CHAPTER-I

INTRODUCTION

The Maria is the oldest Muslim settlers of Assam. The Muslims of Assam may broadly be divided into two categories: indigenous and outsiders. The indigenous Assamese Muslims are the oldest settlers which constitute one of the important segments of Assamese Society. The Muslims outsiders include those who have migrated from other part of India as well as from Bangladesh. Among the Muslims now living in Assam, we may found three social groups- Syed, Sheikhs and Marias. The Syeds claim to be the descendants of the Arabs, the Seikh are supposed to be the local converts who are primarily cultivators (Ali: 1994). The Marias are also local converts, but there are some interesting aspects of their life and background which differ significantly from the other two groups of the Assamese Muslims. The Marias are considered as the earliest Muslims settlers in the Assam valley. They derive their name from their profession in making brass utensils by heating (Mar’ in Assamese means to beat). These people originally a band of Muslims invaders who came to Assam under the leadership of Turbak who was sent by Kushal Khan, the then Nawab of Gaur. They were defeated by the Ahom soldiers during the Ahom monarch Shuhungmung (Saikia, 1986:192) in the third decade of the 16th century at Dikraimukh. Many of them were slaughtered and the rest were taken to the Ahom King as captives. The Ahom King later released them and allowed them to settle in Assam. As they were warriors they did not know any other works other than fighting. They were first employed as the keepers of the royal elephant, and then engaged in-
agriculture. But as they were not found fit for any of these vocation, they were subsequently left to their own choice of profession of braziers. They got married with local Assamese woman as they did not bring any woman with them. Gradually they learn the Assamese language as well as they adapted Assamese culture as a way of life.

Due to the intermarriage and integration with the local Assamese people many changes have taken place in their society. It is noticed that they forgotten many of the orthodox habits of the Muslims. Even they neglected circumcision, the male initiation rite. The women are also free from the Pardah system as found in other Muslim communities. This Maria community has developed their own dialect. While they speak among themselves, the elderly persons use their own dowan or dialect. But in recent time, the Marias again came under gradual process of change towards Muslim customs. As the Muslims do not take them as true Musalmans, the Marias now want to upgrade their social status to make themselves equal with other Muslims. The Marias of Assam are economically very backward. They have been listed in More Other Backward Classes (M.O.B.C) category. Thereby they are entitled to avail certain benefits enjoyed by other M.O.B.C people. The Marias of Assam have their own association named as “Sadau Assam Annyanya Ati Pishpara Maria (Musalman Sampraday)”. This association looks after the welfare of 2.5 lakhs of Marias living in different districts of Assam.

Here the researcher for her present thesis selected two districts of Assam namely Kamrup (undivided) and Nogaon where large concentrations of Maria people are found.

Kamrup (undivided) district is situated on the south-west direction of Assam. Highest population is seen in this district (25,15,030). The density of the population is...
579 per sq.K.M of area. Literacy rate is 74.69% whereas the male literacy is 81.24% and that of female 67.01%. Guwahati, Rangia and Pragjyotispur are the three subdivision of this district. The boundary of the Kamrup district is as follows- in the north the state of Bhutan, on the south Meghalaya, on the west Goalpara and Nalbari districts of Assam and on the east Darrang and Nagaon districts. The famous Kamakhya temple, the temple Basistha, the Haigrib Madhav and Poamocca of Hajo etc are situated in this district. Sualkuchi, the place famous for golden silk of Assam is also a part of this district.

Nagaon is situated on central part of Assam. In the north the river mighty Brahmaputra, on the east Jorhat and Karbi-Anglong district, on the west Marigaon and Karbi-Anglong and on the south, North Kachar and Karbi-Anglong districts are situated. Here the density of population is the highest (604 person/sq.K.M). The subdivisions of the districts are Nagaon, Hojai and Kaliabor. The population is 23,15,387. The literacy rate is 62.28%. Male literacy rate is 68.52% and that of the female is 55.57%. Nagaon town is situated at 123 K.M distance from Guwahati city. The Bardowa Satra, the birthplace of Mahapurukh Sankardev is situated at a distance of 14K.M from here. One sugar mill and one jute mill are the two industries of this district.

Objectives of the study

At present 2.5 lakhs of Marias are living in different districts of Assam. But not a single researcher has taken up this community for a PhD work or for a full fledged study of this community has been conducted. Though their religion is Islam many of their customs are not related to the Muslims. Traditionally expert in brass metal work but now integrating with other people they have been changing their life-
Economically very backward and still they were not getting proper attention from the Government, their economic condition is deteriorating day-by-day. Their traditional brazier techniques are also fast disappearing from their way of life. Therefore, the researcher feels that before changing the whole pattern of life, proper study of the community is very important and hence the socio-economic study of the people was taken into consideration. As the whole community is scattered over nine districts of Assam, within the stipulated time complete study of the whole area is not possible. For this reason emphasis is given on two districts namely Nogaon and Kamrup. The main objective of the study is to know their origin, distribution and socio-economic aspects of the community.

In social aspects the researcher studied about the educational status, the marriage system, the family pattern, kinship, descent, inheritance of property etc.

In the economic aspects, occupational status and changing of the pattern to new means of livelihood is studied. The reason for changing the occupational pattern is also shown.

The comparative study of various socio-economic aspects in rural and urban situation is also another objective of the study.

