PART FIVE
CHAPTER XI

CONCLUSION

An attempt has been made in this study to detail the overall character of social relations among the Assamese Muslims in three different socio-economic settings: a rural village, a peri-urban village and an urban setting. The character and tenor of Muslim social life have been described in each of these situations.

In the body of the thesis, we have tried to answer some of the questions raised in chapter one.¹

The two villages and the city present different kinds of socio-economic situations. The settings play an important role in determining the quality and content of social life of the Muslims. In the details of social, cultural and economic life the Muslims, despite their belonging to a

¹ See pp.11-13.
common socio-religious tradition, display significant variations. As with many other groups, rural and urban dimensions are of considerable relevance as determinants of social relations among the Assamese Muslims.

The village of Singimari is situated in an intact rural environment. The people there are peasants. Only in the recent years few men have taken up wage-occupations. The social life of the Muslims of Singimari shows a continuity with the past and with the local folk traditions. The Muslims maintain their community solidarity through the institution of kinship.

The role of kinship among the Singimari Muslims is unique in some ways in the context of the Muslim social norms. As a patri-kin unit, whether real or fictive, Singimari Muslims observe village-level exogamy. In this regard one finds a distinct influence of the Hindu social traditions in which there is a strict avoidance of patrilineal kin in marriage. Thus the Singimari Muslims have harmonized their social relations according to the dictates of wider Assamese folk traditions.
The socio-religious life of the Assamese Muslims is fundamentally guided by the Islamic doctrine. But at the same time, one also notices, as in the case of Singimari Muslims, some influence of indigenous culture in their social life. From our discussion in chapter one, about the writings on the Assamese Muslims, it is evident that the indigenous folk traditions have appreciable impact in their socio-cultural life. Thus indigenous folk cultural elements have been blended with the Islamic doctrine among the Assamese Muslims. Elements from both these sources coexist within the same social framework. The presence of folk elements in Muslim social life is to some extent explainable in terms of proselytization of local populations into Islam at some earlier dates.¹

The traditional leadership pattern based on kinship is evident at Singimari. It is still very much a kinship-based society.

¹ G. von Grunebaum (1955) has shown in a study the relations between the Islamic doctrine and the local cultures that became Islamized. The author considers that there are different ways in which the conflict, coexistence and interaction of the Islamic high culture and the local cultures can be described (cited in Redfield 1960: 48-50).
The village of Uttar Jalukbari, in the western fringe of Gauhati, offers a rather different picture. The inhabitants of this village are not as unified a group as the Muslims of Singimari. In keeping with their origin from two separate villages, the Uttar Jalukbari people have organized their social life in terms of their ancestral village identities manifested in the *khel* (social division) system.

Unlike Singimari, the Uttar Jalukbari Muslims allow village-level endogamy and marriage within the wider patri-kin group is not frowned upon. As a result of marriage ties within the village, the village households have been linked-up in a network of kinship.

Leadership among Uttar Jalukbari Muslims has evolved on *khel* basis rather than on the basis of the village as a whole. The role of the leaders of a *khel* is relevant only in the context of their own *khel*. When necessity arises the leaders of the two *kheles* might meet as a group. But leadership among Uttar Jalukbari Muslims is not as well-defined and centralized as in the case of Singimari Muslims. The persons who occupy positions
of leadership in the two khels at Uttar Jalukbari are not uniformly approved and supported as leaders of the community by all the villagers. At Singimari on the other hand, a person has to have the approval and support of all the villagers to be a leader.

Many villagers of Uttar Jalukbari lost their agricultural holdings while they left their ancestral villages. Urban development has further denuded their cultivable land in the new settlement. As a consequence, many villagers have switched over to wage-occupations. Thus the traditional agriculture-based economy of Uttar Jalukbari villagers is on the wane. This change in the economic life has led to the emergence of new fields of social and economic relations.

