CHAPTER - I

SOCIO ECONOMIC PROFILE OF ASSAM

To understand the Socio economic profile of Assam, it is necessary to take into account the geographical location as well as the historical background of the state.

Historical background of Assam:

Assam is known by different names in the Epic, Puranic and early historical literature. It is mentioned as Pragjyotisha in both the Epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Pragjyotisha included parts of North & East Bengal (at present Bangladesh) but also the hill tracts up to the border of China. It is known for the first time as Kamrupa in the Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudra Gupta (4th Century A.D) and in the early Puranas. The
territory is called "Asham" in the Ain-I-Akbari and Asam is the Padshahnamah and the same name who applied by Francis Hamilton in his account of Assam compiled during 1807-1808. Asom is apparently the English form of 'Asam'. (Barapujari, H.K, 1990, Vol-I, p- 3).

Assam, known in ancient lore as Kamrupa, originally included, in addition to modern Asom, parts of modern Bengal and Bangladesh. Gauhati, the Pulsating Centre of Assam, is the ancient town where history goes back to puranic days. The city anciently known as Pragjyotishapur was said to have been founded by king Nara Kasur. In the 13th century the country was conquered by the Ahoms under the leadership of Sukapha, a Prince of the Shan tribe, who ruled over Assam for over 600 years. The advent of Ahom changed the course of Assam history. The Ahom kings had to fight with the Mughals. The Mughals under Nawab Mirjumla advanced in 1662 as far as to Gargaon, the capital of the kingdom. But in 1682, the Ahoms, under the able leadership of Lachit Burphukan, were able to expel the
Mughals from the state. In 1817, the Burmese appeared on the scene. They unleashed a reign of terror plunder, devastation, upon the people of the state. In the Anglo-Burmese war, the British troops were able to expel the Burmese from the soil of Assam. Through the famous Treaty of Yandaboo signed on February 26, 1826 between the British and the king Ava, Assam was brought under the rule of the British. In 1874, a separate province of Assam under a chief commissioner was created with Shillong as its capital. (Baruah, Shanjiv Kumar, 1980, Tangled Nationality Question, EPW< March, 15).

On the partition of Bengal in 1905, East Bengal and Assam were formed into one province with Dacca as its capital under a Lt. Governor. These arrangements were abandoned in 1912 due to strong public protest against merging Assam with East Bengal. On the eve of the Independence of India, Assam was put to the category of 'C' under 'Grouping plan' of the British Government, which ultimately would have led Assam to the inclusion of
Pakistan. The people of Assam strongly protested against the grouping of Assam into 'C' category and for the timely interference of Mahatma Gandhi Assam was saved from being included into Pakistan. However, on the partition of India the whole of the predominantly Muslim district of Sylhet was transferred to East Pakistan under a 'Referendum'. Assam lost a good deal of its former territory, as a result of political changes, from time to time. In 1948, the North-East Frontier Agency of Assam (NEFA) was separated from Assam and later on made a separate full-fledged state known as Arunachal Pradesh. In 1963, Nagaland was curved out of Assam as a full-fledged state. In 1972 Meghalaya was curved out of Assam and made a separate state. These new separate states had to be curved out of Assam in order to satisfy the political aspirations of the tribal people like the Nagas, the Luchais, the Garoes, the Khasis and Jaintias including those of Arunachal Pradesh. (Gait Edward, 1984, p-99-103).
Moreover, as is known because of diverse people having diverse religion, caste, language, culture, living in Assam, separate tendencies have particularly grown among the tribal people, both hills and plains. The Karbi Anglong district, a hill district of Assam, has already attained a special states under the Sixth scheduled of the constitution of India, thereupon, the district having a district council with certain exclusive powers of self-rule. Not being satisfied with what the people of Karbi Anglong district where mostly the Karbis and the Dimasa Kasaris live have got under the Sixth scheduled, they are now aspiring for autonomy, even they also have put forward the demand of a separate state hood. The plain tribals like the Bodo-Kacharis, the Rabhas, the Missings have also been demanding autonomous states under the Sixth scheduled of the constitution to their respective region. The dominant group of them is the Bodo, Kacharis who have already attained the status of B.T.A.D (Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts) under the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution. Even then, there is still a section of
people among the Bodo-Kacharis who are demanding for a separate state for them. The same tendency is apparent among certain other groups of the state population like the Koch-Raj Bongshis who are bent upon obtaining a separate Kamatapur state. This separate tendency among the different tribal and ethnic groups of Assam is due to the desire for preserving identity of each group. This identity crisis is the main cause for the growth of the feelings of separation among the different diverse group of people of the state.

