INTRA AND INTER-GROUP RELATIONSHIP

THE CLAIMED HIERARCHY:
INTRA-GROUP RELATIONSHIP

Today 4 percent of the respondents return as Syeds and 96 percent of them return as Sheikhs. Such divisions raise curiosity and demands examination of the origin and growth of social inequality in the Muslim society, against the prescribed egalitarianism in Islam. However, such grouping do not seem to regulate any relationship within the structure. These are not the bases of the social organization. Along with Syed and Sheikh another social group i.e., Morias are settled in some parts of Assam, especially in the district of Nowgong, but they could not be found in the area of study.

Syeds: The literary meaning of the word Syed is 'prince'. They claim their descent from Prophet Muhammad, through his daughter, Fatima and son-in-law, Ali. The Syeds in Dakaidol claim their descent from the Muslim Pirs and warriors, who came from the Islamic countries. They originally started their lives as Preachers; claimed respect from non-Syeds and thus occupied the apex of the social ladder. They enjoyed revenue-free land and acted as a dominant group, socially, economically, politically and so on.
According to tradition, it is forbidden to help a Syed in the name of charity. Ansari finds the same situation in Uttar Pradesh: "According to tradition it is forbidden to help any Sayyad in the name of charity (Khayyat or Zakat)... Thus, whatever is given a Sayyad in order to help him is popularly termed as present (hadiyya) and not charity".¹

With a sense of humour and lamentation, the present caretaker of the dargah (shrine) comments that though he is an actual cultivator, their tradition was different. Today, they are halua Syed (Syeds who cultivate with plough) unlike their parents and grandparents. Their ancestors never even touched the plough. They were landowners only. Such a situation could prevail because, they imitated the Brahmins in the Hindu society and considered such acts as lucrative, both in terms of economic earnings and social prestige. To know about the Hindu impact, E.A. Gait is referred here, who writes, "

The Musalmans have borrowed the ecclesiastical machinery of the Hindus. They have their Goeseins, or spiritual preceptors, to some one of whom every Musalman is bound to attach himself. The names of these personages, originally Arabic or Persians, have usually been corrupted almost beyond recognition ... Occasionally they bear the title of 'Diwan', while their local names are derived

¹ G. Ansari. Muslim Caste in Uttar Pradesh (An ethnographic and folk culture publication, Lucknow, 1960) p.36.
from their places of residence, or from the name of the first saint of the line whose successors are distinguished from him by the appellation 'deka' or 'youth'.... The Musalman Goseins had their own Sattras or establishments of resident disciples (Bhagat), who, however, are not bound to celibacy. They collect their tribute from non-resident disciples by means of village officers of their own, called gaonburas, each of whom is assisted by a barik, or peon".2

A superiority - inferiority attitude prevailed among the Syeds and Sheikhs, on the basis of patron-client relation. However, thinkers observe that, till the early part of this century the Syeds were offered meals on a raised platform by non-Syeds, during communal feasts.3 Such traditions are gradually disappearing. Today, in the village a Syed is no way socially or economically better off than a Sheikh. Gait believes that, Muslims of Assam belonging to the Syed group, are also of local origin and not descendants of the Syeds from Arab. The Syeds of Arab belong to Khandan-i-Nabuat (Prophet's lineage). To E. A. Gait, the tendency of the lower categories of people to raise social status and as the religion also permits mobility - leads to a situation, whereby becoming


prosperous they claim themselves as **Syeds** by just prefixing the title. This was proved correct in the field study. Gait has already remarked:

>'Sheikh' is the title which is appropriated by new converts and just as the members of Hindu castes try to pass themselves off as something better than they really are when they rise in life, so also do the better class of Mussalmans endeavour to dissociate themselves from the lowly cultivator and in order to do so they appropriate other titles. The most favourite of these is 'Saiad'... The true 'Saiads' are descendants of Ali, the son-in-law of Muhammad, but in Assam the term includes many who are not only descendants from Ali, but have not a particle of Arab blood of any sort in their veins.4

Today, those who prefix the title 'Syed, trace their descent from the **Pirs**. Those **pirs** did not prefix the title **Syed** before their names. They were Sabod Ali Darbesh, Akin Shah, Doman Shah and so on. They might be spiritual kin to Prophet and followers of his tenet. They might not belong to the **Khandan-e-Nabuwat**. The present care taker of the **Dargah** remembers his three generations.

