CHAPTER – 4

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4.1 Introduction

As against the polemical and didactic writings of traditional Islamic scholars – that upheld Islam as a homogeneous mass of a religious and cultural uniformity\(^1\) – modern researches have shown that “underlying the creedal, doctrinal, and ritualistic unity in Islam, the Muslim world, at the micro level, presents a much more complex reality of unquestioned pluralism and diversity.”\(^2\) Thus Islam is not only an ideology, but it is also a cultural system. This cultural system has two sets of representations. Firstly, those cultural values that are rooted in certain Islamic beliefs and concepts, which are universal and constant across regions or territories. For example, Muslims throughout the world share the five cardinal pillars of faith viz., the *shahada* (acknowledgement of the oneness of God and the prophethood of Muhammad), *salat*, or prayer (five times a day), fasting, or *siyam* (in the month of *Ramzan*), the payment of the *zakat* (alms to the poor), and *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca). Secondly, there are those cultural values, which are essentially social in character, and are accretions from the regional culture, in which a particular Muslim group exists. And this culture differs from region to region. These cultural accretions are usually manifested through dress, food, language, literature, life-cycle rituals, social structure, idea of fatalism, beliefs in the supernatural, etc.\(^3\) Such cultural values developed as a response to diverse cultural situations to which Islam had to adapt and adjust

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1. In the Indian context almost all the medieval Islamic writers share this stance.
as it made its course from the West Asian heartland to the diverse parts of the world. The Muslims adapted these new cultural values to their own requirements and needs by putting an Islamic tinge into it.4

In the Indian sub-continent too, comprehensive studies have shown that besides the universally ordained Islamic laws, Islam as practiced by its adherents is overlaid with elements which are accretions drawn from the local environment.5 One of the main agents that led to the development of such cultural values, were the converts, who carried with them into their new faith, values and practices of their original environment.6 It is noteworthy that many rituals and practices, e.g. veneration of Muslim saints and their dargahs also came from outside India with the Islamic faith. These were picked up in the course of Islam's journey through the vast areas of Asia and Africa. The Islamic traditions and the indigenous and exotic custom-oriented traditions intermingled to such an extent that they became complementary and integral part of a single and common religious system. Such ritual practices and beliefs may not be orthodox and thus condemned by the ulemas (Islamic scholars) and reformers, but they remain hard to be ignored or crushed. It persists and functions for those who believe in it, and serves some practical needs, which the religion does not provide. According to James Wise:

In no other country have the Muhammadans embodied so many infidel rites and customs with their own creed as in India, ...

Perhaps, the causes that corrupted the Hindu religion, namely,


5 Mrs. Meer Hasan Ali’s Observations on the Mussulmauns of India (1917) and Jafer Sharif’s Qanun-i-Islam (Islam in India) (1921) are the earliest works which deals extensively on such beliefs and practices prevalent among the Indian Muslims. See also Imtiyaz Ahmad (ed.), Ritual and Religion Among Muslims in India and Family, Kinship and Marriage Among Muslims in India; Asim Roy, The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal; Aziz Ahmad, Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment, pp. 163-66.

6 W. Crooke (ed.), Islam in India, p. 9; Aziz Ahmad, op. cit., p. 163.
contact with alien and despised races, each having a peculiar culture of its own, isolation from the cradle and centre of its authority, and the paucity of numbers as compared with the millions of unbelievers around them, also tended in the case of the Muhammadans to produce greater liberality of feeling and more sympathy for the sentiments and religious observances of the aboriginal races. The local gods, the gods whom men sought after in times of trouble and sickness, were too near and dear to the inmost heart of the Hindu convert to be abolished without substitutes. It was much easier to give them an anthropomorphous form and to replace them by saints endowed with equal powers and with spirits of as easy access to the worshipers.7

The Muslims of north-east India are no exception. In fact, the social history of the Muslims in the region presents a case of the regional formulation of Islam. At the social plane, Muslim and Islam made mutual adjustments at various levels with the local environment thereby practicing syncretistic beliefs and practices. Much of these local elements could be seen in the social organization, life-cycle rituals, festivities, beliefs and behavioural patterns, which could be described as practical religion (not to mention the local influence in the realm of language, food, dress, habits, etc.). This practical religion includes supernatural theories of disease causation, e.g. phenomena such as spirit possession, evil eye, etc., and their remedial measures through charms and sorcery, and veneration of Muslim saints and Hindu or local deities to mention a few. Much of these practices can be seen even today among the Muslims of north-east India. It was the prevalence of these syncretistic local traditions of Muslims, which led Sahabuddin Talish, writing in the 16th century, to state that the Muslims of the region were only namesakes. He wrote:

As for the Musalmans who had been taken prisoner in former times and had chosen to marry (here), their descendants act exactly in the manner of the Assamese, and had nothing of Islam except the name; their hearts are inclined far more towards mingling with the Assamese than association with Muslims.8

8 Jadunath Sarkar (tr.), Fathiya-i-Ibriya, p. 193.
It is quite clear from the above account that the Muslims since their early settlement in north-east had adapted themselves to the rituals and practices of the local environment on the social plane, and lost much of the Islamic tinge and exclusive identity they had earlier.

4.2 Social Stratification

Islam, in principal and theoretically, does not permit the segregation of its followers into any hierarchical divisions. The only measure of status in Islam is piety, not power, position, profession, or wealth. In theory, at least, all Muslims are brethren. But, in spite of the theoretical equality, Muslims of the sub-continent practice and follow an inbuilt caste system, corresponding to those of the Hindus, though it does not correspond to it in every detail. Studies so far have shown that caste stratification made inroads into the Indian Muslim society with the induction of converts, especially those from the intermediate and lower rungs of the Hindu society; wherein status was strictly defined in terms of birth and maintained by strong sanctions. Administrative records dating back to the middle of the 19th century, recent works on social history, and several other anthropological studies on the Indian Muslim societies suggest the presence of caste-like features among the Muslims in different parts of India. H. Risley spells out:

In India...caste in the air; its contagious has spread even to the Muhammadans; and we find its evolution proceeding on characteristically Hindu lines. In both communities foreign descend forms the highest claim to social distinction; in both promotion cometh from the west. As the twice-born Aryan is to the mass of the Hindus, so is the Muhammadan of alleged Arab, Persian, Afghan, or Mughal origin to the rank and file of his co-religionists ... ashraf, 'noble' class (and) ajal, or 'low people' ... the limits of the various groups are not defined as sharply as they are with the Hindus. The well-known proverb, which occurs in various forms in different part of North India- 'Last year I was a jolaha

Hindus who were converted to Islam continued to regard themselves as caste-group, while foreign, conquering groups of Muslims, fell into the position of upper castes. Thus, Indian Muslims throughout the sub-continent maintained a two-fold division: foreign origin Muslims or *ashraf* and Indian origin Muslims or *ajlaJ*. *Ashrafs* are the descendants of the Muslim immigrants of Arabia, Persia, Turkey, etc. They are further divided into four major immigrant groups – *sayyid*, *shaikh*, *mughal*, and *pathan*. Indian origin Muslims include converts from higher caste Hindus, clean occupational castes and untouchable castes.

Even though the caste system that developed among the Muslims in Indian sub-continent owed directly to Hindu influences, it was reinforced by the legalization offered through the idea of birth and descent as criteria of status in Islamic law (*Shariat*) by the four school of jurisprudence i.e., *Hanafi*, *Shafi*, *Maliki*, *Hambali*. They

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11 *Sayyids*, meaning lord, also known as *pirzada*, “descendant of a saint,” or *mashaikh*, ‘venerable,’ claim their descent from Fatima, daughter of Prophet Muhammad. They believe in a tradition that: “Angel Gabriel, when he come down from heaven with the divine revelation, held a sheet over the *panjthan-i-pak*, the five holy ones, Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hasan and Husain, and exclaimed: “O Muhammad! The Almighty showers his blessings upon thee, and ordains off springs of the four who sit with thee shall henceforth be *sayyids*.” They flocked into Indian with the Muslim armies as religious teachers, soldiers, and adventurers. Their number in India is few and it is difficult to determine how many of the *sayyids* belong to the true foreign stock. *Sayyids* enjoyed a special position in the Mughal polity. They along with the *shaikhs* held most of the civil and ecclesiastical posts, and were regarded as sacred almost like the *brahmins* in the Hindu tradition. See W. Crooke (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10.

*Shaikh*, meaning “venerable leader,” include only those of pure Arab descent. The name is specially applied to three branches of the *quraish* tribe of the Prophet’s family. In the India sub-continent the title is generally assumed by Hindu converts to Islam. See W. Crooke (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 10.

*Mughal* is a title adopted by those Muslims who claimed descent from the Mughals, originally from Central Asia, but certain local converts also adopted the title. *Pathan* is a corrupt form of the word *pakhtuna*, those who speak Pashto, a language current beyond the North-Western Frontier.

worked out an elaborate scheme of social grades according to birth and descent. It is also noteworthy that Islam had inherited, in a sublimated form, from the pre-Islam pagan Arabia, the system of local grouping, with emphasis upon birth and unity of blood.

In a similar case the Assamese Muslims, generally known as garia or asomiya musalman, in the period under review, like their Hindu counterparts, were divided into four main caste-like divisions:

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13 Imtiaz Ahmad (ed.), Caste and Stratification Among Muslims in India, pp. xxx-xxxi. For example, according to Hanafi school, an Arab was superior to a non-Arab; among Arabs, all Quraishites were of equal standing in a class by themselves, and all other Arab were equal irrespective of their tribes. Among the non-Arabs, a man was by birth the equal of an Arab if both his father and grandfather had been Muslims before him, but only if he were wealthy enough to provide an adequate mehr (marriage endowment). And a learned non-Arab was equal to an ignorant Arab whereas a Muslim qazi (theologian) was ranked higher than a merchant and a merchant higher than a tradesman. See Rauben Levy, op. cit., p. 63.

14 Ibid.

15 E. A. Gait is of the opinion that the term garia is a corrupt word of maria, as the Assamese often pronounced 'g' for 'm,' and the term maria had in course of time changed into garia. Otherwise the word maria probably originated from their profession of braziers. See E. A. Gait, A History of Assam, p. 95.

Others are of the opinion that the appellation garia was given on account of the Muslims having been originally brought from Gaur (Bengal) to teach the people their arts and crafts. See C. J. Lyall, Report on the Census of Assam for 1881, p. 100.

16 The caste system that evolved among the Assamese Hindus was qualitatively different from that of mainland India. It was relatively less rigid, which probably was due to certain historical factors like the peripheral position of the region, different material conditions, relatively late immigration of the Aryans to Assam, the non-caste Ahom rulers, impact of Vaisnava movement in the region led by Sankaradeva (A.D. 1449-1568), and multiplicity of social and ethnic elements in the region. Interactions and influences of all these factors decisively contributed towards relative 'looseness' of the caste structure in Assam.

One finds very few traces of the four original castes and, unlike in other parts caste in Assam, was not necessarily connected with occupation rather it was more or less based on race. The priesthood holds the first place of dignity and was given due regards. For example, the rashi brahmins, emigrated from Bengal, hold the post of spiritual guidance of the king and principal officers of the court. Baidicks were the Assamese Brahmans of the ancient kingdom of Kamrup, degraded in the eyes of their brethrens as they instructed the impure tribes. They did not intermarry with other brahmins. Mention can also be made of saktis, chiefly of the sect of Vishnu, muno singha brahmins, and rajbungsis who served as spiritual guides of the Koch rulers. Below the priestly castes was the khatriya castes claimed by most of the ruling racial groups. For example, the Ahom gentry claimed themselves as khatriya.
a. sayyids,
b. shaikhs,
c. mughals, khans, quraishs,
d. Numerous autonomous and functional groups like marias, dhunias, julahas, mahimals, nagarchi, gains, koyets, and bausiyas.

Besides these hierarchical divisions, Assamese Muslims had also adopted some of the related ideology and practices from their Assamese Hindu neighbour, even though it was not as rigorous as in the case of the Assamese Hindu caste system. These caste-like divisions exerted and still exert a great deal of influence on the social relations among the Muslims.17

As elsewhere in the Indian sub-continent, in Assam too, the upper castes were of foreign lineage and racial groups, and the lower castes were from the local functional groups. Sayyids, shaikhs and quraishs were Muslims of foreign lineage; whereas mughals and khans or pathans were racial groups found among the Muslims elsewhere in the sub-continent. On the other hand, marias, dhunias, julahas, mahimals, nagarchi, koyets, and bausiyas were the autonomous caste groups based on hereditary professions. Many of these castes were local converts who had retained their former professions and caste rules.