In the context of this background, "Role of the Muslim in the Politics of Assam" is an interesting subject that needs comprehensive study for understanding the politics of Assam as a whole. Therefore it is necessary that a study on the geography, demographic features including those of Muslims in Assam, population, literacy, pattern of migration, sects, nature of social composition and the significance of the Muslims in the politics of the state of Assam has to be made for clear conception of the topic.
Geography of Assam:

Assam is located in the far North-East part of the country and situated within the longitude 90°E to 96°E and latitude 24°N to 28°N. The area of the state is 78,523, square kilometers as against the country’s total area of 3,280,483 square kilometers. Thus, the state constitutes 2.39% of the total land area of the country. Population of Assam stood at 266.38 lakhs as on 1st March, 2001 as per 2001 census. Assam is situated at the North-Eastern Himalayan sub-region of India. The state is bounded by Bangladesh on the West and South and is very near to Burma (Myanmar) on the East and to Tibet, Bhutan and China on the North. Internally, the state has a common boundary with Nagaland, Tripura, Mizoram, Meghalaya, West Bengal and Auranachal Pradesh. (Dhar, P.K. 2002. P-28)

Assam plains comprising the plains areas of various plains districts which are 25 in number such as Goalpara,
Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Kamrup (City), Kamrup (rural), Barpeta, Nalbari, Darrang, Sonitpur, Dhemaji, Marigaon, Nagaon, Golaghat, Jorhat, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Baska, Chirang and Udalguri in the Brahmaputra valley and in the Surma (Barak) valley the plains districts are Cacher, Karimganj and Hailakandi. Asom’s hill comprise of two districts, namely, the karbi Anglong district and the North Cacher hills district. Thus, the Brahmaputra valley comprising 23 districts of plain areas and 2 districts of hill areas has a total area of 71,582 square kilometers and the Barak valley comprising 3 districts has a area of 6,941 square kilometers. The Brahmaputra is the main major river of Assam which links all the plain districts excepting the districts of Barak valley and it has flown down through Bangladesh to the Bay of Bengal. The another major river the Barak is flowing through the districts of Cacher and Karimganj. The population of Asom is composed of heterogeneous elements of different races, castes, languages and cultures. There are different types of tribal population in Assam and they speak
different languages and profess different faiths. Every tribe has its own peculiarities and peculiar social institutions. Now-a-days, it is observed that the old type of static society is fast disintegrating in Assam and a new society with modern outlook is emerging which has influence in determining the life and shape of the economy and social system of the people of the state. (Dhar, P.K. 2002, P- 28-29)

