1st to 22nd of the month. As per the Persian chronogram the saint's death is said to have occurred in A.H. 738 (A.D. 1337). See Riyaz-us-Salatin, pp. 45-46; Khan Sahib & M. Abid Ali, Memoirs of Gaur and Pandua, pp. 99-100.
the mountains of Kamru (Kamrup) was not Shah Jalal-al-Din Tabrizi of Gaur, but another saint by the name Shah Jalal Mujarrid.

According to Suhayl-i-Yaman, Shah Jalal Mujarrid was born in Yemen to Muhammad, a distinguished saint of the quraish tribe. His mother, Sayyidah, died within three months of his birth and his father died fighting in jihad against the infidels. His maternal uncle, Sayyid Ahmad Kabir Sugrwardi, a darvesh (saint), adopted him. Shah Jalal after spending 30 years in meditation in a cave was given a handful of earth by his uncle and was instructed to go forth and trace a place having earth of similar colour and smell and make an abode there. He moved towards India and reached Delhi where he met Nizamuddin Auliya. He then came to Sylhet at the head of 360 warrior disciples. The details of his conquest of Sylhet by defeating Gaur Gobind have been dealt at length in the preceding chapter. Later, he discovered that the earth of Sylhet was similar to the one given by his uncle. Hence, he decided to settle down there on the Kamru hills along with his disciples. The remains of Shah Jalal lies buried in the Bari Dargah atop a tila, besides a mosque, which was erected by Sikandar Shah to commemorate and express his gratitude to Shah Jalal to whom he owed his victory over Gaur Govind, the king of Sylhet.

According to Ibn Battuta, Shah Jalal converted the inhabitants of the region, who closely resembles the Turks (i.e., Tartars). The scrappy evidence provided by the traveller’s account suggests that they were aborigines who by then had hardly come under the pale of Hinduism. The saint, according to Richard Eaton, carried on proselytising activities among the nomadic tribes of the region by teaching them wet-rice cultivation. By and large, conversion was effected by the doyens of Muslim preachers in the

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46 James Wise, “Note on Shah Jalal, the Patron Saint of Sylhet,” in H. Blochmann, Contributions to the Geography and History of Bengal (Muhammadan Period), JASB, vol. 43, 1874, pp. 73-75.


48 Ibn Battuta, op. cit., p. 269.
vast delta of eastern Bengal through teaching of wet-rice cultivation among the aborigines. 49

Several miraculous acts of Shah Jalal have become part of the popular local traditions. One day as he was standing by a stream, he saw a women taking bath. It is believed that Shah Jalal never looked at the face of women. Out of curiosity he enquired what creature it was; later when he come to know about her identity he got enraged and prayed for the water to rise and drown her. The water soon rose and drowned her. On another instance, he caused to disappear from a mosque the dead body of Nasir-ud-din Sipahsalar who died at Sylhet. According to another legend, he caused a fountain like the holy Zamzam of Mecca to appear near his abode. Interestingly, the ganjah (hemp) smokers of Sylhet invoked Shah Jalal as:

\[\text{HoI Bishwshwar Lal,} \\
\text{tin lak'h pir Shah Jalal,} \\
\text{ek bar, dubraa, Jagannath Ji ka piyara} \\
\text{Khane ka dudh bhat, bajans ko dotara.} 50\]

\[(\text{HoI Bishwar Lal,} \\
\text{three lakh pir Shah Jalal} \\
\text{once, twice, the beloved of Jagannathji} \\
\text{rice and milk for food, two stringed} \\
\text{(musical instrument) for playing}\]

As per the Suhayl-i-Yaman, rest of the followers of Shah Jalal went back with the army of Sikandar Shah except Shahzadah Zyamani, Haji Yusuf, and Haji Khalil, who remained with Shah Jalal. But it is not attested by other sources. According to the gazetteer account, the tombs of the 360 disciples of Shah Jalal are spread in the different parts of Sylhet and its neighbouring districts. 51

B. C. Allen observed:

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49 For details, see R. M. Eaton, The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760. According to R. M. Eaton, the change in the river system of the Bengal delta resulting to the eastward shift of the active part of the delta led to the intensification of the wet-rice cultivation, and it coincided with the entry of many Muslim notables and saints in the eastern frontier, many of whom enjoyed the patronage of the then Muslim rulers of Bengal. See R. M. Eaton, “Islam in Bengal,” in George Michell (ed.), The Islamic Heritage of Bengal.

50 James Wise, “Note on Shah Jalal, the Patron Saint of Sylhet,” op. cit., pp.75-76.

51 E. A. Gait, et. al., Gazetteer of Bengal and North-East India, p. 55.
Sylhet town is full of memorial of its Muslim conquerors. On every side are to be seen, attended by a concourse of devout worshipers. More numerous one the large brick tombs of the saints, each with a little masonry receptacle for a native lamp, or else with a bamboo lamp post of the most modern pattern, tombs seen in every quarter of the district. 52

The *dargahs* of scores of disciples are also spread in Cachar, Mymensingh, Karimganj, Badarpur, Tripura, etc., suggesting that Shah Jalal deputed them for missionary activities. Many of the influential Muslims of Sylhet and the surrounding areas including Cachar Plain claimed their descent from these disciples. 53

A *dargah* in Sylhet is associated with Shah Fateh Ghazi, who is regarded to be one of the disciples of Shah Jalal. The *dargah* along with those of Shah Ghyas Saheb in Pargana Ghyasnogar, Shah Auliya in Pargana Kasimnagar, Shah Ali and Shah Ghazi near Kasimpur – who were probably disciples of Shah Jalal – and of the Panch Pirs in Alabakshpur were maintained from the rents received from a village, which was granted by the Mughal government. 54

Some of the other followers of Shah Jalal whose *dargahs* lies in the vicinity of Sylhet district are Haji Ghazi near Sylhet town; Qazi Jalal-u-ddin, Shah Zaki, and Qazi Ghaila in Qazi Tola Mohallah; Zinda Pir at Zinda Bazar; Shah Makhdum in Daftari Para; Shah Pur in Bandar Bazar; Ghasni Pir in Gayai Para; Shah Madan in Tilagarh; Shaikh Burhan-ud-din in Tola Tiker, etc.

Mir-ul-Arefeen, another disciple of Shah Jalal, took up residence at Cachar, and engaged in preaching activities. The prayer place on the summit of a hillock and an ablution house on the bank of Dhaleshwari river – a tributary of Barak river in Cachar – is associated with this saint. Today one can see a *musafir-khana* (rest-house) and a mosque near the ablution house. One can still see his

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footprints on a stone-slab that served as his prayer carpet. But his shrine is believed to be in Laur.\footnote{Md. Yahya Tamizi, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 88.}

There is a shrine at Kharampur near Akhaura in Tripura associated with Shah Ahmad Gaisu Daraz. According to the local tradition, he was also one of the disciples of Shah Jalal, who was killed in the battle against Gaur Govind. Kaibarttas\footnote{This low-caste community was spread out in various parts of eastern India. They were most numerous in Mymensingh, Tripura, Dacca, Chittagong, Jessore, etc. See A. E. Porter, \textit{Census of India, 1931, Bengal and Sikkim}, vol. V, p. 455.} – a fishing community – found his severed head along with one of his wooden shoes. The head began to speak. The \textit{kaibarttas} subsequently converted to Islam and raised a tomb for the saint. The descendents of the \textit{kaibarttas} became the \textit{khadims} (custodians) of the shrine. A king of Tripura is known to have made a grant of rent-free land for the maintenance of the shrine. People of all classes visited the shrine, and offerings of cattle, money, and sweetmeats were made to it. Many miraculous cures were said to have resulted from the appeals made to the saint.\footnote{E. A. Gait, “The Muhammadans of Bengal,” an extract from \textit{Census of India, 1901}, in \textit{Census 1951, West Bengal}, p. 269.}

