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IDENTITY OF MUSLIMS IN ASSAM AT THE TIME OF GLOBAL ISLAMISM

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Assam was known to the world what North East, except Manipur means today until very recently when political boundaries were redrawn to make seven different states. The state of Assam which once was the epicenter of moral authority of the entire region that consists of several dozen ethnic groups and people of different faiths and languages is presently fast experiencing political upheavals related to citizenship, nationality, ethnic assertion, secessionism and exposed to the larger menaces of all Indian communalism and cross border terrorism. Disliked by its neighbouring states, threatened by the large scale infiltration from Bangladesh because of the porous border and shaken by the secessionist demands by armed insurgents the very definition of Assamese nationality has been under siege these days where everyone is bewildered by the political stance postured by the various stakeholders of the state. In this context Muslims in Assam is a very important and significant component of public discourse as they are quite often made synonymous with infiltrators, fundamentalists and terrorist. Muslims have been living in Assam since the early thirteenth century and is a very essential part of the inclusive Assamese national and cultural identity till very recently. The Hindu-Muslim strife and pan-Indian communalism made no impact in the Assamese society as the Partition did not cut the state except the predominantly Bengali speaking Sylhet. The integration and assimilation of Muslims in Assamese society was a great instance in comparison to the mutually exclusive and communally polarized societies of Indian heartland. However that prized relationship was greatly undermined when Assam witnessed the six years long agitation demanding the expulsion of illegal immigrants or infiltrators from Bangladesh who are mostly Muslims. Since then many developments have taken part in Assam and the rest of the world where we have seen

unprecedented scenes of terror and violence which are attributed to Muslims. In Assam too, Muslims are exposed to these elements and their effects where an insensitive media making a fuss wherever there is an issue involving Muslims, taking a very generic view of current Islam and global jihad. But the Muslims in Assam have their own problems, challenges to cope up and also have different opportunities to avail for the larger interest of the state and the nation.

The history of Muslims in Assam, the Brahmaputra valley to be precise, dates back to thirteenth century when the army of Mohammad Ibn Bakhtiyar Khalji, a general under Sultan Qutbuddin of Delhi, ruling in Bengal made an incursion to this land in 1206 AD. They were ethnically Turks of Central Asia with only one native convert, Ali Mech, who navigated Bakhtiyar Khalji to enter Kamrupa. However this incursion was Bakhtiyar Khalji's enroute to Tibet, who was desperate to secure that Himalayan region to get access to Turkestan (presently Sinkiang). This was stated by chronicler Minhazuddin in his book *Tabakat-e-Nasiri*¹. Contrary to popular and sectarian beliefs that Bakhtiyar Khalji invaded Kmrupa to extend the Muslim political empire, historians are very clear that he came only for the Tibetan expedition². The then ruler of Kamrupa advised Bakhtiyar Khalji of the unfavourable condition to enter Tibet at that season, but the conqueror went ahead crossing river Bornadi³ and reached as far as Tawang⁴ through present day Darrang and Sonitpur district and retreated after a fatal confrontation with the local tribes and returned to Bengal somehow. This incursion produced no Muslim governance or settlements in western Assam or Kamrupa. Bakhtiyar Khalji's failed Tibetan expedition via Assam was followed by the invasion by the new ruler of Bengal Hussammudin Iwaz in 1226-27. He easily made quick inroads into the Brahmaputra valley and reached as far as Sadiya, the easternmost part of Assam⁵. Iwaz, who revolted against Delhi Sultan Iltutmish, returned triumphantly from Kamrupa with thousands of able bodied soldiers to fight Sultan's army in Bengal led by prince Nasiruddin. The then Kamrupa King Viswasundaradeva conceded much of the areas of his kingdom in the plains of

¹ "After some years have passed away and he had ascertained the state of different maountain tracts of Turkestan and Tibet to the east of Lakhawati, the ambition of seizing the country of Turkestan and Tibet began to torment his brain; and he had an army got ready and about ten thousand horses were organized.—*Tabakt-e-Nasiri*. P. 560

² Noted historian Dr. Mohini Saikia writes in his doctoral thesis, *Assam Muslim Relations and its Cultural Significance*, "Muhammad Ibn Bakhtiyar was perhaps the first of the Muslim conquerors to have entered Kamrupa. But it appears to be certain that he had no desire to plunder or conquer this country. His sole objective was the conquest of Tibet. His army did not seem to have committed any depredation when he passed through Kamrupa.

