

The Islamic Settlement in Assam and its Early History:

A Critical Study

*Mirza Abdur Rohim Mollah Asstt. Professor
Deptt. of History
Chamaria Anchalik College, Research Scholar
Gauhati University*

Abstract

Assam, a state of India is located in one of the greatest routes of human migration of almost all the principal human races from the hoary past. People professing Islam migrated to this land in different times for different reasons. The religion propagated by Prophet Hazrat Mahammad (570 AD-632 AD) is known as "Islam" enjoyed popularity and spread rapidly in different parts of the world. The state is also not an exception to it. Assam is a multi-coloured state which saw its reach diversity in religion and culture and forms a distinct and interesting identity in the history and heritage of India. Islam is inextricable from its culture, economy and society. In Assam, while Hinduism accounts for the majority of the population, the Islamic people constitute the second largest religious minority group. The Muslims of Assam have been playing a very significant and positive role in the formation and development of the Assamese culture and society.

Keywords: Migration, Muslims, Assamese, History.

Assam, a North Eastern province of India lies in between the latitudes 28°18' and 24° North and Longitudes 89°46' and 97°4' East. She is located in one of the greatest routes of human migration. Assam saw the migration of almost all principal human races from hoary past. 1 People professing Islam immigrated to this land in different times and for different reasons. The religion propagated by Prophet Hazrat Mahammad (570 AD-632 AD) is known as "Islam" enjoyed popularity and spread rapidly in different parts of the world. Assam is also no one exception. 2 Assam is a multi-coloured state which saw its reach diversity in religion and culture froms a distinct and interesting identity in the history and heritage of India. Islam is inextricable from its culture, economy and society. In Assam, while Hinduism accounts for the majority of the population, the Islamic people constitute the second largest religious minority group. 3 The Islamic people of Assam have been playing a very significant and positive role in the formation and development of the Assamese society and its composite culture. 4

One of the prominent religions of Assam, Islam forms about 34.22 percent as per 2011 census report of Assam's population. Though Assam's contact with Islam had begun much earlier by trade relationship of Arab, 5 the early history of the Assamese Muslims, particularly their culture at the folk level is limited by the dearth of written materials. They are an integral part of Assam and its politico-economic and socio-cultural milieu. Though the Islamic people form second largest religious minority in Assam, the influence of Islam on Assamese society is much stronger. The main reason for this strong influence is that over a long period of time many Islamic rulers ruled in different parts of India. 6 On the other hand, various Islamic pious persons are said to have migrated from Middle East and taught the local people the techniques of rice farming and also taught them the rudiment of Islam. 7 As for the Turko-Afghan and the Mughal invaders who had been taken prisoner in former times and had chosen to marry here, their descendants acted exactly in the manner of the Assamese. 8 Orthodoxy and untouchability of Hinduism compel the lower caste Hindus to convert to Islam. 9 Moreover, some merchants also settled in coastal Bengal and later on, in Assam through maritime voyages for trade and business venture. During the colonial rule many of the Muslims had been pouring into Assam for growing more foods.

With regard to the village structure and physical folk-life which stand for material culture in folkloristic terminology, a socio-cultural fusion is distinctively noticeable among different communities of this region. Although due to certain historical, geographical and regional divergence, there are some variations from region to region even from area to area in respect of village structure, homestead and house types,

occupation, folk-cookery, weaving and handicrafts, garments, ornaments and so on. These variations are found to be insignificant and have not created any cultural barrier to maintain a component of homogeneity in the whole region and an indigenous flavour is also discerned among the local Muslims. The impact of the Assamese Hindus on the local Muslims regarding the aforesaid cultural aspects, which have occurred over the centuries, is an outstanding feature of the Muslim socio-cultural life of Assam.¹⁰ Some religious and social festivals celebrated by Islamic people in Assam are Maharram, Fatha-e-Dowaj Daham, Sab-e-Barat, Eid-ul-Fitre, Eid-uz-Zoha, Akika Ceremony, Circumcision ceremony (Sunnat), Islamic Religious Jalsa, Ettecaph, Chilla, and so on.

