

Muslims of Sylhet-Cachar Region : A Historical Study with special reference to the Social Stratification and Caste

Dr. Ohi Uddin Ahmed

Teacher, Digorkhal High School P.O. Kalaincherra, Dist. Cachar
(Assam) Pin. 788815

Abstract

The present Sylhet division of Bangladesh or greater Sylhet region constituted the north-eastern part of the territory of Bangladesh. Its upper valley comprise of Cachar region of southern Assam called Barak Valley. Surma Valley, the two regions collectively known so during the colonial period has been intersected by international Indo-Bangladesh border since partition was ethnically, culturally, linguistically, geographically and even ecologically a distinct region inhabited by the people speaking a distinct Bengalee dialect called Sylheti. The region experienced massive Islamization since the time of Muslim occupation of Sylhet. The Cachar region which remained under the tribal Dimasas state till the British occupation in 1830 C.E. was deeply influenced by this historical developments in Sylhet. Absence of any natural barrier between Sylhet and Cachar resulted in the large scale migration of Bengalee people during pre-colonial as well as colonial period. The Bengalee cultivators from Sylhet attracted toward Cachar due to availability of abundant uncultivated land. During colonial period, Cachar became a territory inhabited by the substantial numbers of Bengali speaking Muslims mainly migrants from Sylhet. In course of time, people from different walks of life settled in the region leading to the growth Muslim population. Our study is mainly intended to examine the historical development of Muslim society in greater Sylhet-Cachar region and the subsequent development of social stratification and caste among Muslims.

Keywords: Awlia, Anuwa, Tapadar, Lakharazdar, arzal, beel.

Introduction:

Two regions in Indian sub-continent that witnessed en masse conversion to Islam by the indigenous population were west Punjab and East Bengal. Sylhet region that constitutes north-eastern part of the territory of East Bengal and its adjoining Cachar region of present Indian territory comprised vast majority of ethnic Bengali Muslim population. This massive Islamization in the region was initiated since the time of famous sufi saint Sheikh Shah Jalal (d-1346 C.E.) whose name was associated with the annexation of Sylhet to the Muslim kingdom of Bengal. He actively participated in the Sylhet campaign of Sikandar Shah Ghazi during the time of Bengal Sultan Shams Ud-din Feroz Shah (d- 1322 C.E.) Here after, Sheikh Shah Jalal and his 360 disciples (*awliyas*) dedicated themselves to the spread and propagation of Islam among the native people. Large scale conversion to Islam took place vast majority whom were recruited from lower order of the society. Many *awliyas* associated with Sheikh Shah Jalal spread towards different directions and disseminated the message of Islam. The Cachar region under the tribal Kachari kingdom was deeply influenced by this historical development in Sylhet. Large scale migration of people from neighbouring districts of Bengal especially Sylhet took place in search of abundant uncultivated forested land. As a consequence, during the colonial period, Sylhet-Cachar region became dominated with *Bengalee* Muslim population. The Muslim population in the region emerged out of massive conversion of native people. In course of time, people from different walks of life from different regions came to settle here and merged with the local population adopting their language and culture. Even though they adopted Islam in their religious life, they remained accustomed to their pre-converted traditions and cultural practices. These Muslims in course of time got divided into various groups and sub-groups on the basis of social category according to their pre-converted status, through social mobility they attained under favourable circumstances or occupation they pursued. The pre-existing *ashraf-ajlaf* notion and the emergence of landed elite class led to the growth of complex social hierarchies. The emergence of social stratification which does merit comparison with caste prevalent among Muslims of the region was indeed, outcome of various historical factors and forces.

Historical Geography of Sylhet-Cachar Region :

The geographical and ecological background of the region shaped and reshaped the historical development of the region. The Sylhet and Cachar plain was collectively known as Surma Valley during the colonial period. It covers an area of 6668 sq. miles¹ constituted the north-eastern territory of present Bangladesh. It formed a distinctive land with its *haor*, basin and alluvial plain. The Sylhet region at present comprises the greater Sylhet division covering Sylhet, Habiganj, Sunamganj and Moulavi Bazar district. The Upper valley of Sylhet formed the erstwhile Cachar at present formed the of Indian territory comprises Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi district of southern Assam. The lower Valley of the Barak-Surma rivers consists of Sylhet was surrounded by the Indian state Meghalaya in the north, Tripura in the south, Cachar in the east, and Bangladesh district of Netrokona, Kishorganj and Brahmanbaria in the west. The Cachar plain known as Barak Valley was bounded by the hills of Mizoram, Manipur, Meghalaya and North-Cachar hills in the west, north and the eastern side while the western boundary was connected to Sylhet without any natural barrier. Indeed both the region politically remained divided for ages, geographically and ecologically Sylhet and Cachar were characterized by unprecedented uniformity with abundant water bodies like rivers and their tributaries, *beels* and

hawors, auwas etc.

