ABSTRACT

Assam can be identified as a multi-ethnic state as it has diverse people from different places. Migration of people to Assam has occurred for centuries. Misra (1999) in his article “Identity transformation and the Assamese Community: Illusion and the Reality”, explains that the idea of a composite Assamese or Assamiya jati or nationality started forming during the latter part of the Ahom rule, which for the first time provided centralized administration over what is today known as upper and lower Assam.

Prior to the advent of the Ahoms, the western part of early Assam (referred to as lower Assam by the British) consisted of several tribal kingdoms and territories.

Gait (1963) in his book A History of Assam, mentions that there was a little account on the internal conditions of Brahmaputra valley in 13th century and for sixty years after the copper plate inscription of Vaidya Deb, there was no available records regarding the condition of Kamrupa. Gait again explained that the buranjis of Ahoms holds that a line of Chutia Kings ruled the country east of the Subansiri and the Disang, excluding a part of the south and south-east, where several small Bodo tribes enjoyed independence. In the west there was a Kachari kingdom on the south bank of Brahmaputra which extended to the half of Nagong district. There were a number of petty chiefs called Bhuiyas in the west of the Kacharis in the south bank, and of the Chutias in the north. Each was independent of the others but whenever there was any kind of threat, they joined their forces against that enemy. The Bhuiyas were ruling north of
the Brahmaputra and east of the Chutiya kingdom at the time when Ahom entered Assam.

Muslims came to Assam through various routes and means in the preceding centuries. These Muslims got assimilated with the larger section of the people in course of time. In an article, Udayon Misra, writes about the demography of Assamese society, comprised of “Aryanised Hindus, the Plains tribal and the Assamese Muslims” (Misra1999:99).

During the early seventies, a good number of Bengali speaking people were brought as cultivators from then Western Assam comprising of Darrang (undivided), Kamrup (undivided), Goalpara (undivided) with Habraghat Pargana and also from nearby places. These Bengali speaking Muslim were allowed to settle in Assam for the ‘Grow More Food Programme’ campaign. There is also a group of Muslim people migrating from the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh since independence. Their mother tongue is either Hindi or Bhojpuri. The Muslims of Assam doesn’t consist of homogeneous category but are quite diverse in their outlook and as such the social background of these Muslim communities varies from one another.

**Statement of the Problem**

It can be noted that Tezpur town in Sonitpur district of Assam is a home to diverse Muslim communities. The Muslim population in Tezpur town is again seen to be growing in numbers as people are moving from Northern India and also from various other places. Consequently over time, the increase in population has also resulted in the growth of diverse occupation and profession.
This has further led to many processes of marriage and kinship. All these factors make it compelling to undertake this study.

**Objectives of the Study**

1) This study seeks to understand the occupational background of the Muslims of Tezpur town in Sonitpur district of Assam.

2) This study further seeks to understand and explain the marriage and kinship structure of the Muslims of Tezpur town of whether they had strongly adhered to their tradition or not.

**Methodology**

This study would be based mainly on primary sources and partly on secondary sources. Primary sources would include data collected from the field work based on interview schedule. Secondary sources would include reports on elections, Census report, newspapers, books, journals and magazines.

Nature of study- The nature of study would be explorative and descriptive.

The universe of study will be Tezpur town and its nearby areas, which directly comes under Tezpur town’s administration lying in Sonitpur district of Assam. The data will be collected from sixty respondents following the purposive sampling. The respondents will be divided into twenty Assamese speaking Muslims, twenty Bengali speaking Muslims and twenty Hindi speaking Muslims. These each twenty respondents will again be sub-divided into ten male and ten female.
Chapter Scheme

The study is divided into four chapters and the chapter scheme is as follows:

Chapter I: Introduction.

The First chapter includes the introduction with a historical description, statement of the problem, review of literature, objectives of study, methodology and chapterisation. It begins with historical description of Assam and also explains the demography of Assam.

Chapter II: The occupational stratification among the Muslims of Tezpur town.