The sayyids were found scattered in the Brahmaputra and Surma Valleys. According to the census counts of 1891 and 1901, they numbered 12,127 and 10,647 respectively.18 They occupied a

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The lower stratum of the society was filled by a host of degraded functional castes. For instance, the koyet caste, also known as kaibarttas, was divided into two classes – haluya koyets and jaluya koyets. The former were chiefly cultivators who worshiped Krishna, while the latter were fishermen, who in many ways followed the injunctions of Islam. Yet, they kept themselves distinct as a caste and did not mix with Muslims. The haris or potters, sonars or goldsmiths and the dhobas or washer men, originally from Bengal, were at the lowest rung in the caste hierarchy. See W. Robinson, A Descriptive Account of Assam, pp. 260-64; B. C. Allen, Census of Assam, 1901, vol. I, pp. 116-53; S. K. Chauhan, "Caste Structure in Assam," Eastern Anthropologist, vol. 33, (Jan.-Mar. 1980), no. 1.


superior position in the society. By and large, the descendants of the numerous saints and preachers who visited the region claimed to be sayyids. For instance, some of the old Assamese sayyid families claim their decent from Azan Pir and his brother, Nabi Pir. The komaldaiyas, descendants of Hazrat Osman Gani, popularly known as Khondkar Pir, claim themselves to be sayyids today. But they were not a priestly caste. Moreover, Islam as a religion does not permit or recognize any institutionalised role for priesthood. The title, dewan, by which they are known to these days, suggests that they mostly held the ecclesiastical functions under the Ahom rulers, and abstained themselves from those works that demanded rigorous physical labour. Even today they consider manual labour as work of the lower castes, and in particular, avoided cultivation works. Thus in certain behavioural aspects, they demonstrated their similarity with the Assamese Hindu brahmins. Occupationally, the sayyids had no direct link with any hereditary occupations.

The sayyids were probably an endogamous group like the Assamese brahmins as even today they resist marriage outside their own group. Even now they are a numerically small social group, and their tendency to maintain endogamy restricts their matrimonial choices. Consequently, they often marry among their cousins, including the first cousins. This practice enables them to maintain their exclusivity from other Assamese Muslims whom they consider as inferior, in the presumed caste-like hierarchy. This in a

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19 Ibid.
20 J. Das, Folklore of Assam, p. 111; Mohini Saikia, Assam- Muslim Relation and its Cultural Significance, pp. 201-02.
23 Ibid.
way reflects the implicit existence of non-Islamic beliefs and notions of purity.\textsuperscript{24}

The \textit{shaikhs} were numerically the largest group among the Assamese Muslims, who were mostly local-converts.\textsuperscript{25} They were scattered in both the Brahmaputra and Surma Valleys. The census enumeration of 1891 and 1901 recorded the population of \textit{shaikhs} in both the valleys at 1,381,804 and 1,493,796 respectively.\textsuperscript{26} Possibly those Muslims who were brought from the mainland India by the Ahom rulers also claimed themselves to be \textit{shaikhs}, as their occupation pattern shows. The \textit{shaikhs} took up various services in the Ahom administration like gun and gun powder-making, cannon-making, engraving, minting, \textit{Farsi} (Persian) reading and translating documents and letters sent by the Mughal/Muslim Emperors of India to the Ahom Kings, sword-making, rope-making, tending to birds and elephants, dyeing and garment-making. Besides, they served as carpenters, masons, Hindu temple builders, and soldiers and officers under the Ahoms, until the advent of the British.\textsuperscript{27}

The \textit{shaikhs} were also perhaps an endogamous group. Even today the \textit{shaikhs} are an endogamous group, however, they accept matrimonial ties with the \textit{sayyids} even though the latter resist. But they, like the \textit{sayyids}, try to maintain social distance from the \textit{marias} and other lower castes, whom they consider lower to them in the social standing.\textsuperscript{28}

Subsequently, with the changes brought about in the traditional occupational structures under the British colonial rule, the traditional role of the \textit{shaikhs} gradually diminished. They took up cultivation as an alternative means of livelihood. The \textit{shaikhs},

\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 279.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{27} Monirul Hussain, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 280.
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 279-80.
along with the sayyids, slowly responded to the process of middle class formation in the Assamese society. By the late 19th and the 20th century, the sayyids and the shaikhs maintained distance not only from the marias and other lower castes but also from the relatively less assimilated neo-Assamese Muslims, i.e. the immigrant Muslims. 29

There were numerous other castes whose standing in the caste hierarchy was, probably, above the local functional groups. Qureshi were a Muslim caste in Sylhet who traced their descent to the qureshi tribe of Mecca. They were figured at 380 in 1901 and 1356 in 1891 censuses. The fall in their number was perhaps due to the fact that many of them returned to the fold of shaikhs.30 Qazis, a mere designation rather than a caste group, were those learned Muslim scholars authorized to register marriages. They were accounted for the first time as an autonomous caste group in the census enumeration of 1901, and numbered 36. Khans, a Muslim title usually borne by the pathans, figured 283 in the 1901 census.31 Muslims, who claimed themselves as mughals, mustered 895 in the 1901 census and 2,126 in the 1891 census.32 The fall in population was, in all probability, due to their absorption in other caste groups or migration to mainland.

The marias traced their descent from the 900 Muslim soldiers of the army of Turbak, who were taken prisoners by the Ahoms, and subsequently settled in different parts of Assam. Turbak was remembered by the marias as their traditional leader or king.33 They were mainly concentrated in Kamrup, Sibsagar, and Lakhimpur districts. Their population figured 1,681 and 1,235 in

29 Ibid., p. 280.
31 Ibid., p. 134.
32 Ibid., p. 139.
the census count of 1891 and 1901 respectively. Tradition has it that the *marias* were:

... employed in agriculture, but when the harvest raised by the labour of 900 *marias* came to be reaped, it was no more than 600 *puras* of rice, or 20 lbs. per man. Being tried next as woodcutters, they brought in all kinds of wood that are useless for house building. As grass-cutters to the royal elephants they proved such a ludicrous and damaging failure that the term *hati mahaut* is a by-word against *marias*... At last when left to themselves they choose to be braziers, and braziers they are still, though, they frequently eke out the profits of their trade with a little agriculture.

They were lenient in the observance of their faith, and as a result were much looked down by their co-religionists. It was because of this that their population steadily decreased, as many gradually moved up and merged into the higher castes. Hunter observed, in Kamrup district, that the *marias* were ostracized by their co-religionists and stood out distinctly from the rest of the Muslims even though they claimed to be adherents of Islam. They were not circumcised and ate beef and pork unhappily and were addicted to drinking habits. The *marias* engaged in making house-hold utensils from brass and bell-metal and they are associated with it even today. Strangely enough, utensils made by the *marias* found acceptance not only in the Assamese households – irrespective of caste and religion – but also in the Hindu places of worships and rituals. There still exists certain stereotype against the *marias*, which have sullied their image as ‘dirty’ and ‘unreliable’.

In addition to the above mentioned caste divisions, there were the local, functional and autonomous castes groups. *Dhunia* were cotton carders by profession, and numbered 30 in 1901 and

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13 in 1891; gains, a title applied to low-caste Muslim singers, or wandering minstrels, numbered 278 in 1901. Likewise, julahas or Muslim weaver caste from Hazaribagh, in Bihar, mostly employed as tea-garden coolies in Assam numbered 1,519 on the tea estates of the province in 1901. They numbered 1,734 in 1901 and 2,180 in 1891. They also occupied a lower position in the social hierarchy among the Assamese Muslims. Today most of the julahas have gradually moved up the social ladder and merged into the Assamese shaikhs. They have given up their traditional occupation and surnames, and adopted lifestyles of the shaikhs. Moreover, the small size of the group and shift in their occupation helped them in occupying the status of shaikhs ultimately. Mahimals were a Muslim fishermen caste of Sylhet. In 1881 they were not distinguished from other Muslims, and it was evident that a large number must have had returned themselves as shaikhs. Their population figured 36,544 in 1901 and 58,100 in 1891. Nagarchi were drummers by profession and were concentrated in the Surma Valley. They figured 498 in the 1901 census. Fakirs, which according to Arabic terminology mean Muslim religious mendicants, were loosely used to denote beggars. They were not really a caste and numbered 66 in 1901 and 158 in 1891.

There were some other Muslim castes, regarded as degraded by the other higher caste groups. Bausiyas were a Muslim caste concentrated in Kamrup and Goalpara, but according to F. Buchanan, "they departed so far from all the appearance, that they were considered, by even those of their district as totally unworthy

40 Ibid., p. 129.
41 Ibid., p. 131.
44 Ibid., p. 141.
of the name of Muslim."46 Koyets were originally a tribe of fisherman, who had adopted Islam. They followed strictly the doctrines of caste and did not eat, drink, nor intermarry with other Muslims.47 Curiously, these castes are not accounted in the census operations.

It is a difficult task to depict the behavioural aspects of these castes groups from the meagre information we have at our disposal. However, it has been seen that the upper caste maintained a certain degree of social distance from the lower castes. And each of the caste groups also maintained a considerable degree of exclusivity and distance on the social plane and marriages were confined within the group. Rules, which proscribe eating or drinking with other caste groups, were also observed to some extent. Nevertheless, these divisions were not as rigorous as it was in the case of their Hindu counterparts. There was a certain amount of caste mobility. It has been common finding of the census enumerators that many of the lower castes merged into higher castes, through adopting the traditional occupation, surnames and lifestyles of the higher castes.

There developed further social divisions among the Muslims in Assam in the late 19th and 20th century. This was reflected mainly between Assamese Muslims and the immigrants from the eastern Bengal and elsewhere. The former had a privileged position in society because of their relatively early settlement in the pre-British era. These Muslims had also secured access to the streams of modernization much earlier, as compared to the other group. This enhanced their social respectability. In addition, majority of them were engaged in trades and vocations, which fell in the non-cultivating category, and which had brought about an improvement in their economic status. In contrast, the immigrant Muslims were

predominantly an agricultural group and this was to some extent responsible for their low social ranking in the eyes of their brethren. The two broad groups did not enter into matrimonial relations. Interestingly, like the Assamese Hindus, the Assamese Muslims are also today divided on the regional basis within the state, i.e. those belonging to upper Assam (the region north of the Brahmaputra) and those from lower Assam (the region south of the Brahmaputra). In fact, immigrant Bengali Muslims have mainly dominated lower Assam.

An almost similar caste-like social structure was also seen amongst the Muslims of Tripura. The Muslim population in Tripura was socially stratified into pathan, sayyid, shaikh, and unspecified Muslims. The census count of 1872 mustered the aggregate population of Tripura Plain at 993,564, out of which 213 were pathans, 117 were sayyids, 3,830 were shaikhs, and 983,564 were classed as unspecified Muslims. The majority of the shaikhs and unspecified Muslims were probably local converts.

