Muslims of Brahmaputra Valley in Assam: A Historical Perspective
Dr. Abu Hanifa

Those who have first-hand experience of Assam will find that a sense of mutual respect and warm cordiality exists between the Hindus and the Muslims in Assam. The Muslims in Assam have been there since the last eight centuries. When one speaks of the existing cordiality between these two social groups, one has in mind mainly these early Muslim settlers of Assam. It may be recalled that there has been a large influx of Muslims from a neighbourhood, which is at the most a century old. This influx took place as a result of historical, economic and political factors. This article mainly speaks of the early Muslim settlers and their descendants.

Some of the outstanding literary figures like Mofizuddin Ahmed Hazarika, freedom fighters like Md. Tayebullah, and social activists in Assam belong to the Muslim community of early origin. In respect of the dress worn by Muslim women also, there is no difference. It is identical with the Hindu women, and the interaction between the women of these two communities has been close and cordial. The Muslims celebrate Bohag Bihu, the main festival of Assam, with equal fervour with the other communities of Assam. Many Muslim families have surnames identical to Hindu families, for example the surnames such as Hazarika, Barbora, Saikia, Chaudhuri, Bora, etc. The friendship among Muslim and Hindu menfolk is also equally cordial and close.

We are noticing that narrow-minded fanatic and communal elements amongst the Muslims who are active in different parts of India are raising their heads in Assam also. Occasional reports are found in the local press which say that these communal elements tend to influence the Muslim society of Assam which has co-existed peacefully and cordially with the Hindus for many centuries. In view of this, the Muslims of early origin have started organizing themselves in a manner that they do not get identified with communalistic sections. They are keen to see that their original liberal image is strengthened and their cordiality with their Hindu brethren is also further cemented. There have been reports that this liberal section of opinion are likely to organize themselves to start a campaign of strengthening the existing healthy relationship with the Hindus. The author of this article is a supporter of such a move.

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We find that this article on the Muslims of the Brahmaputra Valley provides an interesting study from the cultural and social point of view. It deals with the history and contribution of the Muslims within the broader framework of Assamese society. Dr. Abu Hanifa rightly says in the article that,

“The Assamese people with their heart and mind as broad as the mighty Brahmaputra, and well-known hospitality have readily accepted the newcomers (Muslims) as an integral part of the Assamese society. The Muslims have very sincerely reciprocated this warmth and kindness being truly loyal to the interests of Assam.”

The article thus provides a valuable insight on the realities related to the Muslims of Assam.
The origin of the first group of people, who converted to Islam in Assam, can be traced to the time when Qutubuddin Aibak reigned in Delhi. The then Governor of Bihar, Bakhtier Khilji, had passed through ancient Kamrupa, in the year 1203. On his way to invade China and Tibet he was guided in his journey through Kamrupa, by one Ali Mech, a local leader of Mech community. Later on, Ali Mech embraced Islam and most likely was the first person of Assam to recite “Qalima” and become a Muslim. Hence, it can be inferred that when a community leader like Ali Mech embraced Islam, in all probability, more people of his community might have followed suit.

Bakhtier Khilji on his way back from the abortive adventure of China and Tibet, was attacked by King Prithu of Kamrupa, following differences of opinion between them. Khilji narrowly escaped and fled away. Some of his men were taken prisoners. These prisoners of war and the local converted Muslims are the actual indigenous Muslims of Assam.

Hereafter, the Muslim rulers had attacked Kamrupa several times. The Mughals also attacked the Ahom kingdom. During these wars, some Muslim soldiers stayed back. These soldiers married local Assamese girls and were assimilated into the greater Assamese society.

In 1322, a Muslim saint named Giasuddin Aulia had come to Kamrupa with the invading army of Sultan Giasuddin Bahadur Shah. Giasuddin Aulia Tabrizi established a dargah at Pua Mecca in Hajo about 30 km west of Guwahati, and he was the first person engaged in Assam to spread the teachings of Hazarat Muhammed. Under his influence, some local people also changed their religious faith. Besides Giasuddin Aulia, some other religious leaders like Ajan Fakir, Khandakar Peer, Manik Fakir, Nawaz Peer also came to Assam to spread Islam. These religious leaders adopted the Assamese language and culture and inspired many local people to embrace Islam.

During the reign of Swargadeo Rudra Singha in the early part of the eighteenth century, some Muslim families proficient in different crafts and arts were invited from Delhi to reside in Assam and offer their services. These families were Pharsiparia, Aakharkatia (experts in making canon balls, locally known as hiloii), Silakatia, Khanikar, etc. In course of time, these families became a part of the greater Assamese Muslim society.