The devastating seasonal flood resulting in from heavy annual rainfall (150 inches approximately) and consequent sedimentation gradually led to the formation of fertile plain in the region suitable for cultivation. Till the Muslim occupation, Sylhet region was covered by forest outgrowth that the venomous reptiles moved freely with no visible difference between natural or man made boundary. It was laying outside the pale of human habitation.² The physiography of the region as situated below the surrounding hills, the water channels sedimented the low lands led to the growth of fertile plains. The region experience hot and humid summer and heavy rainfall from June to September and moderately cold winter. The presence of eroded hills, alluvial hills, alluvial fan and basin plain constitutes its diverse landforms. The vast low lying flood plain with saucer-shaped depression or swams were locally known as *haors*.³

Both the valley lying in the neighbouring foothills, the hilly streams flowing towards the plain forms dense drainage network responsible for the devastating flood. The floodplain remained inundated for about 7-8 months. In the rainy season, the *haors* transforms into huge sea, the raised villages appeared just like Islands.⁴ The other water bodies comprises horse shoe lakes or deserted parts of the rivers locally called *anuwas*, and permanent water bodies in the swams called *beels* that cover an area of 6,000 sq. K.M. There were 35 big and 475 small *haors* in the greater Sylhet region.⁵ The word *haor* in Bengali possibly originated from the word *sagor* meaning sea.⁶ A *haor* was an wetland eco system with saucer shaped depression. W W Hunter describes the nature of Sylhet that the plain areas in Sylhet during the rainy days from about June to October turns into vast sea as a consequences of violent flow of water from the hilly streams as well as heavy local rainfall. The raised villages mostly appeared to be islands and boats served as the only means of transport.⁷ Robert Lindsay writes that he has to use his sea compass and telescope to find direction while sailing across a hoar of one hundred miles in his journey to Sylhet.⁸ In 1864 C.E. Colonel Bruce, the inspector general of India states that there was heavy flood during the summer and boat was the most important means of transportation in Sylhet. He further states that the local people were naturally 'acquatic' in habit and almost everyone was capable of boating.⁹

The Cahar region constitutes the eastern part of the Sylhet was natural continuation of Bengal Plain having no natural boundary. It covers an area covering an area of 941.2 sq. K.M. It was dotted with hollows, *beels* and swamps surrounded by the hills in its three sides. The principal river Barak in association with numerous tributaries that forms hilly streams together with heavy rainfall caused devastating seasonal flood and resulting in continuous sedimentation. Its ecology was characterized by the presence of large numbers of water bodies like swamps, *haors*, *beels* and *anuwas*. in a process of constant transformation as a consequences of the continuous deposits of silts and sediments.

Early Social Formation :

It was believed that during the ancient period, the primitive Austric people belonging to the proto-Austroloid racial type known as *Nishadas* were perhaps the first settlers in the plain swampy low land of Sylhet-Cahar region including other parts of eastern Bengal. These early settlers introduced primitive agriculture in the region, yet a section of them remained dependent on food gathering, hunting and fishing.¹⁰ Gradual Aryanization took place from mainland Bengal with the introduction of plough based agriculture. The water bodies were abundant with palatable fish while fertile plains were suitable for wet rice cultivation. Hence, fish and rice were the staple food at the same time fishing and agriculture developed as the principal occupations of the people. Many parts of present Sylhet and Mymensingh were once covered by permanent water bodies and inhabited by the indigenous fishing tribe called Kaibertas.¹¹ The other fishing and agriculturist tribes such as *Chandalas*, *Namasudra*, *Patini*, *Dom* etc. comprises sizable segment of native population less exposed to Brahminic culture. The Aryan and later the Muslim invaders held the occupation of fishing as 'low' hence, they were awarded a low position in the social scale. These native people embraced Islam in large numbers and formed the bulk of the Muslim population of the region. Since principal food of the people the fish and rice was grown abundant in the region, the Muslim society in the region came to be organized on the basis of two principal food producing activities – the cultivators locally known as *Bangal* (*Bengalee* cultivator) and Muslim Fishermen locally known as *Mahimal* and it became the very basis of Muslim social stratification. Gradually, emergence of other occupational groups along with the landed elite class resulted in the further proliferation of social order.

Spread Of Islam :

Spread of Islam in India was examined in terms of some well precised theories. But none of these theories seems to be appropriate to examine the spread of Islam in Eastern Bengal which experienced en mass conversion to Islam by the native people. Richard M Eaton (1994 C.E.) examined the spread of Islam in Bengal in terms of his famous Frontier Theory. According to this, dissemination of Islam among the indigenous people in Bengal took place in the process of extension of some pre-existing frontiers such as economic, political and cultural. The Turko-Afghan rulers after occupation of the region ushered an era of massive economic exploitation in their search of state revenue. Hence they entrusted the task to the forest pioneers or men of religion for introduction of agriculture in the forested land with a view to develop an agrarian community capable of paying revenue and village community loyal to the state. The Sufi saints or men of religious orientation including the emerging religious institutions such as mosques, *khanqahs* or shrines played the most crucial role of cultural mediator to transform the religious orientation of the agrarian village community. The farmers living in the periphery of Bengal adopted Islam, not as an emancipating ideology rather as a religion of plough breaking the bond of caste.¹²

Hence, the Sufis played the most vital role in Islamization in the region. The Sufi movement in Bengal attained utmost success due to ideological background inherent in social structure. Buddhism was quite popular in Bengal before the expansion of Islam. The Sahajya tradition of Buddhism and Bhakti movement popular at local level and Sufi mysticism all were staunchly opposed to the Brahminical supremacy played a crucial interplay of syncretism. These movements came closer to each others due to their staunch opposition to the Brahminical supremacy. Bengal in its formative period had experienced this ideological resurgence when forest pioneers carried out their economic expansion resulted the massive spread of Islam.¹³ Islamization in Bengal and more particularly in East Bengal including Sylhet-Cachar region took place in the similar context and most peacefully without any use of any force or 'blood or sword. Therefore, when the British first came to East Bengal, they simply presumed it to be a Hindu province. But the subsequent censuses proved that substantial number of population had embraced Islam.¹⁴

