



SOCIO-CULTURAL TRANSITION OF THE MUSLIMS IN COOCH BEHAR FROM THE REIGN OF THE KOCH KINGS TO MODERN AGE

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Abstract:

Cooch Behar was one of the mighty kingdom in the political map of India. From the time immemorial Cooch Behar has been a part of Indian culture. The Cooch kingdom which was founded by Biswasingha in 1515 has become a district of West Bengal since 1st January 1950. The arrival of the Muslims in the Cooch Behar State took place in the beginning of the 13th century. The several Muslim invasions of the Mughal and Pathan rulers and the contribution of the Pirs and Fakirs had contributed in the spread of Islam in this region. A large section of indigenous Hindu population converted in Islam. The Muslims are very close with the Hindu population. Without the difference of religious faiths there are various similarities in occupants, culture and tradition between the Hindus and Muslims in Cooch Behar. The Muslims are the son of the soil Cooch Behar. They are significantly segmented in to certain social groups of varied background. The Nashya Muslim may be mentioned in this regard. Economically the Muslims in Cooch Behar are in miserable condition. Their main source of income is cultivation. Poverty is the main reason for their educational backwardness. During the reign of the Koch rulers the Muslims were loyal subjects of the Koch kings .Since the merger of Cooch Behar with West Bengal most Muslims have been the supporters of the ruling Government.

Key Words: Khen, Pir, Faqir, Sufi, Nashya, Shia, Sunni, Maharaja & Muslim Etc.

Introduction:

Cooch Behar as we find today is only a part of ancient Koch kingdom. From the time immemorial Cooch Behar has been a part of Indian Culture. The Koch kingdom which flourished 500 years ago has become a district of West Bengal. The history of Cooch Behar has a unique past. In ancient and medieval period Cooch was the political gravity under the Khen rulers of Kamatapur and the Cooch rulers of Cooch Behar State. In the beginning of the 16th century, a tribal leader named Haria Mandal organized his own clan and sowed the seed of future Cooch dynasty. Biswasingha, the able son and successor of Haria Mandal ascended the throne of Cooch kingdom in 1515A.D. and from his reign onward Cooch Behar emerged as one of the mighty kingdom in the political of India. During the reign of Maharaja Naranarayan , the kingdom was divided in two parts demarcating the river Sonkosh as the border .The eastern part of the state was named Kamarupa while the western part as Cooch Behar. From the reign of Biswasingha till 1773 Cooch Behar was able to maintain her independent status. Later on it acknowledged the suzerainty of the Mughal. This resulted in the fusion of different culture in the society of Cooch Behar and art administration and various aspect of life.

In 1773 Cooch Behar State lost its independent status and acknowledge the hegemony of the British East India Company. The last king the Cooch Behar State was Jagaddipendranarayan. Though India got its independence in 1947, Cooch Behar State remained as a tributary state till August, 1948. Then it merged with Indian Union on 12th January, 1949. Since 1st January, 1950 the Cooch Behar State is regarded as a district of West Bengal.

The people of different caste and creed are in Cooch Behar. Of these the Rajbanshies are the majority. The Muslims are the major minority in this region. Islam came in Cooch Behar in the beginning of the 13th century. There were severable expeditions of the Pathan and Mughal rulers which paved the way for the expansion of Islam in this areas. The Muslim saints or Pirs and Fakirs had played an important role in the growth of Islam in this region. A large section of lower caste Hindu population were converted in Islam. For long time they followed their traditional occupations and religious beliefs and practices. But in course time the Muslims tried to maintain their distinct identity and they preferred all the basic Islamic rites in proper way. The Muslim of Cooch Behar are divided on the basis of language, ethnicity, culture and economic position. The great majority are Sunni Muslim, the remainder are Shia and other sects. There are several occupational groups among the Muslims in Cooch Behar. In the field of education they are lagged behind the Hindus. The Muslims of Cooch Behar are not are not politically inactive. From the reign of the Maharajas of the Cooch Behar State till now there is a cordial relationship between the Hindus and Muslims in Cooch Behar.

