CHAPTER II

AN OUTLINE OF THE MUSLIM POPULATION OF ASSAM

THE RISE OF MUSLIM POPULATION IN ASSAM

Kamrupa or ancient Assam came into contact with the Muslims in 1203 A.D. for the first time when the Turkish army led by Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar made an expedition to Tibet through this region. Kamrupa was then under the rule of the Koch king Kameswar (Gait 1963:37). Following this, several other expeditions were made by a number of Muslim invaders in the subsequent centuries (Bhuyan 1949, Gait 1963).

The first Muhammedan invasion during the Ahom rule occurred in 1527 A.D., but the name of the invader, however, is not recorded. In 1532 A.D., a Muslim army commanded by Turbak invaded the country. The Muslims were defeated in a battle and those captured and taken prisoners by the Ahoms were settled in different parts of the country. These prisoners are supposed to be the earliest Muslim settlers in the Assam valley. The wars between the rulers
of Assam and the Muslim powers of India continued for a period of 475 years. Mir Jumlah invaded Assam in 1662 A.D. and as per a treaty which was enacted in 1663, part of Assam was transferred to the possession of the Mughals. Finally, in 1682 A.D., the Ahoms expelled the Mughals and then re-established their rule over the territory till 1826 A.D., when the British came to occupy Assam (Bhuyan 1949:5).

The history of Assam-Mughal contact suggests the fact that the Mughals never really gained enough of a foothold in the valley. They could not influence the social and economic organisations of the indigenous society in any appreciable manner. However, these historical encounters between the peoples of Assam and Muslim invaders were not without some cultural significance. As a result of the contact, some traits of Islamic culture were assimilated by the indigenous people. Further, every Muslim invasion contributed a little towards the strengthening and propagation of Islamic faith in Assam (Neog 1965:74). According to one account the sign of Islam appeared in Assam after the invasion made by Ikhtiyaruddin Malik Yuzbak, the ruler of Gauda, in 1257 A.D. The ruler erected a
mosque to celebrate his victory and also initiated Friday congregational services.¹

The prolonged wars between the Muslim rulers and the Assam kings also led to the gradual growth of Muslim population in Assam. Gait was of the view that the Muslims taken prisoners by Suhungmung, an Ahom ruler, were the earliest Muslim settlers in the eastern valley of the Brahmaputra river. They came to be known as Maria² (Gait 1963: 39). Shihabuddin, a writer who accompanied Mir Jumlah on his invasion of Assam, wrote a detailed account of that expedition and gave a description of the people and the country of that time. His observations about the local Muslims were as follows.

"As for the Mussalmans who had been taken prisoner in former times and had chosen to marry here, their descendants act exactly in the manner of the Assamese, and have nothing of Islam except the name; their hearts are inclined far more towards mingling with the Assamese than towards association with Muslims. The Muhammadans who had come here from Islamic lands engaged in the performance of prayer and fasting, but were forbidden to chant the call to prayer or publicly recite the word of God" (Gait 1963: 153).

¹ As quoted by Saikia 1967: 61.
² See pp. 29-34.
The propagation of Islam in India itself was secured by way of conversion, application of force by Muslim ruling powers or by the teaching and persuasion of missionaries. Persuasion might have played a much greater part than force (Ramgopal 1959: 1). The majority of the converts belonged to low Hindu castes who suffered from severe social inequality in Hinduism. The converts changed their faith from Hinduism to Islam, but could not completely wean themselves away from the Hindu social life. These converts retained much of the traditional Hindu restrictions on social intercourse including ban on marriage outside one's own caste or interdining (Gait 1911: 238).

According to one author, proselytising was an easy task in Assam, since the elements of faith of the soil itself was in a state of extreme ignorance (Ramgopal 1959: 9). The Imperial Gazetteer of India (Vol.1 1885: 358) says about the converts, who were as ignorant of Islam as of Hinduism, that "some of them have never heard of Mohammed; some regard him as a person corresponding in their system of religion to Rama or Lakhman of Hindus. The Koran is hardly read even in Bengali, and in the original Arabic not
at all; many of those who have heard of it cannot tell who wrote it. Yet any Muslim peasant is able to repeat a few scraps of prayer in Arabic. During the isolation of the converts from learned Muslims, they used to borrow Hindu customs and manners, and again when the learned Muslims reappeared, the converts were introduced to the doctrines of Islam (Ramgopal 1959:10).