Spread of Islam in Sylhet-Cachar Region :

The spread of Islam in Bengal can be traced long back before the successful political conquest of Bengal by the Turko-Afghan invaders. Islam reached to the deltaic Bengal in Chittagang in connection with the Arab maritime trade even during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad. A number of Sufis and *ulema* came to Bengal to preach and propagated Islam, prominent among them were Mahi Sarwar (d. 1047 C.E) at Mahasthangorh in Bagura, Baba Adam Sahid (d. 1189 C.E.) in Dakha and Shah Sultan Rumi (d. 1353 C.E.) at Netrokona in Mymensingh.¹⁵ Besides many wandering Sufi saints might have visited Bengal including Sylhet-Cachar region during different period. But massive Islamization in the region started after advent of Sheikh Shah Jalal Muzarrod-i- Yamini (1446 C.E) whose name was associated with the successful annexation of Sylhet by Sikandar Khan Ghazi to the Muslim kingdom of Bengal. After Sylhet conquest, Shah Jalal and his 360 *awliyas* (disciples) dedicated to the propagation of Islam among the native people. His 360 disciples spread towards different nook and corners of the Sylhet-Cachar region including neighbouring areas. That is why Sylhet came to be called as the land of 360 *awliyas*. A large number of his followers settled in the present Sylhet district including Habiganj, Sunamganj, Moulavi Bazar and neighbouring Bengal districts. Many of them crossed Sylhet frontier and settled at present Cachar, Karimganj and Haiakandi district of Barak Valley. The centre of their activity gradually became the shrine (*Dargah*) locally known as *mukam* still venerated by the people irrespective of caste and creed. The shrines of Sufi saints became cult sites for the people both Hindus and Muslims.

The Muslim population in Sylhet-Cachar region was mainly recruited from the lower order of the society - farmers, hunters, artisans, fishermen, and other occupational groups. In course of time Muslims from different walks of life migrated to this land and settled here. Gradually, mixed up with the local population and adopted the language and culture of the native people.

Social Stratification and Caste among Muslims :

The word 'Social Stratification' refers to the ordering of society on the basis of a set of criteria or a single criteria to mean the relative status of an individual or group in a given society. The criterion may be wealth, occupation, race, ethnicity, colour, gender or caste. It stands for division of society into classes, sections or castes on the principle of inequality of status among persons or groups. It involves in the hierarchy of social groups on the basis of multiple factors that provides superior and inferior social status. No human society ever existed without stratification based on social ideal, unequal distribution of power, privileges and wealth etc. being a functional necessity social system.

The word 'Caste' derived from Spanish-Portuguese word 'Casta' meaning breed or race. The Spanish-Portuguese word *casta* again originated from the Latin word 'Custus' meaning pure. The Portuguese settled in Goa during the seventeenth century first used the word 'Caste' to describe various classes of Hindu society known by the name *Jati*. Therefore, the word caste is an adjustment of the Sanskrit word *jati* which the British extensively used in Indian censuses to mean different classes of people. Since ancient times, numerous such *jatis* were grouped together to form four basic *Varnas* (colour) among Hindus such as the *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and *Sudras*. Therefore, the word caste and *varna* were not same, caste refers to the *jatis* while *varnas* refers to the fourfold grouping of the numerous *jatis* among the Hindus.

Islam stress in the principle of radical social equality among all its believers. Hence it was strongly opposed to any kind of discrimination on the ground of occupation, ethnicity, colour and of course caste. The Holy Qur'an declares that human kind was created out of a single male and female (pair) that divisions of various tribes and nations were for the purpose of identification, The Most honourable with almighty will be pious believer.¹⁶ Prophet Mohammad said to have declared that weeping loudly before a dead body and to despise someone on the basis of his birth leads people to the infidelity.¹⁷ In *Hujjat-ul-weda*, he said to have declared that no Arab was superior to the non-Arab, no non-Arab was superior to the Arab, no white men were superior to the black men, no black men were superior to the white men. The only criterion of superiority was piety.¹⁸ Hence Islam denounced any kind of discrimination on the basis of caste, colour, ethnicity or occupation and declared them as *haram* (prohibited) and prescribed for egalitarian social order. The social principle of egalitarianism was strictly acted upon during the lifetime of Prophet Mohammad.