Arrival of the Muslims in Cooch Behar:

Islam came in the Cooch Behar State towards the beginning of the 13th century. Few years after the foundation of Muslim empire by Mahammad of Ghore in Northern India, a Muslim kingdom was established in northern and western part of Bengal. In 1204 after defeating Lakshmana Sen, Bakhtiar Khalji captured a portion of Bengal and established a Muslim Principality¹. Later on he took an expedition towards Tibet. At the time the

region lying between Lakhnawti and the Himalayas was inhabited by three Principal mongoloid tribes such as Koch, Mech and Tharu². In the way of Tibetan expedition, one of the chief of Mech fell into the hands of the Muslim soldiers who was converted to Islam by Bakhtiyar Khalji³. After the conversion in Islam he was known as Ali Mech who agreed to conduct Bakhtiyar through the hills. Perhaps Ali Mech was the first Muslim in the Cooch Behar State. The old mosque in the town of Jalpaiguri was built by Ali Mech in 1206 A.D. The process of Islamization which took place by Ali Mech in 1206 had received its perfection after 350 years by the raids of kahalpahar (1578 A.D.)⁴.

After the expedition of Bakhtiyar Khalji, there were series of expeditions in Kamrupa, Kamatapur and later on in the Cooch Behar State by the Pathans and the Mughal rulers. All these expeditions helped in the expansion of Islam in these areas. Tughril Khan Eujbak of Gour also invaded Kamrupa. The rulers of Kamrupa agreed to make a treaty and wanted to pay tribute to the ruler of Gour. But Tughril Khan announced that the region was annexed into the kingdom of Gour and he ordered to make a mosque in the capital of Kamrupa⁵. Sikandar Shah of Gour also captured Kamrupa. During the region of Barbak Shah, Kamatapur was captured by the Muslim soldiers. It is said that after the war, the king of Kamatapur converted in Islam by Ismile Gazi, the famous Muslim saint⁶. Alauddin Hussain Shah of Gour conquered the Kamatapur in 1498 A.D. and got the title of 'Conquerer of Kamata'⁷.

Before the rise of the Cooch rulers, Cooch Behar witnessed a political crisis and in the beginning of the 16th Century A.D. a tribal leader Haria Mandal organized his own clan and sowed the seed of future Cooch dynasty. Biswa Singha, the able son and successor of Haria Mandal ascended the throne in 1515 A.D. and from his reign onward Cooch Behar state emerged as one of the mighty kingdom in the political map of India⁸. During the reign of Biswa Singha the Muslims invaded Kamrupa in several times. Perhaps in 1553 Kalapahar invaded kamrupa⁹. kalapahar destroyed many deities and temples¹⁰. The invasion of kahapahar helped the spread and expansion of Islam in this region.

In 1584, Isha Khan, one of Barabhuia of Bengal attacked the Cooch Behar State but he was defeated by the Koch King¹¹. During the reign of Aurangzeb, Mirzumla, the Subedar of Bengal attacked the Cooch Behar State. Naranarayan, the king of Cooch Behar fled from the capital. Mirjumla occupied Cooch Behar and named it 'Alamgirnagar'¹². In 1664, king Pran Narayan had surrendered to Shaista khan who marched upon Cooch Behar. In subsequent period a treaty was signed between the Koch king and the Mughal ruler. As a result of the treaty the Mughal army left the Koch kingdom permanently.

Pirs and Faqirs, the preachers of Islam in Cooch Behar:

Several Muslim invasions in Cooch Behar State paved the way for the expansion of Islam in this region. Toward the early phase of thirteenth century the preaching of Islam spread in western kamrupa and then many Muslim saints or Pirs came in the Cooch Behar State and preached their religious and spiritual teachings¹³. But long before some Muslim preachers also came in Bangladesh. Dr. Waqil Ahmed said "The coins of emperor Harun-Al-Rashid has been found in the remains of Pahar pur". According to some historians this coins were the outcome of trading relations with the Arabians¹⁴.

The famous Muslim saints or pirs were Torsa pir, Shah pir, Shah Garib Kamal, Giasuddin Aulia, Shah Sultan, Maulana Keramat Ali, Moulana Ekramul Haque and Kalu Saheb. The pirs had established 'khanka' which became the centre for the propagation of Islam. The places where the pirs stay are known as 'darga'. The dargas are the holly place to the Muslims. In early days when the general people of the Cooch Behar were unable to go to Mecca, they had visited the dargas like 'Panjatan'(Goalpara), Parua (Maldah) and Mahasthan (Bagura district of Bangladesh)¹⁵.