In Manipur, the main basis of the social division of the Muslims, known locally as pangals (a generic term), was not caste, but lineage or clan. The presence of clan system among the Indian Muslims have been reported from around 131 Muslim communities, mostly from the north-west and western parts of India like Rajasthan, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Delhi and

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48 H. N. Rafiabadi, Assam from Agitation to Accord, pp. 21-22.
50 R. K. Jhalajit, A History of Manipur Literature, p. 157. Chaitharol Kumbaba and other archaic puyas also refer to Muslims by the same term. According to R. K. Jhalajit, a local historian, the word pangal is a corrupt or derivative form of Bangal. He explains thus:

"In modern Manipur, pangal means a Muslim. But in medieval Manipuri, it meant as East Bengali, East Bengal was known to the Manipuris as Bengal but most people pronounced it as pangal. Any one living in that place or coming from it was a pangal irrespective of religious profession. The earliest Muslim settlers in Manipur were from east Bengal. So they were called pangal. Later on, as a result of a change in the meaning, only Muslims from Bengal were called pangals. Still later, any Muslim from any part of the world comes to be known as pangal, although he had nothing to do with Bengal." Ibid.
Chandigarh. One of the most widely studied clan system among the Muslims in India is that of the meo community, a Rajput convert group in Haryana.\(^{51}\) Clan system among the Muslims in the sub-continent is loosely known as biradari system. But there is no clear definition of clan either in Indian native terms or in anthropological terminology. Instead, tribe, clan, family and lineage are confusingly used to refer to the same thing.\(^{52}\)

Shortly after their settlement, the Manipuri Muslims were given family titles. Later on with the increase in population these developed into lineage groups or clan, the basic social stratification of the Muslims in the region. This lineage or clan organization corresponds to that of the meiteis (hill tribes of Manipur also had clan system). The king on the basis of the specific occupation, place of settlement, place of origin, significant events, etc., gave the family titles. The Muslims called this clan sagei, unlike salais of the meities.\(^{53}\) Sagei is also generally used in reference to the tribal clans. Muslim lineage or clan system is a simpler form of the complex and at times intricate clan system of the meities. Unlike the meities, the Manipuri Muslims do not generally prefix or suffix the name of the sagei to their names, though there are exceptions. The Muslim sageis had equal footing in the society.

By the reign of Garib Niwas (A.D. 1709-98) there were around 27 clans. The list of clan and their origin is given as under:

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\(^{51}\) For details, see Hasim Amir Ali, *The Meos of Mewat*; P. C. Aggarwal, “The Meos of Rajasthan and Haryana” in Imtiaz Ahmed (ed.), *Caste and Social Stratification Among the Muslims*.


\(^{53}\) The clan system of the meitei society can be seen as a remnant of its pre-Hindu past. It is on the basis of this clan division that the whole meitei society rests, regulating its marriage and kinship and giving identity and place to individuals in the society and to some extent arranging the settlement patterns. The whole meitei population is divided into seven salais or clans (ningthouja, khuman, luwang, moirang, angom, ngangba, chengloii). These seven salais are further divided into yumnaks or household. Along with the process of Hinduisation the whole set up of the meities was given a Hindu version by fitting the seven clans into the Hindu gotra. For details, see T. C. Hodson, *The Meithies*, pp. 182-87.
Besides the sagei, there were other smaller units of division called phurup, shinglup, kangbu or khut, which were based either on lineage or other social and customary considerations. Khut and kangbu were based on the lineage of primary kinship, and members were knit into a compact group. They stood for their specific interest and were different from phurup and singlup.

The phurup was a group of people, who were composed more or less of sagei members. Sometimes, it also included the neighbours of an area or leikai (hamlet). It was not a compact grouping like khut, though each member helped one another. A singlup was a closely-knit group of the members of a sagei of a particular local surrounding. Mostly kin groups living in a specific

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54 M. A. Janab, *Manipuri Muslims*, pp. 14-15. Today there are around 50 Muslim clans in Manipur. For a detailed account of the origin of each of the clans, see Kulachandra Sharma & Badruddin, *Meitei-Pangal Haorakpham*.
area formed a *singlup*. Some *sagies* were close-knit, whereas some had factions and groups within. In each *sagei*, there were many families/households, called *yumnak*s. These *yumnak*s formed sub-clans known as *singlup*. There are instances in which two or more different *yumnak*s sometimes formed a common *sagei*, e.g. *khullakpam* and *sajabam* formed a *sagei* as they had common forefathers. Again, within a *sagei* there were divisions based on certain social characteristics like professions, physical features, location, etc. The *maibam sagei* was divided into *maibam angouba* (fair) and *maibam amuba* (dark), on the basis of colour of their skins. On the occasion of socio-religious functions like death, marriage, feast, etc., the members of a *singlup* assisted each other. Almost all the Muslims were members of such social units.\(^55\)

4.3 Marriage Customs

Muslims in the north-east also adopted many marriage customs and rites, observed generally by the populace of the region; much of these are still in practice. Besides the *nikah* ceremony – prescribed by Islam for sealing a marital union between two persons – which was performed strictly according to Islamic rules, the Muslims of the region, like elsewhere had adopted elaborate local rites and ceremonies. As soon as a marriage was settled, the cycle of these ceremonies started and continued until the actual performance of the marriage itself.

In Assam, the Muslims had absorbed many of the rites and ceremonies from the local or Hindu marriage customs.\(^56\) In Sylhet,

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\(^{56}\) Traditional Assamese Hindu marriage consist of: offering of *joran* to the bride as a token of agreement; ceremonial bath or *nowani*; ceremonial feast; ceremony of *rik-khan*; *deo-ban* ceremony; *ap-tang* or bathing in medicated water; *ganthian khunda*; *doiyon* or marriage procession; *huaquri-tola*; sitting under the marriage *pandal* facing the altar made with a sacred *mandal*; leading out the bride from her house and seated on the left side of the bridegroom; to relate the family history (*buranji*) of the bridegroom and the bride for seven generations of ancestors; performances of *cak-lang* ceremony; presentation of a *hengdan* and a cloth girdle with an amulet to the
Muslim women, like their Hindu neighbours, performed a ceremony called *naktan*, in order to ascertain when one would be married. Women assembled at night and sang songs, and took a bud in the name of the man whose marriage time was to be ascertained. They put the bud into a hollow cake and offered it to God. After a specified time the bud was taken out of the cake. In case the flower was found, they inferred that the time for marriage of the person was not very far away.  

After the engagement, in many parts of Assam, Muslims performed the local marriage custom of *joran*. According to this custom, the groom's family made presentation of bridal paraphernalia, which usually included clothes, ornaments, comb and mirror to the bride. But, unlike the Hindu practice of putting vermilion on the forehead of the bride, the groom's mother only blessed her. From this day till the wedding, the bride and the groom underwent ceremonial baths (*panitola*) everyday, known as *nowani*. The custom of *joran* and *nowani* are practiced even today among the Assamese Muslims.  

The ceremony of *joran* was followed by *nikah*, which was solemnized by a person conversant with the requirements of Islamic

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57 See Padma Nath Bhattacharjee, "Folkcustom and Folklore of the Sylhet District in India," *Man in India*, vol. 10 (1930), p. 128. The paper was written in 1898 when the author was Deputy Inspector of Schools in reply to the queries on folklore circulated by Mr. Crooks, ICS, of the then North Western Provinces.  


60 Usually before the *joran*, Muslims, like the Hindus, also traditionally perform ring ceremony, called *mangni* (asking) or *anguthi pindhua*. After the finalization of the negotiations between the families of the future bride and the groom, a party consisting of the close kinsfolk and the parents of the groom-to-be visits the future bridal home. The party carry a gold ring, silk clothes, and sweetmeats as gifts. The engagement is sealed with the presentation of the gold ring to the future bride, which is called *anguthi pindhua*. See Irshad Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 118.
law. He could be either a qazi or village mulla. A proxy of four or five adult men settled the amount of mehr or marriage settlement amount, with the representatives of the groom in the presence of the qazi or mulla. After the mehr was fixed and settled the qazi or the mulla reads the kalima (creed), and the nikah was considered complete. 61

Nakah was followed by a feast, after which the husband took his wife to his own home. 62 The Muslims also fixed the date of marriage in consultation with panjikas (astrologers) or Hindu pandits. 63 Even today, like the Hindus, the Assamese Muslims arrange marriage ceremony generally in all the months except Puh (Dec.-Jan.), Chait (Mar.-Apr.), Bhado (Aug.-Sept.) and Kati (Oct.-Nov.) and during the month of Ramzan. Both the communities preferred Fagun (Feb.-Mar.) and Bohag (Apr.-May) months to arrange marriage ceremony. In the villages, during these months, the rural people are free from cultivation works and they have enough time to engage themselves in celebrating the ceremony. 64

In some parts of Assam, it has been a tradition for Muslim bride and the groom to exchange betel-nut and leaf 65 on the wedding day, after taking the ceremonial bath. Muslim women also sing zikirs and bianams (marriage folksongs sung by womenfolk) on the day. Like the Hindus, Muslims also practiced athmangala. The parents of the bride invited the bride and the groom on the eighth

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62 Ibid.
64 Irshad Ali, op. cit., p. 120.
65 It was and still today customary for all class and religion in Assam and other parts of north-east to use betel-nut (tambul) and leaves on the occasions of marriages and other socio-religious festivals. Tamul pan as they are called in Assamese was the first thing offered to a visitor; to receive it from a prince or priest was considered a special honour. It is also customary in various parts of Indian sub-continent to use betel-leaves at occasion of marriages, social functions, religious festivals, etc. In Indian tradition, tambola along with perfumes, women, clothes, music, tambola, dinner, bed, and flowers are the eight bhogas (objects of enjoyment). See J. Das, op. cit., pp. 55-56; P. K. Gode, Studies in Indian Cultural History, vol. I, pp. 131, 151.
day following the marriage day for a feast.\textsuperscript{66} Like their Hindu counterparts the Muslims in many parts of Assam also demanded bride price for their daughters.\textsuperscript{67}

In Manipur too, in addition to the prescribed Islamic marriage service, the Muslims absorbed the local \textit{meitei} marriage rites, which even today constitute part and parcel of the Muslim marriage system. Muslims, like the \textit{meities}, traditionally practice lineage or clan exogamy. Since all the members of the clan trace their descent from a common ancestor, marriage within the clan is considered to be an incestuous alliance. Even today if such alliance occurs, the boy and the girl are ostracized by their respective families, and by the concerned clan members.

Manipuri Muslims performed \textit{nikah} on the \textit{gaya numit} or the day of groom’s friends, when the boy visited the girl’s residence on a palanquin (\textit{dolai}) at the head of a party that consisted of his friends and relatives. Both the families arranged a big feast on the marriage day. In the evening, the groom (\textit{daman}) along with his friends (\textit{gaya}) and relatives proceeded towards the bride’s (\textit{goina}) residence on a litter, but came back on a horse; now the bride would be in the same litter, which was covered with a veil.\textsuperscript{68}

Various forms of entertainment programmes formed part of the Manipuri Muslim marriage. One day before the marriage two teams from the boy’s friends and the girl’s friends played \textit{kangjei} (local version of hockey) and \textit{mukna} (local version of wrestling) and sang \textit{ghazals} and \textit{kasidas} (panegyrics) throughout the night.\textsuperscript{69} The bride also danced along with her close companions at the veranda of her house with the jangling accompaniment of harmonica. Women – young and old – and boys watched them dance

\begin{footnotes}
\item[66] Satyendra Nath Sarma, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 230.
\item[69] \textit{Ibid.}
\end{footnotes}
accompanied by songs. Along with other forms, thabal chongba, a traditional dance of the meities, was also an item of entertainment, but the boys were not allowed to participate. Women also performed mairbag jagoi, a dance form without music, in which the participants danced with plates on their hands. Even khullang eseis, a folk song of the meities was sung. Much of the lyrics of such marriage songs strongly emphasized the importance of the coming events in a girl’s life. Some of the songs harp on the theme of the earthly and crude facts of married life; some weaved the theme of the sorrow of leaving her natal family thereby emphasizing the pathos of her imminent separation from her beloved family. Both the melody and words used in these songs were very touching and many have come down to us as part of the traditional marriage folk songs of Muslims in Manipur. Some specimens of marriage songs are as follows:

**Song-1**

Girl:  
tamgi khunu maingouba  
ebangi louchi-louyada  
chekta chaktabiranu

Dove:  
tera khadabu loungakpi  
eina tage tabara  
ningnon samlangna loubagi tabani.

Girl:  
(Oh! White dove of the plain
sitting in the corner of the sawn grass field
don’t come to gather food (here)

Dove:  
O girl! Sitting under the tera plant
did I land on my own will
For I got entangled (here) in your hair).

**Song-2**

yengu-thorakle

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70 Thabal Chongba or moonlight dance, is held during the yaoshang, a traditional festival of meities, which falls on the full moon of March, and is celebrated in the next five days of the full moon. Young boys and girls dance hand in hand to the foot-thumping accompaniment of drums.

71 Khullang Esei, a type of folk song is sung in the villages during agricultural works in the fields. Love is the main theme of these songs. There is a fixed set of tunes but the wordings are made up to suit the mood and taste by the singer.


