

Ethnic origin of East Bengal origin Assamese Muslims in the Assamese discourse

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Abstract

The Muslims of Assam has been categorized into different group. Broadly it can be classified as Assamese Muslims and non Assamese Muslim. The Assamese Muslims belong to Brahmaputra valley. They are regarded as part and parcel of greater Assamese life. Within the nomenclature of Assamese Muslim from vertically two distinct is prominent. They are Assamese Muslims and East Bengal Origin Assamese Muslims. The Assamese Muslims also known as Gariya, Mariya and Deshi. Whereas the second group also known as Bhatiya, Miya Abhibhaxi(=immigrants),Na-Axomiya(=neo Assamese).But there is always differences in opinion some are recognized them as Assamese but some are in view that as they have hailed from Bengali entity they don't deserve it. Moreover, they even trying to identified them as foreign origin. As a result the identity of East Bengal origin Assamese Muslims become a matter of contention. The region wherefrom they have sprung was once a part of India but now due to partition become a separate country. So The emergence of a separate country has placed the identity of these group into dilemma. Whether they are really represent a foreign identity which has no relevance in Assamese life and identity or they have no difference but become a victim of constructed narrative, this need to be analyze in details. In this regard here an attempt has been made to justify their Assamese identity in the context of Ethnic distinction of these Muslims. Ethnically is there any affinity or represent totally different identity this has been discussed here.

Keywords: ethnicity, ethnic group of Assam, Assamese Muslim, Muslim of East Bengal, elements in Indian Muslim.

Main Text :

The term 'ethnicity bears great significance in the field of cultural and sociological studies. The cultural manifestation and social distinction of a community is determined by the ethnic origin they belong. In other words, ethnicity gives heterogeneous nature and identical culture to among various groups. The dictionary meaning of 'ethnicity' as found in the Marriem Webster Dictionary goes that, "- of or relating to races or large groups of people who have the same customs, religion, origin, etc." or "associated with or belonging to a particular race or group of people who have a culture that is different from the main culture of a country."(Marriem Webster Dictionary) Ethnic groups and ethnicity both terms were first used in anthropology to refer to a people presumed to affiliate with the same cultural group and who shared the same custom, language and traditions. In 1922, the sociologist, Max Weber, defined ethnic groups in a novel way, "—We shall call 'ethnic groups' those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists Ethnic membership (Gemeinsamkeit) differs from the kinship group precisely by being a presumed identity, not a group with concrete social action, like the latter. J. Milton Yinger says that "Ethnic group a segment of a larger society is seen by others to be different is some

combination of the following characteristics- language, religion, race and ancestral homeland with its related culture” (Haralambos & Holborn-2000)

Assam, has been recognized as the land of diverse ethnic groups. Various ethnic groups has been living here since ancient past. According to Anthropologist, so far racial entity is concerned the Assamese people bear the element of three major racial group. These are Austroloid , Mongoloid, Caucasian. The admixture of various racial groups through the process of Assimilation and synthesis helped to emerge a composite identity. This identity has been recognized as Assamese during the colonial rule. So, Assamese identity doesn't represent a single community or racial group but admixture of various ethnic groups belong to different racial groups. Most of the ethnic groups of Assam are belong to Mongoloid origin. They are known by different names from different angel. They are regarded as the indigenous element of Assam. At present who are regarded as Assamese have possess the ethnic elements prevailed here. But, due to admixture it has turned into a complex discourse where no one able to claim the purity.

The Ethnicity of Muslims of Assam particularly of Assamese Muslim is always ambiguous in nature. Islam is a mono religion and believes in single entity. But as far as ethnicity is concern it is found Assamese Muslims bears quite different elements from the rest of Indian Muslims. The Assamese Muslim though presenting as single entity, vertically it comprises two distinct group namely indigenous Assamese Muslims and East Bengal origin Assamese Muslims. One has been constituted by external migration and conversion of indigenous people of mediaeval period. Others are purely formed by migrants hailed from erstwhile East Bengal of India prior to Independence of India.

The Assamese or Indigenous Muslim of Assam is formed by various elements penetrated to Assam since thirteenth century to the close of eighteenth century. They had come either as saints to preach Islam in this land or military force to conquest the region. Those entered here as religious saints were basically belong to Arab or Middle East. They are known as Sayed. The Muslim invasions commenced from the dawn of thirteenth century to the end of 17th century had contributed Pathan Mughal elements to Assam. Most of them had entered with a distinct view but some of them reluctant to return and stayed here. They had married the local women and began their settlement here. Due to their endeavors some indigenous people also converted to Islam. Initially, the external elements were named as Goriya, Moriya by others. But in the social matrix the above mentioned external elements synchronized with the converted elements led to emergence of a single entity like popularly known as Gariya or indigenous Muslim or Assamese Muslims. The indigenous Muslims of Brahmaputra valley excluding Goalpara represents the same stock and identity. But in case of Goalpara except a few majority belongs to converted origin; they are popularly known as ‘Ujani’ or ‘Deshi’ Muslim of Assam and by origin they are belong to Mongolian or Bodo tribal stock of the district.(Malik Abdul-2010)

In this context the ethnic origin or composition of the East Bengal origin Assamese Muslims is a matter of great concern. They are intermixed with other ethnic groups to such an extent that it is hard to trace their origin. Their culture, language, religion, and ancestry are interpretative of the fact that they are no more retaining the origin, like various tribal ethnic groups of Assam. Even though, within the limitation, an overview on ethnicity of these Muslims would be highlighted here.