Inclination of Conversion of the Lower Caste Hindus to Islam in the Cooch Behar State:

The Muslim of Cooch Behar are the son of the soil. Of course they are converted. According to 1891 Census, the Cooch Behar State had a population of 5, 78,868. Among them the Muslim are 1, 70,746 in number and form about 30 percent of the population. The following table shows the distribution of the Muslim population into different section:

Mughals-49

Pathan including Sayyads-1146

Sheikh including

Nashyas---1, 69, 551

It is clear from the above mentioned table that there were few foreign Muslims namely, the Mughals and Pathans in the Cooch Behar State. The sheikh who were popularly known as Nashya were the majority. According to the historians the lower class Hindus were converted in Islam. Dr Atul Sur in his 'Bangla o Bangalir Bibartan' mentioned that Buchanan Hamilton observed the situation of North Bengal. He remarked that there is not a proof to consider the view that the Muslims of North Bengal were the descended of the foreign Muslims of Bengal. He stated that they are the converted indigenous Muslims¹⁷.

Later on a Muslim writer also remarked that "I have often watching that the Muslims of North Bengal bears the physical features of the Mongoloid Koch race. It shows that they were converted from Koch race (at present the Rajbanshies)¹⁸.

Various causes were responsible for the conversion of the Hindu population in Cooch Behar. The social hierarchy in Cooch Behar which based on the caste system helped the spread of Islam. The upper caste Hindus illtreated and hated the lower caste Hindus. The ill treatment of the upper caste created a protest attitude among the lower caste Hindus. The Hindus who had fallen in touch with the Muslims had no alternative except to convert in Islam¹⁹. Thus the lower caste Hindus who were deprived of social equality hailed the Muslims and embraced Islam in large number. The liberal and democratic ideas the 'Touhid' or concept of the Unity of God, equality and universal brotherhood preached by the Muslim saints or pirs influenced the Hindus²⁰.

The immigrant Muslims of Foreign Origin:

Besides the newly converted Muslims, the Muslims of outside places migrated and settled in Cooch Behar State. The Pathans, Mughals and Sayyads came in the state at the time of the victory over Kamatapur by the Sultans of Bengal and during the Mughal invasions. These immigrant Muslims of foreign origin were settled at Gosanimari, Shitai, Labazar, Golenahut, Pathantuli, Meerpara and Rahimganj of Mekhliganj²¹. Many Muslims from outside areas settled here for the purpose of agriculture. Most of them came from Gour²².

Due to the patronise of the Koch kings and the establishment of political relations of the Muslim rulers with them many Muslims officials, intellectuals, military forces, traders, artisans and various other occupational groups settled in the Cooch Behar State.

Large number of immigrant Muslims settled in rural and urban areas. It is a matter of fact that the establishment of Muslim settlement in the rural areas has taken place earlier than in the urban areas. The lower caste Hindus those who were converted in Islam like before lived in the rural areas. The cultivators of the outside places settled in rural areas where they had a plenty of arable land. Later on the Muslim population in the urban areas has increased day by day.

'Ashraf' and 'Ajlaf': Two Major Groups of the Muslims in Cooch Behar:

The Muslims of Cooch Behar are significantly segmented in to certain social groups. They are segmented on the basis of their places of origin, descent and occupations. They are divided into two major groups, namely 1. 'Ashraf' and 2. 'Ajlaf'. The immigrant Muslims of foreign origin namely the Sheikh, Sayyads, Mughals and Pathans are included in the first category or they known as Ashraf' and the indigenous converted Muslims belonged to the second category are known as 'Ajlaf'. Ashraf, the first category regards themselves as the superior group than that of the Muslims belongs to the Ajlaf category. All the Nashya Muslims and majority of the Bhatia Muslims are of Ajlaf category. According to one group of opinion Sheikh, Sayyad, Mughal and Pathan are the only groups among the Muslims²³.