But as Islam spread to the distant land beyond Arabia, social inequalities and hierarchies re-appeared due to its contact with other cultures, conversion of millions of non-Arab tribes to Islam, emergence feudal institutions associated with the emergence of Umayyad Chalapaht.¹⁹ The old Arabs did not accorded social equality to the other Arab tribes while the Arabs as a whole did not accorded social equality to the neo converts.²⁰ In Persia where overwhelming majority of people embraced Islam, its principle of social equality was not acted upon as per stated Islamic norms. It was from the Persia that social inequality and elaborate hierarchies among Muslims were exported to

different countries including India.²¹

Ashraf-Ajlaf division :

Indeed the notion of social superiority and birth-ascribed status were illegitimate in Islam, it was given added legitimacy in India by foreign Muslims in India. Accordingly, the Muslims of foreign descents were treated as socially superior called *ashrafs* than the indigenous converts looked down upon as *ajlaf*s.²² The medieval *ashraf* scholars authored a number of books to legitimize the claim of social superiority of *ashraf* (noble or respectable) and innate inferiority of those called *ajlaf*s (*razeel*, *kamin* or low-born) and cleverly ignored the Islamic principle of social equality through their distorted interpretation of Islam. The chief exponent of *ashraf* supremacy was Zia Ud-din Barani (d. 1285 C.E.) the courtier of Mohammad Bin Tughlaq (d. 1351 C.E). His disdain for the 'low-born' (*ajlaf*) were illustrated in his two books *Fatwa-i-Jahandari* and *Tarik-i-Ferozshahi*.²³ The Arabic word *ashraf* for the plural word *shareef* meaning noble or respected mainly constituted foreign Muslims from the land of non-Azam. The word *ajlaf* originated from the Arabic word *jilaf* meaning low or mean of base. The indigenous low-caste converts were collectively referred by this name. The people engaged in cultivation and menial labour including low occupational castes among Muslims were also called *Atrap* meaning labour in the context of Bengal. Originally it came from the Arabic word *taraf* includes the people associated with menial labour and agriculture. Another category of Muslims were called *arzal* originated from the Arabic word *razil* meaning low, wretches' or lowest of all.²⁴ The people engaged in certain low occupation like scavenging, sweepers such as *halalkhors*, *abdal*, *bediya* and *lalbegi* were included in it. Hardly other Muslims did associate with them even not permitted them to enter mosques including burial of their dead bodies in the public burial ground.²⁵ The low-caste converts were together known by the contemptuous term *ajlaf* includes various occupational classes.²⁶ They were divided into various endogamous groups but the *ashraf* treated them alike without any distinction.²⁷ The division of *ashraf-ajlaf* was just like the distinction between the *Brahmins* and *Sudras* among Hindus.²⁸ The low occupational groups were modeled on the basis of caste organization and practiced elaborate endogamy.²⁹ The pre-existing *ashraf-ajlaf* division further proliferated existing social stratification as a consequence of the emergence of landed aristocracy.

Landed Aristocracy in Sylhet :

Land revenue being the major source of income to the state during colonial as well as pre-colonial period, the ruler sought to collect it effectively through efficient agencies associated with the emergence of landed elite class. In course of times, they formed a separate class and the most influential social element due to land ownership, money, power and social status. Emergence of landed elite class led to the development of new social stratification.

The Sylhet district was included in the kingdom of Bengal after the death of Shah Jalal administered by a *Nawab*. It was included in the Mughal territory and during the time of Akbar and put in-charge of *Amil* under the *Nawab* of Dhaka. Historically, the land system in the frontier region of Sylhet including Chittagang was characterized by the presence of small holdings. The reason for such small holdings was inherent in the nature of land. Till the Muslim occupation of Sylhet, Sylhet was mostly covered by uncultivated forested land. Large farmers known as *mirasdar* in the context of Sylhet were identical to *zamindar* (landlords) The duty of *Choudhury* was to collect revenue as *Tahshildar* and constitutes an important element of administration. Later on their land holding became hereditary. The *Choudhuries* were the major land lords in Sylhet even after the introduction of permanent settlement. The landlords paying more than five hundred rupees as revenue were came to be called *zamindar* (*zamin* means land and *dar* means owner) and those paying less than rupees fifty were known as *Talukdar* and *Tapadar*.³⁰ In fact, the owner of small holdings who cultivated their hereditary land were locally known as *Talukdar*. There were 15, 185 Talukdars in Sylhet in the year 1872 C.E. and some rich Talukdars were known as *Choudhuries*.³¹ The word *Talukdar* derived from the Arabic word *Tah-alluk* meaning landed property and Persian suffix *dar* meaning owner. The word *Talukdar* stands for landed proprietors with paying Rs. 500/- were called *Zamindars*. Those who paying revenue less than Rs. 50/- were called *Talukdar* or *Tapadar*.³² Actually the small proprietors who occupy and cultivate their hereditary land were locally known as *Talukdars*.³³

The presence of small landholdings was mainly noticed in the frontier districts of Sylhet and Chittagang in East Bengal. The geographical and ecological condition resulted in the presence of huge uncultivated forested land due to scanty human settlement during the medieval period. The Turko-Afghan rulers sought to expand agrarian frontiers towards the forested uncultivated land since the sixteenth century with a view to enhance state revenue, but the pre-occupied smaller independent estates were left in between. The Muslim rulers entrusted the forest pioneers to employ people for clearing forest land to introduce agriculture. The landed class *Tapadar* were quite widespread in Sylhet and Karimganj district of Barak valley. The latter was a part of Sylhet district during pre-partition period and later included with Indian territory of Assam.