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    Darbaru
   /     \
Kero Sheikh
    /     \      \  
Kosiruddin Motwaij   Syed Taleb Ali
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(The present care taker)
It becomes evident that prefixing the title *Syed* is a new style. Because, in the *Pir-e-Silsila* (chart showing the priesthood chronology) no one prefixed the title *Syed*.

Secondly, a villager resembles his Hindu and tribal neighbours in physical appearance. In height, weight, complexion, nose, ears, eyes, hair, there is no difference between an Assamese Hindu and a Muslim. In such a situation, we can undoubtedly believe that, except in religion, Muslims are a part and parcel of the larger Assamese community.

**Sheikh**: The literary meaning of the Arabic word 'Sheikh' is 'leader', 'chief' or 'respectable person'. The term 'Sheikh' is used to denote 'pious spiritual guide and religious teacher'. Ansari points out that, though in this sense, the term was used in earlier days, today in India it includes a group, who are said to be the descendants of early settlers of Mecca and Medina. The two main regional sections are (1) The *Ansar*—means helper—The Muslim residents of Medina who gave shelter to Prophet Muhammad and his fellow immigrants and (2) *Muhajirun*, the Muslim settlers of Mecca who migrated with Prophet. However, the Muslims in the area of study are unaware of this tradition of *Ansar* and *Muhajirun*. Thus,

it can be logically and rationally concluded that, the local converts must enter a group in order to be a Muslim. As they are not Syed so they are Sheikh.

Till the last century, as per the respondents, the so-called Syeds, in order to keep purity of their blood and descent maintained distance from the non-Syeds; the Sheikhs also formed an exogamous group. When members of each group became conscious about their status, this consciousness helped the members of each group to merge with group identity. Social relations were guided by a superiority-inferiority attitude among the members, which in fact goes against Islamic doctrine of equality.

M.K.A. Siddique summarises Islamic doctrine, thus:

As a way of life, Islam envisages a definite pattern of society that has its own mode of social interaction. The principles it lays down are basically egalitarian ... inequality based on birth is supposed to have no relevance to Islamic society and all rankings and stratifications of society, of permanent nature, based on heredity, has no place in the pattern of society woven out of the fibre of Islamic beliefs.8

This is one of the reasons due to which low caste Hindus and aboriginal tribals got converted to Islam. We learn from G. Ansari that, society guided by the principle of equality and democracy was very much possible in the Arabian tribal situation in the seventh century. Society, during that period was based on clan membership and thus the members considered each other as blood relatives. Social grades were unknown in the society. Hence, in those societies, attitude based on superiority and inferiority was out of even remote possibility.

In spite of the controversy about their origin, the Syeds claim themselves superior because they believe that Arabian blood flows in their veins. This is a myth rather than a reality. This, as an impact of Hindu caste system created social division on the lines of 'caste' in the Muslim society.

Islam in the land of caste e.g., in Persia and India was influenced by the caste principles, and thus grades and ranks emerged among the Muslims. In fact, Islamic society does not deny the existence of groups formed on the basis of socio-economic, historical or linguistical background. But these groups are supposed to
be horizontal groups in terms of status and social relations, which are different from the vertical groups of Hindu society. About the relations Srinivas writes, "Caste is undoubtedly an all-India phenomenon in the sense that there are everywhere hereditary, endogamous groups which form a hierarchy, and that each of these groups has a traditional association with one or two occupations. Everywhere there are Brahmins, Untouchables, and peasant, artisan, trading, and service castes. Relations between castes are invariably expressed in terms of pollution and purity".  

Caste system in India is as old as the Aryan culture is. Purusukta hymn of Rig Veda makes mention of division of society, with division of labour associated with each particular group. Thus, though the caste society is based on the idea of smooth functioning through division of labour, it is internally pyramidically arranged. In India, local converts - who formed the Muslim society were influenced by caste system. Caste is, according to Risley, "a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name; claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow the same  

hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogenous community'. He goes on to add that the caste name is generally associated with a specific occupation."10

Among Hindus, the high caste members invariably occupy the apex of the social ladder. A Sudra is at the bottom of the hierarchy. In the area of study, the Syeds claimed a higher status in society. Thus, society was graded as:

According to the Hindu Caste model there were vertical groups. But, today in the field one can observe social divisions patterned according to the Islamic model, as:

Peasants Traders Share Croppers Other occupation holders

Socially, all are equal. Achievement is more important than ascription.

