



---

## The Problems And Prospects Of The East Bengal Origin Assamese Muslims: A Critical Study

**Mir Abdur Rahim** Research Scholar Gauhati University, Guwahati, Assam Email :  
[mirarahim@gauhati.ac.in](mailto:mirarahim@gauhati.ac.in)

---

### Abstract:

There has been a long controversy in the Assamese society and even in the India at large regarding the East Bengal origin Muslim. The Muslims of East Bengal origin are represent an important group of Muslims in Assam. Like the Mughul or British they are not an external dynasty but its true that they migrated/replaced their resident to Assam from western part i.e. Bengal or East Bengal of undivided India. Besides linguistic and cultural differences, the period of migration and the socio- economic status of these Muslims were quite different from their earlier counterpart. The history of their migration to Assam began sometimes during the last part of the 19th century and continued up to the independence of India in 1947 A.D. They represent the majority of Muslim population of Assam. Originated from a different entity, the period of their migration and the contemporary socio-political condition have not provided enough scope for their complete assimilation with the Assamese life or so called Assamese Muslims. Nevertheless, from economic, social, and linguistic point of view they have been maintaining a close proximity with the Assamese life and so called indigenous Muslims. The process of assimilation is now on the way and the present generation designated themselves as Assamese Muslim. However, it is obvious that due to above-mentioned ground they have some distinction from others. This has given them a distinct identity. It is quite interesting to note that apropos to their distinctness, the rest of Assamese people have been using various names or terms to denote this particular section of Muslims. Some of them have been obsolete now, and some are still in use. Again, sometimes, some of these are used in a non-honorific sense. These are 'Pamuah' or farming Muslims, 'Maymensingia' or Muslims of Maymensing, 'Miah', 'Na-Asamiya' or neo-Assamese 'Charuah' or people of 'Char-capori' belt, 'Bhatia' or 'people of downstream' 'Abhibhasi Asamiya Musalman' or Immigrant Assamese Muslim etc.

**Keywords:** Problems, East Bengal Origin Assamese Muslims, Bengal, Replaced, Miah.

### Introduction:

The Muslims of East Bengal origin is categories as a distinctive group and they have distinction in their social and cultural life. There are various terms has been used so far as mentioned above. Nevertheless, in the context of present Assamese life, in the real sense these are not able to designate their actual identity. The term 'Pamuah' as mentined in 'Hemkosh' means- "one who take temporary settlement on the land

taken for cultivation away from his resident.” In ‘Saraighat Abhidhan’ the meaning is given as- “a cultivator living and working in a firm away from home.” These Muslims farmers had not migrated only for farming for a certain period, rather to settle permanently. Therefore, in this sense they were not ‘Pamuah’ or farming Muslim. Hence, the term seems to be irrelevant in relation to their status. The term ‘Maymensingia’ means the inhabitant of Maymansing district of East Bengal. The bulk of migrants hailed from Maymansing, but there were few from other districts like Pabna, Bogura, Rangpur, and Dacca also. Therefore, the term though used as a synonym, but does not represent all the migrants of East Bengal. The neo-Assamese term once becomes popular as for these Muslims. During the initial period of their settlement, there was a general tendency to become Assamese and in the first ever census after independence these Muslims declared Assamese as their mother tongue. Henceforth, rest of Assamese has given the identity by as ‘Na-Axamiya’ or neo-Assamese, an identity subsidiary to Assamese identity. During the 7th decade of the 20th century this was became popular. However, after passing more than a hundred years, the present generation (fourth-fifth generation of the migrants) never consider themselves as neo-Assamese but Assamese; like other domicile Assamese of the state. They are now no more new element, but an integral part of this. Therefore, it is now an obsolete term. The term ‘Charua’ means who lived in the ‘char’ areas or smaller river islands. It is true that during the period of migration and settlement, these Muslims choose the riverine and ‘char’ areas for settlement and from this, the nomenclature ‘Charua’ has been derived. The ‘Char’ areas are still representing the core areas of their settlement. Equally, it is a fact that their settlement is also scattered in the non-char or plain areas. Therefore, it is inappropriate to call all of them as ‘Charua’. In some particular area of undivided Goalpara, the settler of plain areas often termed their counterpart of char areas as ‘charua’. The term ‘Miyah’ generally means the respectable fellow. However, in Assam, a sense of dishonor is associated with this. Further, the said term, found popular in undivided Kamrup only. So it does not represent all. Similarly, the term ‘Bhatia’ means the habitants of downstream of river. East Bengal, the original home of these migrants situated on the downstream of the two great rivers namely Brahmaputra and Ganges. So the place or country is known as ‘Bhati’ i.e. place of downstream or ‘Bhati Desh’ i.e. country of downstream. In the Ahom history, the ‘Kamatapur’ was, often mentioned as ‘Bhati Desh’. Similarly, the migrants came from East Bengal (‘Bhati-desh’) and their descendants are termed as ‘Bhatia’. Probably the so-called indigenous Muslims of western Assam used this term to distinguish this Muslim from self. In undivided Goalpara, this is still found as a popular term, but in case of Kamrup, it is rare. Age prescribed the term ‘Immigrant Assamese Muslim’ to designate these Muslims. As, Ismail Hussain, who favoured the term, say’s, that - “immigrant refers their history of migration from East Bengal, by religion they are Muslim and considering their place in the context of greater Assamese life, they are Assamese, so they are named as ‘the immigrant Assamese Muslim’”(Abhibashi Asomiya Musalman). However, term has become an ambiguous one

