

## **History of Neo-Assamese Muslims of Assam and their contribution to the state**

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### ***Abstract***

*Assam is known as Pragjyotisha in the ancient times and Kamrupa in the medieval times. From the ancient times, Assam has been a melting-pot of various cultural communities and races. It is often described as the Anthropologist Paradise in the academic circle. The society of Assam consists of different social groups having diverse religion, culture, language and ways of life. The Neo-Assamese Muslims are the latest component of Assamese society. Most of this category of people came to Assam from different parts of undivided India during the second half of nineteenth century and the first half of twentieth century. This study makes an attempt to find out the history of Neo-Assamese Muslims and their contributions for the economic development of the state Assam.*

**KEYWORDS:** Assam, Muslims, Neo-Assamese

### **Introduction**

Assam is known by different names in the Epic - *Puranas* and the early historical literature. It is mentioned as Pragjyotisha or the place of Eastern astronomy in the Epics - the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* (Baruah, 2014). In most of the *Puranas* namely Padma Purana, Bishnu Purana, Varaha Purana, Skanda Purana, Kalika Purana etc., this place is mentioned as Kamrupa. Markandeya Purana stated this place as Udayacala; Brahma Purana stated this place as Udaigiri. The first epigraphic record which mentioned this place as Kamrupa is in the Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudra Gupta (4th Century A.D) (Barua, 2014). It is termed as Asams by the local tribes in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The territory is called as Asham in the Ain-I-Akbari (Assam, n.d.). In the year 1663 AD, in a treaty between Ahom Army and the Mogul general Mir-Jumla, the word Assam was used

(Baruah, 2015). The Europeans first used the name of the country as *Asham* in the later part of sixteenth century, which was later on changed to *Asam* by the British who eventually adopted the final spelling as 'Assam' for the name (Baruah, n.d.). The government of Assam adopted a resolution on December 16, 2006, which resolved to change the name of the state from Assam to 'Asom' (Talukdar, 2006; Gogoi, 2007).

Assam is situated between 89°49' to 97° 26' East Longitude and 24°10' to 27°58' North Latitude. The state has an area of 78438 sq km. (78440sq km after "India-Bangladesh sign pact on border demarcation on 6<sup>th</sup> June/15) which is 2.39 per cent of the total land area of India. Assam is located about 79.5m above the sea level (Assam Geography, n.d.). It has a sub-tropical monsoon climate with an average rainfall of around 1,500 mm per year. The daytime temperature in summer, rises to around 35°C and in winter cools to 25°C with a night time minimum of around 10°C (Assam Climate, n.d.).

From the ancient times, Assam has been a melting-pot of various cultural communities and races. It is often described in the academic circle as an 'Anthropologist's Paradise' (Hasnain, 1983, p. 7). Assamese is a composite whole of people belonging to different racial classes who settled in this region. The society of Assam consists of different social groups having diverse religion, culture, language and ways of life. According to 2011 population Census there are 31,169,272 people in Assam where 61.5 per cent Hindu, 34.2 per cent Muslim, 3.70 per cent Christian, 0.08 per cent Sikh, 0.19 per cent Buddhist, 0.09 per cent and 0.13 per cent other religion people in Assam.

### **A Brief History of Muslim in India**

Islam first came to the Western coast of India with Arab traders in the pre-Islamic era. Since then a large Muslim society got developed in Malabar Coast of India (Laskar, 2013). The historian Elliot and Dowson in their book *The History of India* said that the first ship bearing Muslim travelers were seen on the Indian coast as early as 630 AD (Islam, n.d.). Arab trade with Bengal flourished

since the 9th century (Bengali Muslim, n.d.). Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni invaded India about seventeen times during 1000-1026 A.D. during these invasions India received a few Muslims. Mohammad Ghori, the king of Slave dynasty occupied and ruled different parts of India (Ucch, Sindh, Multan, Bihar and Bengal) for a long period (1175-1206 A.D.) and spread Islam. After Slave Dynasty, Khiliji Dynasty ruled India from 1290-1320 AD, Tughlok dynasty ruled India from 1320-1440 AD, Sayyid dynasty ruled from 1440-1451 AD, Lodhi dynasty ruled India for the period 1451-1526 AD and Mughal dynasty ruled India till 1757. During this long period of Islamic dynasty, Islam spread all over India (Laskar, 2013).