There is a \textit{dargah} in the south-west of Garo hill district near the border of Mymensingh district at Number 8, Revenue Mouza, associated with a saint by the name of Shah Kamal. According to the local tradition, Shah Kamal was a contemporary of Shah Jalal, probably one of his disciples, who as deputed for preaching activities. The particulars of the saint are not known. The locals still venerate the \textit{dargah}.\footnote{P. D. Choudhury, \textit{Archaeology of Assam}, p. 59.}

One of the earliest Muslim preachers to visit proper Assam was Shah Badar in the 14\textsuperscript{th} century.\footnote{H. K. Barpujari (ed.), \textit{op. cit.}, p. 243.} A great deal of obscurity and confusion has gathered around the origin and details of this saint. Yahya Tamizi is of the opinion that Shah Badar came along with
Shah Jalal, probably as a disciple, and was later deputed to Badarpur (at present in the district of Karimganj) for missionary activities. The place is said to be named after the saint and a shrine associated with him is situated in the old fort of Badarpur Ghat.\(^{60}\) Shah Badar is also associated with *dargahs* at various places. One such is in Chittagong, which goes by different names, viz., Badar Alam, Badar Pir, Badar Shah, etc. He is also attributed with the spread of Islam in Chittagong. Pir Badar is still today the guardian saint of sailors, both Hindus and Muslims, in the region. Tradition holds that he came to Chittagong floating on a stone slab from Akyab (?). He cleansed the surroundings of Chittagong that was then infested with evil spirits and took possession of it. A shrine and a mosque associated to him in Chittagong were under the custodian of *fakirs*. His *urs* \(^{61}\) is celebrated annually on the 29th of *Ramzan*. \(^{62}\)

\(^{60}\) Md. Yahya Tamizi, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-86.

\(^{61}\)*Urs* is an Arabic term for ‘wedding’, and is also used to refer to the death of a saint. In the Sufi philosophy at the death there occurs the union (*wasi*) or ‘wedding’ of the soul of the saint to God. *Urs* sometime lasts for several days but the great day of the feast is always the anniversary of the saint’s death. The occasion is a time of great rejoicing, feasting, and observation of religious exercises in remembrance of the saints. In mainland India, *mahfil-i-sama* or *qawwali* is organized at *dargahs*, attended by *murids* (disciples) and other uninitiated devotees.

\(^{62}\)See James Wise, “The Muhammadans of Eastern Bengal,” *JASB* no. 1 (1894), p. 41. Pilgrims from all parts of Bengal, both Hindus and Muslims, visited the *dargah* of Pir Badar in fulfilment of vows. Sea-farers commenced their journey into the sea with the chant:

\begin{quote}
*Amara achhi polapan,*  
*Gaji ache nigeuban,*  
*shire Ganga dariya, Panch Pir,*  
*Badar Badar Badar,*
\end{quote}

(We are but children, the *Ghazi* is our protector,  
the Ganges river is on our land. Oh! Panch Pir, Badar, Badar, Badar!)  

Another preacher by the name Shah Diya-ud-din was also deputed by Shah Jalal to Badarpur to disseminate Islam and its teachings among the natives. Tradition has it that strong currents of the Barak river swept down a madrasah and a mosque raised by him in and around the Khadiman village of Badarpur, and it included his own tomb.\footnote{Md. Yahya Tamizi, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 86.} Shah Abdul Malik, another disciple of Shah Jalal, was also commissioned to assist Shah Diya-ud-din in his proselytising activities. His mazar lies in the north-eastern part of the Badarpur Bazar.\footnote{Ibid., p. 87.} The dargahs of Adam Khaki and Shah Abdul Malik in Badarpur, Syed Abu Bakr in Karimganj district, and Meerul Arifin in Panchgram, Cachar district, are also associated to be those of the disciples of Shah Jalal.

Ghiyasuddin Auliya was another popular saint who entered Kamrup district and took up his residence on the Gaurachol hills. The origin of the saint is obscure and there are conflicting opinions about him. Some believe that he had a royal lineage, while others believe that he was a seer. According to the author of \textit{Bahristan-i-Gaibi}, Ghiyasuddin Auliya was the son of the Mughal military leader, Abu Bakr. Mukarram Khan, the governor of the Koch Hajo, in A.D. 1614 commissioned Abu Bakr and his son Ghiyasuddin, who was revered as a saint, along with other commanders to invade Assam. Both the father and son were killed in the battle. Ghiyasuddin’s dead body was interned on the Gaurachol in the vicinity of the Pao-Mecca mosque.\footnote{M. I. Borah, \textit{Baristan-i-Gaibi}, vol. II, pp. 489, 848. See also B. C. Allen, \textit{Assam District Gazetteers, Kamrup}, vol. VI, pp. 101-02.} P. Gogoi is of the opinion that it was Husain Khan, the son of Alauddin Husain Shah, and the governor of Hajo, who brought Ghiyasuddin Auliya to propagate Islam in the region.\footnote{P. Gogoi, \textit{The Tai and Tai Kingdoms}, p. 298.} Besides, there are various traditions associated with this saint. According to one such tradition, he came to India from Arabia in A.H. 642 (A.D. 1264) when the place was

\footnote{Md. Yahya Tamizi, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 86.}
\footnote{Ibid., p. 87.}
\footnote{M. I. Borah, \textit{Baristan-i-Gaibi}, vol. II, pp. 489, 848. See also B. C. Allen, \textit{Assam District Gazetteers, Kamrup}, vol. VI, pp. 101-02.}
\footnote{P. Gogoi, \textit{The Tai and Tai Kingdoms}, p. 298.}
ravaged by famine. He wandered through various parts of India. Later he visited the Brahmaputra Valley accompanied by three other Muslim saints, Shah Gudur, Shah Jamal, and Shah Buzrug. Here he began to preach Islam to the natives and decided to spend the rest of his life on the Gaurachol hills. His preaching activities were further boosted up by the expansion of Muslim power in the region. This saint is generally regarded as one of the first propagators of Islam in Kamrup district.

Ismail Gazi, who invaded Kamarupa around A.D. 1460, is considered even today as the most prominent saint in Ghoraghat and four dargahs in Rangpur are associated with him. The principal one is at Kanta Daur. Another one is at a place called Jala Maqam. These two dargahs were under the care of a fakir, who held a large jagir and claimed to be the descendant of one of the servants of Ismail, who came from Arabia. The head of the saint is believed to be buried at Kanta Daur, while his body at Madaran, in Jahanabad. As referred to in the previous chapter, Sultan Ruknuddin Barbak, the sultan of Bengal, suspecting Ismail Gazi for overtures beheaded him in A.D. 1474. He is credited for converting many zamindars of Rangpur and Ghoraghat.

Khoyaj Pir, also known as Khwaja Khizr, a legendary saint, is held in high esteem in the western parts of Assam. A legend alive to this day among the Muslims of the region tells that he was born at Siraj in Persia to one Hazarat Nur, a Jew. In his youth he was a merchant by profession and a chemist by interest, and later became an itinerant saint. A rock inscription found near a stream on the foot of the eastern slope of the Kamakhya hills records:

67 Mohini Saikia, op. cit., p. 190.
68 Ibid., pp. 179-80.
69 Maheswar Neog, Sankardeva and His Times, p. 46.
The Muslims of Sylhet too venerated Khwaja Khijir, and he was believed to be the Lord of water, and only pious devotees could secure his favour. Interestingly this saint had similar attributes with the one mentioned in the Quran and venerated in various parts of the sub-continent. He seems to be more of a fictitious character rather than a historical figure.