In the 1630s a Muslim saint named Shah Milan, more popularly known as Azan Faquir, came to Assam to stabilise Islam which had deviated here from the main principles and practices as prevalent in Northern India. The priest's activities, though initially misunderstood by the Ahom rulers, received wide recognition in later years (Bhuyan 1958).

To sum up: slow infiltration as well as large-scale migration of Muslim population into different parts of Assam at various dates are among the factors responsible for the growth of Muslim population in the State. The contemporary Assamese Muslims are the descendants of the captured soldiers, converts, migrants and of those families who were brought by the Ahom rulers and appointed in various departments of the State. These

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1 As quoted by Ramgopal 1959 pp.9-10.
Muslims were specialists in different crafts such as minting of coins, painting, carpentry, embroidery work, sword-making, gun-casting and the manufacture of gun-powder (Bhuyan 1949: 14).

Gait was of the view that the majority of the persons in Assam professing Islamic faith were local converts from lower castes and aboriginal tribes, as was the case in eastern Bengal. These converts described themselves as "Sekhs". Gait also maintained that the process of conversion did not occur in the country until late dates (1893: 89).

SOCIAL DIVISIONS AMONG THE ASSAMESE MUSLIMS

In the early accounts, the Muslims of Assam were broadly divided into two classes: Garia\(^1\) and Maria\(^2\).

1 The origin of the term Garia is controversial. Besides the explanation given in page 30, there are many views put forward by different authors about the term. According to one view, the term refers to those who bury (gor) their dead in graveyard or gorasthan (Sarma 1969: 146).

2 Gait refers to a traditional story according to which the Marias are the descendants of Muslims who were taken prisoners of war by the Ahom kings. These prisoners, being ignorant of agriculture, took to work in brass. The term Maria might have a reference to the way in which they fashion their wares which is by beating. Mariba means 'to beat' in Assamese (Gait 1963 pp.96-97).
According to Galt the ordinary Muslims of Assam call themselves Garla, an indication of their claim of having come originally from Gaur, the ancient Mohammedan capital of Bengal (1963 : 89). There are several views regarding the origin of the Maria section of the Assamese Muslims, besides the origin as pointed out in the preceding page. Their traditional occupation is brass-working which is pursued by many even to this day. It seems in the early years the Marias adhered to the Islamic faith only in a marginal way. Robinson referred to the Marias as a "very impure tribe" and did not consider them as a section of the "Mussalman people" (1941 : 244). The first Census enumeration (1872) included the Marias under the list of aboriginal tribes, while the bulk of the Muslim population at that time was included in the unspecified category.

Hunter held the view that the two terms "Gariya" and "Mariya" originated from particular professions which the Muslim settlers in Assam adopted. Hunter believed that those who took up tailoring were known as "Gariyas" and those who took up the profession of brass were known as "Mariyas" (1897 : 39).
The early Census reports of Assam provide ethnographic accounts of different communities and tribes and mention the presence of caste system among the Muslims. In the 1891 Census, it is stated that the Muslim castes were like Hindus, and hierarchically they were arranged in the following manner: the Syed occupied the highest status while the Mughal, the Pathan and the Sheikhs were placed in a descending status order. The Sheikhs were further levelled with that of the Koch caste among the Hindus.