Muslims of East Bengal origin are comparatively new element. Their history goes back to Nineteenth century onwards. During the second half of the nineteenth century to the first half of twenty century their migration had occurred from the erstwhile East Bengal, a place which was a part of British India and after independence and partition simultaneously become a separate country known as East Pakistan, later on as Bangladesh. This historical occurrence tended these Muslims as foreign origin and obviously viewed them as totally different from the indigenous stock. Hence a sense of alienation persists among the common people regarding these Muslims. However, this generalized perception is endorsed by emotion rather than fact. Therefore, it needs necessary scrutiny whether they are totally different from indigenous element and represent foreign origin or have racial affinity with the indigenous people of Assam.

The East Bengal origin Assamese Muslims of Assam is by origin belong to Bengali 'ethnicity of greater Bengal, a non-racial but geographical, cultural linguistic based ethnicity. Their place of origin was the Eastern most districts of East Bengal namely Maymensing, Bagura, Pabna, Rajshahi, and Dacca. Out of the above, highest number of migrants (nearly 90 percent) were hailed from Maymensing. Therefore the term 'Maymansingia' has been used as synonymous for migrants. Besides some other terms also used to refer these Muslims like 'pamuwa'(=farming community), 'maymensingia' (=from Maymansing) 'na-axomiya' (=NeoAssamese), 'abhbhaxiomiya'

(=Immigrants Assamese).Notably, all these are not related to their racial or ethnical origin but referral term to indicate them as extra-origin to Assamese or Assam. Particularly in Goalpara and part of Kamrup these Muslim often referred them as 'Bhatiya'(= of downstream) a semi ethnical term. In colonial government record also they were referred as 'Bhatiya'. The 'ujani' or indigenous Muslim of Goalpara also used this term to identify there counterpart. On the contemporaneous discourse on these Muslims, the emotional or imaginary narrative need to be analysis in the light of historical evidence or data's available so far.

Geographically, the above regions are scattered on the North-Eastern Boarder of Bengal contiguous to Assam and south of North Bengal and extended across the river Brahmaputra. In ancient time, so far history is concerned this vast region fall under the jurisdiction of ancient Kamrupa kingdom "Yoginitantra" has demarked the western boundary of ancient Kamrupa as river 'Korotowa', and in the south the Sea.but during the rule of 'Salstambha' dynasty the western boundary of Kamrupa — "comprised all the three present provinces of Assam, Bengal and Bihar and Orissa with the addition, perhaps of the eastern portion of the united provinces and the northern portion of the Madras presidency". (Kanak Lal Baruah-)Again, during the rule of Pala dynasty- "its western boundary extended beyond Korotowa." (Edward Gait-) So, the present undivided Goalpara and Kamrup district including North Bengal and the portion of North east bordering region of present Bangladesh was integral part of Kamrupa. So the ancient geography of Kamrupa had included the region known as Maymensing, Bagura, pabna . In the later period the rise of Kamata and Koch power of Kamrupa also embrace fully or part of the above region. So, from historical point of view the above region bears a close relation with Assam.

Again, regarding racial or ethical origin of these Muslims, this can be examine from the racial origin of the people of ancient Kamrupa. In ancient Kamrupa, long before the advent of Aryans had been dominated by the Non-Aryan people specially the Mongoloid group known as Bodos . Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee observed that,—“Bodos, who spread over the whole of the Brahmaputra valley and North Bengal as well as East Bengal, forming a solid bloc in North-eastern, were the most important Indo Mongoloid people in Eastern India and they form one of the main bases of the present –day population of these tracts.” (Suniti Kumar Chatterji-2011). Actually, from the foothills of Himalayan to the confluence of Brahmaputra the whole track including Mymensing, Rangpur, North Bengal, and Western Assam were pre-dominantly occupied by the various Mongoloid groups belong to Tibbeto-Burman linguistic family. In the epic "Mahabharata" king, Bhagadatta was described as the king of "Mleccha" kingdom means mongoloid known as "Pragjyotisha".(Birinchi Kumar Barua-) The ancient historical kings of Kamrupa belong to "Bhuama Dynesty"; "Salstambha dynasty" etc. certainly belonged to Mongoloid origin. It is seen that, in case of Bengal, particularly of north and east Bengal, the region bordering with Assam in the east and west of Brahmaputra, the Mongoloid groups who were belong to earlier group might had come into contact with the earlier tribes like "Kol" (Austrie) and "Dravidian origin". (Suniti Kumar Chatterji(2)-2011) Hiuen Tsang, the Chines traveler of 7th century remarked that the tribes living in the frontiers of Kamarupa were akin to the Man tribes of south western China, a wild Tibeto-Chinese people. From Kamrupa he came to the Sama-tata or East Bengal, bordering on the "sea" and according to his description the people of Sama-tata (east Bengal) were "hardy, small of stature, and of a black complexion". Significantly according to him the people of Kamrupa were of "small stature, with a dark yellow complexion".(Suniti Kumar Cattarji-2011) So it can be assumed that the people of the