in the context of the changing socio-political scenario of Assam, The dictionary meaning of the term, as written in the “Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary” goes that “Immigrant - a person who has come to a different country in order to live there permanently”. In ‘Anglo Assamese Dictionary’ the meaning of immigrant is written as ‘One who immigrates, “Desh eri Bidesat thakiboloi aha manuh”. Therefore, the meaning goes that, one who has come from one country to other country with a view to reside permanently is an immigrant. The Muslims of East Bengal had come to Assam to live here permanently. However, at that time, Assam and East Bengal both were two separate provinces of the same British India; so, the migration was only an inter- province migration. They had not left their own country, but left the province; so in the relax sense, their mode of migration similar to immigration but etymologically they were not immigrant. Dr. Amalendh Guha has used the term the ‘East Bengal immigrant’ in his book ‘Planter Raj to Swaraj’, but in the present socio-political context, this term seems to be a controversial title. The present generation of these Muslims never considers them as immigrants but domicile of Assam.

### **Importance of the Study:**

The importance of a subject related to socio-political field is greatly depends on its social significance in the contemporary society. In a multi-cultural, multi-racial society, the social significance of a particular group can be comprehensible from two different aspects. First –assimilation; where various groups merged to a single identity and the importance is determined by the degree of assimilation and contribution of various groups. Second- co-existence; where various groups besides keeping their self-identity, showed willingness for a greater identity. Here importance and significance lies with the fact of unity. The East Bengal origin Assamese Muslims are comparatively a new group. Hence, their assimilation is still a matter of great concern.

### **Significance of the Study:**

The Present study has been undertaken with a view to highlight and estimate the problems and prospects of the life of East Bengal origin Assamese Muslim on the perspective of composite Assamese identity. These Muslims are originated from the Bengali tradition but in the context of Assam, they have been playing a significant role in the social, cultural, economic, and political life of Assam. The most noteworthy feature is indeed their cohesive and coincide attitude towards Assamese identity. But this has never been appreciated by others. The prevaricated assessment from political and social viewpoint and virulent controversy have pushed these Muslims to a controversial position and estranged from others. Their position in the mainstream Assamese life is a matter of concern. However, the social reality is after lot of sufferings, criticism they never tried to give up this. It is significant that the socio-political changes now motivated various smaller groups to uphold and established their self-identity and thereby pertaining themselves from the Assamese nationality.

### **Research Methodology:**

In the field of social research, methodology has great significance. Generally, methodology depends on the research topic itself and on the technique and tools, data available, experience and capability of the researcher. For the study, the necessary data's are collected through survey-based approach, which comprises personal knowledge, personal interview and questionnaire, and field study. The data used in this work has been collaborated from two sources, primary and secondary. The primary data have been collected from extensive field survey done in the Assam. The primary data are also acquired through personal observation, interview with the renowned personalities of Assam and of the particular communities with necessary questionnaires. The fieldwork has been supplemented by the consulting The collected datas, using the objective and analytical method cross-examined and analyzed to attain the findings.