The presence of a Muslim population in urban Gauhati is not a recent phenomenon. Muslims have formed a part of the population of Gauhati even before the advent of the British Rule in Assam. Since then streams of migrants from different parts of Assam have come and settled in Gauhati at different dates. The flow of migration has continued till the present times.
As described earlier, the city is the only context where the Muslim population is heterogeneous in terms of linguistic, ethnic, regional and socio-cultural affiliations. Besides the Assamese Muslims, there are a number of immigrants from other States in the urban setting of Gauhati. Even among the Assamese Muslims, there are two distinct sections: those who are not merely city born but also consider that they 'belong' to the city; and the others who have migrated to Gauhati in the recent years from the villages, especially from Kamrup and Darrang districts.

The city born Muslims, who consider Gauhati as their 'home', live in certain old and established neighbourhoods. The avenues of relations between this section and the recent migrants from the villages of Assam are still rather few. For example, marriage relations involving the two sections are yet to become frequent. This is due to the fact that the average city born Muslim is not merely better off economically than the recent migrants from the villages, but he also feels that the city Muslims have a superior social status to the migrants of recent rural antecedents.
But even the city born Muslims do not contract marriage relations with the Marias, who also belong to the city and consider it as their 'home'. This is because of the low status which the Marias have in the social structure of the Assamese Muslim society. As a fringe group, the Marias have become an endogamous community.

Marriages between patri-kin is not uncommon among the city born Muslims including the Marias. In this regard the Gauhati and the Uttar Jalukbari Muslims constitute a distinct social order from that of their Singimari counterparts. The urbanized Muslims of Gauhati and its vicinity differ from the Singimari Muslims among whom one's patrilineal kinsfolk come within the prohibited degrees of marriage.

A further contrast in the social life in rural and urban situations is offered by the patterns of leadership. The Muslims of Gauhati are not unified as one single community. Hence, the question of a common leadership, representative of the Assamese Muslims of the city, does not arise. There are a number of local or neighbourhood Muslim communities. But even in these, one does not come across persons...
who are undisputed leaders of their respective local communities having large followings and who command power and authority in the neighbourhoods. Instead, a sort of contextual leadership has come into being through the functioning of community-level institutions and organizations. Only the Maria neighbourhood of Islamapatty shows a semblance of village type of socio-political organization and leadership pattern.

Coming now to the economic field, it may be recalled that the traditional occupation of the Muslims of Singimari, Uttar Jalukbari and of Gauhati is agriculture. Only the Marias are brass-workers by tradition. A glance at tables 9, 15 and 23 (pp. 70, 152 and 220) will show that most of the Muslims at Uttar Jalukbari and nearly all the Muslims of Gauhati have switched over to occupations other than cultivation. The change becomes revealing when its course is traced through three generations: the present, the parental and the grand parental. The occupational mobility has paved the way for social change among the urbanized Muslims.

1 See Appendix V.
A comparison of the three situations shows that the shimmerings of occupational change have reached even the rural Muslims. Those who are at Singimari are still almost wholly dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. But a large number of Muslims from other rural areas have migrated to Gauhati in search of better economic prospects. Thus the pressure of population on land available for cultivation and a search for better economic prospects and amenities have had an impact upon the rural Muslims just as in the case of the Hindu peasantry.

The rural Muslims are little differentiated from one another in their occupation as well as in their economic status. In the urban context on the other hand, there is not merely a diversification of occupations among the Muslims, but their economic status also vary within a wide limit. A business as well as a professional section have arisen among the urban Muslims. A distinct middle class has emerged among them which has higher economic status and educational attainments when compared with the rural Muslims.
Progress in the field of education, which is one of the important factors for social mobility, is rather modest among the Assamese Muslims. Within the Muslim group again, the rural section is lagging far behind the urban Muslims. The achievement differential in the field of education has further enhanced the social distinction between the rural and the more urbanized Muslims. An analysis of the data sample shows that 33 per cent of the Singimari Muslims are literate. The corresponding figures in the case of Uttar Jalukbari and Gauhati are 58 per cent and 64 per cent, respectively.

