



Full Length Research Article

SOCIAL LIFE IN CHAR AREA: A STUDY OF NEO-ASSAMESE MUSLIM VILLAGE IN BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY OF ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

The Neo-Assamese Muslims or the immigrant Muslims of the char area (or riverine islands) of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam constitute an important segment of the total population of Assam. As a social group of contemporary Assamese society they are often at the centre of many controversial issues mostly with respect to the question of survival of identity of Assamese speaking people of Assam as a majority community. However, very little is known about the socio-cultural and politico-economic life of this community. An attempt is made in this paper to investigate their position in the making of a larger Assamese speaking community. Also there is an attempt to examine their social structure in terms of continuity and change. The role of economy, ecology and politics in the oppressive and marginalised social existence of this group of people in larger Assamese society is also examined.

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INTRODUCTION

This research paper intends to provide a broad outline of the social structure of the Neo-Assamese Muslim society in Assam and its changing nature. Before proceeding further we may introduce this particular community in broad relief. This particular group of Muslims are known variously as *Pamua Musalman* (the farming Muslims), *Charua Musalman* (the Muslims of river islands or banks). Some scholars use the term 'Immigrant Muslims' while others prefer to identify them as 'Bengali Muslims'. The name *Na-Asamiya Muslamani* (Neo-Assamese Muslims) specifies the group's position in the context of contemporary Assam's nationality awareness (Hossain Ismail, 1997). Though this group of people are mainly Bengali speaking, during the census of 1951 they declared *Asamiya* as their mother-tongue. For our purpose we shall designate them as Neo-Assamese Muslims. These Neo-Assamese Muslims constitute a distinct sociological group among the ethnically diverse population of Assam. Socio-culturally and economically they exhibit certain characteristics which set them apart from other groups of people. They are also different from the two other Muslim social groups of Assam, viz, the *Asamiya* Muslims of the Brahmaputra Valley and the

Bengali Muslims of the Barak Valley, in many significant respects (Choudhury Medini *et al.*, 2002). The majority of the Neo-Assamese Muslims of Assam are the migrants from the neighbouring districts of erstwhile East Bengal, now Bangladesh. The migration started for the first time during the period 1901-1911. Since then this group of Muslims from East Bengal migrated to Assam in successive waves till 1946-47. Most of the migrants came from Mymensing, Pabna, Bagura and Rangpur districts of East Bengal (now Bangladesh). Both push and pull factors played important role in the process of migration. The oppressive Zamindari system of East Bengal acted as a push factor. Because of which the pauperized peasants left their home in search of land. The vast stretches of waste-land of Assam acted as the pull factor (Guha *et al.*, 1988).

These oppressed and pauperized peasants migrated towards Assam in search of land. Sometimes this group of people migrated as a group of several families and settled in the neighbouring Goalpara district of Assam from where later on they spread to different parts of Assam in search of waste land. At other times a single family after acquiring certain amount of land in Assam imported people to Assam and settled them in the newly acquired land. Some migrants initially worked as hired labourer in the lands of the indigenous people of Assam

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and after saving some money purchased their land (Bhuyan, and De Sibopada, 1978-1980). Historians also cited evidences of financing these migrants by the Marwari and indigenous Asamiya traders as they were efficient farmers who could grow cash crops like jute and mustard from which the traders appropriated a large amount of profit (Hossain Ismail, 2001).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is descriptive and qualitative in nature. Both primary and secondary data are collected for this study. The primary data is based on the survey carried out in two char villages populated by Neo-Assamese Muslims. Secondary data is collected from books, local news paper reports and government reports. Out of the universe total 300 respondents have been randomly selected for conducting survey. Observation and interview guide are used for data collection. Objective of the study is to investigate into the distinctive features of the social structure of the community in terms of family, marriage, kinship, land relation, education and religion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The char (river island) which was surveyed is located in Nalbari district of lower Assam. Till 1985, it was a part of Kamrup district. The nearest road head of the char is twenty five kilometres away from the state capital Guwahati. As the char is surrounded on all sides by the river it can be approached from both sides of the river Brahmaputra. I reached the char from the northern bank of the river. The char is approximately twenty kilometres in length and ten kilometres in breadth. The locals refer to three parts of the char as three villages viz. *Kalar-char*, *Bhanganmari* and *Kuhiamari*. *Kalar-char* is the oldest village. One government Dairy farm has recently come up in *Kuhiamari*. The population of the char is approximately 5000-8000. Most of the inhabitants belong to the Neo-Assamese Muslim community whose forefathers migrated to Assam from neighbouring districts of Bengal. Apart from them there are some families of Assamese Hindus belonging to Kalita caste who were settled there after their original village on the northern bank of the river was eroded. A few houses of Nepalis cattle graziers are also there near the Dairy farm. There is ferry for going to char.