**Religious composition of Assamese Society:**

The society of Assam consists of social groups having diverse religion, culture, language and ways of life. Successive waves of migration at different times and from different directions (that is, China, India, Burma and Tibet since ancient times made the population of Assam diverse with a multiplicity of race, religion and culture. Assam is called a mini-India, having the replica of plural social trait of Indian society. Though, we find the presence of the Aryan groups composed of various castes and groups, it
must be admitted that an overwhelming majority of the social groups of Assam belongs to Mongoloid groups. This has been the most distinctive feature of Assam’s demography and society since ancient times. All the Mongoloid groups who came to Assam at different stages of time, belonged to the Tibeto-Burman stock and very distinctively, the Ahoms belonged to the Sino-Tai linguistic family. Despite its Mongoloid predominance Hinduism too played a very important role, as it could embrace most of the Mongoloid groups living in the Brahmaputra valley into its fold through the on going process of Sanskritisation. Though the caste system in Assam was relatively less rigid as compared to the rest of India, yet the Brahmins and other high castes played a very significant elite role in the society. During the later stages of the Ahom rule, the Brahmins priest could successfully reduce the importance of the traditional Ahom priest. As a result of the Pan-Indian Bhakti Movement, Vaisnavism attained popularity in medieval Assam. Prior to the emergence of Vaisnavism, the Shaktism/Shakticul (Worshiping the mother Goddess in
various manifestations) was dominant. Saint Sankerdeva (1449-1568) popularized Vaisnavism among the masses in Assam. Gradually, the Satras (Monastries of Vaisnavism became popular and powerful institutions. However, it would be relevant to record here that with the emergence of the Vaisnavism, the Asamiya language, literature and performing arts like dance and drama developed very significantly. The popularity of Vaisnavism with its rich culture backed by a rich literature helped in reducing the gap of Assam’s isolation from India. It also obviously helped in stabilizing the society in Assam. The Assamese nationality is composed of the caste Hindu Assamese like Brahmins, Gonaks, Kayasthas and Kalitas and non-caste Hindus like Ahoms, Koch Rajbongshis, Morans, Chutiyas, Bodo- Kacharis and Muslims. In addition, the black tribals of Assam’s tea plantations, Sikhs, Buddhists, and a few Bengali and Marwari families have become part and parcel of Asamese nationality. (Hussain Monirul, 1993, p-26-28)
It may be mentioned that among the caste Hindu Assamese, Brahmins are small in number and Kalitas are large in number. Though, the Kalitas are large in number, the society is dominated by the Brahmins because they are intellectual and the means of production are mostly controlled by them.

The Nepalis:

There is a sizable number of Nepali populations in Assam. The Nepalis by religion are Hindus but by race and culture they are tied to Nepal in origin. Their fore-fathers have come to Assam from Nepal and Bhutan and have permanently settled down in the state of Assam. They speak, Nepali language at home though they have accepted the Assamese as their mother tongue. It is a fact that though they have accepted Assamese as their mother tongue yet they maintain their own identity as Nepali. They are predominately inhabited in certain district of Assam like Sonitpur, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Tinsukia, Barpeta,
Kokrajhar etc. There is less conflict between them and the indigenous Assamese people except on the issue of foreign nationals. It has been alleged that many Nepalis have entered into Assam without the restricted area permits, either from Nepal or Bhutan. The Nepalis also were made targets of attack during the Assam Movement. In order to safeguard their constitutional rights, the Nepalis have performed an organization named as the All-India Immigrant Nepali Association (AIENA). The Nepali students of Assam have their own organization, which is known as the Assam Nepali Students’ Union (ANSU) working for the interest of the Nepali people of Assam. (Borooah, G.L, 1985, P-57-58)

There is another ethnic group in Assam, though small in number, which has recently added a new dimension to the identity crisis in the state. This group is known as Southals. They inhabitate in the district of Kokrajhar of Assam. They own their origin to the tribal people of Jharkhand state. In their bid to preserve their racial identity
they are opposing the creation of the Bodo Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD) Council.

**The Tribals:**

The different tribal groups of Assam are an inseparable part of the greater Assamese society. Moreover, they have a significant role in the politics of Assam. At present there are altogether 23 tribal groups distinctly different from each other having been recognized by the Government. They may be divided into two groups – (A) the Plain Tribes and (B) The Hill Tribes. The Plain tribes include – 1. The Bodos, 2. The Missings, 3. The Rabhas, 4. The Deoris, 5. The Sonowal Kacharis, 6. The Tiwas, 7. The Barmans, 8. The Hajongs, 9. The Mech.

