CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

THE PROBLEM

The Muslims constitute 23.29 per cent of the total population (11,872,772) of the State of Assam. From the demographic standpoint they thus make up a sizeable minority in relation to the Hindus who constitute 66.41 per cent of the total population of the State.

On historical, linguistic and certain socio-cultural grounds, the Muslim population of Assam may broadly be divided into three categories.

(a) The Assamese Muslims: The mother tongue of the indigenous Muslim inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley districts is Assamese. They are the descendants of the early Muslim settlers and of

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1 All population figures relate to 1961 Census, unless otherwise stated. Further, 'Assam' here refers to the region prior to the creation of Meghalaya and Mizoram as separate State and Union Territory, respectively.
converts to Islam at different historical times. Besides language, there are many other points of cultural identity between the Assamese Hindus and the Assamese Muslims of the Brahmaputra plains.

(b) The immigrant Muslims: They are primarily peasant immigrants from various districts of eastern Bengal (at present Bangladesh), particularly from the district of Mymensingh, who came and settled in large numbers in the rural areas of the plains of Assam, mainly between the years 1911 and 1931. By 1931, the number of immigrant Bengali Muslims was assumed to be around 3 lakhs. It is estimated that during the 1951-61 decade as many as 220,691 immigrant Muslims entered Assam. Besides the immigrant Muslims there is a concentration of Bengali-speaking Muslims in the district of Cachar who number 539,457.

(c) Muslim migrants from other parts of India: There is a small number of Muslims who originally came from other States of India, mainly from Bihar and eastern parts of Uttar Pradesh. These Muslim immigrants are

mainly to be found in non-agricultural occupations in the urban areas.

This dissertation is concerned with the first group, i.e., the Assamese Muslims who are distributed throughout the Brahmaputra plains. Like the Assamese Hindus they are predominantly rural inhabitants and have agriculture as their main occupation. It is difficult to estimate the numerical strength of the Assamese Muslims since language is not a criterion along which the Hindus and the Muslims are specified in the Census reports. It might be mentioned here that of the 2,199,330 Muslims in the districts of the Brahmaputra valley, a significant majority would belong to the Assamese Muslim category.

In broad terms, this study is an attempt to understand the nature and content of Assamese Muslim social life. In order to obtain a comprehensive picture, Muslim social relations and community life are examined in three different contexts: rural, peri-urban and urban. The study also attempts to examine the quality of social relations which the Muslims maintain with their non-Muslim neighbours, with whom they share many common elements of culture and economy.
Anthropological and sociological studies focusing on different aspects of Muslim social and community life in various parts of India have been made by a number of scholars.¹

One field of interest has been caste among the Indian Muslims. Elements of the Hindu caste system have percolated into the social organization of many other communities including the Muslims of India. This is partly due to the influence of the majority community on the social life of other communities and partly due to the mass conversion of Hindus into other religions at different historical periods. As a result of the latter process, a considerable section of the Hindu population, especially from among the lower castes, accepted Islam and other faiths. But they could not wean themselves away from the organizational framework of the Hindu society.

Guha (1965) studied caste among the rural Muslims of Bengal. The author finds that caste behaviour among the rural Bengali Muslims is not

¹ e.g., December 1972 issue of Contributions to Indian Sociology (ed. by Gould, Madan, Mayer and Pocock) contains papers by a number of authors on religious, social, economic and political situations among the Muslims of India, Bangladesh, Ceylon, Nepal and Pakistan.
as rigorous as among the Hindus but still it exerts a great deal of influence on the social relations of the Muslims. Misra (1964) also discusses the castes and their character among Muslims of Gujrat in his monograph on the Gujrati Muslims. Aggarwal (1966) discusses the problems of cultural integration among Muslim sub-castes of Northern India. Gupta (1956) concerns himself with the study of intercaste relations and ranking of castes among rural Muslims of North Western Uttar Pradesh. Ahmad (1962) presents an account of Muslim castes in Uttar Pradesh. Ahmad observes that Muslim social groups share many, though not all, of the attitudes of Hindu castes. Khan (1968) studied caste among the Muslim peasants in India and Pakistan and observed that Muslim castes may be placed in a descending order like the Hindus in terms of their occupational character and social status. Ansari (1960) studied Muslim castes in Uttar Pradesh from the standpoint of cultural contact between the Muslims and the Hindus. In another study (1956) Ansari makes certain observations about the Muslim castes.
which are prevalent among different Muslim communities of India.