Pir Shah Madan, popular as Badiuddin, is said to have visited Kamrup in the wake of Timur’s invasion. He is believed to be a resident of Arabia and a disciple of one Muhammad Bustami. Many of the holy places in Begura, Rajshahi, Sherpur, Paharpur and Basta near Dacca are associated with this saint. He engaged in missionary activities in Cachar, Goalpara, and Kamrup districts. The scions of the followers of the saint, called madari order, are still found in these districts. The community of madari fakh is believed to be that of the descendants of this saint.

Another saint who is still revered in many parts of Koch Behar and western Assam is Pagal Pir; believed to have settled in Dhupdhora, located about 50 miles east of Goalpara town. Many

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74 Khwaja Khizr finds mention in the 18th chapter (Sura Kalijj of the Quran, which describes the expedition of Moses and Joshua in search of Al Khedr. Most commentators, however, identify him with Elias, or Elijah, who, having drunk the water of life (ab-i-hayat), never tasted death. In various parts of India, a belief was prevalent that he resided in the seas and rivers, and protects mariners from shipwreck, and he was visible to those who accomplished a forty days’ watch on the banks of a river. Muslims made vows to him at the time of sickness or trouble, and present offerings in acknowledgement of any blessing.

The festival of the bera or raft, observed on the last Thursday of the Islamic calendar, was associated with Khwaja Khizir; but in Bengal it was observed on the last Thursday of the Hindu month Bhadon (Aug.-Sept.), which corresponded with the end of rainy season. Hindus, especially boatmen and fishermen, and Muslims observed it. It was observed by launching beras or small paper boats, decorated with flowers and lit up with candles in the rivers and tanks. See James Wise, “The Muhammadans of Eastern Bengal,” op. cit., pp. 38-40; E. A. Gait, “The Muhammadans of Bengal,” op. cit., p. 269.

75 Mohini Saikia, op. cit., p. 188; Md. Yahya Tamizi, op. cit., pp. 89-90.
anecdotes of magical feats related to this saint are narrated even these days. It is said that his presence was enough to tame wild animals. Even to this day when an animal has to be tamed one places a bamboo stick in front of the animal by invoking the name of the *pir*. It is said that his dargah was endowed with a vast tract of *pir-pal* land, which was incorporated into the *zamindari* of Bijni Raj in 1859. Today the descendants of two Muslims, Doman Shah and Baghs Ali Shah, oversee the dargah.\(^76\)

The *dargahs* of two anonymous saints, located at Dakaidal and Degdhowa near the Goalpara town, are associated with the contemporaries of Pagal Pir. These two *pirs*, probably, accompanied the Muslim invaders to Assam for proselytising activities. Their *dargahs* located on the banks of Brahmaputra attracted people equally from different communities and creeds for the fulfilment of their prayers. Both the *dargahs* were endowed with *pir-pal* lands. As per a tradition, the *pir* entombed at Degdhowa was stabbed to death by one of his disciples. It is said that he had a pet bird (*maina*) who had the extraordinary quality of recognising each of the disciples of the *pir*. After the death of his master the bird too fasted unto death and disappeared mysteriously. The place at the bank of the Brahmaputra is known even today as Koitar Pahar or the rock of pigeons. Lots of pigeons used to flock on the rocks. Boatmen, both Hindus and Muslims, whenever they pass by the dargah pay their homage to the saint and make offerings with prayers for a safe journey over the Brahmaputra river.\(^77\) It is believed that the name Degdhowa got its name from *degs* (cooking pans) and *dhowa*, meaning washing in Assamese. The soldiers of the invading army, with whom the saint came, used to wash their pans at this place.\(^78\)

The Panjatan or Dakaidal Dargah was looked after by a *mutawalli* appointed by Muslim rulers. It was also incorporated into


\(^{77}\) Ibid., pp. 335-37.

\(^{78}\) Mohini Saikia, *op. cit.*, p. 208.
the zamindari of Bijni Raj in around 1859. But in course of time the dargah was swept away by the Brahmaputra river and a new one was constructed. Still today the dargah attracts vow-seekers from far and wide: during Muharram people gather and offer prayers day and night at the dargah for 10 days.  

Hazarat Shah Fakir Syed Mainuddin or Hazarat Shah Miran, popularly known as Azan Pir, was the most popular Muslim saint, who came and settled in the Brahmaputra Valley. His brother Hazrat Nabi Pir accompanied him. According to Abdul Malik, he probably came around A.D. 1625-35 as his earliest zikirs were written in A.D. 1635. He settled first at Hajo near the dargah of Ghiyasuddin Auliya and later he shifted to the village of Sunpara. However, others are of the opinion that he entered Assam with the Mughal forces as early as A.D. 1612-13 and stayed with them at Hajo in the Kamrup district till A.D. 1626. He was originally from Baghdad and was a descendent of the family of Prophet Muhammad. He came to Delhi and became a disciple of Nizamuddin Auliya. Some of the old Assamese sayyid families claim their decent from him and his brother.  

Azan Pir started preaching the Muslims of Sunpara village who were then imbued in various unIslamic practices. He is also said to have had established a mosque in the village and said azan. The locals of Sunpara village gave him the title Azan as he had a sweet voice. It was here that he married the daughter of Syed Usman Gani of Khandokar village in Rangpur. He roamed preaching from village to village and soon became popular far and wide. He was once invited by the Muslims of Darrang to preach the theological aspects of Islam. He is also said to have translated the Quran, probably into Assamese.  

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79 Maheswar Neog, Pavitra Assam, pp. 335-36.  
80 Abdul Malik, Ajan Fakir Aru Surya Jikir, pp. 10-11.  
81 J. Das, op. cit., p. 111; Mohini Saikia, op. cit., pp. 201-02.  
Shortly the growing popularity of Azan Pir came to the notice of Rupai Gariya, the Assamese Muslim who served as dadhava (armour-carrier) of the Ahom king, Gadadhar Singh (A.D. 1681-96). Being envious he, in A.D. 1685, brought open charges against Azan Pir before the king, alleging that he was a spy of the Mughals and was in communication with the Mughal soldiers. The king, however, paid least attention to the complaint. But, at last after repeated complaints, the king suggested Rupai to take action which he deemed best and at the same time cautioned him to act with utmost care and tact, avoiding any misjudgement on the part of the royalty and also unnecessarily hurting the sentiments of the Muslim subjects. Rupai Gariya, thus having the king's concurrence arrested the pir and gauged his eyes. A zikir corroborates the event. Its English translation runs thus:

"O! Rupai, do as you please, O Allah,"
Having heard this the enemy of the saint
proceeded to gouge out the eyeballs:
"O! Rupai, you are taking out my eyes,
bring two eastern cups, O! Allah."  

The event led to mysterious consequences. Suddenly, there was turmoil in the waters and earth began to shake. The king learnt and realized the intrigues against the pir and immediately put Rupai Gariya to death. The pir was granted a hospice with free land-grant and servitors, and a math was also built for him at Souaguri Capari near Sibsagar. He stayed there along with his 120 disciples for some years. He probably died some time around A.D. 1690. After his death his body was interned at Dikhomukh, located on the bank of the river Dikhaw near its confluence with the Brahmaputra. His shrine has recently become a sanctum and annual urs is now held at the dargah of the pir.  