### **A Brief History of Muslim in North-East India**

The Muslim communities have a long and rich history in Manipur, dating from the time of Prophet Muhammad. Ahmed (2011), in his exhaustive historical account, traces the arrival of Islam in the North-East region in 615 CE through the Prophet's companion Saad ibn abi Waqqas, an uncle of the Prophet. Muslims of Tripura are the ancient inhabitant of that state. The settlement of Muslims in Assam can be traced back since 8<sup>th</sup> century CE. It is found from the Assamese *Buranji* (the History of Assam) that Kamrupa kingdom had trade contacts with Chinese, Turks and Central Asian region even before the advent of Muslims. From these countries, many *darvesh*, *sufi*, *fakirs* and *pir* (all religious persons) are believed to have come to the region (Assam) as early as 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century (Baruah, 1969). The earliest Muslim ruler attempted to enter Assam forcibly with their invasion of 1205 led by Muhammad Ibn-Bakhtiyar Khilji from Bengal as depicted in the North Guwahati inscription of 1127 Saka Era (Kar, 1990). In the first quarter of 14<sup>th</sup> century, a bulk of population in Assam was converted as Islam and termed them as Mahmal community (Rahman, 2013). The Ahom Mughal wars also helped Muslim settlement in Assam. The Muslim population of Assam was strengthened especially, during the British colonial rule in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century through migration of Muslim people from East Bengal (Ahmed, 2003).

### **Definition of Neo-Assamese Muslim People**

According to Das (2014), the entire Muslim population of Assam can be classified into four major categories which are: Asamiya Musalman (Assamese Muslims), Na Asamiya Musalman (Neo-Assamese Muslims), the North-Indian Muslims, and the Muslims of Cachar or the Barak valley.

The term *Na-Ahamiya Musalman* (Neo-Assamese Muslim) was first used by Jyotiprasad Agarwala, the great man of Assam. He was impressed by their simplicity and hardworking nature and termed them as *Na-Ahamiya Musalman* (Hussain & Hussain, 2000). The Neo-Assamese Muslims are mainly migrant Muslims who arrived in Assam at different periods of history, many of those who were invited to Assam from Bengal by the Ahom rulers, British administration and the government of Assam for the development of the economy of Assam and especially for the cultivation of vast barren and forest land (Muslims in Assam, n.d). Das (2014), viewed that during the later period of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a large number of Bengali Muslim peasants had migrated to Assam and settled in the *Char* (river basin) areas in Assam. They are termed as *Na Asamiya Musalman* (Neo-Assamese Muslims) and comparatively new entrants in the emerging Assamese society. Hence the term ‘Neo-Assamese Muslims’ in this paper refers to the legal Muslim population who migrated to India before 1971.

### **History of Neo-Assamese Muslim in Assam**

It is difficult to say with certainty when the Neo-Assamese Muslims began to migrate to Assam from Bengal due to lack of fool-proof historical evidence. However, it is assumed that this group of people came to the state during 1800-1947 (Rahman, 2012). The Mann rulers killed thousands of Assamese people for which Assam became desert. So, to increase population of Assam, the Ahom King Jyogeswar Singha allowed in-migration from Bengal by allowing no tax on land. This group of Muslim people is assumed as the founder of Neo-Assamese Muslim people in Assam (Ahmed, 1997). Most of

the cultivators of Bengal had no cultivable land and were leading a life of difficulty because of the ill-treatment of the *Zamindars* (landlords) of Bengal. So the poor industrious cultivators came to Assam willingly for their survival from the unbearable treatment of the landlord of Bengal and for a better life of their family, and as such strengthen the Neo-Assamese Muslim (Ahmed, 2014).

After the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, Assam passed on to the control of the British India. In order to increase revenues and taxes, the British government brought Muslim cultivators for rice and jute cultivation in Assam. This Bengali Muslims are a part of Neo-Assamese Muslim people (Gait, 2003). The settlement of Bengali Muslim peasants in Assam had been intensified since 1905 which drastically changed the topography of Assam. From the historical and geographical point of view, Assam Bengal unification till 1911 made this settlement process more intensified. There is no restriction to settle in any part of Assam. This process helped to increase Muslim settlement in Assam (Ahmed, 2014). The Census report of 1911 was the first document on the extra-ordinary influx of farmers to the *Chars* (river basin) of Goalpara from the Bengal districts of Mymensingh, Pubna, Bogora and Rangpur. It was during the next decades that these Muslims spread to other districts of Lower and Central Assam. The total number of Muslim cultivators was 2,58,000 in 1911. The number of Bengali Muslim cultivators in Assam except Sylhet district had risen from 503670 in 1907 to 1279388 in 1931 and in 1941 it was 1696978 (Kar, 1990).

The Ahom kings brought Muslim people from East Bengal to fulfill their needs. Sometimes they tried to attract Bengali Muslims by allowing no tax on cultivable land (Ahmed, 1997). The British government brought poor Muslim agricultural labourers from East Bengal for agricultural production in Assam (Gait, 2003). High rate of growth of population, poor economic condition, frequent famine, the great earthquake of East Bengal and Assam (in 1897) etc. are also responsible for this huge in-migration of Bengali Muslims to Assam (Shek, 2000). To grow more food Muslim cultivators of East Bengal (present Bangladesh) were invited to Assam by the Assam Government and allowed them to settle at the government wastelands

(Shek, 2000). The *Zamindars* (land lords) of Goalpara too had encouraged hard working Bengali Muslim labour migrations from East Bengal for agricultural production (Shek, 2000). Assam has around 260 km international border with Bangladesh. Among this 260 km international border, about 50 km is riverine border which has no protection. This riverine open border indirectly helps to increase Muslim people in Assam (Choudhury, 2013).