Nashya Muslim in Cooch Behar:

The Muslims who were converted from various local caste and tribes namely Hajong, Rajbanshi etc. were known as Nashya Muslim. The title 'Nashya' is very significant. It is generally believed to be corrupted from nashta which means fallen or degenerated and thus appears to be the most probable nick name²⁴. The lower caste Hindus who had fallen in touch with the foreign Muslims were regarded as 'Nashta' or untouchable person in the society. In this regard Upendra Nath Barman wrote: 'In fact the Muslims in the Rajbanshi regions were all converted from Hindu society. Their title was 'Nashya'. At present there is a considerable changes in the various aspect of life of the Nashya Muslims in Cooch Behar.

Bhatia Muslim in Cooch Behar:

Some Muslims in Cooch Behar are known as Bhatia Muslim. They are majority in Tufanganj, Dhampur Balashi of Cooch Behar and Dhubri district of Assam. The forefathers of the Bhatia Muslims were time to time migrated to Cooch Behar from various places of eastern and northern Bengal and Assam and permanently settled and mixed with local population²⁵. The Bhatia Muslims are primarily the cultivators and some of them engaged in different specialized occupation. In course of time they become conscious about their education. Till now their habits and culture in some respect is different from other Muslims of Cooch Behar.

'Sheikh' and the 'Nashya Sheikh':

The Muslims of upper block namely the Sheikh, Mughal, Sayyad and Pathan identified themselves as 'Ashraf'. A portion of Muslim community in Cooch Behar claims themselves as Sheikh but they are not belong to the Sheikh of the Ashraf category. In course of time the Nashya Muslims got the title Sheikh because they believed that the title 'Nashya' hurt their status in the society. The Murids or the disciples of pirs also known as Sheikh. For example by utilising the title of Sheikh, Ghungru Nashya became Piarmamud Sheikh. But there is a basic difference between the Sheikh of upper block and the indigenous Sheikh. The indigenous Sheikhs use the title Sheikh which suffixing their first name viz, Chhamiruddin Sheikh, while the Sheikh of upper block use the title Sheikh that prefixing there first name viz, Sheikh Dayal Mahmud. Later on some Muslims left the title 'Sheikh' and used some Islamic title namely, Ali, Uddin, Hossain, Rahaman, Mia etc²⁶. On the other hand the Muslims of upper block or Ashraf category used the title Sayyad, Chowdhury, Mufty, Meer, Talukdar etc.

On the basic of occupation the indigenous Muslims or the Muslim of Ashraf category are divided into several groups. They did not gave up their traditional occupations. On the basis of their occupation they were designated in the society as Goala, Jola, Dhai Bajigar, Gayan etc. Like the Hindus there exists a distinction of

status between the higher and lower occupational groups of Muslim²⁷. That is why the Muslim peasants regard the Dhai, Hazzam, Dhunia etc. as the lower grade occupational group.

The Traditional Beliefs and Rituals in the Muslim Society:

The indigenous Muslim those who were converted from Hinduism did not gave up their traditional beliefs and rituals or the Hindu culture with which they were familiar for long time²⁸. The Muslims those who were migrated and settled in Cooch Behar carried their own traditions but brought a perceptible changes according to the cultural traditions of the religion. In regard to social customs, language, dresses, material culture, habits, food (except the eating of pork) the Muslim resembles to the Hindus. But they preferred all the basic religious rites viz, Namaj, Roja, Kalema etc. in proper way.

'Pirism' in Islam:

The preceptorship of the Hindus or the respect to the priest had turned into the Pirism in Islam. Later on it paved the way of the worshiping of Pirs namely the Satyapir, Pancha pir etc. A new priestly class emerged in the Muslim society which is known as 'Molla' or 'Munshi'. They performed all kind of religious rites, marriage ceremony etc. in the Muslim society. The Muslims showed their honour to the graveyards or the mazar of the Pirs and they had the belief that they will be cured from many diseases due to the good will of the Pirs. Both the Hindus and the Muslims also participated in the ceremony of Satyapir and Satyanarayn²⁹. Even after the marriage some Muslim women used sindur on their forehead. The Muslims also followed the traditional rituals in their daily life such as Gocharpana, Hal-yatra etc. The wedding - songs are still now prevailed in the Muslim society³⁰.