Azan Pir is said to have survived by three sons. Their descendants are now known as saraguria dewans. Nabi Pir, brother

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83 Ibid., pp. 20-32; J. Das, Folklore of Assam, pp. 111-12.
84 Reproduced from P. Goswami, Folk-Literature of Assam, p. 57.
85 Mohini Saikia, op. cit., p. 204; Abdul Malik, op. cit., pp. 27-33.
of Azan Pir, took up his residence near Simaluguri in Sibsagar, in
the vicinity of the old Ahom royal palace in Nazira. His descendents
are still found there. The khanqah of the pir, as tradition has it, was
at Tiru Pathar near the necropolis of the Ahoms on the Charaideo
hill in Sibsagar.86

Another saint by the name Hazrat Saleh is also said to have
settled at Tiru Pathar near the Charaideo hills. The descendents of
this saint are known as the parbatia dewan. The Muslims of Nazira
in Sibsagar believe that he was buried in the vicinity of the Ahom
royal palace at Gurgaon.87

Hazrat Osman Gani, popularly known as Khondkar Pir and
also a contemporary of Azan Pir, is said to have taken his abode in
Assam and took to proselytising activities. His dargah is situated on
the banks of the river Dilih in Sibsagar. Tradition has it that he
ended his life with a grass blade. No tomb was raised around his
body. Instead white ants were said to have raised a mound over his
body, which is seen even today. He is believed to be a scion of the
family of the Prophet Muhammad and his descendants,
komaldaiyas, claim themselves to be sayyids today. The dargah of
Hazrat Osman Gani enjoyed about 20 bighas of revenue-free land.
The locals discovered a pair of wooden sandals and other relics that,
probably, belonged to the pir from a pond nearby the dargah. When
it was taken out, some untoward things happened to the people,
therefore, they put it back into the pond. Many people still pay
homage to the dargah of the saint.88

Sawal Pir, also popular as Bandar Pir, was entombed on the
banks of the river Dihang in Sibsagar. He is also believed to be a
contemporary of Azan Pir. It is said that the saint always roamed in
jungles in order to avoid crowd. It was because of this peculiar

86 Ibid.
87 Ibid., pp. 204-05.
88 B. C. Allen, Assam District Gazetteers, Sibsagar, vol. VII, p. 163. See also
nature that he was called Bandar (monkey) Pir. His *dargah* was discovered recently. It is related that he appeared in the dream of a villager from Ririya and informed the site of his tomb.\(^8^9\)

From an indigenous chronicle preserved in the Dam Dama Sikh Gurudwara in Goalpara district, it is known that five renowned saints along with Guru Teg Bahadur accompanied Raja Ram Singh in his Assam campaign of A.D. 1667. The five saints – Shah Akbar, Shah Sufi, Shah Kamal, Shah Pagmar and Shah Sharan – were brought to counter the witchcraft and magic widely practiced in the region.\(^9^0\) But another tradition puts the advent of the five *pirs* much earlier. It is said that Mir Jumla during his campaign summoned the *pirs* to counter the magic spells of the Assamese.\(^9^1\) Shah Akbar succumbed to the spells and was buried at Dhubri. But this shrine is referred to as Panch Pir Dargah, and is generally associated with the five saints.\(^9^2\) The other saints, in all probability, had moved on to different parts of the region for preaching activities. And after their death, their bodies were brought and entombed in the Dhubri Dargah, and so the name Panch Pir Dargah. The tradition of Panch Pir is also popular among the Muslims of Sylhet and Bengal.\(^9^3\) There is also a *dargah* referred to as Panch Pir in Alabakshpur, Sylhet as mentioned earlier.

The particulars of the saints are wanting except Shah Kamal. Shah Kamal, originally a resident of Multan, came to Bengal in A.D.

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89 Mohini Saikia, *op. cit.*, pp. 205, 216.
93 The tradition of Panch Pir was also found among the Halal Khor community in Bengal. But no one could name the *pirs*, or give any explanation why they were so called. While in other places it was associated with *pirs*, such as Ghazi Miyan, Pir Badar, Zindah Pir, Shaikh Farid, Khwaja Khizr, and Shaikh Sadu. But they did not observe any special ceremony or festival in their honour. Panch Pir is collectively invoked as guardian spirits in times of trouble. One *dargah* of Panch Pir lies in the forest that covers the old city of Sonargawn, which consist of five unfinished tombs. In the past, Hindus and Muslims came from far and wide in fulfilment of their vows. For details, see James Wise, "The Muhammadans of Eastern Bengal," *op. cit.*, pp. 43-49; E. A. Gait, "The Muhammadans of Bengal," *op. cit.*, p. 270.
1503 and took up his residence at Durmut (?). He was offered a *jagir* for stalling off evil spirits from some influential *jagirdars*. His fourth wife, Baroi Bibi, was the daughter of a Hindu, of the *baroi* (pan-seller) caste, who was inspired by his occult power. The burial place of Barai Bibi, called Baroi Kandhi, is revered as a *dargah*. He spent some time with his numerous followers in the exercise of meditation and preaching at a village called Sakloi in Thana Karibari in Goalpara district. The village is situated on a hill, on the eastern bank of the Brahmaputra river. His *chura* or knife is still preserved there. He died in A.D. 1545 and was buried on the banks of the Brahmaputra where his tomb still exists. Shah Kamal’s another wife was also interned by his side.94 A *khanqah* to the south-west of Garo hill district near the border of Mymensingh district is also associated to a saint by the same name.95

In the Chakala village of the then Sibsagar district, there is a *dargah* of a saint called Komaldya Khunkar Muhammad Gani, which is regarded as a place of particular sanctity and resorted to as a place of pilgrimage by Hindus and Muslims alike.96 The particulars of the saint are wanting.

About two miles south from a big turn in the Tista river, slightly below Dimla (in the then Rangpur district), are the remains of a fortified city, known to have been built by the first king of the Pal dynasty in Kamarupa, Dharma Pal. In the vicinity of this fortified city there is a mound called *Bari Mulla Teri Kazi*, associated with an assembly of 25 Muslim saints to whom the place is dedicated.97 Nothing more is known about these pious Muslims. They probably were engaged in proselytising activities in the region.

Numerous *fakirs* were also settled in the Kamrup region in the last phase of the Ahom rule. They were organized into different

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95 P. D. Choudhary, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
groups called benawas. They abandoned their families and all the worldly pleasures, and lived at places called takiyas (pillows) and survived on endowments. They educated the disciples who would succeed on the death of their chiefs, while the rest were engaged in begging and religious exercises. Some of the fakirs entered marital life. Many survived on endowments, which they received in the form of la-kharaj for their self-sustenance as well as for equipping the dargahs with lamps (cheragi) and canopies. However, many did not receive any endowment and had to depend on alms. Khonkar, an order of these fakirs, was engaged in instructing the people in their religious duty, especially those who enrolled themselves as muriās. Both sexes were admitted into the order of these fakirs, but had to enrol before the age of 17 or 18 years. They held places like Punjton, Pesuya in Dinajpur, and Mohasthanger in Nattar as holy and pilgrimage were made frequently.98

Many of the Muslim preachers also entered into the interior hills of north-east for missionary activities among the hill tribes. The remains of dargahs and khanqahs in the region confirmed this. For instance, on the Laur hills, about 70 miles from Shillong town, there are remnants of a khanqah. Local tradition holds that a saint named Shah Sharifm founded the khanqah. The tradition further asserts that he is still alive, and occasionally they hear the azan (call to prayers) by the saint. And the saint secretly travelled to Mecca through a tunnel; the remains of which can still be seen within the premise of the khanqah.99

In the Dharyans Pargana in Jaintia hills there is a tomb of a great saint called Patashah, which attract a cross section of the population; those desiring to be cured of some diseases or be blessed with children make offerings here. In the Pratapgarh Pargana, to the south of Karimganj, there are several mukams

(abodes), which are believed to have been founded by one of the Muslim rulers of Delhi, who later became a religious mendicant and settled there. Timber traders, both Hindus and Muslims, venerated these mukams, and it is said that tigers used to visit these shrines. Still today timber men in the hills observe Thursdays as sacred days, and timber is neither felled nor dragged on that day of the week.100