73 Ibid.
hanin thaja thorakle
maiba heigi marumda
touthangi hur anina
laina thaon – thathongna
mairbag jagoi Sarare
kaji patki tharona
malang tantha tunginna
jagoi sathek taklare. 74

(Look! there they come
like the moon
from behind the maiba fruit tree
like the two nymphs of Touthang
there they dance the mairbag,
the lily of Kazi lake
swaying to the beat of the wind
demonstrating the moves of the dance).

Marriage custom among the Muslims of Tripura was probably a
simple affair, as the only available account of W. W. Hunter would
have us believe. He writes:

Marriages are arranged by the parents, or other near relatives of
the parties to be united. Boys are married between the ages of 15
and 20. In infant marriages the bride's father gives her away; but
if the parties are grown up, the woman appoints a wakil in the
presence of two witnesses. This man goes to the bridegroom with
his witnesses, and after showing his credentials, asks the
bridegroom if he will have the bride; the bridegroom responds
three times, 'I accept the bride,' and he is at once taken to her.
The marriage service is then read, and a wedding feast concludes
the proceedings. 75

Muslims generally entered marital life between the age of 20
and 40, but girls married earlier than their Hindu counterparts.
There were lesser widows among the Muslims; they remarried more
freely than the Hindus. Polygamy though sanctioned by the Quran
was seldom practiced. 76 Rev. T. W. Reese, a Calvinistic Methodist
missionary, made an interesting observation on this regard in the
early 19th century:

With regard to Mohammedans in Sylhet and Cachar, all my
experience goes to show that it is an extremely rare thing to find a
man with more than one wife. I have met with one or two cases, but
I am sure that not one per cent of the people avail themselves of this
privilege of the Quran. Probably something like one in a thousand

74 Ibid.
would more adequately represent it. And even in the few cases where polygamy is practiced among them, it is generally due to the absence of any issue by the first wife, and sometimes by her inability, on account of physical disease or weakness, to perform the household duties. It may be that the provision laid down in the *Qoran*, that separate establishments should be kept up for each wife, has prevented, especially among the poorer people, the practice of polygamy. But the sentiment of the community is decidedly in favour of only one wife. I have always found, when told that a certain Mohammedan had more than one wife, that he was regarded with a certain amount of cynicism also far as his co-religionists were concerned. Concubinage among the wealthy is extensively practiced, and also divorce. But among the poor, as these things involved money, their circumstances act as a sufficient preventative.77

4.4 Rituals and Beliefs

Besides the assimilation process discussed in the preceding pages, regarding the life-cycle rituals and social structure, the Muslims of north-east also adopted local festivities and many other beliefs and behavioural patterns. These can be described and levelled as belonging to the realm of what is called practical religion. These broadly include belief in the therapeutic power of the Muslim saints – as manifested in the veneration of *dargahs* – faith in supernatural theories of disease causation, especially with regard to epidemics of cholera, smallpox, and belief in phenomena such as evil eye, spirit possession, etc., and their remedial through resort to venerating Hindu or local deities, sorcery and magic.

In many parts of Assam and its surroundings areas, Muslims worshipped and venerated Manasa, the snake goddess; the practice perhaps was only expected in a region where the reptiles and its various species abound. It was propitiated by a class of Muslims called *dihakari*, considered as semi-Muslims by their brethrens, in Nowgong district.78 Another class of degraded Muslims of Kamrup district, called *jahils*, also venerated it.79 Manasa worship or *mare puja* is one of the popular festivals of the local Hindus even today, especially in the districts of Kamrup, Darrang, and Goalpara. The

78 B. C. Allen, *District Gazetteer of Assam, Nowgong*, vol. VI, p. 93.
puja is held during the rainy season, and Manasa is worshipped in the form of an earthen pot (ghota) or a pyramidal structure made out of plantain barks (maju).  

The practice of venerating Manasa was widely prevalent among the Muslims of Bengal. Many are of the opinion that the tradition of Manasa worship might have entered Assam from Bengal in the 13th century along with the Muslim invaders. There is no textual or historical evidence that can be furnished in support of this hypothesis. According to one belief, Arjun introduced the ojapali art form, and brought it to earth in the role of Brihannala from heaven. Later a chief of Darrang introduced it among both Hindus and Muslims. Yet, another tradition holds that it was the marias who first introduced the worship of the goddess Manasa. Interestingly the popular Manasa-poet Sukavi Narayan Deva introduced the episode of Hasan and Hussain in his work, Padma-Purana, composed in the early part of 16th century.

During ojapali festivals, held in connection with the worship of Manasa, some Muslims even lead the ojah singers. In many parts of eastern Bengal and Assam down to the first quarter of the present century there were professional Muslims who sang in honour of Manasa. The ojapali art form, particularly the suknani, or Manasa variety of ojapali, which took themes from the Manasa-lore – that is current both in the forms of oral and written traditions – is not confined to the Hindus only, but is quite popular among the Muslims as well. Even today, in some parts of Assam Muslims sing

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80 For details, see Prabin Chandra Das, “Mare Puja and Deodha Dance of Assam,” Folklore, vol. 28 (1987).
82 Bhrigu Mohan Goswami, A Study of the Ojapali Art Form of Assam, pp. 14, 67.
83 S. Rajguru, Medieval Assamese Society, 1228-1826, p. 144.
84 Ojah pali is a group of chorus singers and dancers. The ojah is the leader of the chorus; the palis are his assistants and the daina pali is the principal assistant numbering three, four or more. They dance and play small cymbals, and sing stories from epics and the Puranas. J. Das, op. cit., pp. 133-34.
the sukmani ojapali. Ojahpalis also sing a type of song, called *patsha geet*, the meaning of which are difficult to follow, which in fact is an admixture of words from the Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, and *Farsi* (Persian). These songs are believed to be written under Muslim influence. There are also influences of the Mughals in the dress-ups of the *ojah palis.*

Another local deity whom the Muslims in Assam worshipped was Sitala or simply called Ai, which means mother in Assamese: a powerful goddess controlling contagious diseases, particularly smallpox. She is believed to be a manifestation of the Hindu goddess, Durga. The practice was popular among the Muslims in Bengal delta as well. As smallpox was a dreaded disease then, common people held the belief that some divine power worked behind it. Any kind of medicine was not prescribed for an attack of smallpox because they believed that it was caused by Ai, and she appears and departs at her own will. Thus the Assamese, irrespective of caste and religion, submit themselves to her without question. In the Cachar district, Muslims contributed funds to *brahmins* to promote the worship of the goddess. Muslims also occasionally chanted *mantras* (incantations), Ai was invoked when the disease appeared and they even went to the extent of sacrificing fowls and pigeons.

Assamese women performed certain rites in honour of Ai accompanied by prayer-songs praising the goddess. A translated specimen of a traditional prayer-song goes thus:

Seven sisters come to the home of the poor and we have nothing to offer; we shall rub your feet with hair of our head. Make our body a bridge for her. Unknowingly we trespassed into Ai’s garden and plucked there a bud; forgive us this time for our faults,

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According to their belief, Ai made her visitation up the Brahmaputra from Kamakhya, first to Deoghar, then to Phulbari on the Pichala river (in north Lakhimpur) and finally arrived at Sadiya. She was, as per their belief, very kind-hearted to the devotees. When she made her visit accompanied by her seven sisters, everybody vowed before her in order to get her blessings. This has the power to cool down the body and mind of those afflicted with the disease. 91

In Sylhet, epidemics were looked upon as causations of evil spirits. In order to prevent them from visiting the village, earthen cups with symbolic mantras, and in case of Muslims with verses from the Quran written on them, were placed atop bamboo posts at the corner of the village. People were directed to observe cleanliness, physical as well as spiritual, if possible. They also wore charmed amulets, to ward off the danger. 92

Everyone shied away from going alone to the woods or fields during the spread of the smallpox epidemic. The entire village folk, in the manner prescribed in the Tantras, worshipped Sitala. Muslims too joined in the worship. 93 Sylheti Muslims believed that cholera epidemic was caused due to God's anger to which the jinns 94 infesting the village also joined. During the outbreak of cholera, villagers procured a healthy cow, goat or pony, garlanded it with flowers, and tied round its neck a new cloth to which five piece

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90 J. Das, op. cit., pp. 108.
91 Ibid., pp. 108-09. Purity of body and mind, and cleanliness of the surroundings were the main precautions taken when the disease spreads. A congregational prayer was made where they sang ainam songs. Every household of the village where Ai visited had to arrange one such prayer. She was invoked in all humanity along with ceremonial offerings. Ibid., p. 108.
92 Padmanath Bhattacharjee, op. cit., p. 136.
93 Ibid., pp. 135-36.
94 Jinn, according to the Islamic tradition, is an airy or fiery body capable of appearing in various forms and capable of carrying out hard labours; created out of smokeless flame. It can be controlled through the use of magic. See H. A. R. Gibb & J. H. Kramers (eds.) Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam, pp. 90-91.
and five knots full of rice were fastened. The animal was then made to walk around the village and driven away at midnight. All evils were believed to go away with it.95

In many parts of Assam, Hindus and Muslims in the villages met together in the village namghar (Hindu temple) once a year to pray for common welfare. On this occasion each participant took their share of prasad (sweet-meats offered to God) from a common basin and enjoyed it communally. Muslims were also invited to Hindu villages, for making tazia,96 or to the temples and sattras to play musical instruments. They were also invited for undertaking joint pilgrimage for paying homage to some deities, of whom Satya-Pir was the most noted one. The Ahom kings also encouraged such practices. Many of such practices are still in existence.97

4.5 Charms and Magic

The popularity of the charms and magic of north-east, especially of Assam, is too well known to be elaborated. The Muslim narratives are replete with the accounts of the expertise of the people of the region in dealing with charms and magic. One such description in the Persian text, Khalasatu-t-Tawarikh, goes thus:

The beauty of the women of this place (Kamrup) is very great; their magic, enchantment, and use of spells and jugglery are greater than one can imagine. Strange stories are told about them, such as the following. By the force of magic they build houses, of which the pillars and ceiling are made of men. These men remain alive, but have not the power of breathing and moving. By the force of magic they also turn men into quadrupeds and birds, so that these men get tails and ears like those of beasts. They conquer the heart of whomsoever they like and bring him under their command. They can foretell the movement or repose (of the planets) of heavens, the dearth or cheapness of grains, the length or shortness of the life of any one. Cutting open the womb of a woman of full pregnancy, they take out the child and read its future. In this territory, there is a wonderful tree; whenever it is

95 Ibid., p. 136.
96 Tazia literally means mourning for the dead, but in general it is made of wood on which are pasted sheets of brightly coloured paper and pieces of mica banners or has representations, in flimsy material, of the tombs of Hasan and Husain which are carried about during the Muharram procession. See Henry Yule & A. C. Burnell, Hobson-Jobson- The Anglo-Indian Dictionary, p. 904.
pierced a sweet liquid drops from it, and makes the thirsty satiated with water. There is another tree, which yields as fruit both the mango and the grapes. In this province there is a flowering plant which will not wither for more than two months after being uprooted, nor loss its colour and smell. They make necklaces of it. Near this province lies Assam, which is very spacious, when any of its rulers dies, his favourites, both male and female, bury themselves alive with him. If any one dies leaving no heir behind him, they bury all their property with him. The Muslims of north-east also practiced sorcery and charms. It has been seen that the Muslim sorcerers adopted many local practices, which were grafted into the system prescribed in the Quran and the Hadith (Islamic traditions). It is worth noting that Islam condemned the practice of, and belief in sorcery or magic, except those, which do not associate things with God.

In the north-east those who indulged in this trade were known by different names in different places. He was known as ojha/ kabiraj/ bez in Assam and Sylhet whereas in Manipur he was known as maiba. These sorcerers indulged in exorcism and offered magico-religious services, for treating those possessed by spirits, madness, hysteria, and a number of other similar diseases, which were believed to be the design of evil spirits, and all sorts of physical ailments. Such afflictions were treated and cured through prayers, offerings, rituals, mantras, holy or wise sayings (aphorisms), sacrifices, herbal potions, etc. Speaking of such sorcerers F. Buchanan writes:

...who by means of certain incantations pretends to cure diseases and the bite of serpents and to cast out devils. Both Hindus and Muslims acknowledge that these incantations were first divulged by order of Kamakhya, the goddess of desire.