Identity Consciousness of the Muslims in Cooch Behar:

In course of time the Muslims of Cooch Behar tried to maintain their distinct identity. Besides the role of the Pirs, the theology of the Barelvīs and Deobandis had an effect on the Muslims of Cooch Behar. The pirs who devoted themselves in the preaching of Islam as well as in the reform of Islam were Maulana Keramat Ali, Maulana Ekramal Haque and others. The pirs and the Murshids worked hard to directed the Muslims in a proper way of Islam by founding madrasas, mosques, khankas etc. and by organising jalsa or religious assembles. As a result of teachings of the Pirs and Murshids the Muslims follow the religious rites of Islam properly which were advised by Hazrat Mohammad, the preacher of Islam.

The various Muslim groups in Cooch Behar have united and interacted with each other through a common bond of Islamic brotherhood. They tried to maintain their distinct identity in social and cultural matters. They organized into units which are known as 'Panch' or 'Jamāt'. The jamāt looks after the socio-religious and cultural matter of the Muslims. Each panch has a Maulavi and a masque or a madrasa. Evry panch has a Molla or Munshi who is known as Emam who has the duty to perform various social ceremonies such as marriage, akika, khatna or sunnat etc.

'Shariat' and the Muslim Society:

So it is clear that the change in the social, religious and cultural life of the Muslims of Cooch Behar came very slowly. They carefully follow the Shariat in the every aspect of life. According to Shariat every parents have a duty to perform the marriage of their adult sons and daughters. Meher is an essential part in the marriage system of the Muslim. In earlier days the rich Muslims had a tendency to marry more than one. But now all of them are satisfied in one marriage. It is said that 'Talaq' or divorce is an easy matter in the Muslim society. But it is not so easy fact. It will happen in such a situation when there is not a scop of adjustment between husband and wife due to the matter of bad character or permanently unfit in sexual relation.

'Shia' and 'Sunni' Sects in Cooch Behar:

Both the Shia and the Sunni Muslims are in the Cooch Behar. But the Sunnies are majority. They divided into two sub- sects namely Barelvīs and Deobandis. The major portions of Sunni Muslims are the follower of the theological school of Barlevi³¹. On the other hand Deobandias follow the thelogical thoughts of Deoband. The Islamic laws or mazahab belongs to the Sunni theology are Hanafi, Maleki, Shafei and Humbali. Like before the majority of Muslims in Cooch Behar are the follower of theological school of Hanafi. The Sunnis celebrates the Maharam as a day of sorrow by performing namaj,roja and milad- mehfil. On the other hand the Shias celebrates the day by performing 'Tajia-Utsab'³². The Muslims belonging to Ahel-e-hadish or Wahabi sect are only a very few in Cooch Behar. Their basic objective is to follow the Islamic Shariat very strictly in every sphere of life³³.

The Sunni Muslims of Cooch Behar are mainly the follower of the order of Quaderia and Chistia tarika. Apart from the masques, madrasas and Islamic welfare centre like Anjuman, another most important religious organization which activity engaged in Islamization at Cooch Behar is 'Tabliq Jamāt'. The tabliq movement teaches the Muslims about the necessities of basic religious rites viz. Namaj, Roja, Kalema etc. The founder of the movement was Maulana Muhammad Ilyas³⁴. Its headquarter is in Delhi. The Suktabari Mosque is the main centre of the tabliq jamāt in Cooch Behar.

Educational Progress of the Muslims in Cooch Behar:

In the early stage of the beginning of modern and western education the Muslims of Cooch Behar were indifferent about it. During the last quarter of the 19th century there was a considerable progress is education in

Cooch Behar State. The Muslims also became conscious about their education. But they were less in number than that of the Hindus. The Muslims showed their progress in education from the third decade of the 20th century. In the Middle English Scholarship Examination of 1930 among 79 successful candidates 20 Muslim. In the Upper Primary Scholarship Examination of 1937 out of 302 successful candidates 97 were Muslim among them 12 candidates were passed in the first division. But it is a matter of regret that the candidates those who succeeded in the various examinations of the primary levels were not found in the higher education. There were scanty of female Muslim students both in the primary and higher education. Besides the educational institutions the Muslim boys and girls of Cooch Behar obtained religious teachings from Maqtabas and Madrasas. At present the Muslims made a considerable progress in education. But for various reasons the educational development of Muslims sustained a setback.