The second chapter discusses the occupational stratification of the Muslims of Tezpur town in Sonitpur district of Assam. The second chapter begins with the description of Sonitpur as the administrative district of Assam in India. It is third most populous district of Assam next to Nagaon and Dhubri. The administrative headquarters of Sonitpur is in Tezpur. A short description of Tezpur is also given in the second chapter. Tezpur is the seventh largest city in Assam after Guwahati, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Nagaon and Tinsukia. Tezpur is inhabitat with different communities of people. The population is largely heterogenous in nature. Assamese, Bengali, Bihari, Marwari and Nepali form the major communities. Muslim population in Tezpur is also not homogenous in terms of language, tradition, occupation and kinship. The second chapter categorizes the Muslims of Tezpur into Assamese speaking, Bengali speaking and Hindi speaking Muslim.
Chapter III: The marriage and kinship structure among the Muslims of Tezpur town.

The third chapter defines marriage, interprets meaning of marriage in Islam and also explains the concept of *Mahr*. It also focuses on the various marriage rites among the Muslims of Tezpur town and the type of marriage among the Muslims. This chapter finally describes the marriage and kinship structure among the Muslims of Tezpur based on data.

Chapter IV: Conclusion.

This chapter concludes the study by highlighting the major findings discussed in the previous chapters.

**Findings and Observation**

**Categorization of the Muslims in Tezpur:**

1) **The Assamese speaking Muslims**: The Muslims whose mother tongue is Assamese is also known as *Thalua Musalman* i.e, native Muslims. These communities slowly emerged over a long period of time, since the first settlement of Muslims in Assam. So these muslims are seen scattered in all the districts of Brahmaputra valley. In Tezpur, these Muslims can be seen in rural areas. The Muslims who speak Assamese as their mother tongue are largely found in *Dekargaon, Diputa, Barika Chuburi* and in the areas of *Beseria*. *Dekargaon* is a village which is again divided into two areas, one area for Muslims and the other for Hindus. The Muslim area in *Dekargaon* is known as *Saikia Chuburi Musalman Gaon*, and the Hindu area known simply as *Saikia Chuburi*. *Diputa* is again divided into Hindu and Muslim villages namely
Diputa Musalman Gaon and Diputa Hindu Gaon. In the same way Beseria is also divided into Beseria Musalman Gaon and Beseria Hindu Gaon. As places of worship, Hindu villages have Namghars and the Muslim villages have Majjids in their respective localities.

2) The Bengali Speaking Muslims: The second category of Muslims is the Bengali speaking Muslims. They mainly moved to Assam during the later part of the 19th century till the first part of the 20th century. Amongst these Bengali speaking Muslims too, there exist diverse social groups depending on social positions. They are also known as Bhatiya Musalman, Mymensingiya Musalman, Charua Musalman, Pamua Musalman, and Miya Musalman depending on the group’s position in the Assamese society. These Muslims are on the whole referred to as Miya Musalman. These Muslims made significant efforts to assimilate into the larger Assamese nationality by adopting Assamese language as the medium of instruction in schools and colleges in their localities. They are even trying to adopt Assamese as their mother tongue. So these second category is known as Na-Asamiya (Neo-Assamese Muslims). This term, ‘Na-Asamiya’ to refer the Bengali speaking Muslim is of recent origin. To determine this whole social group, Bengali Muslims seems to be more appropriate. These Muslims are inhabited in the areas of Dolabari, Gutlung, Bhujkhuwa, Sarimile, Panchmile, Napaam, Borghat and Bhujkhuwa chapor in Tezpur. Bengali Muslims in Panchmile, Napaam and Borghat are educated compared to their other counterparts.
3) **The Hindi speaking Muslims:** The third and the last category is the Hindi speaking Muslims. Their mother tongue is either Hindi or Bhojpuri. These Muslims moved to Assam during the first part of 20th century and also after independence mainly from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. In Tezpur they are scattered in the areas of Darjipatty, Nepalipatty, Garwanpatty and also in **Barika Chuburi.**

**Findings based on the data collected from the respondents:** On the basis of the objectives of study, 60 respondents were interviewed and the following is the summary of field work that was collected from the respondents.