The art of exorcism was handed down from generation to generation. And it was not hereditary; usually one old practitioner teaches the

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98 Jadunath Sarkar, The India of Aurangzeb, pp. 43-44.
100 For a detail treatment on Islamic sorcery or magic, see W. Crooke (ed.), op. cit., pp. 218-77.
101 Kamakhya is an important pilgrimage centre of the Hindus from the ancient period. According to the Hindu tradition, it is one of the most important of all the 51 pithas, or places at which a portion of Sati’s dismembered body fell. Narak erected a temple, but Kala Pahar later raised it to the ground. Nar Narayan again rebuilt it in A.D. 1565. See B. C. Allen, Assam District Gazetteers, Kamrup, vol. VI, pp. 91-92.
102 M. Martin, op. cit., p. 508.
art to one, whom he found reliable, as it is the rule even today. People still believe in sorcery and approach these exorcist.

Like their Hindu counterparts, the Muslims believed in the existence of bhuts and invoked divine assistance to get rid of the baneful influence of the bhuts. Bhuts, as per their tradition, were seen in various shapes and they attacked persons who unknowingly went to a haunted place. Bhuts were believed to be active at nightfall, daybreak, and midday or at midnight. So, children and females were restricted from going out alone to any lonely place at these odd and unearthly hours.

A person possessed by a bhut became either ecstatic or suffered from high fever attended with deuterium. People took recourse to village sorcerers or the ojhas for treatment. Muslim ojhas of Sylhet followed the following procedure in the treatment of a person possessed by a bhut: a circle was drawn on a part of the body of the affected person with a stick, charms were recited, usually a verse from the Quran was read over a quantity of mustard oil, and a wick smeared with the oil thus charmed was burnt and the smoke out of it was thrust into the nostrils of the affected person. This was supposed to be unbearable for the bhut and so it spoke through the possessed. The sorcerer then enquired the bhut his name, whereabouts and how he took possession in the person. The sorcerer then made the bhut promise in the name of Sulaiman Badshah, the king of bhuts, that it would never enter the body of the person and then, when he was satisfied, he cut the magic circle and the bhut would leave.

Muslims also believed in the phenomenon of evil eye. A person may unconsciously produce malevolent effects by looking

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103 According to the Hindu belief, bhut is the general name for a malignant ghost of the dead, usually the spirit of a man who died due to an accident or suicide. They are believed to have no shadows, speak with a nasal twang, and are controlled by burning turmeric. See Maria Leach (ed.), Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend, vol. I: A-1, pp. 139-40.

104 Padmanath Battacharya, op. cit., p. 145.
fixedly at children, or by admiring them with too much affection and enthusiasm, or by touching them. Thus, one would throw away an eatable, which was eyed on greedily, or else anyone eating it would catch a bowel-complaint. Rubbing oil with plantain leaf over the navel of the consumer and throwing the same afterwards into fire treated the problem. Charmed amulets were also worn to protect from evil eye. As a precautionary measure when a child moved out of the house, it was a practice with mothers to put a drop of a mixture of her saliva with earth between the eyebrows of the child. This was to safeguard from evil eye. 105

Some of the main practices used by the Muslims in the exorcism of diseases and other problems were as follows: rubbing the body of a patient with the verses of the Quran, wearing charmed amulets, drinking charmed water, etc. An interesting account of preparation of amulets by the Muslim ojhas of Sylhet tells us that mantras were charmed on things like root of a plant, grains, a piece of metal, etc. and were rolled and fastened into a small ball and attached to black or yellow threads. This was then put into a metal case, which was worn either on the right or left arm, neck or on the waist. Otherwise, a cowrie was charmed and used as an amulet. They also used generally some verse from the Quran, or any saying of a saint, which were written in Arabic as amulets. 106 Many of the mantras used by Muslim ojhas contained references to various Hindu and aboriginal deities. A popular mantra for detecting thieves opens thus:

*Bismillah i Allah u Tara, Gauri
Haji Bakum, Haji Bakum, ...

Amulet was worn or carried by a person or placed in a house to protect the owner from the dangers such as illness, death, attacks by thieves or animals, evil spirits, witchcraft, or evil eye; to

105 Ibid., pp. 244-45.
106 Padmanath Bhattacharjee, op. cit., pp. 246-47.
107 Mohini Saikia, op. cit., p. 246. Tara and Gauri used in the mantra are the consorts of the Hindu god, Siva.
aid him in acquiring luck, wealth, physical strength, magical powers; to bring success in trade, battle or love. It is not only worn by men, women, and children, but also used for domestic animals, houses, placed in the fields, in storehouses, etc.

4.6 Saint Worship

One of the most important aspects of the religious life of the Muslims in north-east in the period under review was the wide prevalence of saint worship. The belief in the therapeutic power (karamat) of the saints, the worship of their shrines and tombs was not peculiar to north-east India. It was widely practiced in many parts of the Muslim world. In fact, the Muslims who came from Central Asia imported the practice to the sub-continent. It got further fillip from the local Hindu converts to Islam in the Indian sub-continent. These neo-converts brought in their tradition of guru-chela and the belief in the worship of gods and goddess. The performance of rites, rituals, customs and festivals related to saints and their tombs was considered an act of polytheism and thus un-Islamic, and drew flak from the orthodox Muslims.¹⁰⁸ Except the Muslims in the Manipur valley,¹⁰⁹ almost all the Muslims in other parts of north-east venerated and performed rituals in the tombs

¹⁰⁸ M. T. Titus, op. cit., p. 137. A Wahhabi tract, Al-Balagh al Mubin, a loosely composed Persian text believed to be written by a Muslim in the mid 19th century (composed before 1860s) describes the practice:

"The tomb worshippers adore the tombs in the same way as one worship Allah in the Holy Ka'ba. For instance, they spread on them covers and all kinds of veils of all colours; they kiss them; they circumambulate them reciting vocal or silent dhikr; they make vows to them; they sacrifice animals in their names; they consider the water used to wash them as a benediction (tabarruk) comparable to the water of Zamzam well. They consider that seeing, or making a pilgrimage to, the tomb of a saint (pir) is an act of worship comparable to seeing the Holy Ka'ba. They consider the tombs as qibla for the prayer; they think that it is better to worship these than any other place." As quoted in M. Gaborieau's "A 19th Century Indian Tract Against the Cult of Muslim Shrines: Al-Balagh al-Mubin," in Christian Troll (ed.), Muslim Shrines in India, p. 211.

¹⁰⁹ There is no particular tomb in the region, which is regarded as of a particular sanctity.
(maqbaras) of saints; usually referred to as gosains.\textsuperscript{110} Many Muslim saints after settling in the region, established khanqahs (hospices), gathered disciples (murids) around them, and imparted instructions. The activities of these saints were not confined within the four walls of their khanqahs rather they exerted a great influence over people’s minds far and wide.

These saints were believed to have the ability to intercede with God, possess power to command the forces of nature, perform miraculous feats (karamat), and had the capacity to heal. People sought their company for worldly as well as spiritual gains. Many such Muslim saints after their death got transformed into universal benefactor-guardian spirit. They, at times, were even transformed into folk deities with the passage of time. And once a saint was deified and came to be widely acknowledged as worthy of veneration, it stayed on to become deeply rooted in the life of the common people to be removed altogether by the apathy or even aggressiveness of the disapproving sophisticated religions. Besides the layman, the popularity of these saints even appealed to the kings and nobles. Commemorative festivals in honour of such deified saints then began to be held at regular intervals. And anecdotes of the miraculous feats of the deified saints gradually spread far and wide to attract an even larger number of vow-makers. Such saints eventually came to command a following even beyond the barriers of caste, creed and even formal religion. Thus, we came across numerous instances of Hindus in the region worshiping the deified Muslim saints along with their own village or household deities with equal fervour. And such traditions are practiced even today. The Muslims also deified at times even fictitious characters, religious objects and spirits.

\textsuperscript{110} The tombs of Muslims are called maqbara (burial ground), turba (heap of dust) or muqam (place), which are mostly left bare while the architecturally adorned are called mazar or dargahs. In mainland India these dargahs are the finest specimens of Indo-Muslim architecture and are usually attached by other buildings. Muqam, as these tombs are generally known in north-east are mostly of simple designs, built mostly of bricks.
The cumulative effect of these on the Muslims was the growth of superstitious and un-Islamic practices of sanctifying the graves of real and imaginary or fictitious saints, which were visited by one and all, and considered to bestow material and religious merits. Ziyarats (visit to the graves) were performed and prayers of supplication (dua) and material offerings were made in the graves to fulfil their inner and worldly desires, e.g. to ensure birth of children, recovery from a terminal illness, averting calamity, success in a particular venture, etc.\(^{111}\)

The *dargahs* of Shah Jalal in Syhlet, Ghiyasuddin Auliya at Hajo, Azan Pir in Sibsagar, and scores of others are regarded even today as places of particular sanctity, attracting people equally across class and religion. Annual urs, which lasted for several days, were organized at the *dargah* of Azan Pir celebrating the saint's death anniversary. Feasting and observation of religious exercises in the name of the *pir* were the main programmes at such urs.

The *dargah* of Pratapgarh Pargana, to the south of Karimganj was of particular sanctity for the timber traders – both Hindus and Muslims. According to a popular legend, tigers used to visit these shrines on Thursday nights, and eat food left for them, without attacking anybody. Even today the timber traders in the hills observe Thursdays as a holy day, and timber is neither felled nor dragged on that day of the week.\(^{112}\) The anonymous *dargah* at Degdhora, on the banks of Brahmaputra, is still visited by many boat farers who pay homage to the saint and make prayer of supplication for a safe journey across the Brahmaputra.\(^{113}\)

Even today people of all class and religion make indiscriminate offerings to the tomb of Ghiyasuddin Auliya on the Gaurachol hill. They tie a thread to an adjoining tree or post in

\(^{111}\) *Piri* tradition is still in vogue in many parts of Assam and Sylhet, see Katy Gardner, "Mullahs, Migrants, Miracles: Travels and Transformation in Sylhet," in T. N. Madan (ed.), *op. cit.*


\(^{113}\) Mohini Saikia, *op. cit.*, p. 208.
order to obtain the fulfilment of their prayers. The Pao Mecca mosque, in the enclosure of the dargah, is the sanctum and even today annual pilgrimage is made by thousands of Muslims. The mosque, as referred, was built on a quarter of a seer of earth from Mecca, so a visit to this mosque, according to their belief, confers one-fourth of the merit obtained from a pilgrimage to Mecca itself.\footnote{B. C. Allen, Assam District Gazetteers, Kamrup, vol. VI, pp. 101-02.}

In Tripura, in the region of Jaganathpur, the miraculous feats of the saint Karim Ali are related even today. Both Hindus and Muslims held the belief that the saint could rise from the dead, and bring rain whenever and wherever he pleases.\footnote{James Wise, op. cit., p. 37.} Pangal Pir, still revered in parts of Koch Bihar and western Assam, is believed to have had power to tame wild animals. According to the belief, a wild animal could be tamed by placing a bamboo stick in the name of the pir.\footnote{Mohini Saikia, op. cit., p. 309.}