The word *Tapadar* stands for group ownership of land. The Sylhet region and tribal Cachari kingdom was abundant with uncultivated forested land due to scanty human settlement. The Turko-Afghan ruler ushered an era of massive agrarian expansion with a view to enhance state revenue after their occupation of East Bengal that includes Sylhet. The new settlers proceeded beyond already occupied area and cleared the forest land to reclaim a fallow tract for their required size. The newly settled villages then started cultivation in a process of voluntary association with agrarian activity which came to be known as *khel* or 'agrarian commonwealth' in Cachar.³⁴ The *Khel* system in erstwhile Cachar was indicative of collective or group ownership of land. However, according to another tradition, the word *Tapadar* originated from the Arabic word *toufa* meaning gift and Persian word *dar* meaning owner.³⁵ The *Tapadar* were perhaps

owner of the gifted land received from the rulers. There was a special kind landed class called *lakharazdar* whose number was very large in Sylhet. *Lakharaz* was an Arabic word for favour. It was allotted as rent free land for maintaining religious and educational institutions.

Even during the nineteenth century, the small holdings and sub-division of land in Sylhet has been continued. WW Hunter observed that 20, 000 estates out of total 78, 000 paid not more than 2 shillings as revenue in a year.³⁶ Large numbers of *Talukdars* comprises local landed elites in Sylhet in 1784 and many of them held the title *choudhury*. As a consequence of the introduction of permanent settlement in the 1793 C.E., Sylhet was divided into large numbers of small estates.³⁷ Under permanent settlement 15, 117 estates were assessed out of total 77, 870. The revenue assessment of only 26 estate was more than Rs. 1000/-. The revenue assessment for 468 estate was more than Rs. 100/-. The revenue assessment of and 25 320 estate whose revenue assessment was less than Rs. 1.00/- and 1566 estates were paying less than one ana (paise) 1238 estates were rent free.³⁸ *Talukdars* and *Tapadars* were hence, dominant landed elites in Sylhet.

Landed Aristocracy in Cachar :

Cachar comprises present Cachar and Hailakandi districts of Assam. During the pre-British period, it was the plain tract of Kachari kingdom and never came under the Muslim rule. The scanty human settlement in the valley was due to its natural reason – devastating flood, frequent outbreak of epidemics, presence of wild animals and repeated raids by the hill tribes.³⁹ Hence, there was plentiful uncultivated forested land including water bodies abundant with edible fish. This was the reason for large scale migration of *Bengalee* people from neighbouring Bengal districts. The early migrants proceeded towards the plain areas beyond already cultivated land, cleared the forest as per their requirement and settled their villages. They organized themselves as an agrarian unit with their collective participation in the production which came to be known as '*khel*' or 'agrarian Commonwealth'. They used to elect a headman for managing collective affairs of the land named *mukhtar*. Ten such *khel* constituted *raj* under a headman named *rajmukhtar* covering entire plain tract known as *deshraj*. They were bestowed titles like *Choudhury*, *Laskar*, *Mazumdar*, *Baro Laskar*, *Mazar Laskar*, *Chota Laskar*, *Baro Bhuiya*, *Mazar Bhuiya*, *Chota Bhuiya* etc. as per importance of their respective *khel*. They were allotted prescribed assignment of land.⁴⁰ However, Kachari king Krishna Chandra (1790-1813 C.E) proposed to distribute suitable titles among his notable citizens in exchange of money in order to fill up his empty treasury, but prematurely died in 1813 C.E. Gobinda Chandra, (1813-1830 C.E), his successor accordingly distributed the same among notable Cachari citizen. The value of the titles for *Choudhury*, *Mazumdar*, *Laskar*, *Bhuiya* was Rs. 100/-, 50/-, 25/- and 15/- respectively. A *farman* or deed was issued to each of them with the specification of various privileges they were allowed to enjoy subsequently.⁴¹ After the occupation of Cachar, the colonial administrators were not willing to alter the existing land system. Initially, they were controller of land, but subsequently their estates were made subject to transfer at a fixed price and their title became hereditary. In the initial days of colonial period, the price of *Choudhury*, *Mazumdar*, *Laskar*, *Baro Bhuiya*, *Major Bhuiya* together *Chota Bhuiya* were Rs, 100/-, Rs, 75/-, Rs, 50/- and Rs. 40/- respectively.⁴²

The people used the above titles with their name largely in Cachar and Hailakandi district were perhaps descendants of those landed elites who had obtained titles from the pre-colonial as well as colonial rulers. However, empirical studies confirm that the vast majority of them using various titles of landed elite class whose forefather at all did not have any titles. This was evident from the old censuses and land documents. It became evident that they had adopted these titles much later during favourable circumstances with a view to raise their status in the social scale and successfully attained social mobility. Doing so, mostly the farmers and intermediary class merged with the landed elite class. Unlike Sylhet and Karimganj, the use of such titles was quite extensive and their social identity was expressed as per their title.

Ashrafization :

The word Ashrafization was first coined by Cora de Vrede in the context of his study of north Indian Muslim women.⁴³ It was a process of social mobility by the lower order of society to attain a higher social order by adopting the life styles of higher order of society. In Sylhet-Cachar region, the common farmers and others adopted titles of higher order particularly that of landed elite class. This was comparable to the *Sanskritization* studied by M N Srinivas in the context of Hindu society.⁴⁴ Owning land and property was subsequently followed adoption of titles mostly by the farmers class in erstwhile Cachar like *Barbhuiya*, *Laskar Choudhury*, and *Mazumdar* while the *Kirans* in the erstwhile Sylhet mostly affiliating themselves as *Talukdars* and *Tapadars*. They came to be the *ashraf* or upper strata of the society.