As regards the Syeds, historians like Gait believed that the Muslims belonging to this class were also of local origin and not really descendants of the Syeds from Arabia. He said that a Sheikh by becoming prosperous could gradually gain social ascendancy and declare himself as a Syed. To quote Gait:

"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' and no less than 12,127 have returned themselves under this head. The true 'Saiads' are descendants of Ali, the son-in-law of Muhammad, but in Assam the term includes many who are not only not descendants from Ali, but have not a particle of Arab blood of any sort in their veins" (1893: 202).
To-day, most of the Syads are distributed in towns and villages of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts of Upper Assam. They trace their descent from Shah Milan or Azan Faquir, the saint who came to Assam, and who in turn is regarded as a descendant of Ali. Allen observed that the Syads consider ploughing or touching the plough beneath their dignity. They also do not carry loads on a carrying pole which is the general custom among peasants in Assam (1906: 101-2). These observations of Allen hold good for the Syads of Assam even today. It may be pointed out here that the 'Brahmins', the highest caste among the Hindus of Assam, do not touch plough and carry loads on a carrying pole.

At the present times, the Assamese Muslims, then, may be divided into three broad classes: Syad, Garia and Maria whose relative social status stands in the order given.

The contemporary social situation among the Assamese Muslims, however, does not present a picture as it was observed by some early ethnographers and historians. The social distance between the Syads and the non-Syads was pronounced in the pre-Independence
period. Till recently, the Syeds were regarded as a priestly class and occupied a dominant position in the Muslim social structure of Assam. At one time in the not too distant past, each of these two sections, the Syeds and the non-Syeds, maintained a considerable degree of autonomy on the social plane. Much of the social intercourse, including marriage relations, were confined within the respective groups. Gradually the social distance between the two groups have become less and less pronounced. As a result, social relations across the class boundary have become more common and frequent, though marriage relations between Syeds and non-Syeds are still rather scarce. The attenuation of barriers between Syeds and non-Syeds have come about due to the expansion of education, religious knowledge among the non-Syeds as well as due to the levelling influences of contemporary economic forces. Within the non-Syad section, the Marias occupy a lower position and there is some amount of social distance maintained by other non-Syeds from the Marias. For instance, marriages between Marias and other non-Syeds are still rare.

It should, however, be made clear that the social divisions and the status connotations of the
terms Syed, Garia and Maria are not as rigorous as in the case of the Hindu castes. Hence, one may refer to the social divisions among the Assamese Muslims as 'caste-like' divisions rather than as a full-fledged caste system. It may be noted that the patterns of inter-caste relations among the Hindus had some impact upon the different groups of Muslims in shaping social relations between the Syed, Garia and Maria groups.

DEMOGRAPHIC OUTLINE

(a) Population

The total Muslim population of Assam, as of 1961 Census, is 2,765,509 constituting 23.29 per cent of the total population of the State.¹

The Hindu and the Muslim are the two principal religious groups in the State. Table 1 shows the religious affiliation of the population of Assam together with the relative proportions of people following different faiths.²

¹ Including the newly-constituted State of Meghalaya and the Union Territory of Mizoram.

² Census figures for 1971 are provided in Appendix IV.
Unlike the present Census operations, the Muslim population of Assam were shown in terms of various sects in the early reports. Upto 1931 Census, various aspects such as occupation, education, literacy etc. of various communities were shown religion-wise. Had the process been continued up to date, it would have been possible to make a comparative appraisal of various demographic aspects of the different religious communities of the population of Assam.

Sunni\textsuperscript{1}, Shiah\textsuperscript{2} and Farai\textsuperscript{3} are the three sects into which the Muslim population of Assam were divided in the Census of 1881 (p. 35). Almost all the Assamese Muslims belong to the Sunni sect. Those who belong to other sects are small in number and mostly non-Assamese in origin.

It should be noted that between 1901 and 1961 the Muslim population of Assam has increased far beyond the other communities in terms of percentage. In the 1951-1961 decade the percentage increase of Muslims has been higher (27.5) than the rate of natural increase of 22.4 per cent for the entire population of Assam. This is assigned to Muslim immigration into the State which began in the early years of this century. This trend of Muslim immigration has not only affected the demographic composition of the community, but it has also exerted an impact on the social structure of the Muslims as well as on the wider Assamese society. We will now briefly discuss the Muslim immigration into Assam and some of the results of this trend.