Besides caste considerations, descent appears to be an important factor which determines the quality of social relations among the Muslims. The Muslims who claim foreign ancestry are known as Ashraf and those who are of Indian origin are known as Ailat. Ahmad (1967) deals with these two categories of the Indian Muslims and examines the extent to which these constitute meaningful units of distinction for the study of social stratification among the Indian Muslims.

Another aspect of study, for many authors, has been the changing social values and patterns of life of the Indian Muslims, following the partition of India. Social change is the overall theme for a study by Bose and Roy (1972). This study deals with the changes in the marriage pattern among the Delhi Muslims of the Sunni sect \(^1\) after the partition in 1947, resulting from the migration of a part of the Muslim population to Pakistan. A study by Khwaja (1965) deals with the changing attitude of Muslim girl students towards

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1 See page 36.
Purdah. On the other hand, Aggarwal (1969) describes the revival of Islam in modern India. The author finds that better communication, education and greater mobility have given a sharper edge to the Muslim identity among the Meos, a dominant land-owning Muslim caste of Rajasthan. Greater Islamic consciousness among the Meos has enabled them to view themselves as a part of the wider Muslim community in the context of Indian society. Bhowmick (1965) studied a village in West Bengal in which Muslims and Hindus live together. The two communities participate in numerous common activities. The study also shows the aspects of social life in which the Muslims and the Hindus act separately and jointly.

In so far as the Muslims of Assam are concerned, anthropological or sociological studies are practically non-existent. No comprehensive study depicting the contemporary social character of this community has yet been made. There are few papers based on limited field work and dealing with certain features of Muslim social life in Assam. Ratha (1970) examined the role of religion in occupational choice among Muslims and Hindus inhabiting villages in the fringe
of a city. The study reveals that the Hindus prefer unskilled menial services and skilled jobs and the Muslims prefer agriculture, skilled jobs and white-collar professions. Ali and Bhagabati (1971) published a paper on kinship and marriage in a rural Assamese Muslim community. The study reveals that indigenous folk traditions shared in common with the neighbouring Hindus have a greater impact in organising kin relationships than the Islamic principles. Another paper (1972), by these two authors, analyses the quality of Hindu-Muslim relations in the same rural community.

The early Census Superintendents of Assam such as Driberg (1883), Gait (1893), McSwiney (1912) and Mullan (1932) made some observations on the social life of the Muslims of Assam. Similar accounts are also to be found in the writings of Hamilton (1940), Robinson (1941) and also of Allen (1905-7) in his District Gazetteers. Historians like Bhuyan (1949, 1956) and Gait (1963) have collated information pertaining to the history of Muslim incursions in Assam.

One also comes across a few books and articles published in Assamese dealing with various cultural
aspects of Muslim life in Assam. But these are not objective anthropological or sociological studies. Sattar (1964) attempted to determine the place of Muslims in the cultural life of Assam. The same author (1969) also pointed out certain basic similarities in the social behaviour of the Muslims and the Hindus of Assam. In another study (1965), Sattar discusses the Assamese culture from the general standpoint of cultural assimilation between the Muslims and the Hindus. Malik (1960) studies the quality of the language usually spoken by the Assamese Muslims in their day-to-day life. The Assamese Muslim vocabulary contains a large number of Persian, Urdu and Arabic words. Malik has also studied Zikir and Jari (1968), which are prevalent among the rural Muslims of Upper Assam. Zikir and Jari are devotional songs embodying the teachings of Islam. These songs are composed on the pattern of Assamese Vaisnava poetry.

