

# SOCIO -CULTURAL LIFE OF THE EAST BENGAL ORIGIN ASSAMESE MUSLIMS

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## Abstract

Every human society has an identical behavior pattern, which is in sociological term, known as culture. According to Ralph Linton, "The culture of a society is the way of life of its member: the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share, and transmit from generation to generation."<sup>1</sup> It is the living pattern of group of human, belong to a particular society, which determined how the members of the society behave, thinks and direct their action. Therefore, Clyde Kluckhohn termed culture as "design for living".<sup>2</sup> So without culture, no human society can exist. Hence, it is found that culture and society, both are inter related, inter dependent subject. In this context, the term 'socio-cultural life' means the cultural life that has been furnished under a given social context. Neither culture nor society could exist without the each other. A culture represents the common behavior and practice of a particular group, while society represents the people who share all these. It is society, that shapes and upholds the cultural life of a particular group, and on the other hand, culture represents the distinctness of a society. So culture and society both are integrated and it is not possible to part one from the other. Without society, there is no culture and without culture, society has no identity. Every community has its own culture and this has been reflected through the social composition, custom, beliefs, feast and festivals, etc. In this context, it is important to know the society and its composition or structure to understand its cultural life. The social structure or division, economic condition, religion, social environment have influenced and shaped the distinctive cultural life of a particular social group. Therefore, culture differentiates one group or society from the next. The 'East Bengal origin Assamese Muslims' the title have been categorized as a distinct socio-religious group of Assam. From religious point of view, they are follower of Islam, belong to *Sunnisect*, and by '*mozhab*' belong to '*Hanifi mozhab*'. In case of Assam, they are part of the Assamese Muslim of Assam, but from socio cultural point of view, they are representing a vertical division of Assamese Muslim. The sociocultural variations of these Muslims like language, tradition, beliefs, custom, socioeconomic backgrounds all have many point of difference with the later. So obviously these Muslims have incorporated a new variety in the composite Assamese identity and enriched the diversified nature of it. At the same time, the distinction has given a selfidentity to them and designated them as an identical group in the line of other racial or ethnic groups.

**Keyword:** Assamese, Muslim, East Bengal, Socio-Economic, Culture, Life

## Introduction

The study area comprises undivided districts of Goalpara and Kamrup, culturally recognized as a separate cultural zone of Assamese culture. These Muslims have added a new element to it. Reciprocally, the regional distinction already exist here, has been influencing the socio-cultural life of these Muslims to the extent, which has given distinctness to these muslims, from their counterparts living in other parts of Assam.

Before going to discuss the socio-cultural life of these Muslims, it is relevant to present the socio-cultural background of the study area (undivided Goalpara and Kamrup). Geographically this two undivided districts represent the western most region of Assam and at present have been segmented into numbers of new administrative districts, namely- Kokrajhar, Chirang, Bongaigaon, Dhubri, Goalpara (undivided Goalpara) and Barpeta, Baksa, Nalbari, Kamrup (Rural) and urban (undivided Kamrup) respectively. The region had been playing an important role in the history of Assam since the ancient period. It is not an exaggeration to say that the history and civilization of the people of Assam had begun from this region.

In the pre-historic period, this region had formed a part of the greater country, known as "*Prag-jyotisha*" or "*Prag-jyotishpura*". By this name, the country was known in the great epic, the *Mahabharata*, as well as in some of the principal *Puranas*.<sup>3</sup> In the '*Sabha Parva*' of '*Mahabharata*', the great epic of India, king "*Bhagadatta*" has been designated as the king of '*Prag-jyotisha*'. The political boundary of '*Pragjyotisha*' though not clear, "varied from time to time, there is no doubt that its northern and south western limits extended much beyond the modern state of Assam"<sup>4</sup> On the basis of all these mythological description, F.E Pargiter come to conclusion that the ancient "*Pargjyotisha* included the greater portion of modern Assam, along with *Koch behar*, *Jalpaiguri*, *Rangpur*, *Bogra*, *Mymensing*, *Decca*, *Tripura*, portions of *Pabna* and probably a portion of *Nepal*."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, present undivided district of Goalpara and Kamrupa was indeed an integral part of this country. During the historical period, the name '*Pragjyotisha*' was replaced by '*Kamrupa*'. According to '*Kalika puran*' when '*Narak*' became the king of *Pragjyotisha* and took the charge of '*Kamkhya*' the country was renamed as '*Kamrupa*'. In '*Kalika Puran*' it is also says that the country lies to the east of '*Karatoya*' is known as '*Kamrupa*'.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand '*Yogini Tantra*' composed in 16th century says that, 'the country lying to the east of *Karatoya* as far as '*Dikkaravasini*' is called *Kamrupa*... a hundred *yojans* in length, spreading over an area of thirty *yojans*.' Again *Yogini Tantra* had divided the country into four 'pith' (part) namely *Kampith*, *Ratnapith*, *bhadra pith* and *Soumar pith*. According to *Kalika Puran* "the temple of '*Kamakhya*' near Gauhati was in the center of *Kamrupa*, and in the *Vishnu Puran* it is added that the country extended around this temple in all directions for 100 *yojanas* or about 450 miles. "Allowing for exaggeration, this may be held