**Occupational Stratification of the Muslims of Tezpur town:** When interviewed 20 Assamese Muslim household, 70% of them are Government employees, 15% of them have commercial shops, 10% of them are commercial cultivators and 5% of them are Governments contractors. When interviewed, 10 Assamese speaking Muslim women, 2 of them are service holders and 8 of them are housewives. Out of the 20 household interviewed, 30% of them posses agricultural land. Agriculture is the significant occupation of the Assamese speaking Muslims living in Tezpur. Most of the Muslims from these groups are preoccupied with the thought of getting a good production of crops. In fact many of the local rites and festivals are celebrated by the Assamese speaking Muslims are centered round the agricultural activities. Granary i.e., **Bharal** in Assamese plays a significant role in the lives of Assamese speaking Muslims in rural areas of **Dekargaon, Diputa** and **Beseria.** But it must be noted that the Assamese Muslims who depend only on agriculture can be divided into
two groups, those who own only agricultural land and those who own agricultural land also being a service man in any department under government or any private firm. The Assamese Muslim who owns agricultural land without being a service man is financially weak compared to an Assamese Muslim who owns land along with a service. These Assamese Muslims with services often give their land in lease for sharecropping from which they get a part of the production after every harvest as a payment from the sharecropper to use their land for cultivation. Agriculture needs lot of time and hard work, the Assamese Muslims engaged in service can’t afford to spend time working as cultivators. Besides agriculture can yield profit only when modern technologies are implemented. Traditional ways involves lot of time and man power. So service holders do not buy agricultural land. If they do, they give it in lease for sharecropping.

Out of 20 Bengali Muslim household, 15% of them are engaged in commercial business as Government contractors, 15% are service men, 10% of them are commercial cultivators, 35% of them are daily wage construction workers, household helpers and agricultural labours and 25% of them are engaged in commercial business like running a grocery or has commercial vehicles. Out of 20 households, 45% of them hold agricultural land. When 10 Bengali speaking women were interviewed, 4 women work as household helpers others are house wives. It should be noted that, the women who work as household helpers, the male member in their house too is a daily wage earner sometimes in agricultural field and sometimes in construction work. The
number of Bengali speaking Muslims engaged in Government services is 15%. The Bengali Muslims are mainly daily wage earners and people engaged in commercial business can also be seen. Basically government contractors are financially sound compared to service men, other business men and daily wage earners.

The last category of Hindi speaking Muslims is growing since the last decade. When 20 Hindi speaking Muslim households were interviewed, 50% of them are engaged in commercial business of groceries, stationeries and have book stalls, 25% of them are engaged in occupation like butcher, mechanics, tailors and drivers, 25% of them are Government employees but all the Government employees are retired servicemen from Police department, Military engineering servicemen and also from Railway department. When the civil administration, Railway Department and Police Department in Assam, was first established by the British provincial government, they had to bring lot of Hindi speaking people in the Government services, as there was no scope of higher education and technical training in Assam. Many of those who served as Government service men on retirement settle down in Assam. This is why we find retired Hindi speaking Muslims as Government service men. When interviewed 10 Hindi speaking women, all are house wives. Their husbands are engaged in occupation of butchers, mechanics and tailors. They are engaged in occupations for which local people are inadequate. It can be said that almost all the Hindi speaking Muslims are engaged in commercial activities and their interaction with the rest of the society is confined to business activities. They
have never tried to assimilate with the larger Assamese Nationality. They are mainly engaged in commercial business.

From the above data, it can be found that, Assamese speaking Muslims are mainly engaged in Government services, the Bengali speaking Muslims are mainly engaged as daily wage earners and the Hindi speaking Muslims are mainly engaged in commercial business of groceries and stationeries. Percentage of women working out is high in Bengali speaking Muslim community compared to the Assamese speaking Muslims though they work as daily wage household helpers. On the other hand, none of the Hindi speaking Muslim women works outside their home.

