

The affiliation or alienation to Assamese: The jeopardize identity of East Bengal Origin Assamese Muslim of Assam

Azizur Rahman

Assistant Professor, Girls' College, Kokrajhar

Abstract:

The Assamese Muslim is an identity that affiliated to greater Assamese nationality. The Assamese nationalism had emerged during the colonial period primarily based on Brahmaputra Valley. On Historical and Cultural perspective the ethos of Assamese nationalism emerged in this valley that have embraced all the social, cultural and ethnic groups of the valley. During the colonial rule this nationalism has been consolidated and identified as Assamese in reference to the valley known as Assam. The Assamese language by and large working as the tiding thread in this regard. The British annexation and its inclusion to Bengal Province had altered the mediaeval period socio-political condition of Assam. Particularly, the inclusion to Bengal province and dominance of Bengali hegemony accordingly created a sense of losing identity among the elite Assam. At this critical point, the newly emerged Assamese middle class inspired by western education rejuvenated their resistance to protect and preserve the Assamese identity and Assamese language had working as the tiding thread in this regard. Thus a language based nationalism has been working here. Among others the Muslim whom origin lies with the Eastern part of Bengal known as East Bengal migrated to Brahmaputra valley despite lot of hurdles slinked themselves into this nationalism and identified themselves as Assamese. But unfortunately due to their Bengali origin as well as number of population have created a sense of fear of jeopardizing Assamese identity among the rest of Assamese. This has created a line of alienation towards them. This has been entangled with Hindu nationalism as well as illegal infiltration of Bangladeshi. In this context here an attempt has been made to evaluated the position of this Muslims in the context of Ethnic affinity with the rest of Assamese and determine their position in the grater Assamese identity.

Methodology:

The proposed study has been done on analytical Methods of Research. The necessary data has been collected from the various primary and secondary sources. Like census report, govt record, published books and journals. The collected datas are analysed and presented here.

Keywords: Assamese Muslim, East Bengal Origin Assamese Muslim, assimilation, migration, Assamese

Main Text:

The Muslims living in the Brahmaputra valley comprises two distinct socio cultural group namely the indigenous Muslim and Muslim of East Bengal origin. Both of them together formed the Assamese Muslim entity of Assam.(Kasim Ali-2010,p-41) The both group have their own legacy of origin. Again both have differences in language, culture and traditions. Even though, in case of Brahmaputra valley, the socio-political-linguistic condition arrayed a synchronized status in the context of greater Assamese identity and nationalism. This synchronized entity has been entitled as Assamese Muslim of Assam.

The Muslim entity of Assam is the result of migration occurred during different time of History. On the basis of time period as well as perspective of migration the origin of Assamese Muslim can be broadly categories into two different group namely Muslim of Medieval period migrated on political perspective and Muslim of Modern period migrated on economic perspective. Both group have their own history of migration and settlement. Both have different history of assimilation with the Assamese entity.

The Muslim entity was totally unknown to Assam up to the beginning of thirteenth century. The first ever contact with Muslim occurred when the Turkish Governor of Bengal Mohammad Bin Bhaktiyar Khalji led a military expedition against Kamrupa in 1206 A.D. On route to his expedition he converted a tribal chief of the wester region into Islam and named as Ali Mech. He was the first historical person who embrace Islam. (M.K,Saikia-1978, p-37). The expedition ended with utter defeat by the King of ancient Kamrupa. Bhaktiyar had returned to Bengal but might be some of his military person were left here as war captive also some reluctant army who had voluntarily stayed here. There after a series of Turkish invasion was occurred from western direction and continued up to the end of fourteenth century. During this period apart from defeat Muslim had occupied some part of Kamrupa. This had established Muslim settlement in ancient Assam and thus Muslim entity in Assam emerged out of this relation. Muslim expedition there after continued with Pathan and Mughol power up to the end of Seventeenth century. During these period Muslim settlement in western Assam become prominent and in upper Assam too the Muslim settlement came into existence Apart from the above the various Muslim saints also sinked into ancient Kamrupa to preach Islam here. Giyas Uddin Awoliya, Ajan Fakir and many others were among them. (M.K.Saikia-1978,p-132,178,190) So the Turkish, Pathan, Mughal and Sayed this four element together formed the Muslim entity of Medieval Assam. Due to the effort of the saint a small group of people from indigenous group converted to Islam. The external elements mixed with indigenous group through conversion and marriage later on emerged as a synchronized group which was later termed as indigenous Muslim or so called Assamese Muslim of Assam. These Muslims are also known as Gariya, Mariya and deshi.(M.K,Saikia,1978, p-137) With the progress of time these Muslims are synthesize with the rest of indigenous group where they are found similar with other group except religious distinction. These Muslims were the single group representing the Assamese Muslim of Assam till to the beginning of 19th century.