to embrace the whole of Eastern Bengal, Assam and Bhutan.<sup>7</sup> As per description of *Yogini Tantra* the boundary of *Kamarupa* extended from *Karatoya* River on the west to river *Dikhoo* on the east, on the north from the mountain of *Kunjabgiri* to the confluence of *Brahamaputra* and *Lakshya* River on the south (Yogini tantra, purba bhag 11/17-18)<sup>8</sup>. So from this it appeared that the ancient Kamarupa “roughly included the Brahamaputra valley, Bhutan, Rangpur, Coochbihar, part of Maymensingh and part of Meghalaya (garo Hills)<sup>9</sup> ‘*Haro- Gouri Sambad*’ written by some unknown writer also divided the ancient Kamrup into four ‘*Pith*’s demarking with certain river, i) *Ratnapith* extended between *Karatoya* to *Swaranakosh*, ii) *Kampith* between *Swarnakosha* and *Kapila*, ii) *Swarnapith* Between *Pusphika* and the *Bhairavi* and iv) *Saumaripith* between the *Bhairavi* and *Dikrang* river<sup>10</sup> Out of this the *Ratnapith* and *Kampith* include the tract extended between *kortoya* to *Kapila*. From this geographical segmentation, it becomes evident that the region included present undivided Goalpara and Kamrupa districts. These districts were in the central position of ancient Kamrupa, and were belong to the two piths namely *Ratnapith* and *Kampith*.

During the beginning of historical period, the boundary of Kamrupa, was more or less same with the mythological period, sometimes it extended beyond this.<sup>11</sup> The unity of ancient Kamrupa had received a jolt most probably during the early part of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The fall of ‘pala dynasty’ of Kamrup, the western part of the country consisting present undivided Goalpara and Kamrup fell under the authority of *Pala* dynasty followed by the *Sen* dynasty of Bengal and was ruled by some tribal chiefs as petty or subordinate rulers of the *Pala* and *Sen* dynasty followed by Muslim ruler. According to Mohini Kumar Saikia, “After *Vaidyadeva* the chiefs of the Koch and Mech people might have ruled under in different parts of the region as vassals or allies of the *Sena* kings and also perhaps, of the Muslim rulers of *Gauda* till at least to the close of the first quarter of the thirteenth century.”<sup>12</sup> This political break up from the rest of the ancient *Kamrupa* kingdom (ancient Assam) was continued with lots of political ups and downs, as much as up to the reorganization of Assam as a separate province in 1874 under British rule. Within this period, particularly from thirteenth century to the close of seventeenth century, the region comprises undivided Goalpara and Kamrup often moved from one power to another. Dr. B.K.Kakati observed about the condition of Western Assam as “It was never for a long period of time under any particular dominant power. It was the cockpit of several fighting force – the Koches, the Pathans, the Mughals, the Ahoms and Political fortunes passes from one power to 11 Kanak Lal Barua- “Sri Harsha Deva...became an emperor himself by subjugating Odra (Orissa), and Kalinga (Ganjam) on the south and Koshala (North Bihar) on the west.” another in different times.”<sup>13</sup> The political separation from the rest of the kingdom and frequent change of political power helped the region to emerge as a separate unit and developed a unique socio-cultural life here. As a result, the region i.e. Goalpara and Kamrup culturally not uniformed with the rest of Assam. Again, within the territorial jurisdiction of western Assam, it was seen that the frequent change of political power interrupted the unity of Goalpara and Kamrup by frequent exclusion and inclusion from each other. This was helped to emerge different social and cultural minute for this two sub region. Since the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century upto, the emergence of Kamata kingdom in the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century the region was under Muslim rule and there after passes to Kamata ruler. Again, with the downfall of Kamata power, the region falls under the political supremacy of Hussain Shah of Gauda, towards the end of 15<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, this region emerged as a independent political state under the Koch ruler, but in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century it was segmented into two parts. Finally in 1691, this two parts, where –the eastern Koch kingdom up to Manas from east came under the sway of Ahom power and the rest of the region stretching in the west of river Manas became the part of Mughal territory. From this segmentation, the undivided Goalpara geographically became a part of Bengal of Mughal India and the undivided kamrup became a part of the Ahom kingdom. When the British had proclaimed the Dewani of Bengal, Goalpara as a part of Bengal was included in the British dominion in 1764. On the other hand, Kamrup as a part of Ahom kingdom was annexed to the British dominion in 1826. and simultaneously, the whole of Assam was placed under the province of Bengal. In 1874, the creation of a separate commission parted Assam from Bengal and restored Goalpara to Assam. Thus Goalpara became an integral part of Assam and the status continues till today.