To pass on to domestic organization: It may be noted that Muslim households in all the three situations show overall similarity in their size and composition. In the urban, peri-urban as well as in the rural settings the elementary family-centred household is the predominant unit. Although the household is a discrete socio-economic unit, it often

1 On an average there are 7 persons per household both at Singimari and at Uttar Jalukbari. Corresponding figure for Gauhati is 6.2 persons. More than half of the households are fully elementary family-centred in each setting.
forms a part of a wider kin group. As among Singimari Muslims, the effective kin group often includes a number of households among which mutual assistance is a recognized ideal and practice.

An important feature in the social organization of the rural Muslims of Singimari is the *chuba* (hamlet) unit consisting of a cluster of households where the heads of the households are patrilineally related to one another. It may be recounted that these households act as a corporate kin group or sub-lineage. In this regard, a comparison may be made between Singimari kin groups and the *biraderi* among the Muslim villagers of Western Punjab in Pakistan studied by Alavi (1972:1-2). The author states that the word *biraderi* may broadly be translated as "brotherhood". The male members of a *biraderi* are all descendants of a common male ancestor. However, while the Muslims of Western Punjab practise endogamy at the *biraderi* level, the patri-kin group at Singimari is strictly exogamous.

It should be noted that kinship is an important dimension of social relationship among the Muslims, although its role is rather diffuse.
among the urbanized Muslims. Among the urbanized Muslims, there is an element of choice on the part of an individual as to who among the kinsfolk he will interact with more closely than others. Corporate kin groups outside the range of immediate familial kin are absent as effective social units in both Uttar Jalukbari and Gauhati. This is significant since at least in Uttar Jalukbari each khel can be traced as a loose patrilineal kin group where most of the male heads of the households claim descent from a common male ancestor. But the factor of common kinship is generally not emphasized in the functioning of the khels. Thus the rural and urban situations differ somewhat with regard to their patterns of kin relationship.

It appears that the persistent functional importance of corporate kin groups among the rural Muslims is to a large measure due to the common pattern of livelihood which is based entirely on agriculture. There are stages in agricultural operations which call for active cooperation of a number of individuals. But not many households have more than a few working persons. At the same time, Singimari Muslims are not
prosperous enough to hire labourers to help them in their agricultural operations. Hence, mutual assistance among the villagers on kinship basis is an eminently suitable device to tide over the problem of labour at critical points in agricultural operations. In the social life also, there are many occasions when people need help and assistance from others. Within the limited horizon of the rural society, it is the kinsfolk upon whom an individual can rely for such help and assistance. Thus the imperatives of economic and social life explain the continuing functional importance of kin groups in the rural society.

As one moves to peri-urban and urban settings, it is observed that new avenues, other than those based on kinship, of cooperation and reciprocal help and assistance are opened for individuals. The occupational pattern is highly diversified and the economic condition of the households is no longer homogeneous among the urbanized Muslims. Even closely related householders often pursue different occupations and have varied incomes.¹ Such kinsfolk sometimes belong to different social classes. Thus, factors other than

¹ See Appendix VI.
that of kinship become operative in the field of social and economic relations. It has already been pointed out how some Uttar Jalukbari cultivators have formed an agricultural cooperative where kin and khel ties are ignored. In the city, it is obvious that there is little scope for cooperation among kinsfolk in the economic life. As for the social life, new avenues of relationship, such as those based on personal friendship, neighbourhood clubs, various committees and organizations and professional associations and unions, have tended to minimize the importance of kinship.