The Hill Tribes included –


Altogether, there are 66 groups in the hill tribes but the Karbis and the Dimasas are the main hill tribe group. (Burman, Shivanath, 1995, p-3-11)

Assam had a tribal population of 16,06,648 and their percentage of the total population is 11% as per 1971 census. But, as per 1991 Census report, the scheduled tribes population has gone up to 2,8,74,441 and their percentage of the total population is 12.83%. As per 1971 census report, the growth percentage was 10.99% and as per 1991 census report, it has come up to 12.83%, so, the percentage of decadal growth is 1.84%. In the plains, the Bodos, the Missings, the Sonwals, the rabhas and the Tiwas have demographically occupied the first, second, third, fourth and fifth position respectively. These tribals stand at lower levels in relation to one another in terms of social, cultural, political and economical development. Besides, their level of assimilation with and exclusion from the Assamiyas also
very drastically. For example, the Sonowals and the Mechès of upper Assam have completely assimilated and identified with the Assamiyas. The Bodos have developed their language in Devanagari script which becomes the medium of instruction up to the secondary school level in the Bodo dominated areas. The Missings have very recently adopted the Roman Script for developing their own language. From 1986, the Missing language has been introduced at the primary level in the Missing dominated area. Besides, the Deoris, Tiwas and the Rabhas have adopted the Assamiya’s script for developing their respective language. Though some of the plains tribals have become very conscious about their distinct identity and language, it must be admitted honestly that all of them have been contributing very significantly to enrich the composite Assamese culture, language, literature, arts and nationality. The late Bishnuprashad Rabha, a tribal communist leader, became a towering figure in the modern Assamese literature performing arts like music, culture and Cinema. Bishnuprashad Rabha is regarded as the Kalaguru of

The growth of population has affected the state only due to the absence of proper industrialization. The density of population has also increased in Assam. According to 1991 census, the density of the All India Average of per square K.M. The density in hills is still very low, that is, between 16 to 37 persons per square K.M. but regarding the Brahmaputra valley, it would be much higher than the All India average. The rapid growth of population has increased the pressure on land. Among all the districts of Assam, Nowgong ranks first regarding density of population which was 302 persons per square K.M. in 1971 and the other places are Kamrup (289), Caher (246), Goalpara (215) Sibsagar (204) Dibrugarh (201), Darrang (198), Lakhimpur (126), and Karbi Anglong (16). In 1991, the density of population of Dhubri district was highest per square K.M. i.e., 470 persons and the lowest was recorded in North
Cacher district, i.e, 31 persons per square K.M. (Dhar, P.K, 2002, P-47)

One may imagine that Assam's average size of land holding is only 1.47 hectares, the per captia cultivable land is only 0.19 hectares, and the per Captia net shown areas is only 0.9 hectares against the All India average of 2.30, 0.32 and 1.8 hectares respectively. All these show severe pressure on land. Much more pressure on land is there only because of the slow rate of industrialization, urbanization and non-application of modern technology in agriculture.

The Indian state adopted the path of development for the country is capitalist in nature because private capitalists were given the significant role in modernizing the economy, which created severe regional disparities. For that matter, Assam has remained a depressed region. Assam is in a strategically sensitive region, stands near the border of four foreign countries like China, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Burma (Myanmar). With political disturbances, perennial flood and underdevelopment of roads, railways,
power, communications and institutional facilities it has failed to pave the way for economic development. Though the state has rich water, mineral resources and forest but still it remains agriculturally and industrially backward. The economy of Assam predominantly is based on agriculture. According 1971 census 55.86% people engaged as cultivators, 9.92% as agricultural labourers and 10.91% as workers were engaged in plantation. Assam has a problem of perennial floods caused by Brahmaputra and other rivers. Thus, one may say that the failure to control the Brahmaputra has kept Assam agriculturally backward. Fertilizers are also playing an important role but due to its low consumption the agricultural sector also remained very low as compared to Indian agricultural situation.(Ibid, 2002, P-66-70).