### **Discussion:**

These Muslims have distinctness in their socio-cultural life. They are a smaller unit of the greater Assamese identity. Therefore, in the context of multi-racial and multi-cultural Assamese life, like others, these Muslims also deserve a specific name or title to signify their self-identity. In this regard, considering their history, religious identity and above all their inclinations towards Assamese life and culture, the term 'East Bengal origin Assamese Muslim of Assam' is preferred here and used in the future. The used has been justified with necessary discourse. Here, the combination of three words has been used with own significance and meaning. These Muslims had migrated from East Bengal, a part of greater Bengal with a view to settle here permanently. The East Bengal as a geographical region had been in use prior to separation of Bengal in 1905 or 1901 census. The 'East Bengal origin' contemplated with their origin, is being used here. Again, the term 'Muslim' indicates their religious identity. The term 'Assamese' used here to signify their present position in relation to Assam and to the greater Assamese life. Further, the 'East Bengal origin Assamese Muslim' is accepted here with the speculation that it will help to understand their origin and comprehend their inclination towards greater Assamese life.

So far through this study it has been seen that East Bengal origin Assamese Muslim represents a distinct socio-cultural-religious group of Assam. Their history, social and cultural lives have given them the distinctness. They have come from a different cultural hegemony but since their migration and settlement in Assam they have been trying to integrate with the traditional life of Assam. The journey or transition from one tradition to other institutes various changes in their traditional life and this has given the distinctness to their socio-cultural life. Their venture of transition from one to another tradition have not achieved in its full form due to some related reasons. The time factor as well as various socio-political factors found responsible in this regard. Though In this study all these imposible to discussed But it is a fact that, they have been showing mingling attitudes since their settlement period to Assamese life in general. In the post-

colonial, postindependence period, the changing socio-economic condition has accelerated the process. Accordingly, these Muslims now designated themselves as Assamese and part and parcel of greater Assamese life. Nevertheless, the assumption regarding their complete assimilation to Assamese life is still a matter of concern. It has not achieved partly due to contemporary socio-political conditions of Assam in general and partly because of their socio-political and economic problems.

The study on the socio cultural life of these Muslims of undivided India has revealed that, they have been facing lot of problems in relation to their social, economic, cultural, political life. Of these, some have similarities with others, but some are quite different from other social groups. As a marginalized group, they have been facing some common problems. These are related to their socio-economic life. The problems like, backward economic condition, poverty, dominance of landless and poor people, lower literacy rate, specially in case of women, higher birth rate, backward status of education, backward communication, unemployment, poor health and hygiene condition etc. are some common problems of these people. Apart from these, there are some other problems too, these are unique in nature and related with their socio-cultural and political life. These are also concerned with their identity and integration. The economic backwardness is a major problem of these Muslims. Their social life is characterized by presence of highest number of poor people. They had come here to sustain their lives and livelihood under economic pressure. But more than one hundred years have passed, but their condition has not changed so far. Poverty remains as a dominant factor for their backwardness. During the period of migration, initially, the availability of land had given them enough opportunity to get settlement. However, in the subsequent decade the increase of migrants created problem for settlement eventually many of them turned to landless or marginal farmers. The condition becomes more serious in the post-independence period. Since 1950 the recurring flood and erosion of Brahmaputra has been damaging agriculture fields and eroded number of villages in the char-chapori belt. As a result, the number of poor people enhanced every year.

One of the major social problems of these Muslim is higher birth rate. The lack of education, early marriage of girls' child, and lack of knowledge of family planning – all are working as contributory factors in this regard. The increase in population have squeezed the land holding size per family and turned many of them as landless poor. So it is found that all these have been contributed in povertyness of these people. In case of Education, the overall literacy rate of these Muslims, compare to others has been found as lowest. The rate among women is most perilous. The illiteracy has been deprived these people from social progresses as well as getting social justice. Due to illiteracy, many of them have become easy victim of religious dogmatism. Similarly, in social life become victimized of politics. On the other hand due to backward economic condition most of these Muslims have been deprived from pursuing quality education. As a result their human resource are comparatively less qualitative than others. In case of land

occupation, they have been faced lot of problems. In the char-chapori belt their land occupation is found temporary in nature, settled as 'eksona', 'touji' pattaland. Due to ignorance and illiteracy many a times their ownership is challenged by the so-called 'dewani' or 'matabbar' and occupaid their land.The 'Miyadi' pattaland or permanently settled land, has been found, very limited in the char-chapori belt. It has been depriving these people from getting the government beneficial scheme or government loan etc. So government schemes for eradication of poverty remain out of reach for them.