The **Syeds** were spiritual preceptors and **Sheikhs** were agriculturists and artisans. But the **Syeds**, as a priestly category could not continue their occupation as priests like the Brahmins in the contemporary Hindu society. Muslims in the study area belong to the **Sunni** sect of Islam as the Muslims of Assam belong to the **Sunni** sect. They believe in and accept religious leadership by any good Muslim no matter to which group he belongs. Thus, gradually it so happened that, today a sheikh can also lead a religious congregation.

Thus, we find that in earlier days at the occupational level, the positions of **Syeds** and non-**Syeds** respectively were arranged hierarchically from top to bottom. So far, marital relationship was concerned, each group formed an endogamous unit. But, since its beginning, caste principles among them were never rigid. There were no restrictions in regard to interdining, and the questions of untouchability, purity and pollution were unknown. They had equal rights of admittance in the mosque, in the **dargah**, in the school. Deads were and are buried in the same graveyard and the residents have been using the same river as

water source. However, the high born attitude of the so-called 'Syeds' who once claimed highest status in society becomes evident in the field from the fact that, they clearly remember the dignified past of their forebears. They pointed out that what they do today, activities particularly relating to agriculture were not performed by their ancestors. Spread of knowledge of the Koranic doctrine of equality to non-Syeds, land alienation which started during the British period and the need for survival have snatched away the glorious past of the Syeds.

Today, the Syeds do not get response to their claim to higher status. Naroll says, "Population which identifies itself and is identified by others as constituting a category is distinguishable from the other category of the same order." The category of self-ascription and ascription by others is the basic identity, which man gets at birth and it is the generalized identity. This category is related to origin and background. What a person achieves and what others ascribe becomes a basic category and this is the basic form of organization to which one belongs. Today, the Syeds no longer get their status ascribed by the Sheikh.


* Ascription here means, what we judge and what others judge about us.
Sheikhs can be said to have sanskritised their culture. According to Srinivas, "Sanskritization is the process by which a "low" Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, "twice-born" caste. Generally such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant caste by the local community." 13

In the study area the Sheikhs sanskritized their way of life in the direction of the Syeds. Srinivas finds that "mobility associated with Sanskritization results only in positional changes in the system and does not lead to any structural change. That is, a caste moves up, above its neighbours, and another comes down, but all this takes place in an essentially stable hierarchical order. The system itself does not change." 14 In a Hindu caste society, positional and structural changes become distinct due to the fact that caste division, barriers among the caste groups, and closeness of each of these are distinct. But among the Muslims nothing is distinct and there is no religious sanction behind it. The syeds only remember their glorious

* The process can be termed, Syedization.
tradition (non-Islamic). Today, if a Syed possesses a
tendency to claim superiority over an original Muslim, he
is logically, historically and correctly underestimated as
a non-Muslim.

Muslim social stratification and power dominance
can be differentiated from Hindu social stratification
system. Among the Muslims, the principle of stratification
is not a heavenly ordained institution; it is no where
mentioned in the sacred literature, but it takes place due to
socio-historical and economic background of each group, as has
already been mentioned.

Because of the features mentioned above, social
stratification among the Muslims in Dakaidol cannot be
categorically termed as, 'Caste system'. So various terms as
'caste-like', 'social-division', 'social category', 'group'
or to use Leela Dube's\textsuperscript{15} term 'caste-analogue' can be used
if it is necessary to denote the social echelon among the
Assamese Muslim of Dakaidol. Use of such terms becomes
necessary mainly to analyse the traditional history and not
the contemporary society and its manifold activities.