In order to understand the economic situation of Assam, it is necessary to look into the development of the industrial sector in addition to that of agriculture. Though oil (petroleum) industry and the plywood industry have
some growth but tea is the major industry in Assam. The number of tea estates and the area covered by tea plantation had increased. It may be observed that the annual profit from the tea gardens of Assam is more than the total annual reveries of Assam in several times. Though, Assam produces about 55% of India’s total production of tea, yet is deprived over benefits and share. In 1889 at Digboi petroleum was first discovered accidentally and a refinery established there in 1901 which is the oldest in the country. As we are aware, India is dependent on imports in crude oil. Till 1977, Assam produced half of the total crude oil produced in India and also produced half of the total natural gas till 1979. The Government of India nationalized the Assam Oil Company and Oil India Limited in 1981. But the oil industry did not develop in Assam. Due to the agitation of the people of Assam, the government of India decided to establish a small refinery at Noonmati near Gauhati and another was established at Bongaigaon. In 1998-99, Assam produced about 16.0 percent of total petroleum crude (32.72 million tones) produced in India. In
1981, total production of these refineries was 15.7 lacs tones and then it increased 52.5 lacs tones in 1998. At present a total of 611 mills and factories including paper, matches and plywood are running depending upon the forest products in the state.

The Muslims:

Historical background of Muslims of Assam:

The Muslims started entering Assam from the time Muhammed-bin-Bakhtiar attacked Kamrup (Assam) in 1206 A.D. but he was defeated. His second attack was in 1227 A.D. The commander-in-Chief was Ewaz Khan who went upto Nowgong district, the central part of Assam. In the same year, Nasiruddin attacked Kamrup and defeated the King Prethu. In this way Muslims came as invaders, some of them were defeated while others could establish their rule in some parts of Assam especially in Hajo. Thus, some Muslims remained willingly while others remained as captives. They got mixed up with local Assamese people
and married their girls to live in Assam permanently. The Muslims, thus, entered Assam as conquerors, administrators, preachers and invitees of the local kings. Most of them settled in Assam permanently. Due to the propagation of Islam by different 'Peers', preachers and Saints, hundreds of lower caste Hindus and tribals embraced Islam. In this way the number of Muslims in Assam increased. In 1682 A.D. there was a war between the Ahoms (Assamese) and Mughals in which the latter was defeated. There after, the Mughals did never try to attack Assam again. Assam was completely a sovereign country, ruled by the Ahoms for more than 600 years. But after the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 Assam passed on to the control of the British India. In order to increase revenues and taxes and also for administration, the British government brought some literate Bengali Hindus to different posts, poor labourers for tea cultivation and Bengali Muslims, for jute cultivation in Assam. Almost all the Bengali Hindus and Bengali Muslims were from Bengal. A few of them came from Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. With the
beginning of the 20th century it was seen that there was the Bengali galore in the state of Assam in various fields of administration, railway, post office law, teaching and primary medicine. The British Government encouraged them to settle in Assam permanently. At that time Assam was very thinly populated. Local Assamese were not sufficient and well up for the different purposes of the British Government. The Muslims of East Bengal were expert in cultivation. The soil of Assam was very fertile, where varieties of crops were expected to produce. There were thousands of acres of wasteland in Assam. So, Bengali Muslim cultivators were invited by the British Government to settle in Assam for cultivation. The Government gave allotment of Khas land to them. These opportunities attracted Muslims of Bengal to migrate to Assam. In this way the Muslims of Bengal started to come to Assam for permanent settlement, like the Hindus. In this connection, it may be mentioned that East Bengal was a part of undivided India till 1947. Moreover, in 1905 Assam was tagged with East Bengal in order to make the greater province of Assam
and East Bengal under a Chief Commissioner with Dacca as its capital. This arrangement lasted till 1912. Thus, the inter state migration took place during this period in large numbers and moreover, such migration continued till the independence of India. (Ahmed, S.U, 1999, P-1-3)