The Assamese people with their heart and mind as broad as the mighty Brahmaputra, and well-known hospitality have readily accepted the newcomers as an integral part of the Assamese society. The Muslims have very sincerely reciprocated this warmth and kindness being truly loyal to the interests of Assam. The Assamese Muslims fought hand-in-hand with the Hindus against the invading Muslim army led by Mir Jumla. When Swargadeo Chakradhwaj Singha refused to pay tax to the Mughals, the Mughal force led by Firoz Khan attacked the Ahom kingdom. The marauding Mughal force faced stiff resistance from the Ahoms led by Madhab Charan, and Sultan Garia Firoz Khan was defeated in the war. In the battle of Saraighat under the leadership of the Ahom general, Lachit Barphukan, Bagh Hazarika alias Ismail Siddiqui led an Assamese force of one thousand soldiers against the Mughals.

In the “Assam Buranji”, a history of Assam written by Gunabhiram Baruah, an instance has been cited when a lady Muslim fishmonger gave shelter to the Ahom prince Gadadhar
Singha, when he had gone into hiding. The two Muslim noblemen Hilaidari Baruah Shah Hussain Khan and Ramjan Khan fought against the Burmese invaders, to safeguard the interests of Assam. Ramjan Khan had laid down his life in the war. He was the ancestor of late Abdul Quadir, a well-known leader of Nagaon. The list never seems to exhaust itself. In Hadirachaki war, the local Muslims fought against the Burmese forces, under the command of Mirdaulla.

In the conspiracy that was hatched to kill the Ahom high official Badan Chandra Barphukan, who revolted against the Ahom King Chandra Kanta Singha, one Rahman Khan also joined hands with Numali Rajmao, Dhani Baruah, Nirbhoy Narayan and Rupsing Subedar. In 1857, in the First War of Indian Independence, Bahadur Gaonbura and Formud Ali had taken active part. Both of them were exiled and Maniram Dewan with Piyoli Phukan were hanged to death.

In the famous peasant uprising at Patharughat under Darrang District of Assam, both the Hindus and Muslims had fought hand-in-hand. Most of the Assamese Muslims expressed their solidarity with the Indian National Congress in our struggle for independence. Nabab Sadiur Rahman, an Assamese Muslim of Titabor was a member of Netaji’s Azad Hind Fauj, who died in action, at Rangoon. He is considered to be the only Assamese martyr of Azad Hind Fauj. Another Muslim lady, belonging to a respectable Assamese Muslim family of Nagaon town named Safiunnessa was exiled for taking part in the anti-British agitation.

During the British regime, a large number of Muslim cultivators migrated from East Bengal to Assam. Availability of cultivable land in Assam and the atrocities meted out to them by the zamindars in East Bengal, forced these cultivators to cross the border and settle in Assam. These migrants have contributed a lot in the field of agriculture, fishery, poultry, etc. They, in course of time, embraced the Assamese language and culture. One, Osman Ali Sadagar, of East Bengal origin, had established an Assamese medium school in Alitangani village of Nagaon district, way back in 1902. Later Sadagar was elected to the Assam Assembly. A number of Assamese medium schools were established in the char areas (where mainly Muslim migrants from East Bengal reside) of Barpeta and Kamrup districts during the 1930s. One Sadagar Ali Sarkar had donated Rs 5/- during the establishment of Cotton College. He was a resident of Rangapanichar of Kamrupa District. Hazi Dudu Miyan of Jamunamukh area of Nagaon District had donated Rs 1000/- towards the establishment of Gauhati University in 1946.

In Assam’s political scenario, the name of Sir Syed Sadulla, the premier of pre-independent Assam, is worth mentioning. Though, for political compulsion, he later joined the Muslim League, he never compromised with the interests of Assam. The now world famous Kaziranga National Park, would have vanished had it not been saved from annihilation by Sir Sadullah. The story goes that one of Sir Sadullah’s colleagues, the Forest and Revenue Minister Muowar Ali, who hailed from Sylhet, had proposed to dereserve Kaziranga Forest and give settlement to the migrants from East Bengal. The then Conservator of Forest SD Stressi did not agree with Muowar Ali’s proposal. Then the matter came to the notice of Premier Sadulla, who sided with the Conservator of Forest and did not agree to the proposal. It may be mentioned here that Sir Sadullah opposed many reactionary opinions of Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan, the prominent Muslim League leader, though both of them belonged to the same party.

Mention should be made of a number of Muslim luminaries like ex-President of India, Fakharuddin Ali Ahmed and Mohammad Taibulla who have made valuable contributions for the welfare of Assam.

High as the peak of Garurachal (Hajo-Pua Macca) wherein the ancient saint Giasuddin Tabrizi lies and beautiful as the paintings of Dilbar in the pages of “Hostibidyarnab” a treatise on elephants compiled by the Ahom kings, the Assam Valley Muslims are now occupying prime positions in the colourful mosaic of modern Assamese society.