\textsuperscript{15} Leela Dube. "Caste Analogues among the Laccadive
(Lakshadweep) Muslims" in I. Ahmed (ed), Caste and
Social Stratification among Muslims in India
(Monohar Book Service, Delhi, 1973) p.57.
The Assamese Muslim society in Dakaidol is the bi-product of the cross-fertilization of the Islamic Great Tradition and the Indo-Islamic Little tradition. Prolonged contacts between Muslims and indigenous population of Assam, in the medieval period of Assam history, resulted in mutual influences and interchanges between those two communities. By and large, Muslim rule was temporary in Assam compared to other north Indian states. Yet preachers, traders, captives and Muslim settlers transmitted elements of material and non-material culture to the Assamese society.

In fact 'political rule' and 'cultural impact' are not casually connected. 'Political control' is not only 'the' determinant factor for cultural impact. While discussing on cultural influences Medini Choudhury argues that, political power and cultural impact can be studied separately. Because, these are not always correlated. He further argues that, had there been a correlation between these two, in Assam we would have felt a strong cultural impact of the 'Tais'. Because, the Ahoms belonging to these groups, ruled Assam for nearly six hundred years and the rule was permanent in nature. To him, in terms of spatial and temporal limit,
Muslim rule was shorter than the Ahom rule. So we can study the cultural impact of the Muslims keeping aloof the political power and rule.\textsuperscript{16}

History shows us that no matter whether people come closer as friends or enemies, the interaction leads to development in cultural traits, due to reciprocal imitation. Muslim cultural elements were derived by the indigenous people through the appointment of the Muslim artisans in different departments of the State. Mohini Saikia writes that, a large number of Muslims were employed in guilds of weavers, tailors, drapers and masons. Consequently, different types of dresses, various types of embroidery enriched the native customery. It has been gathered that use of enamelled gold-ornaments, decorated palaces, doors, masonry decorative works of some temples, bear the marks of Muslim type of architectural design. Even the use of metallic spittons, smoking pipes, hookahs, Masala pan, use of paper for writing - are also the result of Muslim impact. Saikia therefore remarks, "Thus the employment of the Muslims in various services in the government helped not only the re-organisation of the country's age-old systems of warfare, \textsuperscript{16} Medini Choudhury, \textit{Borak, Luit Aru Islam} (Assamese, Rhino Books, Gauhati, 1982) p. 21."
diplomacy and administration for quick attainment of perfection, but also brought about a gradual change in the Assamese ways of living by introducing new elements to their material culture."\(^{17}\) From the simple household objects to the regalia of the court - in political, economic, cultural and social structures, Muslim cultural impact is visible.

In this process, Arabic and Urdu words entered in the Assamese vocabulary. Muslims' contributions in non-material culture, as in language, art, music, painting, revenue system - are important. Abdus Sattar writes that, though Shri Devananda Bharali in his book *Assamese Phonology and Vocabulary* writes that 400 Arabic and Persian words entered in Assamese Vocabulary, yet he assumes the possibility of inclusion of more numbers.\(^{18}\) Such words entered into history due to interchange of letters in the royal courts, and thus became popular among the Assamese Muslims.\(^{19}\)

\(^{17}\) Mohini Saikia. _Assam : Muslim Relation and its Cultural Significance_ (Luit Printers, Golaghat, 1978) p.158.

\(^{18}\) Abdus Sattar. _Sanmisranat Ashamiya Sanskriti_ (Grantha-peeth, Jorhat, Assam 1965) p.Introduction.

\(^{19}\) Leela Gogoi. _Asomor Sanskriti_ (Assamese, Bharati Prakashan, Jorhat, Assam 1982) p.279.
Dakaidol is a typical Assamese Muslim village. In language, dress etc., they are a part and parcel of the larger Assamese community. However, tribal cultural influence is most marked. When the women go for collecting wood for fuel and go to the river for bath and for washing clothes, they dress in a typical tribal (indigenous) way. They have been interacting with the Bengali Muslims, significantly since Independence. However, in the process, the Assamese Muslims in dress and language do not seem to be influenced by the Bengali Muslims.