The character of Muslim culture in Assam has been dealt with by a number of authors. Saikia (1967) finds considerable impact of Islam on the social and cultural life of Assam. In the same
manner the impact of indigenous culture on the life of the Muslims is also quite strong. Thus the sharing of many common social and cultural elements by the Assamese Hindus and the Muslims have made it possible for the latter to identify themselves as 'Assamese'. Sattar (1970) points out instances of Hindu-Muslim unity in Assam in the historical times as ideal examples for the present.

The following study describes the character of social relations and certain other aspects of contemporary Assamese Muslim social life in three different socio-economic settings: a rural village, Singimari, in the Darrang district of Assam; a peri-urban village, Uttar Jalukbari, in the vicinity of Gauhati; and the Muslim residential community of urban Gauhati (see fig. 1). The study was not set out to examine any single central thesis but was largely exploratory, in the fashion common in many ethnographic situations. But there were certain broad questions that had to be kept in view. One general aim, as already pointed out, was to examine the character and tenor of Assamese Muslim social life. The Muslims who, in demographic
Fig. 1
Assam showing the districts and the locales of field work

REFERENCES
STATE BOUNDARY
DISTRICT BOUNDARY
BRAHMAPUTRA RIVER
FIELD WORK UNDERTAKEN IN:
SINGIMARI
UTTAR JALUKBARI
GAUHATI
PARTS OF UPPER ASSAM
terms, constitute a minority group in the Indian context also occupy a distinctive position in the national society due to historical, religious and certain cultural factors.

As briefly summarised in the preceding pages, Muslim social life has been studied by anthropologists and sociologists in other parts of India. But in the context of Assam, as pointed out earlier, no such studies have been made as yet. To what extent do the Assamese Muslims constitute a distinctive social order in the context of regional society? Is the fact of being a minority in terms of religion really crucial in creating a homogeneous social order involving all the Assamese Muslims irrespective of other factors such as language, economy and habitat?

It was assumed that a study of social relations and community life of the Muslims in the three chosen field situations would provide some answers to these questions. In fine, the problem before us is to examine the relative importance of specifically 'Muslim' socio-cultural factors as against the wider social, economic and cultural factors in determining the character of Assamese Muslim
social life. Assuming that the Assamese Muslims do constitute a distinctive social order, we should then be able to locate a clear continuum in the field of social relations from rural through peri-urban to the urban contexts. In other words, over and above the obvious fact of being Muslims, we should be able to discern common elements and patterns in the social structures of rural and urban Muslim communities. In such a case the overall identity of being Muslim and a minority would be more dominant forces in organising social relations. On the other hand it can also be hypothesized that in a part of the country like Assam where the Muslims share many common definitions of situations with the Hindus, including the use of a common language (Assamese), participation in a common economy and so on, the influence of local socio-economic factors are likely to be significant. Hence, the need for exploring the relative importance of these two sets of factors: Islamic traditions and the indigenous determinants of socio-cultural life. The scope of the problem of study may thus be summed up as follows: (a) whether a rural-urban dichotomy is discernible in the field of Muslim social
relations in Assam, and (b) to explore the extent to which the Assamese Muslims constitute a cohesive social entity irrespective of the rural and urban factors.

The need for a scientific understanding of contemporary Muslim society in India can not be over emphasized. There are frequent discussions at various levels of the problems of Muslims and their place in the national society. Social tension and conflict along communal lines involving mainly the Hindus and the Muslims have remained as perpetual problems for the country even after twenty-five years of independence. It is assumed that a series of intensive local community studies detailing out the character of social relations among Muslims in different parts of India would provide us with a better grasp of the situation than what is obtained from generalised macroscopic study of a region. To this extent this study is assumed to have a representative value for the Assam region. The representative quality of this study needs to be seen in broad terms and not in concrete details. For, community relations as observed in the specific
settings of just two villages and one city are not likely to be similar in every detail in other Muslim communities of Assam. The particular combinations of factors and forces are bound to vary from one local community to another. However, since the three selected communities are localised expressions of wider social forces and not isolated worlds, such variations do not minimise the representative value of the study.