2.5 Role of Religious Institutions

Many learned Muslim scholars maintained academics and imparted instructions to the Muslim masses in various parts of north-east, which helped in disseminating and propagating the tenets of Islam. Muslims in Assam established religious institutions, parallel to the Hindu Vaishnava sattras or colleges.101 The heads of these institutions were called gosains (religious or spiritual guides), like the spiritual preceptors of the Vaishnavas. They instructed the resident disciples on Islamic studies. The Muslims looked up to the gosains as ultimate authority in religious and social matters. In the latter part of the Ahom rule some of the most prominent Muslim gosains had their seats in the Jorhat sub-division. They were very influential and were given the title Dewan102 and received pir-pal lands.103

There also sprang up institutions, on the lines of majlises or halqas, in many parts managed by individual Muslim scholars in response to the desire of inquisitive students of Islamic studies. The British surgeon, J. P. Wade, who stayed in Assam from A.D. 1792 to

100 B. C. Allen, Assam District Gazetteers, Sylhet, vol. II, pp. 82-83.
101 Sattras were religious institutions of the Vaishnавites, where gosains, or priests, resided. These institutions had large halls where the people assembled for worshipping Vishnu in one of his numerous incarnations. Attached to these halls were the dormitories of the resident disciples. Some of the prominent sattras were Avniati Sattra near Gauhati, the Patbaisi Sattra near Barpeta, the Nij Patbaisi and Sundaridia Sattra in Kamrup, Chamaria Sattra in Paschim Chamaris, the Khidir Pukhri in Manpur, etc. See B. C. Allen, District Gazetteer of Assam, Kamrup, vol. VI, pp. 97-98.
102 C. J. Lyall, op. cit., pp. 100-01.
103 Tungkhunia Buranji, p. xxx.
1794, observed 10 to 12 houses of Muslims offering private instructions to the children in Gauhati, and there existed more than 20 in Rangpur in the early part of the 19th century.104

F. Buchanan, during his survey in Assam (1807-16), observed that *akhuns* or Muslim teachers instructed the young *zamindars* and wealthy Muslims to read *Quran* and *Farsi* (Persian), and to understand the business of the government, especially law proceedings. Persian was then a polite language that every gentleman, irrespective of religion and class, should understand. Children started learning *Farsi* from the age of five to seven and the course took 10 years.105 He further observed that in Kamrup district a learned Muslim scholar named Saadutullah instructed students in Arabic and *Farsi* literature and the students were lodged at his own expense. He instructed Hindu students too, at free of cost, but their customs did not permit them to live in his house. His only reward was his reputation, and when his pupils got job, it was expected from them to make presents to him under the name of *rateb*. The students studied Allami Zulikha and Bahardanesh, and also the texts of Molla Hafez.106

The *khalifa* community of the Kamrup district are believed to be the descendents of religious teachers who migrated from Bengal. By the late 19th century they had abandoned their original profession, as it was no longer lucrative, and had since then taken to cultivation works.107

### 2.6 Role of Mosques and Dargahs

Mosques and *dargahs* that mushroomed in every nook and corner of north-east also played an important role in the propagation of Islam. Mosque is the most important public place for the Muslims

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106 Ibid., pp. 503-04.
where congregational prayers are held. R. E. Eaton emphasizes the place of mosque in Islam thus:

As the focus of public prayer, the mosque has always been the principal public institution in Islamic civilization. Whether a grand edifice or a humble thatched hut, the mosque conceptually conflates Islam's macro community of the *umma* - the worldwide body of believers - into a micro-community of fellow believers or fellow city-dwellers, affording them the physical space to articulate their collective response to the word of God. As such the mosque is the physical reality of Islam, and hence the paramount institution by which community identity and solidarity are expressed....

It has been a religious tradition for every Muslim settlement to have a mosque. A well-trained scholar is attached to the mosque as *imam*, who leads the congregational prayer, along with a small staff to assist him. These men are usually scholars of profound learning and great piety. People living in the vicinity usually consult the *imam* on matters relating to theology and Islamic laws. Thus they play an important role in the religious life of the community. Some of these *imams*, in the period under review, too must have been endowed with a missionary zeal and carried out proselytising activities.

The role of the *dargahs* in the propagation of Islam cannot be underestimated. Not only the Muslims but also people of other class and religions flocked in large numbers to the *dargahs* of Muslim saints to fulfil their inner most desires. Often if their prayers were fulfilled they embraced Islam. The mosques and *dargahs*, thus, served as important mediums for the propagation of Islam.

It was a tradition among the Muslim rulers to build mosques, often to commemorate their successful campaigns. It was also a symbol of authority and sovereignty. Mosques were also erected to celebrate the memory of pious saints and sometimes even for their personal use. Thus, the *dargahs* of pious saints often had mosques attached to them.

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109 I. H. Qureshi has also drawn a similar conclusion. See I. H. Qureshi, *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent*, pp. 7-8.
Muslim rulers who undertook campaigns to the north-east generally built small brick mosques consisting of an open quadrangle with a covered arcade at the west end. While the mosques built by the native Muslims in the remote parts were usually simple thatched hutments.¹¹¹

There is much similarity in the architecture of the mosques built in the region, with that of Bengal. As the region lacks suitable building stones, the predominant materials available for constructing mosques were red clay bricks, bamboo, and thatch. The roofs were mainly of two types, char-chala and do-chala. Most of the important buildings, however, were made of bricks. In the pre-Mughal period buildings were covered either with red terracotta plaques or less frequently with stones. From the 16th century onwards brick buildings began to be coated with white plaster.¹¹²

Unfortunately, most of the mosques and dargahs are in a decaying state while scores of dargahs have sunk under the earth, and many are either lost in the deep forest or swept down by currents of the rivers. As the region falls under copious rainfall zone, which encourages the growth of wild vegetation, especially banyan trees, many of the structures are damaged. These trees hold the building in its grip of fast expanding roots. Moreover, these humble monuments are not of sturdy building materials. Besides, the burgeoning population, and the consequent pressure on the land has also uprooted many of the structures. And people in their misguided zeal often refurbish, enlarge, and modernize these old monuments by giving them a modern appearance thereby striping them of their original historical character and splendour.

¹¹² Andrews Petersen, Dictionary of Islamic Architecture, pp. 33-34. The dominant form of Islamic architecture in Bengal is the mosque. In pre-Mughal Bengal, mosque was the only form of Islamic building, although after the 16th century a wide variety of Islamic building types such as serai and madrasah were introduced. The characteristic features of all the mosques in Bengal are multiple mihrabs, engaged corner towers, and curved cornices. See ibid.
The shrine of Shah Jalal also called Bari Dargah consists of Jami Masjid and other buildings dedicated to Shah Jalal, atop a tila. As per the inscription recovered from Sylhet the buildings, except the mosque, were erected by Ruknuddin Khan, who served as the general of the sultan of Bengal, Husain Shah in A.H. 918 (A.D. 1512).\textsuperscript{113} The mosque, built by Sikandar Shah, was approached through a gateway of solid masonry, much of which was shaken down by the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century. As one enters the mosque, on the left hand side there is a tank with a ruined mosque in front, which now stands repaired. On the right is an open shed, where in earlier days food was cooked for the faithfuls during urs. The building is approached by a flight of steps that ends in a broad platform. In front is a central hall through which the faithfuls pass onto the tomb of the saint. There is a small place for prayer, which along with the gateway, was erected by John Willes, one of the earliest of the Collectors of Sylhet. South of the central hall is the mosque in which prayers are usually held, while at the back is a well. During the British rule, government had set a grant of Rs. 93 per mensem, which was sanctioned by the nawabs for the maintenance of the mosque.\textsuperscript{114}

There is another famous mosque, situated in Sylhet town, which is known to have been founded by Shah Abu Turab in A.D. 1698.\textsuperscript{115} The remains of many more masonry mosques are also seen in other parts of the town.\textsuperscript{116}

In Sylhet, eight miles to the south-west of the sub-divisional town of Habiganj there are remains of a mosque. This mosque depicts the Bengali style of Muslim architecture. The monument is locally attributed to Shah Majlis Amin, one of the fellow saints of Shah Jalal. The stone inscription engraved on the centre of the front