In case of socio-cultural and political problem, it is seen that these are vulnerable problem and these are basically concerned with their identity question. There is a common allegation on these Muslims that they have not assimilated with the indigenous people. Assimilation is a natural process and it happened among the groups who are equal in status, from socio-cultural point of view. The mutual influence have helped different group to merge in to a single entity. Historically these Muslims were poor and backward migrant community. Moreover, they hailed from a different cultural tradition. Therefore, their migration has placed them as a minority group here. As a result they have failed to influence the host tradition of Assam and become submissive to the host community. Further, .the colonial politics have segregated these Muslims from the rest of people since their settlement period. In the post-independence period, the same notion has been continued through various social political issues. As a result, the mode of integration and assimilation shown by these Muslims has been looking as a matter of consideration. Sometimes their contribution has been acknowledge by the host community and accepted them as a well come group to the Assamese fold. On reverse some issues have intended these Muslims as anti Assamese, anti-nationals. So in case of these Muslims 'social exclusion' cannot be denied. These Muslims have been contributing to the national life of Assam since their settlement in Assam. Besides economic contribution, in case of Assamese language and literature they have been contributing a lots. Even in case of politics too when required they have been extended their cooperation. But despite all these they have been keeping outside of the so called Assamese fold by saying that they are yet to assimilate with the main stream life. But it is difficult to determine the degree of assimilation required for being Assamese. It has been seen that there are some reasons that debarred these people to assimilate with the mainstream life. These are hardly been taken into consideration by any intellectuals or social thinkers. This are- Firstly, They are coming from a different tradition that is heterogeneous in nature compare to Assamese culture. Secondly, Their place of settlement is unique and in most cases they are isolated from the mainland. Further the colonial mode of settlement keep these Muslims away from the indigenous people. It has developed a mental gap. Thirdly, The social and economic backwardness of these Muslims have created a status differences with the rest of people Fourthly, Since pre independence period the 'identity crisis of Assamese' as raised by section of Assamese middle class and continued henceforth has been entangled with these Muslims in terms of 'Muslim -Bengali' dominance, in terms of 'Muslim league Pakistani supporter', in terms

of 'illegal Pakistani', in terms of 'illegal Bangladeshi' and lastly 'Jihadist fundamentalist' etc. All these have estranged these Muslims from the main fold of Assamese.

These above mentioned reasons are found responsible for obstructing the complete assimilation of these Muslims with Assamese fold. The study has revealed that their settlement in Assam geographically, politically, and socially parted them from East Bengal forever. Eventually the participation of these Muslims in the agriculture sector have placed these Muslim into direct contact with the indigenous people. It has provided greater opportunity to develop a cordial relation with the indigenous people. This have been inspired these Muslims to develop a socio-cultural life which is complementary to greater Assamese life. In case of other contemporary migrants it is seen that they still have been maintained a relation with their past. But in case of these Muslims the independence of India and separation of East Bengal as East Pakistan, later on as Bangladesh have placed them as an isolated group in Assam. As a result they have taken the option to merge with the indigenous life of Assam and began to adjust their socio-cultural life with the new surroundings. They have already become major contributor in agricultural economy of Assam. In social life gradually move to Assamese language and accept it as own language. Moreover try to intricate with the every social, political issues related to Assamese life and thus try to become Assamese like other social group.