The Government of India Act, 1935 provided for full fledged autonomy system at the provincial level. Sir Mohammed Sadullah was popularly associated with the All India Muslim League and supported the movement of partition. He was able to form a League Ministry in Assam in 1937. During his days as head of Assam Government, he took particular interest in planning and development, rural uplift, eradication of unemployment, land reforms and promotion of cottage industries. For the development of low lying regions of Brahmaputra and Barak valley, he favoured and encouraged immigration of peasants from Bengal, who were particularly expert in jute cultivation. The Government of Assam not only encouraged Muslims cultivators by giving them railway concessions, but also, by
providing them 'family ticket of rupees five' for the entire family to come directly from Mymensingh to Nowgong district of central Assam. It is worth mentioning that in order to check the influx of the Muslims from the East Bengal a new device was evolved in 1916 by the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong. This new device is known as the 'Line System' and the system was introduced first in the district of Nowgong in 1920. The 'Line System' meant that the Muslims coming from East Bengal were not allowed to settle beyond a line drawn by the Government. During the second term of the premiership of Sir Mohammed Sadullah the 'Line System' was abolished in 1940. in the mean time, there was shortage of food in some provinces of India during 1942-43. Under the scheme of 'Grow More Food' Sadullah Ministry of Assam in its second term again invited Muslims cultivators of East Bengal to come to Assam, to settle at the Government waste land and to grow more food. Thus, a new process of immigration started in Assam. The influx of the Bengali Muslim from East Bengal to Assam virtually ended with the
attainment of independence and the partition of India.
(Datta, P.S, 1993, P-125-127)

**Nature of Social Composition of Muslims:**

Muslims of Assam can be grouped into three categories.

1. Garia, Maria and other contemporary Muslims.
2. Assam origin Muslims or local converted Muslims.
3. Miah Muslims or migrated Muslims of Bengal.
4. The Barak Valley Muslims.

The word 'Garia' is related to Muslims of Assam. A good number of Muslims in Assam are commonly known as 'Garias'. The word 'Garia' has been derived from the word 'Gour' the capital of the Sultans of Bengal. Muslims who came from ancient 'Gour' (Bengal) to Assam were popularly known as 'Gouria'. Later on, they came to be known as 'Garia'. According to Sir Edward Gait, "The ordinary Muhammedians of Assam call themselves 'Garia', an
indication of their claim to have come originally from ‘Gour’, the ancient Muhammadian capital of Bengal,” (Ahmed, S.U, 1999, P-6). ‘Marias’, a section of Muslims of Gaour origin are known as ‘Maria’ because they specialize in making brass and articles of brass. According to the Assamese dictionary, ‘Hema Kosh’, Maria means “a class of Muhammedians who worked in brass’, (Idid, 1999, P-8). The word ‘Maria’ has been derived form an Assamese word ‘Mar’ or ‘Mariua’ means “to beat or to strike with a stick”. They had their own language but gradually they assimilated with Assamese. Kaliabor of Nowgong district of Assam was their first place of settlement. According to the Census report of 1991, there are 55 villages of Maria Muslims in Assam. They are economically very poor in comparison to other communities, in Assam. The Government of Assam, therefore, categorized them as most other backward community (M.O.B.C) in Assam. With the advent of Muslims in Assam the process of
Islamisation had started. Many Peer, Ghazi, Aulia, Dorbash, Saint, preacher and propagator also entered in Assam. Their aims and purposes were to propagate Islam among the non-Muslims. Existing caste system in Hindu society and contemporary social conditions had permitted low caste Hindus and tribals to accept the religion of Islam. Thus, many local people of Hindu origin were converted to Islam. Though, they were converted as Muslims, they retained Assamese language, culture and way of life. So, it is very difficult to find out a difference between an Assamese Hindu and an Assamese origin Muslims excepting their religion. Shahabuddin Talish, a famous historian, who came to Assam at the time of Mirjumla, wrote that, “As for the Mussolmain’s who had been taken prisoner in former times and had chosen to marry here, their descendents act exactly in the manner of the Assamese and had nothing of Islam except the name; their hearts are inclined far more towards mingling with the Assamese than toward

There was another kind of Muslims known as the Miyan Muslims or migrated Muslims from East Bengal. These Muslims who were poor cultivators in East Bengal had migrated to Assam for economic reasons. As they were expert in jute cultivation the local Assamese also welcomed and embraced them, calling them Miyan. ‘Miyan’ means ‘gentlemen’ or ‘middlemen’. They had their way of life similar to the Bengali culture and Bengla was their mother tongue. They have settled in the Brahmaputra valley, particularly in the ‘Char’ areas of Assam. Since 1951 census they have accepted Assamese as their mother tongue. Today, the Assamese language is in majority because of the acceptance of the language as mother tongue by the immigrant Muslims. The immigrant Muslims have contributed a lot to the development of Assamese language and culture. But inspite of that
they have become targets of harassments in the name of foreigners in the state of Assam. (Alom, Fakhrul, 2004, p-11-17).