To pass on to the subject of discerning a "rural-urban dichotomy" in Assamese Muslim social life: Considering the Muslims in the three situations, e.g., urban, peri-urban and rural, we can visualize them "... as ranging from most urban to least urban" (Anderson and Ishwaran 1965: 26). From this standpoint, the Singimari and the Gauhati Muslims occupy the extremes of the "rural-urban

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1 "The purely urban and purely rural would be abstractions at the opposite poles of the 'rural-urban dichotomy'. This range between the extremes is called ... the 'rural-urban continuum'" (Anderson and Ishwaran 1965: 26).
continuum" and the Uttar Jalukbari Muslims occupy an intermediate position between the two. At the same time one also comes across, as in the case of the Maria residents of Gauhati, a centre resembling a rural situation in the urban milieu.

In chapters five and ten the nature of Hindu-Muslim social relations have been considered at some length. In the compact village setting, the Hindu and the Muslim peasants have many occasions for social and economic interactions. An important feature of inter-community relations in the rural setting is that the Hindus and the Muslims belong to the same broad socio-economic status-group and they interact as equals. The ritual distance between the two communities is there. But the religious difference is of little import in the day-to-day interactional field. Neither the Hindus nor the Muslims envisage their positions as dominant or subservient groups. This is important because, though not in the village level, the Muslims constitute a minority group in the regional society from the demographic point of view.
In the urban context also, there is a similarity in the framework of Hindu-Muslim relations described above. The demographically dominant Hindus and the Muslims, who are a minority in the city, do not interact in a majority-minority social dimension. Other factors such as occupation, income and educational levels and class identity remaining constant, the Hindu-Muslim relationship is envisaged by both the groups on a plane of equality.

In the finite social universe of the rural setting, there is scope for intimate personalized relationships between individuals belonging to the two communities. Thus, the kinship model of relationship is often invoked in Hindu-Muslim relations in the village. In the urban setting, however, except for certain small pockets in compact and mixed neighbourhoods, this sort of intimacy on a kinship perspective is absent. The highly diversified and diffuse social milieu in the city do not provide opportunities for this kind of intimacy across community lines, except for personal friendship based on like interests among some individuals.
It would appear that in the situations described in this study, religion does not create a strong barrier in the field of inter-personal relationships between the Hindus and the Muslims. The situation here is rather different from the one described by Jain (1971). His study, carried out in a small town in Uttar Pradesh with predominantly Muslim population, shows that religion supersedes all other social divisions and there is little interaction between the Hindus and the Muslims.

As outlined in chapter ten, in Gauhati many of the educated urbanized Muslims tend to think in terms of Hindu-Muslim dichotomy in matters such as assessing the achievement pattern of the Muslims in the social and economic spheres. They express their concern at the relative backwardness of the Assamese Muslims as a whole in a mood of self-criticism. This kind of opinion is expressed freely only among themselves and not usually in the presence of Assamese Hindus. The Hindu-Muslim distinction for this purpose is drawn in terms of assumed differences in educational, economic and professional achievements.

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of the two groups. But this awareness among the educated articulate section of the urbanized Assamese Muslims of being different from the Hindus on these counts seems to be devoid of any sense of hostility towards the Hindus as a group. Instead, as already described, conscious efforts are made by the educated Muslims as well as the Hindus to maintain an agreeable and conciliatory relationship.

It would thus appear that the overall tone of Hindu-Muslim relations obtaining in Assam is somewhat different from what is noted for parts of India (Jain op.cit.) and its neighbouring countries. For example, Gaborieau (1972 : 93) states that in Nepal "... Muslims identify themselves in opposition to Hindus by sticking to the main tenets of Islam and by expressing, through festivals and legends connected with them, their hostility".

The Assamese Muslims and the Hindus speak the same language and are engaged in the same kinds of rural and urban occupations. The general pattern of living has also many points of similarity. Thus, like their Hindu counterparts the Assamese Muslims are participants in the same socio-cultural and
economic fields of Assam. The degree of participation of the Muslims in the political processes of the State is similar to that of the Assamese Hindus (Krishna 1967, Rao 1970, and Reid 1966).