Social Stratification :

As a consequence of emergence of landed Aristocracy, the pre-existing social stratification based on *ashraf-ajalaf* division led to the complex social hierarchies. They came to be the upper strata of the regional Muslim society or *ashraf*. On the other hand, the Muslim caste group like Mahimal (Inland Muslim fishing caste) Kiran (including *Nankar Kiran* or hereditary tenant farmer whose position was no less than serfs) Patikaar (hereditary mat makers), Hajjam (hereditary barber including those associated with circumcision), Bajunia (hereditary Muslim musician including those known as *Dhulia* or Drum players), Khalia (hereditary tanners), Khari (ex-river gypsies known as Bej or Kurundis) and Mirshikar (hereditary bird hunters) came to be considered as the lower strata of the society or *ajlaf*.

They could not experience any social mobility due to their association with particular occupation which were traditionally considered as demeaning.

Traditionally, the *Sayeds* or reportedly the lineal descendents of Prophet Mohammad occupied the highest position in social hierarchy followed by the *Choudhuries* due to their wealth and status. The other landed elite class also share the same status for there was no bar in internal marriage among them. They constituted a single endogamous community. The occupational castes constituted separate endogamous community for each. They were treated as 'low' by the upper strata of the society. The reason their low position in the hierarchy was their traditional association with particular occupation which were considered as 'low'. Indeed, there was no universal criteria of internal ranking. However, endogamy determines the rigidity of stratification and caste. The elaborate practice of endogamy between upper and lower strata was mainly motivated by the sense of purity of blood.

Muslim occupational Castes in Sylhet-Cachar Region :

The *ajalf* or lower strata of the Muslims of Sylhet-Cachar region mainly comprises occupational castes. They were converts from the native Hindus and embraced Islam under pious guidance of Sheikh Shah Jalal and mostly his 360 disciples. Even after conversion, their socio-economic condition remained unchanged. Many of them continued to profess the occupation of their forefathers. Their low social status was due to their association with demeaning occupation. Their social identity was associated with their ancestors occupation. The occupational Muslim caste of Sylhet-Cachar region are mentioned below.

Mahimal : The word mahimal originated from Persian word *mahi* meaning fish and *malla* meaning boatman. Therefore, Mahimal or locally known as *Maimal* were traditionally associated with the occupation fishing and boating. They were inland fishing caste and reportedly first group of converts from the native Hindu fishing castes like Namasudra, Patini, Kaibertas, Chandalas, Pod etc. The erstwhile Sylhet-Cachar region was abundant with water bodies like rivers, *haors*, *beels* and marshes. Therefore, this region was dominant with the people associated with fishing and boating along with wet rice cultivation. The fishermen were called *Maihim* while Muslim cultivators were known as *Bangal*. The Mahimal-Bangal stratification on the basis of occupation was the first stage of social classification among the Muslims of this region. The Mahimal constituted a significant segments of Muslim population in Sylhet and later migrated to Cachar Plain due occupation reason. Their despised status in the social structure was due to their association with fishing which was traditionally considered as 'low'.

Kiran : The Kiran or Kishan constituted the second largest Muslim caste group among Muslims in Sylhet-cachar region traditionally associated with cultivation. They were local converts from different occupational castes later engaged in agriculture who did not own land. They cultivated the land of *zamindars* or *mirasdars* as tenant farmers, share croppers etc. Their condition was hence, deplorable. However, the Kiran called *Nankar* Kiran were worst off for they were nothing less than serf in feudal system. The *Nankar* Kiran indeed comprises different occupational groups, but lion share of them were cultivators and were provided with a plot of land for their livelihood including house and to render all sorts of services for their masters without any payment. Due to their demeaning socio-economic status like that of *Ghulam* or slave, hence, they were considered as 'low' in social scale.

Patikar: The Patikars were Muslim artisan caste traditionally associated with the manufacturing a finer kind of mat locally known as *Pati* and local converts from the similar Hindu artisan castes like *Dum*. Their settlements were mainly concentrated in certain localities of erstwhile Sylhet and present Karimganj district. Their low status in social hierarchy was due their association with a particular occupation considered as 'low' since their pre-converted times.

Hajjam : The Group of people associated with the occupation of barbering including circumcision were known as *Hajjam* or *napith*. They were local converts from the native barber caste. This occupations were traditionally considered as low hence they were assigned a demeaning status in the society.

Bajunia (Dhulia) : The Muslim musician caste more particularly associated with the profession of drum playing were locally known as Bajunia or Dhulia. They were local converts from similar Hindu castes and remained associated with their forefather's occupation. Such occupations were traditionally considered as low. Hence, they were assigned a low status in social scale.

Khalia : The Muslim occupational caste traditionally associated with the profession of tanning were known by this name. They were local converts from lower order of the society. Such professionals were given a demeaning status in the local society.

Khari : The group of people locally known as Khari in Sylhet-Cachar region were local converts from Bej and Kurugis (river Gypsies). Traditionally their occupations including snake charming and community healing by their women folk were considered as 'low'. Hence, they were awarded a 'low' position in the regional social hierarchy.