Influence of Bengali culture is assumed to be prominent in Goalpara. In order to understand this issue we need to hark back to the British period. During the British period, Bengali was used in offices, court and also in Educational Institutions. To realise their own interest, they imported not only Bengalees but their language too. Many leaders from Assam, notably Anandaram Dhekial Phukan agitated for the restoration of Assamese language. The Baptist Missionaries assisted him in this matter. They said,
By the substitution of the Assamese, we do not mean to suggest that Bengalee should be altogether abolished from the schools. On the contrary, we are of opinion that it should be cultivated as a language indispensable to complete the course of vernacular education, and that the standard Bengalee works should like-wise be introduced in the higher classes. We are only opposed to its exclusive adoption as the medium of instructing the people in literature, science and other useful branches of knowledge.20

After overcoming many odds, gradually towards the early part of the twentieth century, through the effort of local leaders and organizations Assamese was restored. During this time Assamese vocabulary got impregnated with Bengali vocabulary. Along with the rest of the state, people in the towns got the benefits of Bengali language and education. The interaction with the imported Babus (gentlemen) also took place. Besides this, Goalpara being the border district always had occasions to mingle with the neighbouring Bengalees. In such interactions, the urban dwellers were most affected.

INFLUENCE OF THE LOCAL TRADITION

Because of the association and prolonged residence as neighbours, the Muslims were notably influenced by the local practices. These are manifested in their life style,

customs, languages, dresses, food habits, superstitions etc. The local people developed a 'live and let-live' attitude towards the Muslims. Impact of the local culture was so great during the early periods of their settlement that, some Muslims were even engaged in the worship of idols, trees and snakes.

It is written, "The Muhammedans dressed, shaved and worshipped idols like Hindus. They eschewed beef and declined to kill a cow and in time of sickness and troubles endeavoured to obtain relief by reciting mantras and singing hymns".21 Such was the conditions of the Muslims in other districts also. Hunter writes about the Muslims of Kamrup in 1879 -

Two sects or classes stand out distinctly from the rest of the Muhammadans. They are the Garias or tailors and Marias or braziers. These both claim to be Muhammadans by religion, but are not circumcised, and are looked upon with detestation by the more orthodox Musalmans. They form a low and degraded class, and appear to be of aboriginal descent. They eat beef and pork indifferently and are much addicted to drinking habits.22

Gradually, the Muslims have accepted the local agricultural practices. The immigrant Muslims became expert in the indigenous system of ploughing and cultivation. Today, Muslims as well as Hindus go to the shrine and offer prayer and sacrifices to get their wishes fulfilled. The Hindu friend who accompanied us to the village and to the shrine justifies it. This makes evident, the existing religious tolerance among Hindus and Muslims. While entering the village from the North West side, one needs to cross through Bhatipara, where there is a place of worship of Goddess Kali. Thus Kali Bari of the Hindus, and Dargah of the Muslims are closely located. The members have mutual respect for each other. Degree of participation at each other's family ceremonies becomes evident from the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ST. Nos.</th>
<th>Ceremonies</th>
<th>Invite non-Muslims</th>
<th>Are Invited by non-Muslims</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Birth</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Death</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The non-Muslims include Assamese Hindus, Garos and Koches. The above table shows that in the village in the ceremonies following a birth of a child and during death the Muslims do not invite a non-Muslim and vice-versa. However, during marriage ceremony, they invite their non-Muslim friends and they are also invited by the non-Muslim friends. They share some of the kinship terms as 'Ma' for mother, 'Mahi' for mother's sister, 'Jethi' for mother's elder sister and so on. The same kinship terms are used to address members of each other's community.

In the agricultural system, Muslims follow the Hindu customs. For example, during Bihu - the festival relating to harvest, a day is devoted for the care of the bullocks who plough the field - this is known as Goru Bihu. The Muslims also seem to take part in this. Till few years back, they participated in yatra - narration of stories through singing and dancing. Significantly, the stories are related to Hindu theme. These are Bhasan Yatra, Monai Yatra, etc., where Hindus and Muslims participate together. The Bhasan Yatra is also known as Monasa Bhasan. The narration goes that, Lakhindar was the son of a rich merchant. But he passed away due to snake bite. His widow, Behula, accompanied the dead body, floated on the river and
made her way to heaven. Hindus and Muslims participate in the \textit{Yatra} (Drama) and narrate this touching story. On the other hand, \textit{Monai Yatra} is related to a Muslim story. Monai was the son of Sultan Badshah Faqir. The Faqir’s advice to the son is the theme of this \textit{Yatra} in which members of both the communities participate.