Large boat fitted with diesel engines is used for ferrying people. The ferry is available twice a day- once in the morning, another in the afternoon. I reached the *char* in the afternoon at 4 p.m. It took one hour to reach the char from the river bank. This char can be approached only by the boat. I also found some small boats fitted with diesel engine which were carrying jute bales and sunhemp. The communication with the outside world is very difficult for the char villagers. It took another one hour on foot to reach the habitation from the river bank of the char village. There was no rickshaw, auto or taxi inside the *char* area. Most part of the *char* is covered with sandy soil. The land near the river is unsuitable for cultivation and prone to erosion. From the bank of the river the whole char looks like a vast stretch of sand. There is no human settlement near the bank of the river. Only going after deep inside one finds human settlement and cultivable land. There is no direct road connecting the ferry station to the village as the location of ferry station keeps on changing depending on

the level of river water. At a distance of about three kilometres within the village from the river there is a *katcha* (earthen) road connecting the two main villages of the char. Inside the char there are some deep low-lying areas where jute is grown. Also inside the char there are several small channels of the river Brahmaputra. During the rainy season most of the char is inundated by water, only the raised houses of the villages remain above the flood water. There is no pond or tank in the whole *char*. People depend on tube wells for drinking water. According to the respondents, the soil of the *char* is not suitable for cultivation of finer variety of paddy. Only coarse variety of paddy is grown by the villages. Other important crops grown are jute, mustard, wheat and different varieties of vegetables. As reported by respondents the *char* was originally a grazing reserve where Nepalis people live with their cattle. Older settlers recall that a major portion of the char was covered with deep forest infested with wild animals including tigers. From late 60's migrants started arriving in this char, who were mostly Neo-Assamese Muslims, whose previous settlement in the river bank or other chars were eroded by the Brahmaputra. Gradually the grazing reserve was encroached and the forest was cleared by this people.

Cultivation of crops started and ultimately settled villages came up in the area. The Nepalis graziers started leaving the place and now only a few families are present there. The villagers claimed that they still possess the *patta* (land deed) of their original land which now constitute the river bed. The Neo-Assamese Muslims stress this point to prove that they are not foreigners but immigrants of pre-independence period. During late 70's the government of Assam distributed land in the char among the settlers by earlier grazing reserve forest. Each household was given an average five *Bighas* of land. The Neo-Assamese Muslims allegeded that the government of Assam allotted nine *Bighas* of land to each Assamese Hindu Kalita household, where as each Muslim household got only five *Bighas* of land. When I enquired from the Hindu villagers they justified it by saying that since Muslims are good in cultivation they can fit themselves with less amount of land. The present situation confirms this because most of the Hindu families had left the char being unable to cope with the harsh life of the char. Originally there were about Assamese Hindu families but at present there are only sixty to seventy families.