The political fluctuation as discussed above helped to emerged a distinct socio cultural life in Goalpara and Kamrup respectively. The social composition, language, tradition and customs, religious life and many other cultural manifestations uphold this. Again, the socio-cultural life of Goalpara and Kamrup together, also represent heterogeneous nature from the rest of Assam owing to this political fluctuation. Internally there are differences but even though, there are some points of homogeneity, which uphold it as a distinct unit from the rest of Assam. This distinct socio-cultural life got a new element during the colonial rule in Assam, particularly since late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The migration of Muslims from eastern districts of East Bengal added a new variation in this regional variety.

These Muslims hailed from a different cultural tradition. However, in Assam in general and particularly in this two undivided district they have failed to generate greater change in the existing tradition. The migration and settlement in Assam and in the concerned district in particular parted them from their homeland and tradition. Being the newcomer and due to some economic, political, and social reason they were ostracized to the host tradition. During this period, a sense of cultural isolation remained active in their mind and the same continued with the migrant generation. Despite this, with the progress of time they adopted the mode of acculturation of the host culture. In this process, they at first adopt the host language. From next generation onwards, their process of acculturation got extension. In this regard, some natural reason also contributed a lot. The independence of India and emergence of East Pakistan as separate country had estranged out all link with east Bengal exist so far. Further, partition has placed them as an isolated group in Assam in general and in the concerned districts in particular. It is noteworthy to mention that in the postindependence India, all the migrants of colonial period have their counterpart in the same country. *Adhivasis* are found in West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Orissa etc. *Nepalis* are also living in Darjilling, Sikkim etc. Bengali Hindus are in West Bengal, *Marowaris* are in Rajasthan etc. But for this Muslims, the independence persuaded them as an isolated group having no counterpart in India. Their condition rightly estimated by noted writer Medini Mohan Choudhury that, these Muslims “like other indigenous groups of Assam, also have no other

place in India where their counterpart has been living or where they can go in time of crisis.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, there are apparently some compulsions for these particular Muslims, that left them with no option but to assimilate with the local tradition. As a result, within next fifty years a significant change in their socio-cultural life is seen. In this changing trend, the transition from one tradition to other is prominent. It is important to mention that in case of these Muslims, the traditional mode of assimilation and synthesis has not occurred so far. So, like the Muslims of mediaval period, they are not fully absorbed within the prevailing tradition. But it does not allianate them from the Assamese identity. In this regard, it is relevant to mention that the traditional concept of cultural identity has been changed in the postmodern discourse, “In place of concrete fixed cultural identity the present concept of identity is mixed with hybridity, difference, migrancy, and diaspora. Hence the new norm is heterogeneity in the place of homogeneity, hybridity in the place of purity, fluidity in place of fixity or rigidity”<sup>15</sup>. In stead of complete assimilation a strong sense of integration found more prominent among these Muslims. Concerned with this, their assimilation can be seen from the postmodern angle. The transition of tradition has marked the socio-cultural life an admixture of tradition with fluidity. So despite distinctness, the dominance of Assamese hegeomony uphold their socio-cultural life as a variety of greater Assamese culture. The process of acculturation and integration particularly in case of undivided district of Goalpara and Kamrup become so deep rooted that it has been influencing and shaping their socio-cultural life a distinct one, which in true sense reflected a hybrid tradition. Within this hybrid phenomenon, the Assamesization found prominent rather than preserving East Bengal legacy. So the socio-cultural life of these Muslims, is no more homogenous with the Bengali or East Bengal (now Bangladesh) but with Assamese particularly to local tradition of Kamrup and Goalpara.

In this regard, it is important to note that in case of these Muslim the complete absorption or assimilation is still a matter of concern. However, this does not interpreted that they are not Assamese. The following reason furnished with historical point of view keeps these Muslims away from complete absorption or assimilation with rest of Assamese people

- a) The history of these Muslims in Assam is comparatively new.
- b) The nature of migration and the quantity of migrants of these Muslims had provided little scope for assimilation.
- c) Their settlement was mainly centered within particular areas rather than scattering among the indigenous groups.
- d) The colonial rule never encouraged but contributed widening the gap between indigenous people and these Muslims.
- e) The socio-political issues of 20th century have developed a hatred relation between section of Assamese Hindus and these Muslims that contributed isolation of these Muslims from the rest.

### **Conclusion**

Even though the common geographical boundary, economic background and means of livelihood, common linguistic behavior and partly due to the interest and attitude shown by these Muslims have shown close proximity with the Assamese people of Assam in general and particularly of undivided Goalpara and Kamrup. Considering all these point, these Muslims are now regarded as Assamese; to identify this particular group of Muslim from the rest of Assamese Muslim as well as from other racial, cultural groups of Assam they are designated here as East Bengal origin Assamesen Muslim of Assam. The socio cultural life of these Muslims of undivided Goalpara and Kamrup has manifested the variation and at the same time, it highlights the regional diversity of the said districts. The socio-cultural life of these Muslims of undivided Goalpara and Kamrup has been studied through the following sub chapter-

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