A Muslim women dresses like her Hindu counterpart and some of the Muslims possess Hindu names too. To focus the past, we read, S.N. Sarma who says that, there was a time when Muslims used to wear ‘Dhotis’ and ‘Chadder’ and bore Hindu names like Dhaniram, Sonaram etc. But with the emergence of the Muslim League in the nineteen thirties and forties, religious consciousness among the Muslims became stronger and as a result they gave up Hindu dresses and names in preference to Muslim costumes and personal names.\textsuperscript{23} No doubt, the Muslim society has succeeded much in the process towards stabilization. But even today Muslim children are called by Assamese nicknames as ‘Madhon’, ‘Jone’ etc.

\textsuperscript{23} S.N. Sarma. “Social Changes in Assam (1750 - 1950)” in Journal of University of Gauhati Vol. XXVII-XXIX, No.1, Arts., 1977-78, p.120.
It is also known that the Purdah system among the Hindu women percolated from the Muslim society. Abdus Sattar writes that Purdah system (veiling of women) did not remain confined only among the Muslims and it reached to the Hindu families also - mainly to the aristocratic families.\(^{24}\)

At the level of religion, each group tolerates the other, due to some of the common elements in both the religions - which differ only in manifestation. For example, a Muslim offers prayer while a Hindu offers Puja; a Muslim keeps Roja while a Hindu keeps Brata; a Muslim goes for Hajj while a Hindu goes for Tirtha. Both the societies are patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal.

Differences are obvious between the two communities, yet interaction becomes possible due to the mutual assimilation of both the cultures. Local influence has been always more on the cultural side, because of the numerical weakness of the Muslims in the beginning. Thus, both groups never had organized agitation against each other, because

they partially belong to each other's culture. Muslim Pirs converted locals to Islamic faith. Sankardeva's Vaishnavism also contributed much towards Hindu-Muslim unity, 'whose right hand possessed Muslim devotees too'.

ASSAMESE MUSLIMS AND THE BENGALI MUSLIMS

The level of interaction between an Assamese Muslim and a Hindustani Muslim is very limited. On the other hand, the levels of relationship existing between Assamese and Bengali Muslims are many and varied. It has already been said that Dakaidol consists of three hamlets. Demographically, the size of the middle hamlet is smaller, compared to the other two hamlets. The larger size of the Bengali Muslims has significant affect on the life of the Assamese Muslims.

The terms 'Miyan' (pronounced as Mia), 'Mymensinghia' and 'Bhatia' are used by the Assamese Muslims, in a much derogatory sense to denote a Bengali Muslim from Bangladesh, without taking into account his economic condition, educational achievements, manners and habits. But this is an indication of ignorance about the origin of the word 'Miyan'. Abdul Malik clearly points out
the misuse of this term of honour. He summerises that, during the rule of King Akbar, problems crept in the matters of collecting revenue in the zamindari system. A section of Muslims (Syeds and Sheikhs), well versed in Parsi and Arabic literature, well behaved, well educated and because of their sympathetic attitude and catholicity of outlook, were granted revenue-free land and they were rehabilitated in the midst of Hindu zamindars for collecting revenue.

Those group of people were not actual cultivators. Neighbouring Hindus were engaged in the cultivation of those lands. Those Muslim intermediaries were called 'Miyan' (a respectable term of address). Literary meaning of this Parsi word is 'middlemen'. Thus, the use of the word 'Miyan' to denote an illiterate, landless immigrant peasant is nothing but misinterpretation of the word. 25

The Bengali Muslims of Dakaidol belong to the rural-based agricultural background like the Assamese Muslims. Towards the beginning of the Twentieth century East Bengal experienced pressure on cultivable land due to population explosion and the landless peasants were

mercilessly exploited by the zamindars (In the year 1930, peasants revolted against the zamindars in Bengal). Besides these, the peasants had to suffer a lot, due to natural calamities. On the other hand, there were vast tract of cultivable waste land in Goalpara and Assam - pleasantly fertilized by the river Brahmaputra. This topographical situation coupled with the reluctance of the indigenous people to work for surplus easily attracted the Muslims from East Bengal.