Islam starts its journey in India almost from 8th Century. History of Bengal is important for writing a history of Assam because Bengal and Assam being two land bordering states influenced each other's society and polity for a long period of time. Many times the frontiers of Assam extended into Bengal. Similarly, the frontier of Bengal penetrated into Assam. During the Turkish period, the Sufis and merchants had entered Bengal in many occasions for preaching and trading purpose.¹¹

From "Kanai Barasi Rock Inscriptions" of North Guwahati and from a literary work entitled "Tabaqat-i-Nasiri", we know that in the early part of the 13th century a group of Turko-Afghan from Delhi attacked Kamrupa. Ikhtiyar Uddin Mohammad Bakhtiyar Khiliji (1201-06) the first Muslim ruler of Bengal entered Kamrupa on his way to Tibet, when they were totally crushed. Thus, the beginning of the 13th century is a landmark in the history of Assam for concern of Islamic settlement. Ali Mech, a tribal chief of Bodo community embraced Islam and became a trusted guide of Bakhtiyar Khiliji during his campaign.¹²

In 1257 A.D. Ikhtiyar Uddin Yuzback Tughril Khan was successful in his invasion of Assam and he celebrated his conquest erecting a Masjid in North Guwahati, which was then known as Kamrupa Nagar, introduced the reading of the "Khutbah" and observance of Friday religious service.¹³

A trade relationship with a section of merchants from Arabian countries, who evidently visited the coastal Bengal, visited Assam. We have come across some evidences that an Islamic settlements took place in Sylhet District, a part of the eastwhile Kamrupa ¹⁴.

Some religious persons are said to have migrated to Assam from Baghdad and other places of undivided Arabian Country to spread the message of Islam. Thus many of the Peer penetrated in the remote areas of eastern Bengal and North-Eastern region and managed to propagate Islam. The presence of these Peer and theologians and their missionary activities are attested by the numerous local traditions also by the Dargah, Mazar, Muqams (graves) and Khanqah (hospices) associated with these peer that mushroomed far and wide in the region.¹⁵ The rulers of the land including the Ahoms also granted "Peer-Pal-Lands" (revenue-free lands), presented stipends, granted money for the maintenance of their shrines and many of them were attached to the royal court.¹⁶ They were employed to pray for the welfare of their benefactor.

In the Ahom court some Muslim religious pontiffs were attached along with the Hindu priest.¹⁷ There no restriction was imposed on their missionary activities. Thus, patronized by a section of the rulers of the land, many of the Islamic peers adopted Assam as their homeland.

Assam's relation with the Mughals that cover almost the whole of the 17th century forms an interesting subject of study in the history of pre-colonial Assam. The Mughals came into direct clash of arms with the Ahoms. During this period, some Muslim armies were arrested and later on, they settled in this land. Mir Jumla pillaged the temple of Devargaon and made the priest embrace Islam.¹⁸ Raja Ram Sing's also helped a lot in permanent settlement of a section of Muslim officials, who were appointed in different parts of newly controlled area.

Under the colonial rule, the chief commissioner of Assam encouraged some outside people to settle here for their official assistance and under the premiership of Sadullah, a large number of labourers and cultivators professing Islam were brought and provided all amenities and facilities to settle here with the slogan of “grow more food”.¹⁹ Moreover, it was the fertility of soil which attracted them. The Muslim leaders of the Brahmaputra valley also extended full support for much more immigration.

Under the above circumstances, a number of Islamic Religious establishments were grown up. The Poa-Mecca in Hajo near the celebrated Hayagriva Madhava temple claims to be the most important place of pilgrimage in Assam not only for the Muslims but also for the Hindus. The mazar of Ajan Peer at Saraguri

Chapori of Sivsagar district is also claimed to be the next. In Guwahati the Dargha of Hazrat Zahir Aulliya Khuwajagan (chisti) at Ulubari, the Jame Mosque at Panbazar, Hajarat Shaikh Jalaluddin Tabriji Dargah Sharif at Garigaon, Mazar of Makhdamshah at Hatigaon, Kamrup Nagar Mosque at North Guwahati are important religious institutions of Islam. The Mazar of Boga Fokir and Masjid of Mirzabag at Dibrugar district, the Dargah of Khondakar Peer or Abdul Goni Sahab, Nobi Peer or Saleh Peer Dargah and Bandar Peer or Sawal Peer Dargah at Sivasagar District, Laskar Shah Dargah, Lal Fokir Dargah, Kola Fokir Dargah at Golaghat, Garukata Parbat, Koliabor Masjid at Nagaon, Durgapur Dargah and Dargah of Syed Shahnur Dewan (Bhella) at Barpeta, Damdama Dargah and Peerpara than (Mirza) at Kamrup, Patrapur Masjid and Peerpai Masjid at Darang, Panjatana or Dakaidal Dargah of Degdowa pahar, Paglapeer Dargah (Dhubdara) and Mazar of Khorachani Peer and Dargah and Koborastan of Hazrat Kamal Ali Saha Baba (Jeleswar) at Goalpara, Panchpeer Dargah, Mirjumla Mosque, Panbari Masjid or Rangamati Masjid and Husaim Sawali Dargah (Gauripur) at Dhubri are also visited by innumerable pilgrims.²⁰