\textsuperscript{113} H. E. Stapleton, “Contributions to the History and Ethnology of North-East India,” JASB, vol. XVIII (1922), p. 413.
\textsuperscript{114} B. C. Allen, Assam District Gazetteers, Sylhet, vol. II, pp. 81-82.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., p. 82.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
wall however ascribes it to the reign of Husain Shah (A.D. 1493-1518).\textsuperscript{117}

Malik Yuzbak, after taking possession of Kamrup in A.D. 1254-55, is known to have built a mosque there and instituted the reading of the *kutbah* and Friday congregation prayer to show his gratitude to God. Kamrup had by then started showing signs of Muslim settlement as mentioned earlier.\textsuperscript{118}

Another prominent mosque is the Pao-Mecca mosque built on the Gaurachol hill, located adjacent to the Hayagriva-Madhava temple, which was destroyed by Kalapahar and rebuilt in A.D. 1543 by the Koch ruler. According to the anonymous author of the article "Ancient Assam" (published in the *Calcutta Review*), it was Sultan Ghiyasuddin, the governor of Kamarupa, who planned the construction of the mosque, but he died before completing the dream. He was buried on the hill. The paper states:

\begin{quote}
This prince (Sultan Ghiyasuddin) introduced a colony of Muhammadans in the country, and made large consignments of land for the maintenance of the Muslim religion. Most of the land is, by permission of the British Government still retained for this purpose. Extreme measures were also adopted for making proselytes, and temple were indiscriminately plundered and demolished...Ghiyasuddin resolved to build a grand mosque, which was to stand on the top of a high hill, known as the Gaurachol. There is a tradition that, in order to give it peculiar sanctity, it was to have been built upon a stratum of earth that had been brought for this purpose from holy city of Mecca. The hill is known to this day as the 'Pao-Makkah,' and the Muhammadans of the country believe that four pilgrimages to it are equal in meritorious efficacy to one made to the tomb of the Prophet. But Ghiyasuddin died before he could complete the arrangements for the erection of the mosque. He was interned beneath the holy earth, and the materials he had collected were used in raising a monument over his remains, which also serves the purpose of a mosque.\textsuperscript{119}
\end{quote}

According to the Persian inscription recorded on the wall of the mosque, it was Mir Lutufullah-i-Shiraji, who built the mosque in A.D. 1657 during the reign of Shah Jahan. He was the then Mughal


\textsuperscript{118} *Tabqat-i-Nasiri*, vol. II, p. 764.

faujdar of Kamrup region. But the construction was completed by
his son, Niamatullah, in A.D. 1657.120 The English translation of the
stone inscription of the Pao-Mecca Mosque reads thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Donor: Mohammad Sajauddin (A.D. 1657)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hijri 1067</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Started in the name of Allah who is full of love and compassion. All good qualities are attributable to Allah. The sustainer of the world, showering His love on all inspired by Him. He is Mohammad. Allah says nobody is greater and nobler than Mohammad and his sacred descendants. One who builds mosque and believes in Allah, worships Him, offers zakat and fears none accept Him, for them it is a matter of hope that they find place amongst the blessed dead. Allah and His messenger say that whoever builds a mosque in this world will have seventy mosques built for Him in the other world.

Emperor of the world, defender of the faith, good-natured, prince and royal judge Sujaudin Mohammad, during whose time and tenure in Bengal, many important events took place, and during the time Muslims lived, devoutly in peace and honour in the Sujabad province. And in this place Lutfulla from Siraj builds this heavenly mosque. For the name and glory of the saints and with the blessing of Allah this sacred home be permanent, its foundation solid. When human intelligence asks for date then come the heavenly words – Holy home is enlightened. 1067 Hijri (A.D. 1657).121

The mosque is popular as Pao-Mecca either because quarter of a seer of earth brought from the holy place of Mecca was preserved in the mosque, or because a visit to this place confers one-fourth of the merit obtained from a pilgrimage to Mecca itself. In the vicinity of the mosque is the tomb of Sultan Ghiyasuddin. People of all class and religion make offerings at the tomb, and tie a thread to a neighbouring tree or post in order to obtain the fulfilment of their prayers. The strong earthquake that occurred in 1897 demolished the mosque.122 Today the mosque of Pao-Mecca stands repaired and is managed by its khadims.

After the conquest of Kamrup by Sultan Husain Shah in A.D. 1498, he constructed a brick mosque by the side of the road that leads to Goalpara.123 Another brick mosque situated on a hilltop by

120 Annals of Delhi Badshahate, p. 17; P. D. Choudhary, op. cit., p. 41.
123 P. D. Choudhary, op. cit., p. 31.
the side of the Kola river in the Dhubri sub-division was built by Mir Jumla during his Assam campaign in A.D. 1601-02.\textsuperscript{124}

Besides these, there are remains of several old mosques in the villages of Karara, Mirtola, Dhakpara within the Kamalpur circle of the Kamrup district.\textsuperscript{125} Most of these mosques were endowed with \textit{pir-pal} lands by the Ahom kings, but are now encroached upon by new constructions.

During the Mughal occupation of Gauhati and Kamrup, the Muslim rulers turned their attention towards improving the condition of these mosques.\textsuperscript{126} Interestingly, in the aforesaid period, they liberally patronized Hindu priests. A gift of two \textit{bighas} of land in Mauza Turukpara in Sarkar Dakhinkhul was made in June A.D. 1669 during the reign of Aurangzeb to the two \textit{pujaris} of the Kamakhya temple, Sri Ballabh and Prananath. Originally, Allah Yar Khan and Hasan Kandahari Khan, the \textit{faujdars} of Gauhati, made the grant in perpetuity according to the system of tenure known as \textit{madammas} or \textit{brahmottar}. The land was exempted from taxes, and so were the recipients from the customary personal service to the state. However, according to S.K. Bhuyan, Syed Firoz Khan, who was the \textit{faujdar} of Gauhati immediately before the reoccupation of Kamrup by the Ahoms in November A.D. 1667, probably made the grant.\textsuperscript{127}

In the month of September in the same year, Aurangzeb also issued grants to the two \textit{pujaris} of Umananda temple at Gauhati, Sudaman Brahman and his son Kamdeb. They were granted two portions of land in Bangeswar, Pargana Pandu and Sardar Dakhinkul. The \textit{sanad}, which embodies the grant, was in the possession of the \textit{dalai} of Umananda temple. It is written in Persian

\textsuperscript{124} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{125} Mohini Saikia, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 217.
\textsuperscript{126} \textit{Annals of Delhi Badshahate}, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{127} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 17-18.
on a hand made paper. The sanad is reproduced vide Appendix-E. These grants serve as yet another corroboration of Aurangzeb’s tolerance of other faiths, who was otherwise condemned for his orthodox and fanatic dispositions.

On the outskirts of Comilla – then under the kingdom of Tripura – there is a mosque called Shuja mosque. It is a rectangular building (58 ft. - 28 ft.), walled with bricks and lime about 5 ft. - 8 ft. thick with an open veranda of about 24 ft. wide. The structure stands on four octagonal tunets at the four corners. The mosque has three arched entrances on the eastern side. Inside the mosque, the western wall is decorated with three mehrabs in which the central one is semi-circular in shape and bears ornamental decoration. The front wall of the mosque is decorated with panel works. There are three gambuzes on the top of the building, of which the middle one is larger than the other two.