\textsuperscript{1} A follower of Sunnah (The Prophetic teachings of Muhammad given by word or examples or by tacit approval (Morgan 1958: 441).
\textsuperscript{2} Literally 'followers': the followers of Ali, who look Ali as the true successor of Muhammad (Ibid: 441).
\textsuperscript{3} A sect founded in eastern Bengal about the year 1804 A.D. The Muslims belonging to this sect do not usually observe Friday and Id prayers (Gibb, Krammer 1953: 39). Also see Bertocci 1972: 39.
(b) **Muslim Immigration into Assam and its Effects**

The two decades, between 1911 and 1931, are important in the history of population growth of Assam. During this period there was a considerable volume of immigration to Assam. Again, the 1951 - 1961 decade shows the highest percentage increase (34.45) of population among all the States of India for which the percentage increase is 21.50. In the six decades from 1901 to 1961 the population of Assam has increased from 37.1 lakhs to 118.7 lakhs.

This very high growth rate during the last sixty years is primarily due to the immigration into Assam from different parts of India and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). These immigrants include labourers to tea gardens who came mainly from Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh; peasant immigrants (both Hindu and Muslim) from eastern Bengal, mainly from the district of Mymensingh; Nepali immigrants; and finally, others from different parts of India who came in search of economic opportunities including trade and commerce.

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1 The 1961 population of Assam should have been 106.8 lakhs if the All India average decennial rate of growth of 21.5 per cent was true for Assam as well. *(Census of India 1961, Assam, Vol.III, Part 1-A. General Report).*
However, for our purpose, we need to discuss briefly only the immigrants from eastern Bengal (i.e. Bangladesh).

The Census report of 1911 for the first time mentioned about the immigrants from Mymensingh. At that time there were 159,000 persons who were born in Bengal but lived in Assam, mainly in the Char\(^1\) lands of Goalpara district. Lloyd, in 1921, estimated that the total number of the settlers, including children born after their arrival, was at least 3 lakhs in Assam. Mullan estimated their number in 1931 to be over half a million.\(^2\)

These immigrants first entered Goalpara district in the west and then gradually spread over the Assam valley. They have mostly occupied the vacant but cultivable Char lands and forest reserves of the Brahmaputra plains.

Mullan described about these immigrants in the following manner.

"Where there is waste land thither flock the Mymensinghias. In fact the way in which they have seized upon the vacant areas in Assam valley seems almost uncanny .... It looks like a marvel of administrative organisation on the part of Government but it is nothing of the sort: the only thing I can compare it to is the mass movement of a large body of ants."

\(^1\) Small river-islands formed by deposit of sand and silt.

"They have opened up vast tracts of dense jungle along the south bank of Brahmaputra and have occupied nearly all the lands which are open for settlement in this tract. These people have brought in their wake wealth, industry and general prosperity to the whole district .... Their industry as agriculturists has become almost proverbial....

"Not having sufficient land of their own in their home districts and leading a life of difficulty with the drawbacks peculiar to under-tenants of Bengal Zamidars in overcrowded villages it was quite normal for these industrious agriculturists to be attracted in large numbers" (1932: 51-2).

The increase of Muslim population in Assam during this century will be evident from table 2.

Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Decade variation</th>
<th>Percentage of Decade Variation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>503,670</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>634,101</td>
<td>+ 130,431</td>
<td>+ 25.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>880,426</td>
<td>+ 246,352</td>
<td>+ 38.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>1,279,388</td>
<td>+ 398,962</td>
<td>+ 45.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>1,696,978</td>
<td>+ 417,598</td>
<td>+ 32.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>1,995,936</td>
<td>+ 298,958</td>
<td>+ 17.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>2,765,509</td>
<td>+ 769,573</td>
<td>+ 38.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the basis of available Census data, Pakyntein came to the conclusion that the total Muslim population in Assam in the various decades was much above than what could be due to natural increase. The excess of Muslim population must had therefore come to Assam as immigrants, mostly from East Bengal (1964: 249, part I-A).

