



Islam And Tribal Societies In North-East India: A Discussion

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Abstract

The Islam appeared in Northeastern India after the invasion of Malik Yuzbak in 1257 who built a mosque for the first time in Assam to celebrate his victory. Following this, a number of mosques were constructed in Assam by different Muslim invaders. Azan Fakir, who was the chief force of consolidation of Islam in Assam valleys in the 17th century, also undertook missionary work for the propagation of Islam in parts of present-day Nagaland. He also asked one of his associates, Saleh Saheb, to stay in the Naga hills to undertake propagation work. A large number of Muslims from undivided Bengal entered Manipur through the western boundary at different historical times and settled there. Khasis came into contact with Muslims around the 17th century. Muslims paid occasional visits to the Khasi hills as wanderers, traders, fortune tellers, hunters and in other capacities. In the course of time these Muslims adopted Khasi customs.

The introduction of Islamic beliefs into different tribal societies of Northeast India did not result radical socio-cultural changes. The tribals of the region who have embraced Islam have organized their way of life primarily according to the dictates of their tribal traditions. At the same time one also notices that various elements from both tribal and Islamic traditions coexist within the same socio-cultural framework of the tribals. The socio-cultural life of many of the tribals who have come under the influence of Islam is guided more by their tribal traditions than by Islamic tradition.

Keywords: North-east India, Islam, tribal societies, Azan Fakir, socio-culture etc.

Introduction and Historical Background:

Islam appeared in Northeastern India after the invasion of Malik Yuzbak in 1257. Yuzbak, erected a mosque for the first time in Assam to celebrate his victory. Following this, a number of mosques were constructed in Assam by different Muslim invaders. It may be noted here that the ruins of a very old mosque have been found at Kimin in Arunachal Pradesh.

The complexity of studying the Muslims of the world in terms of hundreds of languages and ethnic groups may be simplified by identifying larger culture areas. Such a system assumes that ethnic groups within a single area will have some cultural commonality. To an extent this is feasible, especially where culture areas

embrace a major linguistic area or encompass relatively simple physical environment. It is possible to identify nine culture areas in which most Muslims live. Culture area here refers to a geographical area in which the inhabitants share most of the elements of culture such as language, ecological conditions, economic systems, socio-cultural and ideological systems.

The introduction of Islamic beliefs into different local societies involved radical socio-political changes, apart from the more personal aspects of conversion. As Islam spread to various parts of the world, it gradually took over many elements and features of indigenous folk traditions. The presence of indigenous folk elements in the social life of various local Muslim communities is to some extent explainable in terms of proselytization of local populations into Islam. While examining the interrelationships between the Islamic doctrines and the local cultures that have become Islamized, G. Von Grunbaum (1955) states that there are different ways in which conflict, coexistence and interaction of the Islamic high culture and local cultures can be described.

Several studies in cultural contact between Islam and various local communities and cultural traditions, in parts of the world, have demonstrated the extent of Muslim influence on various spheres of social life of the traditional cultures and the patterns of adoption and assimilation of Islamic elements by the traditional cultures. Religious and cultural syncretism is a worldwide phenomenon arising out of cultural contact. The interrelated aspects of this phenomenon are cultural change, reinterpretation, assimilation etc. the concept of syncretism was originally proposed by Herskovits (1938) when he observed the extensive blending of African tribal religious meaning and Christian forms among the New World Negro cultures. Syncretism refers to the combination and blending of elements from different cultural and religious traditions. This is a general feature of the development of cultural and religious systems over time and reinterpret elements drawn from other traditions with which they are in contact. Some of these studies have also referred to a 'syncretism' between Islamic and traditional customs and rituals. Such syncretism is also discernible in Northeast India in general and Assam in particular.

The process of the spread of Islam to various parts of North-East India and Assam started as early as the thirteenth century. This region came into contact with the Muslims when expeditions were undertaken by a number of Muslim invaders. Between 1206 A.D. and 1662 A.D. several expeditions were made by different Muslim invaders to this region. Every Muslim invasion contributed a little towards the strengthening and propagation of Islamic faith in this region. Migrations of the Muslims into different parts of Northeastern India at various times and conversion of local people to Islam are some of the primary factors responsible for the growth of Muslim population and the formation of a number of discrete Muslim communities in the region.

The spread of Islam (since 1206), Sikhism (since 1668) and Christianity (since 1826) along with the people coming from outside the region resulted in acculturation among these religions and the different local societies. In the process, conversion of groups of local peoples to these religions took place and also these religions gradually took over many elements and features of indigenous folk traditions.

Islam in Khasi and Garo Hills

Khasis came into contact with Muslims around the 17th century. Muslims paid occasional visits to the Khasi hills as wanderers, traders, fortune tellers, hunters and in other capacities. In the course of time these Muslims adopted Khasi customs. In some places of the Khasi hills, some Muslims were even honoured with chieftainship. The Syiems of Mawiong are believed to have descended from four migrant Muslim families. The Muslims of Sylhet made repeated efforts to invade Khasi hills.