The needy Bengali peasants from erstwhile East Bengal hardly faced any difficulty in crossing the Assam-Bengal boundary, which even today remains ill-guarded. Prior to 1950, the Bengali Muslims in Dakaidol settled on the fertile char (river islets) areas of the river Brahmaputra, away from the localities of the indigenous people. Gradually, some of them were hired as labourers in the field of the original Muslims. The Bengali labourers could win the confidence of the local owners due to their hard work, sincerity, knowledge of agriculture and the knowledge of Koran and Hadith. They were preferred to the indigenous labourers; they used to provide cheap labour too.
This gave an impression in Bengal of the availability of unlimited fertile land in Assam. Mullan comments in 1931 "Where there is waste land thither flock the Mymensinghias". The selfish propensity of the natives is most responsible for such a flow: Most of the Goalpara Zamindars identified themselves with Bengali culture and launched a movement for the transfer of Goalpara to Bengal after World War I. Their agitation persisted throughout the twenties and early thirties. It was then that the demand for containment of further influx of East Bengal Muslim immigrants into Goalpara, and the rest of the Brahmaputra Valley, was increasingly raised as a political issue.

However, our interest is not to identify whether immigration is due to economic or political motivation but to see the level of inter-relations between the groups. The following table gives us the place of birth of the respondents and of their parents, in the Bengali Muslim hamlets.

Collection of materials for the above table was a difficult task indeed. All the respondents, below fifty years of age give Dakaidol as their place of birth. When cross-questioned and made confident about the confidential nature of the data there were changes in the responses.

With great reluctance, twenty two percent of the respondents gave their birth place - Mymensingh. 66% percent gave Mornoi char (Map No.III) and rest gave Dakaidol. Majority of the parents were born in Mymensingh. The rest were born in the Mornoi char. The earlier immigrants had marital ties with the new comers. Significantly, the respondents speak Assamese and children are receiving education in Assamese medium schools. By this, they claim
themselves as Assamese. But in their home, parents and children, kith and kin speak Bengali. Only, in their interaction with the Assamese Muslims in the middle hamlet, they communicate in Assamese. Thus, they are in the process of forming the 'Neo-Assamese Muslim Society'.

The residents have patta (document) for their land. A patron-client relation exists even today. The strong unity among the three hamlets was manifested in the first meeting with the villagers. Politically, three hamlets are identified as Dakaidol – constituency No.9 under the Shri Surya Giri Village Panchayat.

Economically, they belong to the same system of production. However, through their hardwork and sincerity, their standard of living is little improved to that of the indigenous Muslims. It is reported that some of the Assamese youths, due to extreme poverty work as wage earners in the Bengali Muslim households and field. But, this is considered as beneath the dignity.

However, there are certain restrictions in their social relationship. Both the societies turned to be watertight compartments in certain matters. The Bengali
Muslims try hard to mingle with the indigenous Muslims. However, the indigenous Muslims maintain considerable distance from the Bengali Muslims. In the family level ceremonies - at birth, marriage and death - all the villagers are invited for prayer and feast. Significantly, the villagers only of the middle hamlet are invited. Villagers from the other two hamlets are not invited. Similarly, when the Bengali Muslims organize ceremonies, they do not ask the Assamese Muslims to participate. Sometimes a Muslim male from the middle hamlet invites his friends from the other hamlets. But, the womenfolk of both the societies, hardly come closer.

The Assamese Muslims express their resentment in freely mixing with the Bengali Muslims. However, this attitude is not guided by any well-defined and well-accepted principles. Free mixing against the notion of superiority-inferiority in terms of purity and pollution, is highly encouraged in Islamic principles. Because of this, the Bengali Muslims always get a support, and these sparks ignite the ethnic 'problem'.

The crisis of identity of the Assamese is not acute. Because as Frederik Barth shows, ethnic group is not a culture bearing unit but an organizational type.  

28. Frederik Barth (ed.). *op.cit.*, p.9
Assamese Muslim does not want to establish affinal relation with the Bengali Muslim. Because, as per the respondents, the Assamese Muslims are monogamous whereas the Bengali Muslims are polygamous. There are a few cases of marital ties established with the Bengali Muslims. As already been discussed, the second wife comes from the Bengali Muslim village.