Mirshikar : The Muslim hunting caste was known as Mirshikar in Sylhet-Cachar region. They were Muslim converts from similar local Hindu Shikari castes. The erstwhile Sylhet and Cachar were abundant with marshes and wetland called *haors* were ideal habitat for different species of birds. Since the time immemorial, a section of people remained dependent on fishing and hunting. They were the descendents of the most primitive people. Their population dramatically declined during post independent period.⁴⁵

Attributes of castes

The social Stratification among the Muslims of Sylhet-Cachar region on the basis of landed aristocracy and pre-existing *ashraf-ajlaf* notion was characterized by presence of significant caste attributes. The landed elites theoretically formed social classes and provided for class stratification. But when birth and lineage co-operate to reinforce social inequity, rigorous class stratification emerges. The consequential strictness of stratified class system prohibits social mobility. Thus, social distinctions became caste differentiation. In Sylhet including parts of Bengal, the social differences between the landlords and the professional cultivating groups became caste differences. In East Pakistan including Sylhet, the fishermen, the Oil Presser, Weavers, the Grocers, Blacksmiths and the Potters that constitutes the lowest peasant social hierarchy and marriages between the landed class and the occupational castes was strictly prohibited. The Progression from one class to another was not so easy. In case of any transmigration, the couple were to be abandoned by the cluster of villages.⁴⁶ Therefore, the social differentiation on the basis of landed elites and that of occupational peasants resulted in the evolution of caste stratification with visible attributes of caste.

The most important attributes of caste among Muslims in the region was elaborate practice of endogamy. The Upper strata of the society constituted a single endogamous group while the occupational castes formed separate endogamous groups. Theoretically, there was no such prohibition among Muslims since Islam is an egalitarian religion and allow any Muslims to select a suitable spouse irrespective of caste or occupation. But such incidences, if any were strongly frowned upon even to the extent of ex-communicating of them by the entire village or cluster of villages. Endogamy is of prime importance in any social relationship. The rigidity of endogamy determines the rigidity of stratification and that of caste system.⁴⁷ This practice of rigid endogamy was mainly responsible for the persistence of caste among the Muslims in Sylhet-Cachar region. The Practice of Islamic egalitarianism could have undermined the caste system within a short span of time. But quite conversely, the social practices among the Muslims in the region was found to be strictly endogamous with rare cases inter-caste marriages.

Along with elaborate practice of endogamy, occupational specialization was also quite visible. In theory, caste is an occupational category. The Muslim caste group such as Mahimal, Kiran, Patikar, Hajjam, Bajunia, Mirshikar all were occupational groups held the lower order of the social hierarchy while the people associated with landed class were assigned the higher rank. The status of respective caste in the social hierarchy was determined by the despised index of the occupation. The profession like fishing, barbering, hunting, tanning, playing music including manual labour associated with cultivation were considered as the most stigmatized occupation. This was further determined by the close occupation and open occupation. The close occupations were to be only professed by the members of the respective caste group because social stigma was attached with it. But open occupation on the other hand, professed by any one such as cultivation for no social stigma was associated with it.

The social hierarchy of the Muslims in the region was characterized by well precise stratification organized on the model of caste organization with presence of high-born (*Barojat*) and low-born (*Chotajat*). The pride in ancestry and notions of superiority with presence of demeaning people associated with the so called low occupation were quite common.⁴⁸

Caste among Hindus was based on the religious ideas which supports social hierarchies and inequality and certain idioms like *Karma* and *Dharma* reinforce the same. But Islam on the other hand, is an egalitarian religion and strongly opposed to any such distinctions. But The Islamic jurists in working out a practical adjustment with the Islamic principle created certain social grades that provides for social hierarchy on the basis of what is known as *kufu* in Arabic. In order to provide Islamic legitimacy of Muslim marriage, *kufu* started to be determined by birth, ethnicity, occupation etc. Therefore, Muslim marriages continued to take place within one's caste or ethnic group. In this way, Islamic theology recognized caste distinctions among Muslims since caste is in theory a birth-based, endogamous group. The Muslims of Sylhet-Cachar region belonged to Hanafite school of Sunni sect having firm conformity with the dominant Hanafite position on *kufu* being determined by birth, ethnicity and occupation. Therefore, it prevented inter-caste marriages and supported caste to persist among Muslims.⁴⁹

Conclusion:

The social Stratification and Caste among Muslims of Sylhet-Cachar region was outcome of many factors. The pre-existing *ashraf-ajlaf* divide among Muslims was further proliferated with the emergence of landed aristocratic class. The class stratification among the Muslims took the form of caste stratification as a consequence of rigidities associated with the elaborate practice of endogamy reinforced by notion of lineage or birth. This very idea of social distinction was sustained by prevailing notion of superiority and inferiority associated with occupation. Hence, the landed elite class came to be regarded as the upper strata of the society while people associated with particular occupations were assigned despised status.