The remaining people had left the char after selling their land to the Neo-Assamese Muslims. However, there are many households in the village who do not possess any land. They depend either on share cropping or manual labour. The flow of people into the char is still going on. Near the government Dairy farm many families of Neo-Assamese Muslims have settled quite recently on the government land. They are living in temporary huts without any permanent arrangement. They cultivate the fellow land in the vicinity of their huts. Their settlement pattern is just like urban slums. Once, government of Assam tried to evict them. Their leaders, particularly *Matabbars* and aspiring *Matabbars* approached some Guwahati based lawyers and politicians who filed cases against this eviction in the Guwahati High Court and Supreme Court of India. Dwelling Houses in the village are compactly arranged on raised ground and surrounded by paddy and jute field. Each household is situated on a square land and surrounded by trees. All the households in the village are situated one after another. There is little space in between the areas of two households. It seems that due to allotment by the

government, the pattern of looks planned and arranged in a homogeneous way. In each house holds the three sides of the court-yard is surrounded by rooms. There is usually a outer-house in each household which is used for entertaining the guests. Walls of the houses are made of bamboo or reeds plastered over with muds. The roof is made of thatch supported on bamboo or wooden posts and floor is *katcha*. In the whole village only one house used tin sheets in roof. The schools and one mosque of the village is made of bricks and roof is covered with tin. Most of the villagers sleep on bamboo *machans* (platforms on stilts) or on mats spread on the floor. Only a very few middle class households have bedsteads, tables, chairs and benches as furniture. The main food items of the villagers are rice, *Dal* (pulses) and vegetables. The rice is of coarse variety and the curry is usually spicy and hot due to application of large quantities of chilis.

The villagers are gradually becoming accustomed to wheat and take chapati during the season of wheat. Drinking of tea is a luxury for the villagers. In the whole char no tea shop was available except one on the river side new ferry station. Another item of daily food is fish. Every villager has his own net for catching fish. However, usually the villagers buy fish from fishermen. Beef is also taken by the villagers. They reported me that it is available only on weakly market day. Dresses used by the villagers resembles with the dresses of Bengali people of Assam and West Bengal. All the male villagers belonging to Muslim community wear cotton lungi and females wear ordinary sari. Some of the Muslim villagers wear kurta-pajama while going out to the urban areas. The educated section of the villagers wear trousers and shirts for going to town. But in the village all of them wear lungi. From the dress habit it is very difficult to understand the wealth and education of the villagers because in lungi all of them appear more or less similar. Among the Assamese Hindu villagers the male dress is dhuti and female wear traditional Assamese dress called *Mekhla-chadar*. One noteworthy feature of the female dress of the Muslim villagers is that unlike the Muslims of the mainland villages of Assam here they with or without atecoat do not wear *makhla-chadar*.

In this respect they are similar to Bengali Hindus whose females even in the mainland villages wear saris instead of *Mekhla-chadar*. Moreover the women of the Neo-Assamese Muslim community do not observe purdah or veil. This is not peculiar to them. Because Muslim females nowhere in Assam wear Burqa or veil. Some middle class Muslim families have women who cover their head with part of their saris. In the char area females move freely without any restriction. They do not go to field for cultivation. But work on vegetable gardens where vegetables are grown. However, the females of the landless villagers are engaged in different kinds of manual work like construction of huts, making of ropes from jutes etc. The females of Assamese Hindu families also do not go to field for cultivation. Most of the female villagers in this community are engaged in making of cloths on small handlooms. I found no handloom in the household of Neo-Assamese Muslim community. The language spoken by the villagers at home is Bengali. The Bengali dialect which they speak resembles the dialect of Dhaka area of Bengal. The village among themselves too speak in Bengali. Even the school teachers and emams of mosque speak in Bengali while discussing something or giving sermon. However, with outsiders they speak Assamese. Some villagers, particularly