Muslims also venerated totally fictitious and unreal deified religious objects, characters, and spirits. In most of the cases some old popular beliefs and practices associated with a particular locality or a site were Islamised through the protean process of deification. Muslims in Sylhet venerated Khwaja Khijir as the guardian-spirit of waters, who according to their belief was invisible to normal human beings, and only the pious devotees could secure his favour. Muslim boys and girls beg rice and spices from house to house and offered it to Khijir to bring rain. It was believed that a saint, Mir Arpin – also popular as Khaja Ilias – was the Lord of mountains and it was through his mercy that people escaped from malevolent influence of jinn, which infested the hills. There is a dargah associated with the pir in the Dhalaiyar hills. People ascending the hills offer sermis to the dargah. He was believed to be invincible, and visible only to those who performed a particular
ritual. Muslims and Hindus alike held the belief that unless they offer *sermi* to an anonymous *pir* their cattle will die. So they offered *sermi* that consisted of milk, rice, sugar, plantain, etc. to the *pir*. The orthodox Muslims disparaged the practice. A poet by the name Sadak Ali wrote:

```
Pir serni na karile
   garu bachur mare
Kon pir kar beta keta chine tare
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(Give no *serni* to *pir*, then see your cattle die but know ye who he is, what parentage high).\textsuperscript{118}

In Koch Behar, the Muslims held Satya-Pir, probably a deified *pir*, in veneration. The Hindus called him Satya-Narayan. He is believed to have had power of conferring happiness.\textsuperscript{119} F. Buchanan writes:

...I find, that here as well as in every part of Bengal, there is an object of worship common to both. By Hindus, he is called Satya-Narayan, the true Lord, and by Muslims he is called Satya-Pir, or the true saint. There is no image; but the Hindus make hymns in his praise. These hymns are composed in the political language of Bengal, and are read both by *brahmans* and *sudras*. The Moslems worship the same personage in a similar manner; but the hymns, which they read, are different.\textsuperscript{120}

The tradition of Satya-Pir was also popular in many parts of Bengal among the Hindus and Muslims. A great deal of obscurity prevails over the origin of Satya-Pir. A tradition ascribes him to be originally from Baghdad and his original name as Mansar Hallak. According to their tradition, he was killed for uttering the words: "I am the truth," but his blood repeated the words. His body was then burnt, but still his ashes continued to cry, "I am the truth."\textsuperscript{121}

Another tradition asserts that he was a Hindu convert from Rajshahi district and the name Satya-Pir – by which he is known –

\textsuperscript{117} Padmanath Bhattacharjee, *op. cit.*, p. 124.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., p. 134.
\textsuperscript{120} M. Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 512.
\textsuperscript{121} E. A. Gait, "The Muhammadans of Bengal," *op. cit.*, p. 270.
is merely an appellation. He is credited with converting many Hindus of north Bengal to Islam and is also said to have stopped the use of meat in the *serni* functions.\(^{122}\) In the *panchhali* (hymns), dedicated to the *pir*, no distinction is made between Satya-Pir and Satya-Narayana:

\[
\begin{align*}
Jei \text{ Satyanarayan sei Satyapir} \\
Due Kule laiche seva Kariya Jahir \\
Satyapir name puja Karbe yavane \\
Enup Kanibe seva jar jei mane
\end{align*}
\]

Satya-Pir is the Satya-Narayana

(He receives devotion from both the sides, Hindus and Muslims in his (two) forms. The Muslim will worship in the name of SatyaPir. Thus all will perform the worshiping in their own way).\(^{123}\)

Muslims in many parts of the north-east, like their neighbours, held trees in veneration. Particular groves of trees called *mukams* (abodes) were associated with spirits and held as sacred and venerated. Flags were pitched near the trees and grounds beneath them were kept clean. Nobody was allowed to cut these trees. It was believed that any attempt to violate it might result in dire consequences. Some of the prominent *mukams* were Kutub's *mukam*, Mudarband *mukam* in Taraf, Habiganj; Gaibis' *mukam*, near Betuamukh in north Sylhet; Chapghat *mukam* in Karimganj. In an almost similar way their Hindu counterparts also associated certain trees with deities, who were venerated, e.g. *tulsi* with Visnu, *sij* with Manasa, *seora* (Sanskrit *sakhota*) tree with Rupeswari, *vilwa* with Siva, etc.\(^ {124}\)

### 4.7 Festivities

Muslims in north-east, besides the prescribed Islamic festivals, viz., *Id-ul-Fitr* and *Id-ul-Azha*, also shared and participated in the non-religious parts of the non-Muslim festivities. The Muslims in Assam celebrated whole-heartedly in the local festivals,


\(^{123}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{124}\) Padmanath Bhattacharjee, *op. cit.*, p. 252.
besides the Islamic festivals, especially Bihu,\textsuperscript{125} which was and is till today one of the most important and popular festivals of the Assamese associated with cultivation.\textsuperscript{126} Bihu is associated with the agricultural cycle and therefore secular in concept. There are, in fact, three bihus celebrated – bahag bihu, kati bihu, and magh bihu – at various stages of the cultivation of paddy. The timings of the three bihus are related to the sun’s position. Bahag is associated with the vernal equinox, kati bihu with autumn equinox and magh bihu with the winter solstice.\textsuperscript{127}

Muslims are frequently referred as garias in the traditional Bihu songs. One such song, popular even today talks of the proficiency of the Muslims in playing gagana, a musical instrument made of bamboo slip, which is placed in between the teeth and played by finger. The translated version of a bihu song is as follows:

When a gariya plays the gagana/ made of a tender bamboo slip, /
my desire grows evermore to listen to it, /the shrubs of birina on
the bank of Dichi/ break beneath the dancer’s feet.\textsuperscript{128}

\textsuperscript{125} Bahag bihu or rangali bihu (bihu of merriment) is celebrated in mid-April (springtime), the Assamese New Year. During the festival, farmers take ceremonial baths of their cattle; Then people in new clothes visit friends and relatives wishing them for the New Year and they are entertained with refreshments. Husani, a kind of carol singing, and bihu songs are sung to the beat of drums, cymbals and the bamboo instrument taka, at the village namghar.

Kati bihu or kangali bihu (poor bihu) is so called as it is celebrated at the time when paddy seedlings began to grow. Various rituals are performed for the welfare of the growing crops. Offerings are made to tulsi plants in the courtyard. The cultivator goes to their field, lights the clay lamps, brandishes a stick over paddy plants and recites mantras for his fields for protection from depredation by birds, rodents, insects and animals.

Magh bihu is celebrated during harvest time. In the eve of the day, called uruka, women prepare delicacies. Menfolk go to the field to build a bhelaghar (a make-shift cottage) and meji (a temple pegged with fire wood). The whole night is spent in feasting and singing. At the crack of dawn, a man after taking bath kindles the meji in the name of God followed by offerings to the bonfire by the villagers, and congregational prayers. The crowd returns back with half burnt fire-woods, which are thrown to the field for better results followed by feasting. Various sports – buffalo fight, sword-play, javelin-throw, and falconry – are organized in the village. For details, see J. Das, \textit{op. cit.}, 83-84.


\textsuperscript{127} J. Das, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 79.

\textsuperscript{128} Mohini Saikia, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 249.
Muslims in Nowgong district even joined their Hindu counterparts in the cattle-bathing ceremony, which marked the beginning of the bihu festival.\(^{129}\) Even today during the bihu Muslims visit their Hindu neighbours and participate in the games held in connection with the festival. Interestingly, a Muslim by the name of Jamili, probably a historian of the 17th century, recorded a short account of the festival in Persian, now preserved at Aligarh Muslim University’s library. It is the oldest and the only description of springtime bihu accounted by an outsider. The English translation of the account runs:

The people are industrious, hospitable and jovial by nature. They are of short stature, broad shoulders, yellow in complexion with flat nose and small dreamy eyes. They speak in a tongue which has no resemblance with the Shahanshahi language...they have songs on their lips and dance in their gait. In the spring season they hold a festival in every village and in the capital of their king. The festival continues for a month or so. In the morning of a particular day – perhaps on the Naoroh day – all men and women of the village put on new clothes...The women, specially the young girls, wear a piece of cloth of the izara type hanging from the breast up to the lower part of the calves, and put several flowers of different colours in their locks of hair rounded up at half the top of their heads...They have in their hands a kind of long bamboo split perpendicularly into two pieces and giving a kind of clattering sound when played upon.... The youths have large drums like the double-edged taasas carried on their back. Some of them have long pipes in their hands producing high-pitched shrill sounds. From the time of mid-sun the boys and girls gather in the open fields in various groups and sing and dance to their heart’s content, with the music of drums and pipes. The elders of the village also gather to see their young ones and very often participate in the dance.... There are exchanges of hearts and elopements. In the evening they take rice and liquor made from rice and sugarcane (?) and some pigs or fowl are killed for the purpose. Echoes of songs come from various directions of the village and of songs come from various directions of the village and the forest even at mid-night, day after day, night after night.\(^{130}\)

Assamese Muslims also probably participated in other local festivals. Some of the Muslims of northern Kamrup today performed bah biya or bamboo marriage during the batheli

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\(^{130}\) As quoted in P. Goswami, *The Springtime Bihu of Assam*, pp. 30-31.
festival. Batheli, also called deul or sori is celebrated in the western districts of Kamrup and Goalpara and also in some parts of Darrang district. Batheli synchronizes with bahag bihu. On this day-long festival many villages came together to celebrate the festival.

4.8 Puritan Movements

In the late 19th and early 20th century, Muslims throughout the world experienced a significant change in their religious outlook. The new religious outlook brought about a significant and radical shift in the attention of Muslim piety from life after death to this-worldly life. This meant giving less credence to the faith of contemplating on God’s mysteries, and emphasising more on God’s capacity to intercede for men on earth. It meant instead valuing a faith where Muslims were increasingly made aware that it was only they who could act to create a just society on earth. The balance, which had long existed between the other-worldly and the this-worldly aspects of Islam, was now tilted firmly in favour of the latter. This new outlook found expressions in the various movements like Wahhabi (Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah), Mujahidin, Deoband, Ahl-i-Hadis, and Aligarh movement in the 19th century

131 J. Das, op. cit., p. 86.

132 During this daylong festival many villages come together to celebrate the festival. Each participating village brings a chair, referred to as throne. The youths after taking bath erect three bamboo poles at the front of the village namghar (temple). The bamboo poles are given different names – para or pigeons, bar or groom para (the longest pole), and the kanya or bride para. On one of the posts a small house-like structure (batheli ghar) is pegged with bamboo leaves, where God is enthroned and offerings of food and coins are made. Villagers bow to the bamboo poles and touch them reverentially. Sometime a procession with a throne is taken out singing all the way khicha geets (teasing songs). The whole atmosphere is surcharged with spirit of joy and merriment. In the evening the batheli ghar is formally dismantled by young men wielding sticks, shouting, “Batheli is over.” The thrones are taken to its respective village; on their way back the villagers show respect to the throne by offering lighted clay lamps, coins, rice, grains, and fruits. These are later distributed on the batheli day. In the past, horse race and fights between buffalos and elephants were organized in village squares and fields. Ibid., pp. 85-86; S. N. Goswami, “Batheli – A Springtime Festival of Lower Assam,” Folklore, no. 2, vol. XII (Feb. 1971).

133 Francis Robinson, Islam and Muslim History in South Asia, pp. 106-07.
and Nadwat-ul-Ulama, Tabliqi Jamaat, Jamaat-i-Islami, etc., in the 20th century. One of the important aspects of these movements was the insistence for a purer form of faith through purificatory purging of non-Islamic accretions and excrescences that was hitherto prevalent among the Muslim folks.

The reform movement had its impact in north-east too. By the late 19th and early part of 20th century most of the then Muslim preachers turned their attention from proselytising activities to the strengthening of the Islam's foundation already laid. In fact, new conversions to Islam became few and far between. They took to expounding the scriptures of the faithful and demanded cleansing of non-Islamic accretions and excrescences widely practiced by the Muslim folks, and endeavoured to instil in them a purer form of faith. But such efforts were for the most part the continuation of earlier missionary activities.