eastern most districts of East Bengal like Maymensing, Bogura, and Pabna were probably admixtures of Mongolian and Kollarian or Proto-austroloid origin. However, Mongolian elements were predominant here. Minhaj-ud-din' pharsi historian of 13th century had referred about the people of intervening region of the then Kamrupa and Bengal. He mention about Koches, the Meches and Tharus in "Tabakat i-nasiri", who were certainly of mongoloid origin.(Mohini Kumar Saikia-1978) The Koch, from where later on the Koch Rajbanshis emerged said to be an admixture of the Dravidian and Mongolian groups. They are dominating groups of North Bengal and Rangpur, Dinajpur of present Bangladesh and undivided Goalpara of present Assam . In Maymensing areas also belong to mongolion origin but might had represent mixed ethnicity of Austro-mongoloid or may be Austro-mongoloid and Dravidian. Nevertheless, Mongoliod element is predominant in this mixed ethnicity. So from the above discussion it is evident that the racial origin of the people of North and Eastern Bengal stretch along the border of Assam belong to same Mongoloid stock. Dr. S.K. Chattarjee remarked that,- "The Bodo section of the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Tibeto-chinese people (Bodo, Mec,Koch,Kachari, Rabha, Garo Tipura) came to Assam and East Bengal , and were spread all over East and North Bengal. The time of the Tibeto-Burman incursion and settlement in Assam and East Bengal is not known, but it could not have been long before the beginning of Christian era, at the earliest". This part i.e. East Bengal, particularly Maymansing, Bagura, Pabna etc of Bengal remain free from Aryanisation till the beginning of Christian era. Before Aryan influence could embrace them fully, they came under the influence of Buddhist religion. Aryanisation of Bengal, seen since Maurya period but Paragjyotish and Vanga got the influence later then west, north and central Bengal. The Aryanisation import Brahminical idea of cast and consequently many of the non-Aryan tribes have become occupational castes in the Aryanised society and their position was determined by the nature of their occupation. Especially in the East Bengal, during the rule of Pala dynasty most of them embraced Buddhism, but during the rule of "Sena dynasty" the influence of Aryan Hinduised caste division placed most of these non-Aryan Buddhist follower of as lower status and termed as Mlechas, Sudras, or Namu-sudras. But in case of North Bengal and western Assam who were racially belong to same stock remain free from such social categorizations in absence of hard Brahmanical influence.

With the advent of Islam in Bengal, most of these downtrodden tribal people of East Bengal accepted Islam for social recognition. The occupation of Bengal by Bhaktiyar Khalji had expedite the conversion. During their conversion or after conversion might also have mixed with some elements. In case of North Bengal, during the expedition of Baktiyar Khilji one tribal chief accepted Islam and subsequently during long Muslim invasion number of tribel origin people embrace Islam. But in absence of rigid Cast system here Islam didn't got much space compare to East Bengal. So here, these people were either remain as tribal or become Hindus or converted to Islam. Those who had hinduized, became the ruler of the region. They are come to known as Rajbanshi and those who were converted to Islam are come to known as desi 'musalman' or 'ujani musalman', Significantly, their counter part of Bengal is simply known as Muslim or sheikh. The following points may forward as reason for this. The influence of Brahmanism and rigidity of casticism was prominent in East Bengal. This had favoured Islam to penetrate their and works as dynamics of social change. In case of Northern Bengal including western Assam absence of deep influence of Brahmanism as well as casticism people were liberal to accept either Hinduism or Islam. Apart from the degree of social context people of both region bear the same racial element.

So, east Bengal origin Assamese Muslims were from racial point of view share the same element of North Bengal and Western Assam. Further, the East Bengal Origin Muslims and the Desi or Ujani Muslims belong to same stock. Hence, the concurrent discourse on their foreign origin or have no relation with indigenous people of Assam is not a fact but a constructed social narratives. The origin of this narrative lies with the prevailing socio-political condition of Assam during provincial Government regime in twenty century. The homogeneity in agricultural practice and social customs of the Bodos, Ujani Muslims, and East Bengal origin

Muslim also asserted this. It is only after partition of India that their place of origin becomes a foreign country and simultaneously these Muslims have been termed as off coming of foreign element or quite different from the indigenous Muslims.

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