One of the conspicuous results of Bengali Muslim immigration into Assam was the gradual formation of a distinctive community by those who especially migrated during the years before partition. Their descendants are now distributed in Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong and Lakhimpur districts of Assam. In popular parlance the immigrant Muslims from eastern Bengal are called Mia, a term having slight pejorative connotation when used by the local Assamese people. However, over the years, with the gradual rise of literacy and education, many descendants of these immigrant peasants have attempted to formally identify themselves with the local Assamese people through sending their children to Assamese medium schools. In view of the contemporary trends of identifying themselves with the local people, the community is sometimes labelled as Na-Ashamya Mussalman ('Neo-Assamese Muslim'). No figures are available about
the number of these peasant immigrant Muslims. However, they constitute a sizeable proportion of the population of Assam, running into several lakhs.

Pakyntein points out that the hunger for land among these immigrant peasants was so great that in their eagerness to grasp as much land as they could cultivate, their encroachment on Government reserves and on lands belonging to local persons were not infrequent. The eviction of the encroachment was stated to be difficult (1964: 255, part I-A). When land became scarce, their land hunger brought them into many conflicts in the economic sphere with the tribals and other indigenous peoples of Assam.

These conflicts in the economic sphere also exerted some influence in inter-community relations in Assam. Commenting on the large influx of Mymensinghia immigrants in the 1921-31 decade, Mullan observed that the relations between the Hindu and Muslim communities in Assam underwent a decided change for the worse during this period (1932: 197).

(c) The General Distribution of the Muslims in Assam

The Muslim population is not evenly distributed throughout Assam. There is marked variation from
district to district. However, in each of the three
districts of Darrang, Kamrup and Cachar, nearly 10 to 40
per cent of the total population are Muslims. In
Goalpara and Nowgong, the two other plains districts, the
proportion of Muslims to the total population is above
40 per cent. This has resulted from the influx of large
number of Muslim immigrants. Among all the plains
districts, only in Sibsagar and Lakhimpur the proportion
of Muslims to the total population is low, being only
4 to 6 per cent. As figure 2 indicates, the hill areas
of Assam have very small number of Muslims.

The Assamese Muslims are distributed in the
districts of the Brahmaputra valley. These Muslims are
found to be concentrated in the villages located along
the northern and southern banks of the Brahmaputra river.
The Syeds are found in a limited number of villages in
the districts of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur, sometimes with
non-Syeds in the same villages. The Marias are usually
to be found in distinct villages or hamlets situated on
the fringe of urban areas. On the other hand, there are
villages in the Brahmaputra valley which are of a
composite nature including Syeds, non-Syeds and a few
Hindu castes.
Fig. 2
Assam showing the distribution of the Muslim population (1961)

REFERENCES
DISTRIBUTION OF THE MUSLIM POPULATION (1961):
0 - 4%
4 - 6%
6 - 10%
10 - 40%
40 AND ABOVE
It is important to note here that while Assam as a whole is one of the least urbanized States in India, the proportion of urban Muslim population is much less than the proportion of urban population of the other communities of Assam. Out of the total Muslim population of the State, only 4.12 per cent live in the urban areas, whereas the remaining 95.88 per cent are rural inhabitants. This overwhelmingly rural distribution also indicates that the Muslims in Assam are predominantly agriculturists. They are in tune with the agrarian economy of the State.

Table 3 shows the rural-urban distribution of the Hindus, Muslims and other communities in Assam.

Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rural-Urban Distribution of the Population of Assam, 1961</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 In 1961, only 7.69 per cent are enumerated as urban residents in Assam.
3 Include Buddhists, Christians, Jains, Sikhs, other religious persuasions and those who did not state their religions.
An analysis of the rural-urban distribution of the Hindus and the Muslims in Assam indicate that proportionately more Hindus (9.12 per cent) are urban dwellers than the Muslims (4.12 per cent). This shows that the rate of urbanization of the Hindus is much higher than the Muslims of the State. However, certain communities such as Sikhs, Jains and some Christians are primarily urban residents.

The slow pace of urbanization of the Muslims in comparison with the Hindus, is the result of several factors. Above all, the immigrants as a whole have affected the demographic picture in this respect. These immigrants, with their agricultural background, have settled primarily in the rural areas.