It is written that Assamese Muslims are strictly monogamous by tradition, though the religion permits polygamy, and divorce is also rare. As against this, the practice of polygamy and divorce are common among the Bangladeshi Muslims. This indicates that, the Bengali Muslims try hard to mingle with the Assamese but not vice-versa. In this process, they do not even hesitate to send their daughter to an Assamese Muslim married man, as a second wife. But an Assamese Muslim usually do not think of getting his daughter married to a groom (Bengali) even who is marrying for the first time.

About the social interaction between the groups, a social anthropologist writes, "... an analysis of the interactional pattern between the Assamese Muslims and 'Neo-Assamese Muslims' shows that much of the social intercourse, including marriage relations are confined to the respective groups. The Assamese Muslims express their resentment either to marry away girls to 'Neo-Assamese Muslims' or to marry girls belonging to later group".  

Their relationship, at the religious level is partially significant and partially limited. The Bengali Muslims are true followers of Islam. This is evident from the following table:

Table No. III  RELIGIOSITY AMONG THE RESPONDENTS (BENGALI MUSLIMS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Do the respondents perform</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.a</td>
<td>Once a day</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.b</td>
<td>Five times daily</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.a</td>
<td>Keep fast sometimes only</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.b</td>
<td>Keep fast throughout the month</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cent percent of the respondents perform prayers five times a day and keep fast throughout the whole month of Ramadan. Significantly, males, females and children consider these as compulsory. In every family even the small children can recite the Arabic Koran. Generally, their families are larger than that of their neighbours.

So far this religiosity is concerned, the Bengali Muslims remain as reference group to the indigenous Muslims. Through, the reference behaviour the Assamese Muslims seem to be much benefited. They have learned more about the Koran and Hadith from the Bengali Murrubis (Headmen). It is observed that each Bengali Muslim respondent keeps his beard longer, wear Lungi and Shirt and recite Koranic verse quite often. Seeing their extreme devotion to God the Assamese Muslims call some of the Bengali devotees as Sufi.*

Myron Weiner observes that, Assamese people believe in assimilation. They believe in the possibility of linguistic assimilation. But, the field work refutes this feeling which prevails among the Assamese. Both the

* Sufi: A pantheistic Mohammedan mystic.
communities are distinct in their own way. The Assamese Muslims are Thalua (native) or Khilinjia (native), while to identify the Bengali Muslim, the words, Pamua (a non-local), Bhatia (one who has come from places West of Goalpara) are used. The word Bangal is also used to identify the Bengali Muslims.

The Assamese and Bengali Muslims belong to two different cultural backgrounds. When an Assamese Muslim cites a proverb he cites in Assamese. But, when a Bengali Muslim cites a proverb, he cites in Bengali. Srinivas finds that Sanskritization sometimes results in resentment and even beating up of the members of the group who want to be Sanskritized. In Dakaidol, though it does not lead to any physical coercion yet imitation results in social criticism. It is very difficult to conceal reality and original identity. Reality is bright and hardly remains hidden. A Bengali Muslim may act and speak like an Assamese, but he remains a Bengali. To know the reality, he needs to be cross-questioned, cross-checked and observed with little concentration.

Thus, data collected by a census officer and a sociologist greatly differ. Sociologists start where the census officer completes. There exists a relation between
overt cultural traits and ecological factor. Over a period of time people are not only adopted to environment but they are also constraint by environment. A Bengali Muslim resembles not an Assamese Muslim, but he resembles his counterpart in Bangladesh.

Barth observes that, a change in overt behavioural features from their typical mode of livelihood does not make them different people in a different environment. Self-ascription is always related to ascription by others. No individual is isolated. Each and every respondent of the middle hamlet knows to which stock his neighbours belong. Socially, the Assamese Muslims are never amalgamated with the Bengali Muslims. Both the groups perpetuate in tight confinements. No doubt, due to growth of population and shortage of natural resources members of each 'niche' go to the 'niche' of the other group. And the original Muslim share the resources with the new comers. But, the difference between a Swadeshi and a Bedeshi always remains crystal clear.

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