Notes & References:

- 1 H Beverly, *Report of the Census of Bengal 1872*, Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta, 1872, p. XVII
- 2 Pushpa Neogi, *Brahminic Settlement in Different Sub-Divisions in Bengal*, K M Maitra, Calcutta, 1967, pp. 19-20
- 3 Alam et al, *Sylhet and its Evolving geography* in Shareef Uddin Ahmed ed., Sylhet, History and Heritage, Bangladesh Itihas samiti, Dhaka, 1999, p. 73-74

- 4 Ibid, p. 76
- 5 Ibid
- 6 Choudhury Acyutacharan, *Sylheter Itibitta*, (Purbangsa) Utsa Prakashan, Dhaka, 1912, p. 40)
- 7 WW Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Vol-II (Sylhet), Trubner & Co, London, 1879, p. 205
- 8 Robert Lindsay, *Anecdotes of an Indian Life*, S Simms, Wigan, 1840, p. 26
- 9 Robert Bruce quoted by Ashfaq Hossain, *Historical Globalization of Sylhet : The Land and its People*, Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, Nottingham University, London, 2007, p. 131)
- 10 Humayun Bokth, *Muslims of Barak Valley Region in Southern Assam : A socio-Historical Study*, IJSSIR, Vol. IV, Issue. I, January, 2015, p. 135
- 11 K N Gupta, *Some Castes and Caste-Origins in Sylhet*, Indian Historical Quarterly, Vol. 7, 1931, 7, p. 25-26
- 12 Richar M Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier (1204-1760)*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1994, pp. 228-267
- 13 Atis Dasgupta, *Islam in Bengal: The Formative period*, Social Scientist, Vol. 32, Issue No. 3-4, Mar-April, pp. 30-39
- 14 James Wise, *Races, Castes and Trades in Bengal*, Harrisons and Sons, London, 1883, pp. 4-5
- 15 M A Rahim, *Social and Cultural History of Bengal*, Pakistan Historical Society, Karachi, 1959, pp. 79-82
- 16 Holi Qur'an, Sura 49 (*al-hujrat*), Verse, 13 which states that, " Oh Mankind !, We have created you from a single (pair) male and female and made you into tribes and nations so that you may know each other. Verily, most honourable of you with Allah is the pious believer."
- 17 Azizul Haque, *Muslim Shareef*, Bangladesh Taj Company, Dhaka, 2006, p. 137
- 18 Islam House, Prophet Mohammad's Last Sermon, accessd from <http://www.islamhouse.com> on 12/12/2016, p. ns
- 19 Y Sikand, *Islam Caste and Dalit-Muslim Relation in India*, Global Media Publication, New Delhi, 2004, p. 17
- 20 Ruben Levy, *Social Structure in Islam*, Oxford University Press, 1959, pp. 56-70
- 21 Ghaus Ansari, *Muslim Caste in Uttar Pradesh (A Study in Cultural Contact)* Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society, U.P., Lucknow, 1960, pp. 28-29
- 22 Y Sikand, *ibid*, p. 21
- 23 For details see O U Ahmed, *A Manuvadi Ulema of Medieval India : An Analysis of the Works of Zia Ud-din Barani*, Studies in Indian Place Names, Vol. 40, Issue. 02, Feb. 2020, pp. 6754-62
- 24 Sayed Abdul Halim, *Bagali Mushalmaner Utpatti O Bikasher Dhara*, (in Bengali), Nabayug Prakashan, Dhaka, 1998, pp. 191-92
- 25 H H Risley, *The People of India*, 2nd edn., ed., by Crooke, Thecker & Sprink, Calcutta, 1891, p. 123
- 26 *Ibid*, p. 122
- 27 *Ibid*
- 28 *Ibid*
- 29 *Ibid*, p. 121
- 30 K U Ahmed, *Karimganjer Itihas* (in Bengali), Natun Diganta Prakashan, Silchar (Assam), 2013, pp. 334-35
- 31 WW Hunter, *op cit.*, p.290
- 32 K U Ahmed, *op cit.*, p. 334-35
- 33 WW Hunter, *ibid*, p.
- 34 J B Bhattacharjee, *Khel : Root of Agricultural Commonwealth in Cachar*, Journal of Assam University, Vol. I, Issue, I, Asaam University Silchar, 1996, pp. 1-6
- 35 Harun Akbar, *Abhijatye Sylheti Samaj*, (in Bengali) Jalalabad Loksahitya Parishad, Sylhet, 1994, p. 96
- 36 WW Hunter, *op cit.*, p. 289-90
- 37 Ashfaq Hossain, *op cit.*, p. 136-37
- 38 Harun Akbar, *op cit.*, p. 57
- 39 J B Bhattacharjee, *Cachar Under the British Rule in North-East Indian*, Radiant Publishers, New Delhi, 1991, p. 3
- 40 JB Bhattacharjee, 1996, *op cit.*, pp. 1-3
- 41 Upendrachandra Guha, *Kacharer Itibritta*, (in Bengali), Sopan Publishers, Calcutta, 1912, pp. 108-09
- 42 WW Hunter, *op cit.*, p. 415
- 43 Cora Vrede de Steurs, *Parda. A Study of Muslims Women's Life in Northern India*, Von Gorkum, Assen, Netherlands, 1968, p. 6
- 44 M N Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, Berkeley, University of California Press, California, 1966, pp. 54-55
- 45 O U Ahmed, *Social Stratification and Caste among Muslims in India with special Reference of Barak Valley of Assam*, Unpublished Ph.D thesis, Assam University, Silchar (Assam), 2019, pp. 223-51
- 46 J R Khan, 1964, pp. 191-99
- 47 E A H Blunt, *Caste System in Northern India*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1931, p. 47
- 48 O U Ahmed, 2019, *op cit.*, pp. 253-261
- 49 Y Sikand, *op cit.*, pp. 27-43