There is another group of Muslims population in Assam migrating from Bihar, UP etc. providing of India. They are called Bihari Muslims and they speak Hindi & Urdu language. Their number is not much. Some of them stay in Assam permanently, but majority of them come here for earning money as labour, like labour, barber, coolie, rickshaw pullers thelawales and wage-labours. They do not stay for permanently. There is another group of Muslims living in Barak Valley. They speak Bengali as mother tongue. They are second to the Immigrant Muslims in number.

**Population and literacy of Muslims in Assam:**

The Muslims population in Assam has risen to 30.4% of the total population of the state as per 2001
census. The Muslims of Assam are of three categories in view of their culture, language, and ways of life. The indigenous Assamese Muslims who are original residents in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam are having similarities in respect of their language, culture and ways of life with the indigenous Assamese speaking Hindu people. The second group of the Muslims population lives in the Barak valley of Assam whose mother language is Bengali and having affinity with Bengali culture and ways of life. The third group of the Muslim population is known in Assam as the immigrant Muslims who have migrated from the province of East Bengal of undivided India (present Bangladesh) to the Brahmaputra valley of Assam in the first part of the twentieth century and settled down in that valley. Although their mother tongue was Bengali but since the 1951 census they have recorded their mother tongue as Assamese but they still maintain Bengali culture and ways of life. The immigrant Muslims of Assam are the largest
group among the Muslim population of the state. It may be said that the immigrant Muslims of Assam have contributed a lot to the development of the Assamese language as it is they who have kept Assamese language as majority in the state. Excepting the five upper Assam districts namely, Sisagar, Golaghat, Jorhat, Dibrugarh and Tinukia, the immigrant Muslims population is found more or less in the remaining districts of the Brahmaputra valley. The lower and central Assam of the Brahmaputra valley have heavy immigrant Muslims population, although a large number of them have settled even in the districts of Tezpur, Demaji also.

Assam has witnessed a record growth of Muslims population in the country and is second to only Jammu and Kashmir in terms of proportional growth, with 30.9% percent of the state's population being recorded as, according to the census report on religion. According to the report, Six districts of
Assam are Muslim majority while rest of the 19 districts are Hindu majority.

### District-wise distribution of population in Assam:

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<tr>
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<td>North Cacher Hills</td>
<td>131429</td>
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<td>Cacher</td>
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<td>522051</td>
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</table>

According to 2001 census, Assam's population was 2.66 crore out of which 1,72,96,455 were Hindus and 82,40,611 were recorded as Muslim population. The proportion of other religions were Christians (9,86,589), Sikhs (22,579), Buddhists (51029) and Jains (23,957). Countrywide, Assam is second to Jammu and Kashmir in terms of proportional growth of Muslims. With 67 percent of its population being Muslims, the state of Jammu and Kashmir has the highest Muslim population in the country and is a Muslim majority state. West Bengal with 25.2 percent of its population being recorded as Muslims closely follows Assam. In the North-East, Tripura and Manipur have a significant Muslim population with percentage of Muslim population covering around 8 percent.

In Assam, Barpeta district has the highest Muslim population in the state with 97,79,436 being Muslims and 6,62,066 recorded as Hindus. The Muslim majority districts are Dhubri, Goalpara, Barpeta, Karimganj and Hailakandi.
Assam and Meghalaya are among the eight states in the country, which have more than 20 percent of child population among the Muslims. The Muslim population on the other hand, grew by 36.0 percent during 1991-2001, compared to 34.5 percent during 1981-1991. (The Assam Tribune, September 8, 2004).

**Economic conditions of Muslims in Assam:**

Sound economy is the most important factor of development. Without the development of sound economy, no community can develop itself educationally, socially and culturally. Muslims of Assam not only educationally backward but also backward socially and economically for long time.