As we have seen in the preceding pages, such non-Islamic accretions abounded among the unlettered Muslims in the villages or in certain parts of the country where they were isolated from the mass of believers. The census report of 1881 gives an account of the religiosity and perception of Islam by the common Muslim folk thus:

The Musalman peasantry of the Assam valley, like those of Bengal, are extremely ignorant of the elements of their faith. Some of them have never heard of Mahomet; some regard him as a personage corresponding to the system of their religion to the Ram or Lachman of the Hindus; others again believe that the word is an appellation expressive of the unity of God; while some of the better educated explain that Mahomet is their danger pir, or chief saint, the minor saints being four individuals named Hoji (Hajji), Ghoji (Ghazi), Auliya and Ambiya. Abu Hanifa appears as the son of Ali; the Koran is hardly read, even Bengali, and in the original Arabic not at all; and many of those who have heard of it cannot tell who wrote it. Yet any Muhammadan peasant, when asked, will be able to repeat a few scraps of prayer in Arabic with a pronunciation of surprising accuracy, though his explanations of their supposed meaning are often ingeniously wide of the mark. Allahu akbar, for instance, is supposed to mean Allah ek bar, a testimony to the oneness of the deity...

135 C. J. Lyall, op. cit., p. 100.
New Muslim reforming sects like *Ahl-i-Hadith*, *Wahhabis*, and *Faraizis*, made their appearance in the region. These sects emphasized on the absolute monotheism (*tawhid*), denied all acts implying polytheism, such as visiting tombs, and venerating saints and non-Muslim deities, belief in magic and incantations. They levelled these practices as *shirk* (associating companions with God), and advocated a return to the original teachings of Islam as incorporated in the *Quran* and the *Hadith*. The collector of Rangpur reported in 1871 that *Faraizis*, also called *Namazis*, was slowly gaining ground among the Muslims of the district. All the higher class Muslims in Rangpur were said to be gradually becoming *Faraizis*. They adhered strictly to the laws of Islam as laid down in the *Quran*, and abstained from traditions like processions and ceremonial observances of the *Muharram*, which they considered were not sanctioned by the *Shariat*.140

During this period, many of the learned scholars and saints travelled from village to village to expound to the Muslim folks the pure precepts of Islam and their basic duties as adherents. In fact,

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136 *Ahl-i-Hadiths* were the followers of the prophetic tradition. They were not bound by *taklid* or obedience to any of the four recognized *imams* but consider themselves free to seek guidance in matter of religious faith and practice from the authentic traditions, which together with the *Quran* are to them the only worthy guide for true Muslims. The *Ahl* movement appeared as a distinct sect in the 20th century, partly through the influence of the writing of Nawab Siddik Hasan Khan (1890) and the teaching of Sayyid Nadhir Husayn (1902). See H. A. R. Gibb, J. H. Kramers et. al., *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. I, pp. 259-60.

137 *Wahhabiyah* was founded as puritan movement by Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhad in the 18th century in Najd, Arabia, and adopted in A.D. 1744 by the Saudi family. Saiyid Ahmad, a native of the British district of Rai Bereli, born in A.D. 1786, introduced *Wahhabi* doctrine into India. For details, see Qayamuddin Ahmed, *The Wahhabi Movement in India*.

138 The *Faraizis* emerged as a sect in Bengal in the early 19th century under Hajji Shariatullah and his son Dadu Miyan. This puritan-cum-political movement was against various un-Islamic practices like the celebration, with funerary laments and special ceremonies, of the martyrdom of Hussain at Karbala, the various ceremonies introduced into the Muslim marriage and burial customs, and the offerings made to the tombs, etc. See H. A. R. Gibb & J. H. Kramers (eds.), *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, pp. 99-100.


preaching activity of such kind dates back from Azan Pir, which have been dealt at length in the preceding chapter. B. C. Allen gives an account of the preaching activity taken up by a renowned scholar, Abdul Jalal Zulqad Ali, against the un-Islamic beliefs and practices of the simple Muslim folk in the villages. It runs thus:

Many of the simple villages, who had been converted to the faith of Islam, began to forget the principles of their religion, and to be gradually affected by the customs of their Hindu neighbours. They practiced circumcision and offered prayers after the Muhammadan fashion it is true, but they could not read the Koran, and service was held in the open fields, as there were no buildings set apart for the purpose. They dressed, shaved, and worshipped idols like Hindus; they eschewed beef and declined to kill a cow, and in times of sickness and trouble endeavoured to obtain relief by reciting mantras and singing hymns. The state of affairs is to have continued till 1880, when a preacher called Zalkad Ali or Safi Saheb, who came from Gauhati and spent some years in the sub-division of Mangaldai, inaugurated a revival of the true Muhammadan faith. Fired by his example the Muhammadans abandoned their Hindu superstitious, allowed their beards to grow, and took to eating beef. Thatched houses were erected to serve as mosques, and the ordinary villager at the present day conforms, outwardly at any rate, to the dictates of the Mohammedan faith.\footnote{141 B. C. Allen, \textit{Assam District Gazetteers, Darrang}, vol. V, pp. 100-01.}

Abdul Jalal Zulqad Ali was born in Sibsagar in A.D. 1796. His father Pir Muhammad Sufi was in the service of the Ahom royal court. After his primary education, Zulqad Ali went to Dacca for higher studies where he became a \textit{murid} (disciple) of the renowned saint Maulana Keramat Ali Jaunpuri,\footnote{142 Maulana Karamat Ali was the son of the Sarishtadar, the Collector of Jaunpur. He spent his youth in Delhi studying under Maulana Abdul Aziz and afterwards under Ahmadullah, a renowned teacher of Jaunpur. Influenced by the preaching of Saiyid Ahmad of Rae Barreilly, he followed him to Calcutta, became his disciple, and accompanied him to Mecca. After his return he enrolled himself as a deputy of the Patna mission of Wahhabi movement. In later years he made the most significant admission that India under the British rule was not \textit{dar-ul-harb}. Maulavi Karamat Ali along with Zain-ul-abidin, and an Arab, Sayyid Muhammad Jamal-ul-lial, were the celebrated missionaries, “whose preaching among the villagers of eastern Bengal has had the momentous effects, not only by uniting under one banner the vast majority of the middle and working classes, but also by arousing the intolerant spirit of Islam, which had laid dormant for nearly a century.” See James Wise, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 53-55.} who later gave him the title of Sufi. He also became a \textit{murid} (disciple) of Imdadullah Muhajir Makki, a renowned \textit{darvesh}, who allowed him to initiate disciples in
the four silsilahs – Chisti, Suharawardi, Qadiri and Naqshbandi. After he returned home he started missionary activity in various parts of Kamrup, Nowgong and Darrang districts.143

As part of the preaching activity, Abdul Jalal Zulqad Ali also wrote books and pamphlets on various aspects of Islam. In one of his books entitled, *Tariqul Haq fi Bayan-e-Nurul Haq*, written in Assamese with Arabic script,144 he preached to the unlettered Muslims the importance of the *Quran* and the *Hadith*. The translation of an extract from the book goes thus:

O! Followers of Islam. What could be the reason for this book? Worthless people of this land do not understand Hindi, Arabic and Persian, do not understand even Bengali properly. So they are not able to understand the *Shariat* and *Quran*. Therefore it has been translated into Assamese. Now it has been translated and those who do not listen will incur sin. The *Satan* who avoids good deeds would run away upon hearing these words. If one does not pay heed to these tenets then one would be afflicted by diseases, famine, which no doctor can cure. Hazrat Nabi is the keeper of both worlds. We are the servers of his slaves. And if we do not present ourselves when called for then we would incur sins.

**Holy Quran**

*In Assamese language*

Hi! All the Muslim male and female believers of Islam, *Aslem-u-Alai Kum* (salutations). Meher (?) hears every word told. It is good if listened to it. I invoke the name of the creator of two worlds. Listen with your ears and heart. He who created Muhammad Mustafa at the beginning is called *Khuda* (God). His praise has no end. How can I praise when I myself am ignorant.

O! Muslim brothers

let me recite Allah’s order (*hokum*).

When the *Quran* is being read

listen to it by your heart.

And if found wanting

misfortune would come to you.

If you do not apply your heart
then you would know later
what kind of place Hell is.

And if you listen with your heart
good would be done to you
in both the worlds

where the *Quran* and the other books

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143 Md. Yahya Tamizi, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-03.

144 The manuscript of the book, 6 1/4" x 4", written on paper, bound in leather, contains 177 pages, is in the possession of Muhammad Saleh Kazim, the grandson of Julkad Ali Sufi Saheb. Red ants have damaged some parts of the book. The entire book is written in lucid Arabic script with phonetic marks as in case of Urdu in order to facilitate easy reading. See J. Mohan Bhattacharya, “Two Assamese Manuscripts” in *Prof. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan Commemoration Volume*, pp. 26.
of the faith are.
Know all of them as the Prophet’s Quran
Those who do not pay attention while
sitting in the majlis and blabber having tamul pan
he does not get any grace
and returns home empty handed. 145

Another prominent preacher of the time was Khawaja Shaikh Tamizuddin, the son of Khawaja Shaikh Muhammad Jalil bin Shah Khawaja Shaikh Muhammad Mansoor whose ancestors came from Baghdad during the reign of Shah Jahan. Muhammad Jalil moved to Bengal for propagating Islam. Noakhali, Rangpur, Mymensingh, and Sylhet became his areas of operation. Tamizuddin had his education in Dacca, became a murid of Maulana Keramat Ali, who later sent him to Sylhet for missionary activities. He then moved to Cachar and established a madrasah for boys. He married Saghiru Banu. With her help he established a madrasah for girls. He died in 1899 at Shibnarayanpur, 18 miles west of Silchar town. 146


4.9 **Zikirs andJaris**

Folk songs also served as an important medium for preaching and propagating simple Islamic precepts. Here special mention must be made of the two types – zikirs and jaris. Both these types of folk songs are sung in Assam even today and form one of the most important oral traditions of Assam and occupy a distinct place in Assamese literature both for its lyrical beauty and theme. These songs were composed mainly to remind the glory of God to Muslims in general, and especially those who had strayed away from the virtuous path. The language used in composing the songs is simple and direct and set in harmony with the rural atmosphere of Assam by employing indigenous themes and imagery. So far no manuscript of zikirs and jaris have been found. Village folks have instead orally transmitted these through generations, all these years. These songs were sung in groups, often accompanied by appropriate dances on socio-religious occasions. It was sung usually at night at weddings ceremonies and community feast. Even women sang these songs, but they did not dance and the custom is followed even today.

Zikir, derived from the Arabic word ziqr, meaning singing or remembering God’s name. It was a popular terminology in the Sufi circles. Many of the zikirs are attributed to Azan Pir. He is believed to have written 160 zikirs. So zikirs are also otherwise referred to as azan phakirar geet. While in Assam he chooses to preach amongst the illiterate Muslims, the basics of Islam with the help of these folk songs, employing local themes and imagery. Thus, while composing these songs he adopted rhymes and tunes of Assamese folk songs like ojapali, nitya geet, deh bicarar geet, bihu, ainam, bianam, husuri, etc. His earliest zikirs were written some time around A.D. 1635.\textsuperscript{147} Many of the zikirs are also credited to his disciples namely,

\textsuperscript{147} Abdul Malik, *Ajan Fakir Aru Suriya Jikir*, pp. 11, 16, 19. It was only from the 50s that the zikirs got the attention of the scholars, who started collating and analysing. Muhibul Hussain made the first major collection of zikirs in his book *Hajarat Ajan Pir*, published in 1954. In 1955-54 Asam Sahitya Sabha
Majnudil Fakir, Syed Murtaja, Bandar Fakir, Husain Ali, Munia Dewan, Bethai Suwal, Haridas Kumar and others, also composed zikirs. Even Assamese Hindus were believed to have composed zikirs.148

The main theme of all the zikirs rests on two types of teachings: one for the practical life and the other for the spiritual life. The first is meant for the lay Muslims, whereas the second type is only for those who pursue the highest path of salvation. Some zikirs, particularly those of Azan Pir, are direct teachings of Islam told in simple language, while others show Sufi influence and acquire deeper meanings not easily intelligible to the ordinary Muslims. However, all the zikirs upheld the teachings of the Quran and the traditions of Islam, in a simple manner. The fundamental Islamic teachings embodied in the zikirs is that human body is mortal whereas the soul is immortal, but maya (illusion) envelops the soul. As a result, man wastes his life by running after worldly pleasures thereby failing to remember the noble cause for which they were sent to this earth. The composer repents thus:

a) Ei dunit thakote behaila mukuta
   pübi goi amayar than.
   Aruto nepabi manabi janam
   allaoi nakara kan

(Accept the pearl in the trade of life while you are in this world then only you would reach to the abode of Allah (remember), you cannot have this human life again (once you die) (oh! you fool!), you are not taking heed of the Allah.) 149

b) Gosha: kewal namme kewal nam,
   kewal namme ratee,
   dine rathi laba nam
   nakriba khati

and Department of Tribal Culture and Folklore Research, Gauhati, entrusted Professor Syed Abdul Malik to gather zikirs. In 1958, Malik published a book entitled, Asamiya Zikir Aru Jari. Besides these many scholars too have published explanatory articles on zikirs in various journals.

Pad: kewal namme-kewal nam
kewal namme sar,
duchku muddile Bandar
dinte aandhaar.
Kichhunai kichhunai
kichhunai sar,
kekorar mati shene
kumar bhewar.
Jar nam pallo Allah
tar nam leilo,
sar nam nepallo Allah
charne bhajilo.150

(Prologue: Take His name always without fail. It is His name only that counts. Song: Only the name is absolute. It is Your name (God, Allah) that guides me. Or else even this benighted world appears dark and incomprehensible. It is only by taking Your name that one can be guided on to the path of deliverance.)

c) Kewal name kewal nam
kewal name sab,
duchku mudile bandar
dinte amdhhar.
Kichu nai Kichu nai
kichu nair sar,
kekorar mati jene
kumar brawahar.
Jar nam palo Allah
târ nam lalo
jar nam nepalo Allah
charne bhajilo.
Mukhere parib lage
momin- Musalman,
dilere janiba banda
mojammil eman.151

(Only in His name is the real refuge. If one closes his eyes even in daytime it's dark. Only in His name is the refuge. As the earth is to the potter, whoever's name I couldn't find I melted. The pious Musalman should read (Allah's name), through his mouth, and have unshakeable faith in his heart.)

In their attempt to present Islamic tradition in terms meaningful to the local unlettered Muslims the composers of the zikirs also searched for parallels in the Hindu or local religious traditions. Many of the zikirs contain stories, divine characters, and allusions to contemporary Tantric, Sakta or Vaishnava beliefs. Similar to the Hindu's concept of bhakti marg or adopting path of devotion as a means for attaining salvation, the composers of zikirs

150 Abdul Malik, op. cit., p. 61.
151 Ibid.
also emphasized that even without getting into the ritualistic aspect of religion one can build up a noble life by constantly taking His (Allah's) name or singing *zikirs*. Binod Sharma elaborates:

*Zikir* has been influenced by the Vaishnavism of Assam, since here, emphasis is laid on the unflinching devotion of the heart and not on the love of the heart as the Sufis. Moreover, unlike Sufism, the *zikir* invokes Allah as a formless God (*nirakar*). The disciple has to leave aside his ego and then humbly submits himself to the feet of Allah. This is also the concept of *bhakti marg* (path of devotion) as delineated by the Vaishnavism of Assam.152

Azan Pir not only endorsed the *Quranic-Hadith*’s injunctions of *namaz* (prayer), *roza* (fasting), and following the *Shariat* but also prescribed *zikir* and *kalima* (creed) for directing the mind towards the path of God.153 One of his *zikir* runs as:

\[
\text{kalimar nam sarthi} \\
\text{jiur lage jai,} \\
\text{ji daileke chalam jogai} \\
\text{tatee khodai}154
\]

(The easiest way of invoking the creator is *kalma* (i.e. invoke His name, sing *zikir* or recite His name.)

The composers of *zikirs* adopted the practice of uttering the *nam* as a way of remembering God like the *vaishnavas* and Allah is referred to as Brahma (the all-embracing transcendental conscious of the *Upanisads*). It thus enumerates:

\[
\text{Purbe-ayu paccahime bayu} \\
\text{mahyat Brahma kur,} \\
\text{Kaba dharriche hakar} \\
\text{murshide kalima jekirar mul.}
\]

(Longevity (of life) rises in the east and Air (breath) dreams in the west. Between these two, there exists the ocean of Brahman. The virtuous *murshid* is telling you that 'Kalima (Allah) is the substance of the zikir.‘)155

Thematically, the general philosophy embodied in the *zikir* is in tune with the local *deh bicarar geets*, associated with a particular esoteric sect known by various names, *Ratikhowa*,

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152 Binod Sharma, *op. cit.*, p. 279.
Ritiya, Puranaseva, etc. who used these songs for their spiritual upliftment. The main philosophy the sect expounded through the deh bicarar geets was the relation between the body and the soul, and the ambiguity of this mundane world, thereby emphasizing to thread on the path of righteousness for the people. These songs sound like Vaishnava songs and frequently use the name of Madhadeva – a well-known Vaishnava poet – giving them a Vaishnava look. 156

Like the Hindus, the composers of the zikirs gave much importance to the mystic initiator (pir) in getting enlightenment. According to the philosophy embodied in the zikirs, the spiritual upliftment of the soul through reason (ilm) and knowledge (kalam) could be attained only under the guidance of a pir (preceptor), referred to as guru.

a) Bhikhari Ajane kay who
    pardesh bina gursur murkhey
    Kewe reply namar bhed.

(O! hear) Azan (Fakir), the beggar, coming to this foreign land speaks; the real significance of reciting the name of the lord cannot be understood by anybody without beings initiated by a guru.) 157

b) Osai kalam jibhai kagaj
    date chab bijahi bate
    sampt mahast auliya sakle
    ekti namte gate.
    Saiti namre jjian momine
    Sabai kabi ase rati,
    Mawar sat purush, bapar sat purush
    Sio pai jab gati. 158

(If the illiterate were to seek refuge in the guru not only he but also his father's and mother's ancestors would get salvation.)

One of the most interesting aspects of the zikirs was its liberal outlook towards other religions. Ajan Pir and other composers of Zikirs, while preaching the essence of Islam, advocated for a harmonious social existence by respecting other religious orders and its adherents. Azan Pir through his zikirs gave

157 Ibid., pp. 279-80.
158 Abdul Malik, op. cit., p. 57.
a clarion call for building a peaceful and harmonious society based on the inter-personal liberality, and mutual understanding and love between Hindus and Muslims. In many of his zikirs he called for an end to pride and conceit in men and rather harness precious resources of unity and good-feeling. Some specimens are given below:

Mor manath bhao
nai O! Allah,
mor manth bhin par
nai O! Allah
Hindu ki musalman
ek ke Allar farman
mor manta ek ke ti bhak
Hindu ke jalap momnik gatib
eke khani jaminar talat.
Hindu ke jalap momnik gatib
khakar tai khakat milap Allah
faring ke dekhi salli ke pagale
chite tale balle kare.
nijano Allah mei
nijano khoda mei
kaun dena maote dhare.159

(I don't have any other thoughts except you, O! Allah, I do not differentiate between anyone and anybody. Hindus and Muslims are all yours manifestations. They all spring from you, in that I have no doubt. Hindus are cremated, Muslims buried – ultimately they all become part of the same soil.)

Nitti dharma, ashran parwattan
manee mahantar sangh,
shun janlei ashaasha mei karisho
asha nakriba bhanga.
Nitti dharma acharan parwattan
mane mahantar sangh,
shant janere piriti karichho
piriti mahadharam
shant janere piriti karichho
Allar palei chhai,
Allar ek nam pachhāwa bata
Allai dillihe pai. 160

(All laws and customs are creation of the mind. Only the name of the one god is the truth. All laws are the creation of men, why should they be causes of dissensions. It is only any thinking of that one god had that unity can be achieved.)

Jaris or morsias are different from the zikirs in content and style. These types of songs are mainly based on the tragedy of

159 Ibid., pp. 54-55.
160 Ibid., pp. 60-61.
Karbala (in Iraq) where Imam Hussain, the son of Ali, fell fighting against the Yazid, the king of Damascus. Thus, the Assamese Muslims like any other Muslim community elsewhere also had given expression to their poignant reactions to the tragedy of Karbala in the jaris. This type of song was also popular among the Muslims of Bengal, which is discussed in the subsequent paragraph. The term jari means 'lamentation' and it was sung in a group and in the saddest possible tone; beats marked by clapping, and accompanied by drums and other local instruments. It was sung mostly during the annual Muharram festival. Along with the narration of the historic tragedy these songs also made an attempt to preach Islam among the unlettered Muslim folk. A jari lamenting on the general unawareness of the Muslim population regarding Islam runs as following:

Hai! Hai! Subanala/ jan dio karbala/ sato hajar nure jari kore/ asho Quran/ kitab parota nai/ baba dekhele agun jale/ ase dul dul ghora sawari nai baba dekhele agun jale/ ase tope jama parota nai baba/ dekhele agun jale/ Ase tege-dale khelota nai baba dekhele agun jale/ lino babar kino hal/ champa phul jon dui gan lahute mili hai hai! Hai! Hai! Hai! Phiriya nahin ghora/ Ase Quran kitab parota nai baba dekhele agun jale...¹⁶¹

Hail Hail Subanala/ gave life in Karbala/ 7000 Prophets issued many commandments/ there is the Quran/ no readers/ upon seeing this my heart burns/ so many horses/ no one to ride/ upon seeing this my heart burns/ there are so many caps/ but no one to say prayers/ upon seeing this my heart burns/ so many drums/ but no one to play them/ upon seeing this my heart burns.../ went to the battle field Hussain/ Hail Hail Hail Didn't come back/ no one to read the Quran/ upon seeing this my heart burns...)

This type of song was popular in Bengal, particularly in Mymensingh, as jari gan. There too, the subject matter was the same depicting the tragic killing of Imam Hussain;¹⁶² sung in long narrative by a leader known as boyati. He was accompanied by refrainers, who also danced to the tune by forming themselves into a ring, and was supported by a few musical instruments like dug-dugi and khanjani, along with the clapping of hands. The boyati

¹⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 81-83.
takes a chowrie in hand and starts singing various invocations first. Portions of songs were distributed sometimes between boyati and other participants.\textsuperscript{163} One specimen of jari gan based on the tragedy of Karbala is as following:

\begin{verbatim}
are O! – amar sonar baran gayal kande jaynal bandhakhana ghare Ezide baindhache che ghar, jaynal achhe bandhaghar/bais manipathar ache chaitir upar/bhai-o nai, bandhab-o nai, ke laiba khaba
\end{verbatim}

(O! my golden Jaynal !
Jaynal sobs in the closed prison.
Ezid has built the room, Jayanal is in this closed room.
A stone weighing 22 maunds is on his breast.
He has neither brother nor friend there, who will look after him.) \textsuperscript{164}

\textit{Jang-nama} (war-story), a historical ballad, very similar in form to jaris, was and is still popular among the Muslims of Manipur. The subject matter of these ballads also revolves around the struggle of Ali with Muawiah and that of Imam Hussain with Yazid, and the sufferings and martyrdom of Imam Hussain in the battle of Karbala.\textsuperscript{165}

\textit{Zikirs} and jaris, in general, were an attempt to enlighten the mass of Muslim co-religionists about the essentials of Islamic tradition. Muslim saints and preachers realized that the root of the lack of mass awareness was due to their inability to follow the works on Islamic tradition in the Arabic and Persian languages. The realization prompted them to take it upon themselves to provide such works in the vernaculars, and it was a bold step as it reduced the religious truth, enshrined in Arabic and Persian, to a ‘profane’ and earthy local language. They attempted to set the Islamic characters, situations and stories in the natural geographical, social, and cultural environment of the land.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{163} A. E. Porter, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 539; Sukumar Ray, \textit{Folk Music of Eastern India}, p.121.
  \item \textsuperscript{164} Sukumar Ray, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 121.
  \item \textsuperscript{165} Md. Riyazuddin Choudhury, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 122.
\end{itemize}
4.10 Summary

From the above study it has been observed that the social history of the Muslims in north-east presents a paradigm for the regional formulation of Islam. Even though Muslims in north-east India, like elsewhere in the Islamic world, believe in the cardinal pillars of their faith, their practical religion was overlaid with beliefs and practices which were accretions and influences from the local environment. These cultural values evolved gradually as a response to the existing cultural situations, adaptations and adjustments. The Muslims adapted these new cultural values to their own requirements and needs by giving an Islamic colour to it. Much of these local accretions could be seen in the dress, food, language, literature, social organization, life-cycle rituals and festivities, and beliefs and behavioural patterns, like supernatural theories of disease causation, and their curative measures, propitiation of Muslim saints and Hindu or local deities, etc. The persistent efforts by religious reformers in the 19th and early 20th century to get rid of such un-Islamic accretions and excrescences from the illiterate Muslim folks, and to instil in them the purer form of the faith, failed to achieve much success. B. C. Allen observed:

They (Muslims) have not, however, succeeded in entirely freeing themselves of the ideas they borrowed from the Hindus, and, when cholera or small-pox appear in epidemic form, secretly recite mantras, in the hope that by this means they may be preserved from falling ill.¹⁶⁶

In fact, the reformers failed to perceive that much of these local beliefs and practices served some practical needs, which their religion did not provide. Much of these local accretions can be seen even today among the Muslims of north-east India.