From the beginning it was felt that field work limited to one single community, whether rural or urban, is not likely to provide answers to the questions I had in mind. Though the Muslims are by and large rural inhabitants in Assam, it is in the towns that one finds a concentration of educated and articulate sections of the Muslims who are likely to exert influence even in the rural communities. It is in an attempt to understand the kind of elite which exists among the Muslims, as well as the difference likely to be found between the rural and urban situations, that I undertook field work in the three situations. This would, I thought, enable me to observe the social and
economic relations in all the major types of community perspectives present in Assam. This assumption was kept in view in the selection of communities for investigation.

This thesis reports the results of nearly two years of field work among Muslim residents in the three places already referred to. As time passed in the field, it became evident that in order to understand the dynamics of social relations in a situation of this kind, there was little scope for concentrating on one particular area of social life in all the field settings. I had to attempt to understand the overall quality of Muslim social life in each of these settings. Hence, instead of focusing attention on any particular facet of Muslim life, this investigator, like many others, ended by collecting information on a wide variety of topics.

The plan of the study that finally emerged and the way it has been presented in the following chapters need to be stated in some details in order to make the seemingly unconnected range of data meaningful. As in the field so also in the description, it was found useful to maintain
a wide approach in describing the social life of the Assamese Muslims.

Chapter II of Part One provides a general outline of the historical, demographic, social and cultural features of the Muslim population of Assam. This chapter is intended to give some idea of the origin of Assamese Muslims, their differences from other Muslims in Assam, and their social status.

Part Two containing three chapters is devoted to the social situation in rural Muslim community. Chapter III in this part deals with the rural community setting. Since the village has a composite population of Hindus as well as Muslims it has been found necessary to provide an account of the Hindu castes as well. The chapter also describes the economic life of the village community.

The next chapter is an account of the kinship and community relations specifically of the Muslims. In this chapter, an attempt is made to evaluate the importance of kinship as a basis of social relations among the rural Muslims. The extent to which the Muslims constitute a sub-community within a wider rural society is examined here.
Chapter V tries to portray the social structure of the Muslim community, including the informal and institutional frameworks of social relations. The way in which the rural socio-political life involving the Muslims is organised is presented in this chapter. Since the Muslims do not constitute a fully autonomous social entity, it has been found necessary to detail the quality and content of social relations between the Hindu castes and the Muslims of the village.

After describing the rural Muslim situation we move on to the next part which contains a study of Muslim social relations in the peri-urban situation. Chapter VI, like chapter III, provides an outline of the Muslim community of Uttar Jalukbari situated on the fringe of urban Gauhati. The extent to which influences, including economic influences, emanating from the urban source have made their impact in this community are also examined here.

Chapter VII is an account of bases and determinants of social relations in the peri-urban context. This chapter examines the ways in which rural social relations among the Muslims are affected by urban influences.
The next three chapters in Part Four are concerned with Muslim community relations in the urban situation of Gauhati. Since Gauhati represents a rather complex kind of social situation, it has been thought necessary to provide a brief outline of the city and its characteristics. Chapter VIII thus begins with a brief description of the city and its demographic character. The description is carried to the Muslim population of the city and the various neighbourhoods or residential communities which are important arenas of Muslim social relations. The familial and economic life of urban Muslims are presented in this chapter.

Chapter IX delineates certain aspects of urban community relations of the Muslims. The role of neighbourhoods as determinants of informal relations is examined here. Besides the formal and institutional frameworks of social relations including the role of mosques, the emergence of leadership in the urban context are also discussed in this chapter.

The next chapter is mainly concerned with the involvement, both informal and formal, of urban Muslims in the wider social situation of the city. This chapter throws some light on the rural-urban
differences in organising social relations among the Muslims.