The establishment of Muslims in Assam was not on solid grounds. They remained weak economically from the very beginning. A small number of Mughals, who settled here permanently, were economically weak. Low caste Hindus and tribals who embraced Islam were also poor and
backward. Muslims who migrated from East Bengal to Assam were mainly poor cultivators. Most of them settled at pasture-land, wasteland and riverine areas. They are affected by floods every year. They still build and rebuild after every flood and are to change their places of residence very frequently because of erosion of rivers and other factors related to their poor economic conditions. Therefore, their economic condition remain weak. It is thus obvious that the Muslims are economically weak from the very beginning of their settlement in Assam. Many people who are living in riverine (Char) areas, are suffering from extreme poverty. In an economic survey it is recorded that 70% percent of the Muslims of the 'Char' areas are below poverty line. Moreover, the literacy rate of these people is around 19% percent. (Ahmed S.U, 1999, P-297).

Illiteracy among Muslims was high. Large member of Muslims, who migrated from East Bengal were cultivators and daily labourers. They did not feel about the need of education. They were busy in earning money for their
livelihood. They are satisfied if their children could earn some money. No programme was taken up during the British period in Assam for removal of illiteracy from among the Muslim community. After independence, the socio-economic and educational conditions of the Muslims have changed to a certain extent, but not so much satisfactory compared to other communities. Assamese Hindus are far advanced than the Muslims in respect of economic conditions. Even, socially and politically they are far better than the Muslims of Assam. The Assamese Hindus get administrative support as, almost 98% of the different departments and agencies of the government belongs to Hindu community.

A large number of Muslims have no land for cultivation. The number of landless people in Muslim community is greater than any other community of the state. The Muslims living in the riverine char areas are yet to get permanent patta of the lands they are holding, which stand in their way of getting bank loans and other facilities
of the government. These facilities are also responsible for their economic backwardness. Most of them are living in riverine areas on river-banks or in waste lands. Majority of the Muslims of Assam are cultivators and daily wage labourers. They are more expert particularly in Jute and Ahu paddy cultivation than the Hindus. They produce more food grains even from the waste land, river-banks, riverine and low lying areas. However, the methods of cultivation they follow are ancient. The system of irrigation is lacking in their area for which they can not produce crops as expected. Most of the cultivators can not purchase modern machinery and tools for cultivation, because they are poor and economically weak. Governments are not providing them sufficient loans whatever little previsions are made by the Government. Moreover, the poor peasants can not get loans etc. due to the corruption of some bank managers and other employees of the Government. Even in the market, the poor peasants in general and the Muslims in particular, do not get proper price of their farm products. The poor peasants can not hold and stock their produce due to their
poverty. They have to sell their produce in order to meet their day to day needs. So, they have to sell their goods at lower price immediately after its production. Due to these various reasons, Muslim peasants could not improve their economic conditions even though they produce much more as compared to the others. (Taher, Muhammed, 1988, the population base of Assam, February-1).

It is because of their backward socio-economic and educational conditions that the Muslims feel that they must play active and positive role in politics in order to bring them to the level of development of other community of the state. Moreover, because of challenges to their citizenship rights, existence and political empowerment as come from time to time from certain anti Muslim organizations of the state, the Muslims feel the need of their active involvement in politics to be reckoned as a political balancing force so that no political party can ignore the interests of the Muslims of Assam whether it is in power or not. In addition to their community interests, the Muslims have played an
active role in the over-all development of the state of Assam. In the Pre-independence days the Muslim participated in the freedom struggle, and the Muslim leaders like Muolana Taibullah and Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed did a lot in saving Assam from the conspiracy of including Assam into Pakistan through the grouping plan of the British. During the language movement in 1960 the Muslims of the Brahmaputra Valley unitedly sided with the Assamese Hindus in support of the Assamese language to be the state language of the state. During the medium movement in 1972 the Muslims again stood solidly behind the Assamese speaking Hindus in favour of the Assamese language to be the medium of instruction of schools and colleges of the state. So, at any period of crisis and question of survival to Assamese live, language and culture, the Muslims of Assam never lagged behind in protesting the interests of the Assamese speaking people.
The socio-economic profile enables us to understand the origins of Muslim organizations which play an important role as interest groups or pressure groups.