Political Behaviour of the Muslims in Cooch Behar:

The Muslim of Cooch Behar are not politically inactive and they are considered as pro-establishment³⁵. During the reign of the Maharajas of Koch kingdom they were loyal subjects. They were loyal subjects of the Koch kings. They did not organize any kind of unrest against the Koch kings. The wave of various political movements touched the soil of Cooch Behar. The Muslims generally did not take part in such political movements. But the environment was totally changed during the period of partition. In 1947 at the time of independence of India there was a tension among some renowned Muslim on the issue of the future of the Cooch Behar State. After the independence the Muslim of Cooch Behar supported the government of Indian National Congress. Thereafter when the Left Front government came to power, they became the supporter of the government. At present a major portion of Muslim community is the supporter of the Trinamool Congress Government. During the reign of the Cooch rulers there were some famous personalities who had influenced in political matter of Cooch Behar. Among them Khan Chowdhury Amanatulla Ahmed and Anchharuddin Ahmed were very famous.

Amanatulla Ahmed was the Revenue Minister of the Cooch Behar State³⁶. Anchharuddin Ahmed was a member of the legislative Assembly³⁷. But at present the most striking feature of political situation of Muslim in Cooch Behar is the absence of reputed political leaders among them. The Muslim masses in general are confined their political activities to voting only.

Some Reputed Muslim Personalities in Cooch Behar:

Cooch Behar gave birth some reputed Muslim personalities who achieved success in their respective fields. They were honoured by the Cooch rulers with title and distinction in darbar. The most notable Muslims who had wealth, power and status in Cooch Behar were Khan Chowdhury Amanatulla, Anchharuddin Ahmed, Majiruddin Ahmed, Makbul Hossain, Hedayat Ali, Lt. Altaf Hossain, Abbasuddin Ahmed, Nayeb Ali (Tepu) etc. Abbasuddin Ahmed and Nayeb Ali (Tepu) were the famous bhawaiya singer not only of Cooch Behar but also all over Bengal and Assam also.

Middle Class Muslims in Cooch Behar:

There are very few number of educated middle class Muslim in Cooch Behar. For various reasons they failed to utilize the facility which are existing in the field of education, communication, industry etc. That's why very few Muslims are now engaged in different kind of services. Majority of Muslims are self-employed and they engaged in economic activities of marginal nature. In the post partition period many rich Muslim cultivators and educated service man left Cooch Behar and settled in East Pakistan (Bangladesh). The migration of such prosperous class had caused a serious setback for the Muslims of Cooch Behar³⁸.

Some Occupational Groups of the Muslims in Cooch Behar:

The majority of Muslims in the rural areas professed agriculture as their primary means of livelihood and some with specialized occupations. The cultivators take the self-dependend agricultural system. The indigenous Muslims follow their traditional occupations and the means of livelihood for various reasons. Majority of them remained poor. The cultivators are fully self-dependend and they produces various kind of crops such as paddy of three kinds- Aus, Aman and Boro, jute, tobacco, pulses, wheat etc. Beside these potato, onion, garlic, ginger, hemp, sugarcane are also produced by them. Similar to the earlier days at present the Muslims of Dinhat Sub-Division have the exclusive control over the cultivation of tobacco.³⁹

Besides the cultivation some Muslims are engaged in making agricultural tools and other materials of domestic uses. The most common occupational pursuits of the Muslims in urban areas were small business, hawking, tailoring, driving, masoning, binding, mechanical works, leather and rubber works, crafts works, rickshaw pulling etc. There are only a very few Muslims in the section of government services although a large number of higher educated persons have been found having no work.

Conclusion:

The Muslims of Cooch Behar living in Hindu dominated cultural environment. Under such a social environment the Muslims are highly assimilated and integrated with the local non-Muslim population. However at the same time they also maintain their social boundary and cultural identity. From the reign of the Maharajas of Cooch Behar till now there exist a good relationship between the Hindus and the Muslims of Cooch Behar. The religious tolerance and communal harmony have been strictly maintained in Cooch Behar.

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