The Muslim entity of Assam got a new element with the beginning of nineteenth century. This time to from western direction a new group with distinction in tradition, language religion migrated to Assam. Instead of military expedition or thrust for conquest of a region this time the migration was took place on economic reason. Accordingly the migrants were marginalized Muslims, most of whom were landless farmer. The extreme pressure of poverty forced these Muslims to migrate to Assam from the adjacent part of East Bengal namely Maymansing, Pabna,Bogura,Dhaka etc. The migration particularly in Goalpara district might had occurred earlier but was not prominent in nature. Since from the second half of the nineteenth century the fresh wave of migration was noticeable here. Initially this was sporadic in nature, but with the progress of time it took the form of large scale and continuous migration. How and exactly when from the trend was started, it is hard to distinguish but learnt that the Zamindars or their Subordinate officials of Goalpara might had taken the initiative for migration particularly for settlement of wasteland here.(M.K.Kar-1990,p-11) In the census Report of 1881, 1891 the data of migration was ignored, but in the Census Report of 1901 bears the data of migration of Muslims. In the subsequent decade the lakhs of Muslims migrated and settled in the wasteland of riverine region of Goalpara, Kamrup, Nowgong and part of Mongolodoi subdivision. In 1947, with the attainment of Independence and divide of India into two countries the migration from East Bengal was stopped for ever on legal ground. So from 19th century to first half of 20th century the migration from East Bengal had contributed in emergence of a new group of Muslim in the existing Muslim entity. Their present generation scattered in the Brahmaputra valley do not regard themselves as migrant but son of this land. Besides like other smaller groups of Assamese entity they also identified themselves as Assamese

Muslim. They are known as East Bengal Origin Assamese Muslims or Bengali origin Assamese Muslim of Assam.(Ismail Hussain-1997,p-73)

The East Bengal origin Assamese Muslims bear many point of difference compare to their counterpart termed as indigenous Muslim. The reason is obviously the time period of their migration and settlement and also the changing socio-political condition of Assam. These Muslims are comparatively new inclusion to Assam. They had migrated including all dependents with a view to settle here permanently. Moreover they had chosen the region which were generally left abandoned by the local people due to inaccessibility and non-hygienic condition. So these Muslims were living as an isolated group. Secondly, the colonial rule had cheesed all the possible condition of assimilation and synthesis exist so far.

Despite all these limitations, these Muslims particularly of Brahmaputra Valley had gotten the privilege to ensue close contact with the indigenous people. Their place of settlement were in or around the indigenous people. They had engaged themselves in the agriculture sector and thus become a counterpart of the agricultural society of Assam. Their participation in agriculture sector had given a new pace to the growth of agriculture economy. Further, the day to day contact with the local people had created a situation of understanding and coexist. So since from the date of migration they had shown general tendency to leaning towards Assamese. All these helped these Muslims to accustom with the local tradition and to adopt or adjust it with their own tradition. So, the process acculturation and Assimilation was found active among them. This process had got a new momentum with the acceptance of Assamese language as formal as well as medium of education by these people in general.

So, from economic, social and linguistic point of view, these Muslims had instituted a pro Assamese attitude. This attitude has been recognized by the Assamese intellectuals like Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury, Moidul Islam Bora, Benudhar Rajkhowa,Hem Baruah, Jananath Bora and many others. (Ismail Hussain-1997,p-28) Specially their linguistic behavior has been hailed by them. The reason was to counter the eclipsing dominance of Bengali hegemony and to preserve Assamese identity.