Chapters III to X thus present a description of salient features of Muslim social life in the rural, peri-urban and urban situations. The concluding chapter is a discussion of the findings of the preceding chapters. Here an attempt has been made to examine the relative importance of the 'Muslim' and the local socio-economic factors as determinants of Assamese Muslim social life.

FIELD WORK

The field work for the present study was started in January 1969 and completed in January 1971. The work was undertaken in two villages and the city of Guwahati. A month-long rapid field tour was also undertaken during this period in some villages and towns of Lakhimpur and Sibsagar districts of Upper Assam in order to acquire some idea of Muslim social life in that part of the Brahmaputra plains. This tour was undertaken with a view to get a comparative idea of Assamese Muslim society.

In all the three situations, the two villages and the city, basic quantitative information on
household level were collected with the help of a cyclostyled schedule. Another structured schedule was used for collecting information on religious institutions, such as the mosque, among the Muslims of the three situations. A questionnaire was used to collect information on interpersonal relationships among the students, belonging to the two communities—Muslims and Hindus—studying in a local secondary school in Gauhati. All the Muslim households of the two villages were included in household survey. In the case of Gauhati city, sociographic data from 116 Muslim households were collected from different neighbourhoods. It would never have been possible to cover all the Muslim households of the city within a reasonable period in view of the large size of the urban Muslim population. Besides the Muslims of Singimari village, certain basic demographic data have been collected from all the Hindu households of the village. Besides the Muslims, certain non-Muslims, both in Singimari and in Gauhati, were approached and interviewed to collect relevant information. Over and above the structured questionnaire

1 See Appendix I.
2 See Appendix II.
3 See Appendix III.
and schedules, quantitative data have been gathered through the usual field techniques, viz., direct observation, participant observation, genealogical method and concrete case studies. The investigator lived in each of the field settings for prolonged periods, made acquaintances and friends among the people, visited them in their homes, attended all kinds of ceremonies and festivals, listened to and participated in formal and informal meetings and had ample opportunity to gather information in long and informal chats with the people.

This is the study of a community to which the investigator himself belongs. Singimari actually happens to be his ancestral village where his kinsfolk still live. Gauhati happens to be the city where he has had his collegiate and University education. There is always a possibility of getting involved or be drawn into the local norms and patterns of life. In such a situation there is a likelihood of ignoring relevant facts which might seem to be only too obvious to the local ethnographer. This might affect the scientific validity of a study. Nukunya, while studying his own community, faced many
difficulties and put the advantages and difficulties of a local ethnographer in the following manner:

"......for most advantages he gets from being a local man there are corresponding difficulties for the local ethnographer. For instance, as a local man he is expected by his informants to be knowledgeable in certain basic things, and certain queries which from an alien may be attributed to a curiosity to know things may be considered irrelevant or even impertinent coming from him. Also in questions concerning personal problems, specially where morals may be involved, some informants gave the impression that by revealing facts about their private lives to me they were in some sense giving themselves away. This looks paradoxical but it is true, because as an insider I might be led, it was thought, to pass the information on the other members of the community who previously had no knowledge of it. But when an outsider is involved his question can always be attributed to mere curiosity" (Nukunya 1964 : 19).

As an Assamese Muslim, I enjoyed certain advantages in the field work. Establishing rapport with the people and collection of information were easy due to my identification with the community. But I experienced disadvantages as well. Some people were reluctant to give me information on the plea that I might pass their views on to other people in the community and thereby make things rather awkward for them. A total stranger would have perhaps been considered more trustworthy in such situations. Again, others were reluctant to disclose information on the suspicion that I had been working for some communal...
organisation or collecting data for a purpose not at all academic in nature. All these difficulties piled around me especially when I was working among the city Muslims.

It has been my constant endeavour to keep in mind the disadvantages of a local ethnographer in writing down the material. An attempt is being made to present the report as objectively as possible.

The descriptions are presented here in the 'ethnographic present' (Piddington 1957: 685). The names of the villages and the city are real but the names of persons, wherever used, are all fictitious. This has been done with a view to preserve the anonymity of the individuals.