It is pertinent to note that the proportion of urban Muslims is less in those districts where there have been large influx of immigrant Muslims. Thus in Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong districts the Muslims are primarily rural. Besides immigrant Muslims, another factor which seems to be responsible for the relatively lower rate of urbanization among the Muslims is their backwardness in education and economic life. Though no figures are available, there are many indications to suggest that the rate of rural
emigration is much lower among the Assamese Muslims than among their Hindu counterparts.

Table 4 shows the distribution of the Muslims in rural and urban areas of different districts of Assam.

Table 4.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State/District</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>2,765,509</td>
<td>2,651,664</td>
<td>113,845</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>668,748</td>
<td>646,473 (96.67)</td>
<td>22,275 (3.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>605,524</td>
<td>587,195 (96.97)</td>
<td>18,329 (3.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>249,585</td>
<td>241,353 (96.70)</td>
<td>8,232 (3.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>88,242</td>
<td>69,189 (78.41)</td>
<td>19,053 (21.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>499,320</td>
<td>486,123 (97.36)</td>
<td>13,197 (2.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>87,911</td>
<td>73,416 (83.61)</td>
<td>14,495 (16.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cachar</td>
<td>539,457</td>
<td>527,115 (97.71)</td>
<td>12,342 (2.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garo Hills</td>
<td>17,163</td>
<td>16,757 (97.63)</td>
<td>406 (2.37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Khasi and Jaintia Hills</td>
<td>5,856</td>
<td>644 (10.99)</td>
<td>5,212 (89.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Mikir and North Cachar Hills</td>
<td>3,500</td>
<td>3,288 (93.94)</td>
<td>212 (6.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mizo Hills</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>111 (54.68)</td>
<td>92 (45.32)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Figures within brackets indicate percentages of the total Muslim population in the districts).
Table 4 shows that of all the plains districts of Assam, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur have higher proportions of urban Muslims than in any other districts. These urban Muslims are largely Assamese.

Since 1881, different Census Superintendents have observed a general tendency of backwardness within the Muslim community in various respects. Some of these may be regarded as effective deterrents of urbanization of the community. Mullan observed that in Sibsagar and Lakhimpur the Muslim literacy was proportionately higher than in other districts (1932: 155-56). Lloyd in 1921 said that for ".... the apathetic attitude of the Muhammadans in Assam they will never catch up the other communities in education...."\(^1\)

The variations in the trend of urbanization within the Muslim community also have certain social significance. Generally the Muslims of Upper Assam hold certain negative stereotypes about those of Lower Assam districts, whom they think to be less sophisticated than themselves. These attitudes have also influenced the general pattern of social relations within the community itself, including a general reluctance of

\(^1\) As quoted by Mullan 1932 p.156.
Muslims from Upper Assam to marry among Lower Assam Muslims.

Likewise, the distribution and settlement pattern of the Assamese Muslims have certain social significance. For instance, among the rural Muslims, social relations, including marriage, are usually restricted to their own village and a few neighbouring villages. Among the town dwellers, such relations are confined to other town dwellers, sometimes outside the district. The Muslims of Upper Assam (Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Nowgong districts) differ in certain ways, such as dialect and folk customs, from the Muslims of Lower Assam (Goalpara, Kamrup and parts of Darrang districts). This way, a sort of regional cultural boundary is present even among the Assamese Muslims of the Brahmaputra valley. In fact, for a long time the Assamese Muslims of these two regions were more or less isolated from one another. Besides variations in dialect and folk customs, transport and communication difficulties were also factors responsible for the social distance between the Muslims of these two regions.

However, over the last 30 years—especially in the years following the Second World War and the
Independence - the rise of literacy and education together with improvement of communication system have lowered the inter-regional and inter-cultural differences among the Assamese Muslims to a considerable extent. Besides the consolidation of Islam in Assam, the recent years have opened up possibilities of better communication across the former lines of divisions within the wider Assamese Muslim community.