Finally, in Assam, Muslim community is heterogeneous in character. Unlike other religious groups of the state, they are also divided culturally and linguistically. They are historically concentrated in the South and West Assam in large number. There are nine districts in Assam where the Muslims are majority in number. These districts are Dhubri, Goalpara, Barpeta, Morigaon, Nagaon, Karimganj, Hailakandi, Bongaigaon and Darang and also some other districts in these regions have significant percentage of the Muslims.²¹ Establishment of historic Masjid, Dargah, Mazar in various places of lower Assam also proves that Assam has become richer and healthier with the establishment of the Assamese Muslim society in the Brahmaputra valley. It is likely that the Assamese Muslims who are found primarily in the northern parts of the state are descended particularly from those who embraced Islam during the earlier period. The Islamic people are well integrated with the rest of the Assamese society. Proud of their language and culture the Muslims have often been in positions of influence within the society of Assam.²²

References

1. Kar, Makhnallal. Muslims in Assam Politics. New Delhi: 1997, Pp. 1-2.
2. asih, Y. A comparative study of Religions. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Pulishers Pvt. Ltd., Reprint – 2013, P. -115.
4. Baruah, S.L. A comprehensive History of Assam. New Delhi: M.M. Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Third Edition-2003, P.-11.
5. alik, Dr. Abdul. Asamiya Mussalman : Samaj Aru Sanskritir Abhasa (A Socio-Cultural and Historical Study about Assamese Muslims). Dhing, Nagaon, Assam: Jagaran Sahitya Prakashan, 2010, P. 22-23.
6. Siraj, Minhaj. Tabqat-I-Nasiri, Trans. H.G. Raverty, Vol-I, 1970, P-557. Kakati, Devdas (Ed.). The Brahmaputra Becons. Madras, 1982, P-38.
7. Eaton, Richard. The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, Seventh impression, 2011, P-208.
8. Gait, Sir Edward. A History of Assam. Guwahati, Assam: Lawyer's Book Stall, Seventh Edition, 1997, P – 141.
9. Saikia, Dr. Nagen. Asamiya Manuhar Itihas. Katha Publications, 2013, P-110, Dr. Abdul Malik Ibid, P-122, Also see, Monoj Kumar Nath, Asomor Rajnitit Musolman, Krantikil Prakashan, Assam, P- 50

10. Ahmed, Kasim Ali. The Muslims of Assam. Guwahati: EBH Publishers, 2010, P.179. Siraj, Minhaj. Ibid, P-557.
11. Neog, Dr. Maheswar. Prashya Sassanawali. 1974, P-14.
12. S.L. Baruah, Ibid, P-175 Minhaj Siraj, Ibid, P-557
13. S.L. Baruah, Ibid, P-38
14. Barpujari, H.K. The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol.- III, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati-21, P-93, Also see, S.L. Baruah, Ibid, P-412
15. S.L. Baruah, Ibid, P-416 Ibid, P-265
16. Problem of immigration in the Brahmaputra Valley- a crisis there of , Published in the journal of North East India council for social science research, Shillong, Dec., 2006, Pp. 22-33
17. Neog, Dr. Maheswar (Ed.), Pavitra Assam, Kiran Prakashan, 2008, P-75, 88, 111, 147, 212, 262, 331, 364.
18. NIYOMIA BARTA (An Assamese Newspaper), Assam, 26 August, 2015, Pp- 1, 12.
19. as, Dr. Angshuman (Ed.), Axamar Barebaraniya Sanskriti, AANK-BAAK, Dec., - 2013, P-402.