### **Contributions of Neo-Assamese Muslims for Agricultural Development of Assam**

During British period agriculture was the main source of revenue. Therefore, to earn revenue the British government gave priority to increase agricultural production by importing labourers from the then Bengal (Ahmed, 1997). The hard working Neo-Assamese Muslim peasants introduced modern methods of land use and broke the monotony of rural stagnation. They converted many deep jungles into smiling field and produced new varieties of crops. It is this community, which produces the state's vegetables, mustard, sesame and 82 per cent of the total jute of Assam (Muslims in Assam, n.d.). The migrated Muslim cultivators came to Assam with the method of intensive and commercial cultivation. They also create a competitive mind among the local cultivators who also try to produce same variety of crops in their agricultural field (Barman, 2013). It also goes to their credit that extensive areas of *char* (alluvium) lands had been turned into lush green agricultural scene of Assam. These cultivators also eased the labour scarcity in the rural economy of Assam (Bhattacharyya, 2004). According to Ahmed (2014), green revolution started in Assam because of the effort made by this group of people during the last part of 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Khangai (2011), since the early decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century, large number of Muslims migrated to Assam from East Bengal to fulfill the demand of rural wage labour in the agro-economic sector.

Seventy five per cent livestock and poultry production of Assam is in the hand of the Neo-Assamese Muslim people of Assam. They supply milk, meat, leather, egg, fish etc. to Assam and help to develop the economic condition of Assam (Karim, 1997). Pisciculture

(Fish cultivation) in Assam is a very new step included in agriculture of Assam. It is the unique contribution of Neo-Assamese Muslim people of Assam. This group of people started digging fisheries individually and started commercial cultivation of fish (Ahmed, 2014).

### **Other Contributions**

To develop the industrial sector of Assam, the Ahom kings hired technically expert people such as weaver, tailor, carpenter, mason etc. from Bengal (Ahmed, 2014). During the Ahom rule (1228-1826), a good number of Muslim artisans and learned men were brought by the Ahom kings and appointed in various departments of the state. These Muslims were specialists in different crafts like minting coins, painting, embroidery, carpentry, sword-making, gun-casting and manufacture of gun powder (Ahmed, 2003). It is important to note that most of the Neo-Assamese Muslim people form the manual workforce in Assam: rickshaw pullers, house construction workers, house painters, gardeners, field workers, road construction workers, vegetable vendors, etc. Women mostly work as maids. Significantly, these migrants worked willingly at odd hours and in the most arduous activities which local Assamese labour are unwilling to do (Goswami, n.d.). Assamese music and folksongs have always fascinated the Muslims. The *Zikirs*, *Jaris*, songs of *Haidar Ghazi*, *Cheradhek* and *Ghazals* are the unique contribution of Muslims to Assamese folk literature (Ahmed, 2003).

### **Negative effects of in-migration of Muslims into Assam**

In-migration to a particular level is helpful for a place but after a point large-scale in-migration has a wide range of short-run as well as long-run negative effects on the society and economy of that place. Assam is not an exception of that. The important negative effects are:

- i. Pressure on land: The immigrants came to Assam as poor landless peasants. Most of them occupy fallow government lands or reserve forests or even agricultural land belonging to indigenous people in more remote areas. The traditional

- common property resources of the indigenous communities have been encroached in this process.
- ii. Environmental degradation: Rise of population is one of the main causes of environmental degradation. Creation of slum in and around the city and production of huge wastes has a large scale contribution in environmental degradation is mainly due to large scale population migration.
  - iii. Effect on labor market: The labour market is almost completely captured by the migrated people. They provide service at low wages than the local labour, thus the local poor labours are deprived from earning their livelihood from household work to agricultural field also.
  - iv. Price rise: Due to immigration, the population increases rapidly but the agricultural products are not increasing at that ratio. As a result price of agricultural products and other commodities are increasing day by day in Assam.
  - v. Social problem: Many poor immigrants are involved in unsocial and criminal activities due to struggle for their existence, which directly or indirectly affects society (Gupta, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

In the conclusion it could be said that the Neo-Assamese Muslim people has been residing in Assam since British period and has been contributing in various ways to improve the agro-economic condition of the state of Assam. They have been trying to give a new dimension to Assam's agriculture by developing this sector almost in all ways. These Muslim settlers had made this land their permanent home, assimilated with the local people, adopted Assamese as their mother tongue, and identified themselves as Assamese with the local people, and through this process they have enriched the socio-cultural life of Assam. Although the Neo-Assamese Muslims of Assam is an inseparable and integral part of the contemporary Assamese political and socio-cultural milieu and discourse, due to relentless inflow of migrants, this population in study is confused with the recent influx and doubts are rise against them. Hence, the



Neo-Assamese Muslims in this paper do not refer to nor include the recent influx of Muslims.

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