Historical evidences show that Khasis maintained some trade relationships with the Mughal emperors through their viceroys at Murshidabad. During and after the British rule, a number of Muslims from Kabul, Kashmir, Punjab, Jaipur, Allahabad, Madras, Calicut, Lucknow, Banaras, as they absorb Gauhati, Nagaon, Cachar,

Sylhet and Dhaka migrated to Shillong and settled there for trade and commerce. Many of them married Khasi women. Thus, there is the presence of a group of Muslim Khasis within the tribe, which is the result of marriage between Muslim males and Khasi women. It has been observed that children born out of the union between a Muslim father and a Khasi mother are considered Muslims as far as their religion is concerned. But for all practical purposes they are treated as Khasi. Scholar's opinion is that the decorations of the graves of Khasi chiefs have been influenced by the decorations of the taziya of Muslims. (Taziya is a model or representation of the shrines of Hassan and Hussain, sons of Ali, cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad.)

Clan among Garos is known as chatchi and there are five known exogamous clans among them. They are Sangma, Marak, Momin, Shira and Areng. Some scholars are of the opinion that originally Garos had two matrimoieties – Sangma and Marak and that at a later stage Momin and other chatchi came into existence. It is generally believed that the Momin chatchi originated from the union of a Muslim man and a Garo woman.

Islam in Naga Hills

Azan Fakir, who was the chief force of consolidation of Islam in Assam valleys in the 17th century, also undertook missionary work for the propagation of Islam in parts of present-day Nagaland. He also asked one of his associates, Saleh Saheb, to stay in the Naga hills to undertake propagation work. The descendants of Saleh Saheb have come to be known as Parbatia Dewan – literally the 'Chief of the Hill'.

During the early part of the 20th century, a Muslim from Bengal, Keramat Ali, undertook works to propagate the faith of Islam in the foothills of Naga Hills. However, the spread of Islam in Nagaland did not result in the emergence of a clearly identifiable tribal Muslim community in this hilly region.

Islam among Manipuri

Muslims constitute 8.4 per cent of the total population in Manipur. A large number of Muslims from undivided Bengal entered this region through the western boundary at different historical times and settled there. The present day Manipuri Muslims (known as Pangals) are believed to be the descendants of the Bengali immigrants and war captives who had come to this region in the beginning of the 17th century. These Muslims, some of who married Meitei women, in the course of time formed a distinct community. Among the Manipuri Muslims the traditional clans are still in existence. It has been reported that in a village called Promptat in the Imphal valley, the Muslim householders belong to sagai or clans namely, Ipham, Kulaibaum, Koijing, Wang, Bogi, Yumikhaibaum, Mogjai, Chesham, Moinam and Phisubaum.

Islam among Bodo Kacharis and Rabhas

The Bodo Kacharis, who constitute an important plains tribe of Assam, observe various ceremonies and festivals connected with birth, death, marriage and agricultural activities. Baisagu and Kherai are the two important festivals of Bodo Kacharis. Baisagu is a spring time festival and Kherai is a religious annual community festival. During the Kherai festival they worship and offer sacrifice to a number of gods and goddesses. One of these gods is called

'Nawab Badshah' or Muslim God by Bodo Kacharis. At the time of offering sacrifice to this god, the priest wears a dhoti in the fashion of a lungi and the sacrifice is made by facing west. While sacrificing the cock, the priest utters the word Bismillah (in the name of Allah).

As in the case of Bodo Kacharis, some influence of Islam is also discernible among Rabhas – another plains tribe of Assam. Rabhas celebrate Baikho and Khoksi festivals annually with the intension of propitiating Baikho, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. The Rabhas of Baida area in south Goalpara sacrifice a cock in the name of ‘Sainnas Thakur’ – one of the gods of Baikho. During the sacrifice, like Bodo Kacharis, a Rabha priest faces west, wears a dhoti in the fashion of a lungi and utters the word Bismillah (in the name of Allah).

Social Adjustment

It appears that one of the most significant social aspects of Islam-tribal contact situations in Northeast India is the contact between Islam and the matrilineal tribal societies. It has already been pointed out earlier that in Northeast India, the matrilineal Garos and Khasis have come into contact with Islam. Of these two groups the influence of Islam is clearly discernible in the latter. The socio-cultural life of the Muslim Khasis exhibits a mixture of the principles of Islam and matriliney. The children born out of marriages between Muslims and Khasi women are of two categories: one follows the Khasi tribal tradition and the other follows tribal Islam. The pattern of family, kinship, marriage, inheritance and residence of the Muslim Khasis clearly indicate a compromise between Islam and matriliney.

Among Khasis, the youngest daughter (khadduh) is the custodian of the ancestral house, traditions and religion (ka bat ia ka niam). However, among the Muslim Khasis, the youngest daughter neither enjoys any special rights and privileges nor has any religious duty to perform. With regard to inheritance unlike the tribal and Christian Khasis, the youngest daughter among the Muslim Khasis is treated as equal with her sisters. Contrary to matrilineal Khasi custom, the tendency among the Muslim Khasis is to leave the family of orientation after marriage. A majority of the Muslim Khasis reckons the descent through the female line and use Muslim surnames along with maternal clan titles. The Khasis are exogamous and Muslim-Khasi kinship alliances have not remarkably affected the clan organization of the Muslim Khasis.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion indicates that the introduction of Islamic beliefs into different tribal societies of Northeast India did not result radical socio-cultural changes. The tribals of the region who have embraced Islam have organized their way of life primarily according to the dictates of their tribal traditions. At the same time one also notices that various elements from both tribal and Islamic traditions coexist within the same socio-cultural framework of the tribals. Thus, a kind of ‘syncretism’ between Islamic and tribal customs and rituals has taken place. The socio-cultural life of many of the tribals who have come under the influence of Islam is guided more by their tribal traditions than by Islamic tradition.

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