During provincial Government period the Valley (Brahmaputra-Suroma Valley) and Congress Muslim League Politics had dominate the politics. In this regard these Muslims become the victim of politics, where their social security had been politicalized by Muslim league and prompted as savior of them. These Muslims were not only backward but totally illiterate. So they were not in a position to counter this. This had provided a vintage ground to section of Assamese middle class backed by Hindu lobby (Hindu Mahasobha) to uphold them as anti Assamese. In the Provincial government, the Bengali Majority Suroma Valley had dominated the government. So the unleashed migration of Bengali Muslims from East Bengal to Brahmaputra Valley would change the demography. It leads to generate a xenophobia among Assamese mind that the increasing Bengali Muslims and influence of Muslim league would jeopardize the Assamese identity in Brahmaputra Valley. This had created an alienate feelings towards these Muslims. (Amalendu Guha,1978,p-211 Therefore just after independence a riot was broke out in parts of lower Assam in the areas dominated by these Muslims. Lakh of Muslims fled to East Pakistan. Some of them returned after Nehru-Liyakot pact in 1951.It is evident from the above that in the pre independence period when there was a process of acculturation and assimilation was going on, in political sphere a line of deference was drawned to disaffiliated there Assamese identity.

In the post-independence period these Muslims owing to changing socio-political scenario trying their best to adjust. In 1950, just after the riot, the government led by Gopinath Bordoloi appealed to these Muslims to become the obedient citizen by satisfying the interest of the son of the soil.(M.Kar-1990,p-114) In the dawn of independence these Muslims too forgetting the atrocities trying to fortify their pro Assamese attitude. The reorganization of Indian states on linguistic base proposed by the reorganization committee had prompted leading Assamese to prove Assam as Assamese majority state. According to census report of 1931 the Assamese speaking people in the province was merely 31.4 percent. The exclusion of Suroma Velley did not change the Bengali dominance, but generate a perception if the Muslims of Bengali origin declared themselves

as Bengali, the state would turn to Bengali majority state and The Assamese identity would no longer exist. So, there was a great drive to win up the mind of these Muslims. The leading Assamese intellectuals, civil societies like Axom Sahitya Sabha, and political parties like Congress had undertaken a massive drive and appealed to them to declare Assamese as their mother tongue. Some leaders from this community accompanied them. These Muslims already bearing the affection to Assamese deliberately and openly declared and registered the same in the census operation of 1951. So, the cumulative efforts did not go in vain and in the census Report of 1951 the number of Assamese speaking people jumped from 31.4 percent to 62 percent (Ismail Hussain,1997,p-60) and thus retain the position of the state as Assamese Majority state. Besides the fate of Assamese language and Assamese nationalism also keep alive in the Brahmaputra Valley. The declaration inspired the Assamese intellectuals to embrace them as Assamese and Axom Sahitya Sabha, the flag bearer of Assamese nationalism affiliated there Assamesisation by giving the entitled 'Neo-Assamese' (=Na-Axomiya). Henceforth the journey of these Muslims to Assamese nationalism got a new momentum. The affiliation inspired these Muslims to support language movement in 1962, where no of youth belong to this community sacrificed their lives. Again in 1971 there was medium movement in Assam and in this critical moment too these Muslims didn't turn down their support for Assamese. So these Muslims got affiliation as Assamese by dint of their contribution to greater Assamese life.

On contrary, since independence it is observed that their affiliation to Assamese identity on various occasions has been challenged or obstructed by section of Assamese intellectuals and organizations in a regular intervals. Each and every time their nationality and identity has been questioned and forced them to bear atrocities related to their Indian identity. In 1963 the govt. of Assam introduced PIP scheme to detect and deport illegal Pakistani. The anticipation was to find out illegal Pakistani but in practice it got relevance to East Bengal origin Assamese Muslim. Within next 5 years under the provision of this act randomly 2 lakhs Muslims of East Bengal origin had been identified as illegal Pakistani and deported to East Pakistan.(M.Kar,1990,p-144) Despite this bitter experience the Muslims did not turn down their support from Assamese identity. Their support to Medium movement of 1972 had proved this. In 1979 the All Assam Students Union launched Assam movement against outsiders to protect social cultural, economic and political hegemony of Assamese. But gradually it had taken a communal angle and motivated against illegal Bangladeshi Muslims. The narrative of illegal Bangladeshi in practice targeted these Muslims. Thousands of notices served randomly against these Muslims and compelled them to prove their identity as Indian. The atrocities in the name of illegal Bangladeshi had gone to the extent of violence. In 1983 massive riot occurred in some places like Chalkhawa Chapor, Neli, Bijni, (Diganta Sarma,) where thousands of innocent Muslims were killed. In 1985, the signing of Assam Accord and fixing a cut of date for citizenship had given a relief to these Muslims. But the anti-attitudes of section of Assamese has generated a sense of insecurity among these Muslims to some extent and put the question of Assamese identity in dilemma. Again in recent time the politics of polarization targeted these Muslims and presenting them as threat to Assamese. So the affiliation henceforth continued now jeopardize by all these.