As per a local tradition, when Shah Shuja was at the court of Arakan taking refuge, Govinda Manikya (A.D. 1660-76), who was also at that time taking shelter at the court, protested against the ill-treatment meted out to the former by the king of Arakan. Shah Shuja, being impressed by the humane behaviour of Govinda Manikya, offered a diamond ring and a precious nimcha (sword) as memento of their friendship. After Govinda Manikya was reinstated on his throne, he sold off the ring to erect a mosque on the banks of Gumti in Comilla, which was then an integral part of the kingdom of Tripura. He also renamed the village as Shujanagar and opened a market, named Shujagain, in order to meet the daily expenses of the mosque. The royal family maintained the mosque from time to time. According to another version, the mosque was built by Shah

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129 D. N. Goswami, “The Episode of Shuja Mosque-A Historical Review,” PNEIHA, 10th Session, Shillong (1989), p. 120.
130 Puranjan Prasad Chakravarty (ed.), Tripura Rajmala, p. 61.
131 D. N. Goswami, op. cit., pp. 120-26.
Shuja to commemorate his conquest of Tripura, and not by Govind Manikya.\textsuperscript{132}

\section*{2.7 Extension of Royal Patronage by the Local Rulers}

Politically isolated from rest of India, the rulers of north-east imported and patronized large number of skilled craftsmen who had something new to teach. They were provided with full facility and encouragement to settle in the country. The farsighted Ahom king Rudra Singh created the officers, \textit{khaunds} and \textit{bairagis}, whose function was to visit important centres in mainland India and bring back to their country new things that were then introduced in Assam.\textsuperscript{133} The Ahom rulers welcomed many Muslims by provisioning them in different trades. According to W. W. Hunter:

\begin{quote}
The Muslims of Assam are according to tradition been originally introduced into the region by one of the native \textit{Rajas}, who imported a colony of them from Bengal in order to teach his people their arts and industries.\textsuperscript{134}
\end{quote}

They were recruited in departments like minting of coins, painting, carpentry and gun-manufacturing. Learned Muslims were attached to the Ahom court as scribes, who also did the work of deciphering and interpreting Persian documents.\textsuperscript{135} According to F. Buchanan:

\begin{quote}
...on the whole, however, the Mohammedans seem to be more fitted for the business of the courts than the Hindus, whose views are more directed to the management of the landed estates, which, indeed in the present state of affairs is more profitable.\textsuperscript{136}
\end{quote}

Muslim artisans and craftsman were incorporated into \textit{Knam} as \textit{khanikar khel}. The royal mint was usually under the supervision of Muslim officers, and several Assamese kings and queens struck coins with Persian legends engraved on them.\textsuperscript{137} According to the

\textsuperscript{132} Puranjan Prasad Chakravarty (ed.), \textit{op. cit.}, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{134} W. W. Hunter, \textit{A Statistical Account of Assam}, vol. I, p. 245.
\textsuperscript{135} Tungkhunja Bhuranji, p. xxx.
\textsuperscript{137} \textit{Annals of Delhi Badshahate}, p. 15, 18; Tunkhunjia Bhuranji, p. xxx; S. K. Bhuyan, \textit{Anglo-Assamese Relations 1771-1826}, p. 4.
report of A. J. M. Mills, by the second half of the 19th century, 12 
dewans, one nawab dekah, two Persian readers, and one engraver 
were attached to the Ahom court.138 The gohains and the phukans 
(civil or military officers) employed under the Ahom government, 
whether Hindus or Muslims, could look forward to a baruaaship up to 
the year A.D. 1772.139 Many of the Muslims too served in the higher 
posts of the Ahom military department. As mentioned earlier, one 
Muslim, Rupai Garia, served as the dadhava (armour-carrier) under 
the Ahom king, Gadadhar Singh (A.D. 1681-96). Moreover, under the 
paik system, it was compulsory for every adult male in the age group 
of 16 to 50 under the Ahom kingdom to render military or menial 
service, except the priestly class and the families of kings and 
nobles. Thus the general Muslim population too served the state in 
rotation as soldier at the time of war and as labourer in times of 
peace.140

Instances of patronisation of Muslims also come from 
Manipur. The one thousand Muslim captives taken by king 
Khagemba were patronized by allowing them to settle in the valley of 
Manipur, offering local women in marriage and land for sustenance. 
Nongsamei records that the prisoners were men of various 
professions, like turners, cobblers, weavers, cleaners, drummers, 
elephant and horse-keepers, rope-makers, utensil-makers, milkmen, 
cultivators, trumpeters, etc.141 It indicates that the Muslim prisoners 
were petty cultivators and artisans, who were raised as army by the 
ruler of Taraf, to meet his military need.

As the Muslims were endowed with great skills, Khagemba 
possibly realized the advantage of settling them in his kingdom. The 
indigenous sources, especially Nongsamei and Pangal Thorakpa, are

140 For details, see M. Makenzie, The North-Eastern Frontier of India, p. 6; (Mrs.) 
S. L. Baruah, “The Muslim Population in Pre-British Assam: Their Social 
Status and Role in Cultural History," IHC, vol. I, Hyderabad Session (1978), 
pp. 573-74, 579.
141 Nongsamei, p. 30.
replete with instances of rewarding the Muslims with local women as wives and land for their skills.

Nongsamei records that Muhammad Shani, the chief commander of the Muslim forces, was provided with two female partners by the name of Nongthoanbam Maitek and Chakpam Melei, along with two slaves and five paris (1 pari = 2.5 acres) of land.\(^{142}\) Nooriya Sheikh, a master potter, was also given local women by the name Pati, as wife, for presenting the king a beautiful pot made on the potter's wheel.\(^{143}\) In a similar case, four Muslim carpenters by the name Kundan Khan, Zamakhan, Sheikh Jali, Muhammad, and Niamatullah presented to the king a palanquin. The king delighted with the gift offered women to them.\(^{144}\) Another group of five milkmen named Umar Sheikh, Kala Khan, Suriya, Uliya and Manthe prepared varied delicacies from milk, ghee, curd, cheese, etc., and presented to the king for which they were similarly rewarded.\(^{145}\) In another instance, Kaniya, a fisherman, and Minihila, a hunter by profession, presented a big sareng (a kind of fish) and a hunted animal respectively to the king, for which they were also bestowed with local girls as partners. A cultivator, Ponam Sheikh, is said to have presented new varieties of vegetables for which he was rewarded with Laishram Tombi as his consort by the king.\(^{146}\) It is also recorded that Ponam Sheikh along with his brother, Khamba, brought mango seeds from Taraf, which they planted. Later they offered the fruit to the king for which they were allotted land for taking up its cultivation at Khumidok Hainou Khangnembi (in the northern part of the kingdom).\(^{147}\)

King Khagemba for the first time inducted Muslims in his army during his campaign against marings (one of the hill tribes).

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\(^{142}\) Ibid., p. 39.
\(^{143}\) Ibid., p. 34.
\(^{144}\) Ibid., p. 36.
\(^{145}\) Pangal Thorakpa, p. 18.
\(^{146}\) Nongsamei, pp. 38-39.
\(^{147}\) Ibid., p. 45.
For their audacity and services, Muhammad Shani along with Miyamba, Shah Kusum, Khong, Anup, Suliya, Nampha, Phaidong, Tumya, Khamya, Aman, Khende, and Akrou were rewarded with land for cultivation. These allotted lands were christened after the aforesaid soldiers viz., Miyam low (low means land for cultivation), Kusum low and so on.\textsuperscript{148} Thus, the Muslims soon got settled in and around Imphal, the capital, from where they later on dispersed far and wide in the suburbs of the valley of Manipur, mostly probably in search of new avenues close to rivers, lakes, etc. Facilitation of cultivation on fertile riverbanks and additional income from rivers and its transportation facilities – when road transport was not in an advanced state – must have been the possible reason for their dispersion. According to a record, a commander by the name Sheikh Junaid settled down at Irong near Mayang Imphal, which is almost 24 km south of Imphal.\textsuperscript{149} Besides, there is the record of Muhammad Shani’s son Nazarra settling down along with Shaikh Jali at Kamen, in the southern periphery of the kingdom.\textsuperscript{150}