### **Conclusion:**

So it is evident that these Muslims are an integral part of greater Assamese life. Since their initial days of settlement the Assamese intellectuals, writers, various civil societies have acknowledge their endless contribution to Assamese life with a hope that in future they will be become Assamese like others. But significantly some sensitive issued tagged with these Muslims since pre independence period have not only turmoil the process of integration and assimilation but also develop a sense of insecurity and distrust among them. The experience of PIP scheme (1964-68), Assam Movement (1979-85) and list may be extended upto the ethnic violence in bodo-dominated areas of lower Assam (1992, 1994, 1998, 2008, and 2012) time and again proved the truth. Under such a condition the need of the hour is to estimate their 'Assamese' identity on the basis of social fact and reality. Assimilation is a natural process. So in case of these Muslims the forced assimilation can never be possible. The modern mode of social living, network and accessibility have tide different group of people to work and live together. These Muslims are now also a part of these. The experience and knowledge they have gathered from the greater society now transmitted to their own society. In this way the social differences are now gradually merging. It is seen in every aspect of life like construction of dwelling house, adornment of bride, dress, food habits, marriage function, celebration of festivals etc. Even in case of creative art like creative literature, performing art likes Drama, song etc, this has been seen. Earlier majority of these Muslims had remained confined within their own areas only. But the changing economic condition has been forced these people irrespective of their economic class to come out from the traditional geographical berear.

There expositions to outer world have created a changing trend in respect of their socio-cultural life. In this changing trend the tendency of merging with a greater tradition is noticeable. This natural mode of change now waited for positive response from the main stream Assamese life. These Muslims are representing major share (nearly 70-80 laces) of state population, from economic point of view this huge number of population has been playing an important role in the state economy. Besides agriculture at present they have been playing the major source of labour force required for modern developmental work. This huge number if utilized in proper way from economic perspective will surely provide stong economic base to state. Similarly in case of other social, political and cultural issues of Assam they have been assigning the important role. In time of reorganization of state in 1950, in time of language movement of 1965, in time of Medium Movement they have took part in favour of Assamese and Assamese national life. So an Assamese mind has been active among them. In case of Assamese language, also it is seen that in recent time various smaller groups of Assamese fold now favoured their self-linguistic identity. It has practically put a negative impact on Assamese. But despite this the Assamese language still holds the majority status only because of these Muslims. They also provided the greater reader bank for Assamese writers. Again, from political point of view in recent times the various ethnic and racial groups of Assam have parted them from the greater Assamese identity and trying to establish self-identity. Some are even demanding the geographical segmentation of present Assam. The demand of Bodoland, Kamatapur, and Karbi state are instance of this. All these social and political issues have put a great challenge to Assamese identity. Amidst these changing socio-economic and political condition the Assamese identity has been facing dunting challenges for its existence. In this critical juncture the recognition of this Muslim, surely provide a strong vintage ground for Assamese Identity.

## **Bibliography**

1. Ahmed , Hafij & Others (ed) : Bitorkar Ba- Marolit Asamar Bideshi Samasya , 1st Edition, Char- Chapori Sahitya Porishad, Guwahati, 2005.
2. Ahmed, Hafij : Asamiya Sahityalai Bangamulio Musalmanar Avadan , Unpublished Thesis, Gauhati University, 2015 .
3. Ahmed, Taj Uddin : Tirashir Raktakta Itihas, 1st Edition, All Assam Minority Students Union , Guwahati , 1983
4. Ahmed, Fazal Ali: Abhibashi Asomia Musalmanar Samaj Aru Sanskriti, 1st Edition, Nandan Prakashan, Guwahati, 1998 .
5. Barborua, Hiteswah : Ahomar Din, 6th Edition, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati, 2013.



6. Barman Santa : Goalparar Jana Itihas, 1st Edition, Ashok Publications, Guwahati, 2009.
7. Barua, Hemchandra : Hemkosh, (Ed) Debananda Barua, Enlarged 48th revised Edition, Hemkos Prakashan, Guwahati 2011.
8. Barua, Birinchi Kumar : Asamar Loka Samskriti, 2nd Edition, Bina Library, Guwahati, 1985 .
9. Barua, Birinchi Kumar : Asomiya Bhasa Aru Sanskriti , 9th Edition, Journal Emporium, Nalbari , 2001.
10. Bhattacharya Debendra Nath (ed) : Kalika Puran , 1st Edition, Bani Mandir, Guwahati, 2008 .
11. Bhattacharya, Gauri Sankar : Bhumi Putror Marma Bedana, 1st Edition, Nava Diganta Prakash, Guwahati, 2000 .
12. Bhattacharya, Ashutosh : Bangar Jana Kristi (Assamese), 1st Edition, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 1983 .