Justification

As it is mentioned in the introduction it is felt that it will be interesting to study the Maria community who are scattered in different part of Assam. Furthermore, the study of the socio-economic life of the Marias of Assam as a whole is not undertaken by anybody as a research topic. So the question of continuity and change of occupation of brass metal works of these people, what are the problems of continuing with the old tradition, why these are changed in both rural and urban areas, what are
the probable alternative occupations undertaken by the Marias, arises. All these questions and their practical solutions are considered by this researcher and such a study will enrich our knowledge and help in better understanding of the problems of these people. As the researcher intends to study the social and economic life of the Marias, the present study will cover the socio-economic life of the community as found in present time. It will be also useful in future for other researchers and development workers, planners etc. to do further research and far development work on this community as a whole.

Methodology

The present study on the Marias of Assam is of empirical nature. The researcher mainly depends on her own field-work. It was done in phased manner. At the beginning of the work a survey was conducted to locate the Maria people all over Assam. After the survey and the study of the relevant records from various sources, it was found that majority of the people were living in Kamrup and Nogaon districts. Therefore, in the second phase of the work, the researcher selected these two districts for detail study. It was not possible to do field-work in all the areas within a short period.

A schedule was prepared for collecting primary data from these areas. Majority of the Marias are living in rural areas. But there are people of this community living in urban areas. Therefore both rural and urban areas are selected for data collection. These are presented in tabular form whenever found necessary.

Other anthropological methods like observation, case study, group discussion, questionnaire etc. were also used for gathering information and understanding their
family, marriage, Kinship and economic life. The data have been analyzed by statistical method and interpretations have been made in a scientific manner.

**Review of Literature**

A few writing have had been published on the Maria community of Assam as not much research have been done on this people. The following works on the Marias of Assam are published from time to time. The pioneering work of Robinson (1841) Gait (1963) and some other’s work can be mentioned.

W. Robinson does not at all consider them as a section of the Musalman people. He described these as a very impure tribe. The Marias being the earliest Muslims settlers in the eastern part of Assam, might have become adept in Assamese customs, manners and mode of life and like their Hindu brethren, looked down upon the Musalman invaders of Assam most of whom were Mughal by blood. They were consequently also held in contempt by those Muslims of Mughal stock that came and settled in Assam in later periods. It was probably of them in particular that Shihabuddin Talish, the chronicler of Mirjumla, said that they were Musalmans only in name and they knew nothing about Islam.

Gait (1963) mentioned in his article “The manufacture of Brass, and copperwares in Assam” published in the Journal of Indian Art and Industry that “The manufacture of Brass utensils on the other hand, enjoys the distinction of being the only industry of the part which is appropriated by a particular caste. It is the traditional occupation of the Marias who has a very particular history. The Assam Buranjis (historical narratives) state that they are the descendants of prisoners captured by the Ahom Kings during Turbak’s unsuccessful invasion of their territory about 1506AD. These prisoners it is said were at first employed as grass cutters of the state elephants, but proved so useless that they were soon employed instead as cultivators but at this
work also they proved utterly useless. They were then left to their own devices with the result that they adopted brass working as a means of earning a living and on this occupation they are still exclusively employed. Cases in which Marias have taken to agriculture are very rare. Saikia (1986) mentioned in his thesis “Assam Muslim relation and its cultural significance” that Marias are regarded as a section of Mohammadan of a lower social order brought as captives from Turbak’s army, after the victory of the Ahom monarch Suhungmung in the third decade of the sixteen century. According to traditions they were first employed as keepers of the royal elephant and then engaged in agriculture. But as they were not found fit for any of these vocations, they were subsequently left to their own choice of profession and it is thus that they adopted the profession of brazier.

In census of India 1981, Part-XD series 3 Assam, Handicraft survey Report: Brass Metal Industry of Niz Hajo published in 1988 drafted by Dr S.K.Baruah then Investigator, edited by N.Bhattacharjee, Asst Director of census operation and supervised by J.C.Bhuyan, Dy Director of census operation, it is written that the Marias are the traditional artisans of brass works in Assam. They have practiced the craft as their traditional occupation since many centuries. Marias are regarded as a section of Mohammadans of a lower social order. It is said that Marias are survivors of the army of Muslim general ‘Turbak’ who invaded Assam in the 16th century. The Marias have a history of their own. Then Dr S.K.Baruah gives an extract from the ‘Reprint on the caste and tribes of Assam from chapter IV of the report of the census of Assam, 1881’ incorporated in the report of census of India 1961, Assam, volume III, pt V-A- Scheduled caste and scheduled tribes’.

The extract is as follows -
"The native history of Assam relates that in the spring of 1510AD. A force was sent into Assam by Gaureswar or the ruler of Gaur, a title which was notwithstanding its Hindu etymology was commonly used in Assam to donate the head of the Musalman dominion in Bengal. The commando of the force was a personage named Turbak, who is still remembered by the Marias as their traditionary leader or King. He fought his war up to the south bank as far as Kaliabor, but reinforcements were sent down from upper Assam by the Ahom King and at Dikraimukh the Bengalis were surrounded and broken. Turbak’s head with that of his colleague Nawab Khushal Khan was carried to Gargaon and formed part of a chaplet of skulls exposed by the Victorians Ahom on one of the hills near his capital. Turbak’s vanquished followers who escaped the slaughter were carried into captivity. They were employed at first in agriculture but when the harvest raised by the armour of nine hundred Marias came to be reaped, it was no more than 600 puras of rice or 20lbs per man. Being next listed as wood cutters, they brought in all kinds of wood that are useless for house building. As grass cutters to the royal elephants they proved such a ludicrous and damaging failure that the term ‘Hati Mahut’ is a by-word against Marias to this day. At last when left to themselves they choose to be braziers and braziers they are still, through they take out the profits of their trade with a little agriculture"