As noted in chapter one, it is important to examine the relative importance of specifically 'Muslim' socio-cultural factors as against the wider socio-economic and cultural factors, in determining the character of contemporary Assamese Muslim social life. The two sets of factors, however, need not be conceived as mutually exclusive. The two may be seen in complementary roles and existing in mutual association. In Redfield's terms we may view Assamese Muslim social life as showing a combination of influences emanating from two different or even opposite sources. Social relations are determined not just by one set of factors but also by the other set of factors. The content of social life shows elements from both the sources (1960: 133). There is a local (or regional) dimension of Muslim life and at the same time many features in it are derived from the Islamic socio-cultural tradition.
The question as to the extent to which the Assamese Muslims constitute a distinctive social order in the context of the regional society was raised in chapter one. Though the Muslims belong to the wider Assamese society, yet certain distinctiveness is discernible in their socio-cultural life. Along with religion, this distinctiveness has helped in establishing their identity as a social order.

However, this is not to imply that the Assamese Muslims constitute a homogenous and unified socio-cultural order within the wider Assamese society. The socio-cultural life of the Assamese Muslims vary in details not merely on rural-urban basis, but also on regional basis. As noted in chapter one, the Muslims of Upper and Lower Assam show many points of differences in dialects and customs. Even within each of these broad geographical regions, variations may be observed in the details of socio-cultural life. Thus in each case the Muslims have organized their socio-cultural life in tune with the local or regional socio-cultural order.
It will be pertinent to quote Ahmed. He observes:

"... 'Language, social customs, economic differences, and sectarian and other religious differences tend to divide them throughout the country into a number of different enduring units. Most contemporary writers on Muslims continue to use such expressions as 'Muslim politics', 'Muslim mind', 'Muslim culture' and 'Muslim ethos', as if the entire Muslim population was an undifferentiated collectivity sharing a common worldview throughout the country. I concede that as a purely theoretical abstraction one could speak of 'Muslim culture' or 'Muslim worldview', but it is highly questionable that such abstractions will conform to actual empirical reality." (1972: 174).

The Assamese Muslims constitute a demographic minority in terms of religion. But this status has not been able to unite them as a unified group. As a minority in the context of the State, they are not corporately organized against the wider society. In Brotz's (1955: 166) words we can label the Assamese Muslims as an "open minority", where the law of the wider society operates directly upon the minority.

We have so far tried to draw certain generalizations about the Assamese Muslim society based on information from the three settings in which field investigations were undertaken. It needs to be emphasized that to provide an all-encompassing picture
of the Assamese Muslim society, it is necessary to take into account variations tending away from the three situations delineated in the body of the report. In parts of Upper Assam, the internal relations among the Muslims have certain determinants which are absent in our settings. For example, the Syeds as a fairly prosperous priestly class claiming a higher social status over the other Assamese Muslims is absent in our study contexts. In many villages of Upper Assam having Syeds and non-Syeds, the character of internal social relations would be different from those obtaining at Singimari or at Uttar Jalukbari. Further, in Upper Assam, especially in the towns, the social identity of the Muslims tends to be more sharply defined than it is the case in Guwahati or in the villages of Kamrup and Darrang districts. This can be explained by the fact that the Islamic socio-cultural traditions were firmly and successfully established among the Muslims of Upper Assam by the Syeds.

The Assamese Muslims have so far been, by and large, a part of the Assamese folk society. They have had only limited exposure to the trends of
thinking and development among other Indian Muslims. Except for a limited number of educated persons, Assamese Muslims as a whole have had little or no occasion to align their interests and aspirations with the protagonists of Indian Islam. Barring the political turmoil in the years before Independence, when the Muslim League as a party gained support from a section of the Assamese Muslims, there has been practically no occasion when Muslim identity has been a focus of organized interest and activity among the Assamese Muslims.

However, with the rapid changes taking place in the Indian social scene and with the fast expansion of lines of communication and contact with the rest of the country, it is difficult to say for how long the Assamese Muslims shall be able to exist without being affected by the developments among the Indian Muslims elsewhere.