younger generation, tried to speak Assamese with me though I was speaking in Bengali with them. Because they thought that I belong to Assamese speaking community. Medium of instruction in the schools of the villages is Assamese. This group of people though Bengali speaking at home adopted Assamese as their mother tongue during the census operation of 1951. They felt that the adoption of the language of the majority community will help in their accommodation by the majority community. However, the history of last forty years has shattered their hope. During all these years they have been in constant fear of being branded as foreigners, besides they faced all kinds of discrimination. Now, these people are introspecting about the language and during every census there is call for either returning Bengali as the mother tongue or emphasis on returning Assamese as the mother tongue like the past keeping in view the emotive and explosive nature of the issue of mother tongue in Assam. Even today the culture of these people is very similar to the Bengalis of East Bengal. In the villages which I surveyed there are at least four high schools and several primary schools. Among the four high schools only the Kalar-char Anchalik High School has got the recognition of the Secondary Education Board of Assam. All the remaining schools are functioning without any official recognition and government aid.

There are widespread dissatisfaction and protest among the villagers and the teachers of these schools about the pathetic conditions of these schools. The teachers of these schools have been serving without any salary for at least 8 to 10 years. Villagers are well aware about the value of education. During the last school final examination 9 students from Kalar-char school got second division while 15 students passed the examination in third division. Which is a remarkable achievement for students of such an isolated and backward area if compared with schools of other advanced villages of the main land. Even girls are attending classes upto class X. I found many girls who were attending private coaching for school final examination. These girls are mostly from middle class peasant families. The problem with the poor families is that if their girls get education beyond class X it becomes difficult for the peasants to get a husband having equal educational qualification. Because of their poverty many boys drop school in order to help their parents in cultivation. Moreover, there is no examination centre in the village for high school examination.

The students usually go to the main land villages or towns and stay there during examination, which is difficult for those who do not have relations in these places. Further, if anyone wants to get higher education after schooling he must go to the town and stay there during the period as it is not possible to communicate between the *char* and the nearby town easily. This is a great problem for these people those who are subsistence or marginal cultivators. The person, in whose house I stayed during my survey, is a school teacher and graduate in arts. After his schooling he joined the school as a teacher and later on studied further as a private candidate. He now wish to appear in M.A. examination as a private candidate. His wife is also educated upto intermediate and is a teacher in the primary school of the village. All of his brothers attended school. One of them is a diploma holder in engineering and is serving in a private farm at Guwahati. Three brothers of my host are engaged in cultivation because

they could not carry on their education and one brother after dropping the school is now an LIC agent. There are also other villagers who after getting education have established schools locally called 'vantage schools' or have taken petty government jobs in the towns. Those who leave school mid-way usually work in the field. There is no hesitation for cultivation among the literates.

Social structure of the community in village setting

Family is the basic unit of social organisation of the village. Most of the families are nuclear families. There are some joint families also but these joint families do not have members beyond three generations. Joint families are more prevalent among the rich and the middle level of peasantry. The poor peasants and the landless workers generally have nuclear families. Even the joint families of middle peasantry are undergoing fission. One or two brothers usually leave the original family and establish their own household. The ageing parents usually stay with their sons. Marriage generally takes place within the community. Marital contacts with the outside villages are few. Economic and educational considerations are determining factors in the selection of spouses. During my brief stay there I could not find out the role of caste distinction in the contracting of marriages among the villagers. In their general social relations no caste distinction is found. However, this aspect needs detailed further observation. Polygamy is not prevalent. Only a few families are polygamous. Polygamy is found among the richer section of the peasants and among *matabbars* of the villages. Among the landless workers also a few polygamous marriages are found. Among the educated section of the peasantry polygamy is totally absent.

Kinship ties in villages under study are not very cohesive since the villagers are migrants from different places. However, some of the families maintain kinship ties. They often talk about *samaj*. I could find out the real significance of the term *samaj* due to my short stay there. Religion of the people of the villages is Islam. The villagers are aware of their religious identity. But people are not very particular about the observance of religious rituals. There are two mosques in the villages. But the attendance in prayers is thin. Both the mosques are without any permanent *Imam* (prayer leader). However, recently due to the effect of *Tablighi Jamat* people are becoming aware of the religious morals and rituals. *Tabligh* is carried out by small group of religious persons who move from one village to another and stay in the local mosque. Anybody can join in this group. Each village has an *Imam* of the local group of *Tablighi* persons. They preach for observance of *salat* (five time daily prayers) and urge the people to follow the message of the prophet.