King Khagemba also established an administrative body solely for the Muslims called Pangal Sanglen, which was attached to the royal court.\textsuperscript{151} The principal head of the Sanglen was designated as qazi. The incumbent was supposed to take up the general administration of the Muslims. Keeping in view the importance of the skills the Muslims possessed, various departments were also established, which all continued to exist till the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{152}

The British consul, T. C. Hodson, particularizes the constitution of the office thus:

\begin{quote}
The group of departments which was in charge of affairs relating to the Panggans of Muhammadan inhabitants, and consists of Panggan Sanglen, Panggan Inkhol, Panggan Singa Loisang,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., p. 71.
\textsuperscript{149} Ningsing Chephong, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., p. 9. For a general distribution of the Muslim population, see E. W. Dun, Gazetteer of Manipur, pp. 157-58, 182-83, 189.
\textsuperscript{151} Cheitharol Kurnbaba, p. 33. See also Sagei Salairol, p.46.
\textsuperscript{152} W. Mc Culloch, An Account of the Valley of Manipur and Naga Hills., p. 14.
The functions of these departments are not specified. But, it can be inferred that *Pangan Singa Loisang* was concerned with the group of Muslims who played *singa*, a kind of musical instrument (a prototype of trumpet). Muhammad Shani, the Muslim commander, was himself proficient in playing this instrument. *Pangan Phundrei Loisang* was probably connected with Muslim palanquin-makers, for *phunderei* was an instrument used by them. *Pangan Inkhol* could be associated with the management of lands the Muslims possessed, for *inkhol* means cultivable courtyard land, or it could have been the office, which administered the Muslim cultivators. *Pangan Kamar* could be related to Muslim potters; *kamar* at any rate can be nothing else but a corrupt form of the word *kumhar*. In Nongsamei, *kamars* are mentioned as one of the skilled Muslim prisoners.

Muslims were also conscripted in the *lallup* or state militia. In fact, every able bodied man in the Manipur Valley was liable to appear at the king's office (*loisang*) for 10 days to perform the work compatible with the class to which the person belonged. And for the next thirty days he remained at home. If he did not turn up for his *lallup*, he was fined one rupee, and from this sum a substitute was hired.

Besides the Muslims made captive by the king Khagemba, there are records indicating frequent Muslim immigration that took place in small batches. In Manipur valley, soon after the settlement of the Sylheti Muslims, four brothers named Syed Auliya, Muhammad Najiri, Syed Abdullah and Syed Kalka Hussain visited the place in A.D. 1607 and brought *Quran* along with themselves.

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154 *Ningsing Chephong*, p. 4.
155 *Nongsamei*, p. 36.
156 T. C. Hodson, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-62.
Syed Auliya, a religious pontiff, was adviser to the *Nawab* of Taraf. King Khagemba enticed them to settle down in Manipur by honouring them with consorts. It was probably due to their efforts that the Muslims remained practicing Muslims in the long run. The Muslim clan, *merei* (a corrupt form of *Mir*), is believed to be the descendants of these brothers.\(^{157}\)

During the reign of Khunjaoba (A.D. 1652-66), a Muslim family led by one Esakalimullah along with four *brahmins* came from Pratima (?) and settled in the valley of Manipur.\(^ {158}\) In A.D. 1661 some Mughals are known to have visited Manipur. Nothing is known about the purpose of their visit and whether they returned or not. In the same year, three Manipuris were sent to the Mughal court, possibly at Bengal. They returned back after staying there for a year and two months.\(^ {159}\) The purpose of the visit is not known.

During the reign of Paikhomba (A.D. 1666-97), 37 Muslims came from a place called Makak (?) led by Sunarphool, who is said to have been a prince of Makak. Muhammad Shani, the general of the Muslim captives, introduced them to the ruler. They presented elephants, palanquins, jewelleries, pigeons, etc. to the king. The king in return gave them women in marriage and allowed them to settle down in his kingdom.\(^ {160}\) This was followed by another batch led by one Putan Khan. They were also given local women in marriage and settled down permanently.\(^ {161}\) During the same period, four Mughals along with 10 commanders were also settled by giving them consorts and land.\(^ {162}\)

During the reign of Charairongba (A.D. 1697-1709), five *fakirs* by the names Ponuwa, Molang, Wangulaba, Leikhun, and Buta visited Manipur Valley for performing pilgrimage to a hill. They

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157 *Nongsamei*, p. 49.
158 *Pangal Thorakpa*, p. 40.
159 *Cheitharo! Kumbaba*, p. 8.
160 *Pangal Thorakpa*, pp. 43-44.
161 *Nongsamei*, p. 100.
demonstrated their magical powers to the king. The king being pleased with them gave cattle, lands and slaves, and accordingly settled them in the valley. A big hut was built at Khongjam (in the southern part of Imphal) near Morisoi (Alphabi Leikai) where these five fakirs lived. 163

Manipuri Muslims also migrated out of Manipur in large number. Their migration took place along with the meiteis in the wake of Burmese occupation of the valley for seven years, a period known in the history of Manipur as Chahi Taret Khuntakpa or the seven years of desertion (1815-21). Taking note of it Mc Culloch writes:

The Muslim population appears before the devastation of the country by the Burmese to have attained a very considerable amount, but as was the case with all the other sections of the Manipuri community, the greater portion of it was carried into captivity by these ruthless invaders (Burmese), and the present Musalmans are the descendants of the few that then escaped being captured... 164

Even now one can find big pockets of Muslim community living in close proximity with meiteis in parts of Assam, Tripura, Burma, and Bangladesh. As no specific census work has ever been attempted among them, it is hard to assess the Manipuri Muslim population in these regions. Roughly, at present, there are around one lakh Manipuri Muslims settled in the Cachar Plain and around 50 thousand in Tripura and Sylhet.

2.8 Summary

In sum, the protracted contest between the Muslim powers of India and the rulers of north-east from the 13th down to the 18th century witnessed the introduction and gradual development of Muslim society in the socio-religious history of the region. It has been seen that regions, which were subdued and controlled by the

163 Nongsamei, p. 105.
164 W. Mc Culloch, op. cit., pp. 14-15. The dealers in cattle and forest produce in Manipur were generally Muslims from the Surma valley. This evinces the possibility of many of these Muslim traders settling down in the Manipur valley. See B. C. Allen, Gazetteer of Bengal and North-East India, p. 622.
Muslims, such as western Assam (especially Rangpur, Goalpara and Kamrup), Sylhet and the Tripura Plain became the strongholds of Muslim population. Even though British accounts and local traditions emphasized that the Muslim rulers perpetrated pressure and force to gain converts in these regions, it is not corroborated by any of the contemporary or near contemporary accounts. In fact, the Muslim rulers who undertook campaigns to the north-east India, never adopted a systemic policy of conversion. Instead, the early growth of Muslim population in the region is attributed mainly to slow infiltration and settlement of Muslims at different points of time. Besides, the Muslim soldiers posted at many of the Mughal out-post in the region, and captives made by the local rulers, contributed towards the spread of Islam. They contracted alliance with the local women and settled down permanently thus increasing the Muslim population. Muslim population further augmented due to the major transformation in the river system of the Bengal delta – linking up of the Ganges with the Padma river by the late 16th century – which pushed the Muslim population from the Bengal delta eastward (towards western parts of Assam).

Another factor that enhanced the Muslim population was the entry of a large number of Muslim preachers, endowed with profound learning and great piety, from far and wide; who through their assiduous and persistent propaganda won over large number of converts from the aborigines and lower castes Hindus. Moreover, mosques, shrines and khanqahs that mushroomed in every nook and corner of north-east, and Islamic academics, like Muslim sattras, also helped in disseminating and propagating Islam. The importation and patronisation of skilled Muslims by the local rulers of the north-east too contributed towards the gradual growth of Muslim population.