The above studies have shown that the History of East Bengal origin Muslim in Assam is now become a 200 years old history. The migrant generation and their history of migration now simply become a reminiscence of past only. The present generation have been representing the 4/5 th generation of them and regarded themselves as son of this land. This Muslims are part and parcel of greater Assamese life. The Brahmaputra valley has been playing a dominant role in emergence and consolidation of Assamese national life. Being the inhabitant of this valley these Muslims are discarding their origin and stand with the Assamese identity. They have been contributing in the economic, social, cultural and political life of Assam as well as consolidation of Assamese nationality. The social changes and trends have instigated them to assimilate with the rest of Assamese people in relation to their education, occupation, matrimonial relation and so on. They think and designated themselves as Assamese in the line similar to other smaller indigenous group. Their attitude has

been attributed by the Assamese intellectuals and affiliated their status as Assamese. In contrary, it is evident that a motivated mob has been active to alienate these Muslims from the Assamese life.

These Muslims have sprung up from a different tradition. Their time period as well as social condition of Assam had not allowed them for complete assimilation. Despite all these hindrance they have been trying to adjust and rebuild their own tradition here in relation to Assamese identity. It is quite natural that they poses many point of differences with the host community or group, but this doesn't pretend that they are not Assamese. In modern period, the classical mode of assimilation and synthesis have been losing its relevance in the society. The different groups when come in to contact with host community or tradition, their own tradition will be replace by the host tradition. The Normal form of assimilation is homogeneity and the extreme form is complete absorbtion. The assimilation is now marked by hybridity due to co-existence of different groups. A state of adoption and adjustment become prominent among various communities or group. This social integration prompted a new form of assimilation which has been termed as hybridity. The East Bengal origin Assamese Muslims are representing this hybridity and this is the recognized truth of the present.

This hybridity is comprehensible through the attitude they possess and their contribution to economic, political, linguistic and social life of Assam i.e. to Assamese life. They have changed the agricultural economy of the Assam in general. In case of language, they have been using Bengali origin dialect among them but opted Assamese as formal language. This has been influencing their dialect and giving a changing trend. So their present dialect is no more a variation of Bengali but emerged as a distinct variety of Assamese. Besides, their adoption of Assamese not only fortify the base but also helps in flourishing as a dominant language in the Brahmaputra valley. In case of social integration and political integrity these Muslims never opposed the main stream politics. Despite lot of atrocities in the name of foreigners they still supporting the main stream. Apart from all, in their day to day life too they are gradually adopting various traditions from Assamese life by relinquishing old traditions. These are found in their dress, food habits, celebration, literature, and in others aspect of life. So it is evident that these Muslims are representing themselves as Assamese and trying their best for Assamisation.

In Brahmaputra Valley, these Muslims are representing nearly 80 percent of the total muslim population. This number is very big. This huge population have no second identity except Assamese and never goes against this. So if this huge population disregard their Assamese identity, it is sure that the Assamese identity will be jeopardize. So need of the hours is to adjust them instead of alienation. Their well adjustment in the greater Assamese identity definitely provide a new horizon and dimension to composite Assamese identity and help to flourish Assamese nationality in the entire valley.

#####

References

1. Ali, Dr. Kasim –The Muslims of Assam, Eastern Book House,1st Edition,Guwahati,2010
2. Saikia, Mohini Kumar – Assam Muslim Relation and Its Cultural Significance, Luit Printers, Naharani, 1st Edition,1978.
3. Kar, Dr. Makhanlal- Muslim in Assam politics,Omsen Publication, New Delhi, 1 st Edition,1990.
4. Guha, Dr. Amalendu- Plantar Raj to Swaraj,Peoples Publishing House, New Delhi,Reprint,1988.
5. Hussain, Ismail-Asomor Jatiyo Jibon Aru Abhibhashi Axomiya Musolman,Anamika Gronthalaya, 1st Edition,Nalbari,1997.
6. Sarma, Diganto- Neli 1983 & Chawolkhowa- 1983