Most of the people who are playing important role in this new religious movement are from the educated section of the peasantry like school teachers and unemployed educated youth. Villagers also show great respect for the religious leaders of *Jamiat-ul-Ulema* who are mostly teachers of traditional religious educational institutions known as *madrasa*. They also follow sufi preachers of different schools (*Tariqat*). Religious leaders belonging to both these groups are known as *pirs* (saint) and they initiate people to their respective *Tariqat* (mystical school). After their initiation the people are known as *murids* (followers) of particular *pirs*. The

alligience to *pirs* is very strong and emotional. Some *pirs* even try to dictate the voting behaviour of their followers. The *pirs* belonging to *Jamat-Ulema* have been traditionally supporters of the congress party and during election they often campaign for the party. People often perceive their disadvantaged position in religious terms in the context of the larger society. As mentioned earlier in case of land allotment they were discriminated vis-a-vis the Assamese Hindus. More recently, most of the beneficiaries of the recently established dairy farm are from Assamese Hindu families which is resented by the villagers. All these reinforces their religious exclusiveness and they view Assamese Hindus suspiciously. However, social contacts between both the communities is more or less cordial. They attend the religious festivals of each other and cooperate during natural calamities and share each others pain and struggle for survival.

Land relations of the village is also studied. Most of the respondents are peasant cultivators. Some peasants belonging to middle peasantry employ labour on hire for cultivation. The labourer is usually paid a fixed amount in cash on yearly basis. However, the owner of the land himself goes to the field and cultivates the land alongwith the labourers. There is no visible owner-labour divide in the field. The villagers use bullock for ploughing the land. There is no facility for irrigation at all. Besides ploughing the peasants often dig the soil with spade. In some places the soil is fertile. But due to deposition of sand the process of cultivation is a hard job for the peasants. Land holdings are usually marginal varying from 2 Bighas to 10 Bighas. However, there are at least two families who have acquired land upto 50 Bighas. There are some peasant families who originally lived in the *char* but later on migrated to the mainland villages who still possess farm houses and cultivable land in the *char* villages. They generally own large amount of land. The landless peasants are comparatively new migrants to the *char* area. They are mainly engaged in the work of labourer outside the *char*. Their families live in the *char*.

Leadership in the village is provided by the traditional leaders called the *Matabbars* or *Dewani*. However, in every village there are several *Matabbars* and each *Matabbar* has his own following which constitute a group, locally known as *samaj*. The *Matabbars* play an important role in settlement of disputes involving two or more villagers. Usually all the villagers sit together to settle a particular dispute. One respondent told me that some *Matabbars* take money in order to give judgement in favour of a person. Usually such *Matabbars* are powerful enough to be challenged by the villagers. In one of the village I found four *Matabbars* who are arranged hierarchically. The position of a *Matabbar* in the hierarchy depends on his following. The larger the number of followers, higher is the position of the *Matabbar* in the hierarchy. Moreover, contact with the political leaders in the mainland Assam is also a factor in the enhancement of the prestige of a *Matabbar*. The political leaders usually approach these *Matabbars* during elections.

Conclusion

Social life in the char areas of Assam has undergone many changes in recent years mainly because of spread of modern education. The Neo-Assamese-Muslim youths are coming out of the char villages for acquiring higher education in the

mainland Assam though their number is still small. These villagers are now the only producers of some crops like jute and wheat in Assam. However, the poor cultivators are exploited by the middlemen so they are unable to get the remunerative prices for their product. The religion is still having a strong influence among the villagers. However, there is a new phenomenon of plurality of religious ideas because of emergence of new religious organizations in the outside world and extension of them into rural areas. There is a very strong feeling for showing integration with the larger Assamese society among the villagers, particularly among the educated section.

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