Marriage and kinship structure of the Muslims of Tezpur town: When 20 Assamese speaking Muslim household were interviewed, it was found that, out of 20 household, 70% of the households are nuclear families and 30% of them are extended families. Out of the married respondents, 99% of these respondents’ marriage was presided over by Maulavi and 1% of the respondent’s marriage was presided over by Kazi i.e., marriage was registered. All the 20 household preferred their daughters to get married with meher and with bride price. Not a single household preferred inter-community or inter-religion marriage. While selecting groom for their daughter, all of the 20 households preferred to see the boy’s religion first, secondly his community and finally his occupation. While selecting a bride for a son, they preferred to see the girl’s religion first, second her community and finally her education.
When Bengali speaking Muslims were interviewed it was found that, 65% of the total respondents belong to nuclear family and the other 35% of them belong to extended family. Again out of 20 households, 75% of the respondents’ nikah (marriage) was presided over by maulavi, 15% of their nikah was presided over by Kazi, 5% of their nikah was carried out both by Kazi and in Court and the last 5% were unmarried. When asked about dowry, all of the respondents said that gifts were exchanged but not demanded like dowry. There was no system of bride price like their Assamese speaking counterparts. Only the system of meher is common in all the Muslim communities. Though inter-community marriage was preferred but inter-religion marriage was not preferred. While selecting a groom for their daughter, 85% of the respondents look the religion in the first instance and then the occupation of the boy. And other 15% of the respondents look only for the religion of the boy. These 15% is financially very weak comparing to the other 85% respondents. And while selecting a bride for their son, they just look into the religion of the girl.

Interviewing the Hindi speaking Muslims, it was found that, 80% of the respondents’ marriage was presided over by Maulavi, 10% marriage was presided over by Kazi and other 10% were unmarried. 60% of the total respondents belong to extended families and other 40% of the respondents belong to nuclear families. When asked about dowry, all of the respondents said that gifts are exchanged but not demanded. There is no system of bride price like their Assamese speaking counterparts. Though inter-community
marriage is preferred but inter-religion marriage is not preferred by any of the respondents. While selecting groom for a daughter, they first look into the religion of the boy and then his occupation. And while selecting bride, they only look into the religion of the girl.

From the above data, it can be said that, the Assamese speaking Muslims generally live in a nuclear family and the Hindi speaking Muslims have extended family. This is because Assamese speaking Muslims are mainly Government employees, and live in urban areas. In urban areas nuclear families are more manageable. Though the system of *meher* is common to each Muslim community but the system of offering bride price to the daughter-in-law is seen only in the Assamese speaking Muslim community. The percentage of *nikah* (marriage) presided over by *Kazi* is high in Bengali speaking Muslim community and *nikah* presided over by Maulavi is more among Assamese speaking Muslims. Both the communities of Hindi and Bengali Muslims prefer inter-community marriage but none prefer inter-religion marriage. Whereby, Assamese speaking community do not prefer any of these marriages. While selecting a bride, the Assamese speaking Muslims look upon the girl’s religion, community and education. Similarly while selecting a groom, they look upon the boy’s religion, community and occupation but in relation to this, the Bengali and Hindi speaking communities do not follow any such criteria.

From the data collected in the field, it can be said that, the Assamese speaking Muslims generally live in a nuclear family and the Hindi speaking Muslims have extended family. This is because Assamese speaking Muslims
are mainly Government employees, and live in urban areas. In urban areas nuclear families are more manageable. Though the system of *mahr* is common to each Muslim community but the system of offering bride price to the daughter-in-law has been seen only in the Assamese speaking Muslim community. The percentage of *nikah* (marriage) presided over by *Kazi* is high in Bengali speaking Muslim community and *nikah* presided over by Maulavi is more among Assamese speaking Muslims. Both the communities of Hindi and Bengali Muslims prefer inter-community marriage but none prefer inter-religion marriage. Whereby, Assamese speaking community do not prefer any of the inter-religion and inter-community marriage and even while selecting a bride, the Assamese speaking Muslims look upon the girl’s religion, community and education so that they can maintain their tradition and culture. Similarly while selecting a groom, they look upon the boy’s religion, community, occupation and even education and they do not want to mix up their family line with other community of Muslims. So they particularly look into the community of the girl and the boy while they select bride and groom for marriage. But in relation to this, the Bengali and Hindi speaking communities do not follow any such criteria. Bengali speaking Muslims have always tried to assimilate with the larger section of Assamese speaking Muslims and so they do not mind in entering with an Assamese speaking Muslims. Though they don’t mind in marrying a Non-Hindi speaking Muslim but they have never tried to assimilate deliberately and kept the interaction with the society confined to their business activities only.