³ Kanak Lal Baruah, *Early History of Kamrupa*, p. 212

⁴ Dr. Monini Saikia, op. cit p. 44

⁵ E. A. Gait, *A History of Assam*, p. 37

the Brahmaputra valley to Iwaz and thus increased contacts between Assam and Muslims from Indian mainland. This confrontation was followed by the invasion by another Bengal ruler Ikhtiyaruddin Malik Uzbek in 1256-57. This ethnic Uzbek general constructed the first mosque in this land. After a brief success Malik Uzbek was defeated by the Kamata king Kameswara and was killed in the battle. His son and many personnel were taken as prisoners. In this way the first group of Muslim POWs was taken in Assam and they started to settle down here.

Malik Uzbek's eventful invasion was followed by Mughisuddin Tughral, another general from Bengal in 1268⁶. He subjugated some Bhuyan chieftains in Kamrupa but due to his hectic confrontation with Delhi Sultan Ghyasuddin Balban, Tughral's hold did not last long in Kamrupa and for a considerable period there was no war by Muslims with rulers Assam. After a long period Muslim powers invaded Kamrupa in 1320 AD with the incursion by Sultan Ghyasuddin Bahadur Shah of Bengal. Since then there has been regular armed conflict between Muslim political forces and rulers of Assam till the late seventeenth century. These included by Muhammad Shah in 1338, by Sikandar Shah in 1357, by Sultan Ghiyasuddin Abul Muzaffar Alam Shah in 1389, by Hussain Shah in 1498, by Mit Malik and Rukun Khan in 1517-18 (the first entry of Muslim political powers of Bengal to upper Assam and first confrontation with the Ahom king), by Sulaiman Karrani in 1568 (due to Koch monarch Naranarayana's territorial ambitions), by Seikh Kamal in 1613(intervention in Koch kingdom as a result of internal feud ending in the complete annexation of Koch kingdom to Mughal Empire of Delhi), by Satrajeet and Sayed Abu Bakar in 1614 (first Mughal-Ahom war), by Mir Jumla in 1661, and by Ram Singha in 1671 (with the great Battle of Saraighat). The last Mughal-Ahom war occurred in 1682 when the legion of Delhi in Kamrup retreated to Rangamati ending a six hundred years of confrontation. During these six hundred years of engagement by various Muslim political powers of Indian mainland Muslim settlements started in various places of Assam which finally led to the formation of Muslims which are different and most unique than their brethren in rest of India. Interestingly unlike in other parts of India, conversion to Islam by natives was significantly very low in Assam. Nevertheless this phenomenon is not reflected in the Muslim population of Assam prior to the mass-migration from East Bengal.

⁶ *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, p. 79

It has been popularly held that all the so called indigenous Muslims of Assam were the descendants of the prisoners of war taken by triumphant Ahom king Suhungmung in the sixteenth century. However historical facts reveal that Muslims started settling in this land well before the sixteenth century. After the success of Hussain Shat in 1498 a colony of Afghan warriors was established in Hojo, the first ever largest Muslim settlement in Assam⁷. These early Muslim settlers of Assam lived with perfect harmony with the indigenous people even after the area was recovered by the Ahoms.⁸ The Muslim POWs taken by Ahom king Suhungmung were taken to upper Assam and was settled in various places engaged in different professions, particularly metal works of brassware. They came to be known as the *Mariyas*. Thus the amity and peaceful coexistence between Muslims and other communities in Assam dates back to late fifteenth century. Similarly the peace deal between Mughal Emperor Akbar and Koch king Naranarayan brought many Muslims in western part of Assam, mostly the undivided Goalpara and Kamrup district in early sixteenth century.⁹ The success of Mughal Governor of Bengal, Mir Jumla in Assam saw the extension of Mughal Empire up to Darrang and Nagaon districts. It may not be wrong to surmise that a large number of Muslims settled permanently in Darrang and Kamrup by right of conquest.¹⁰ However the infiltration of Muslims from those parts of conquered areas to upper Assam can only be traced after the invasion of Mir Jumla. In 1838 some Muslims from Jorhat told Maj. Jenkins' enquiry that their ancestors were those who accompanied the 14 *Omrahs* under Nawab Mir Jumla.¹¹

The erstwhile Cachar district of Assam formed a part of the province of Bengal along with Sylhet during Mughal Emperor Akbar's rule. Till 1765 they were ruled by a succession of Amils subordinate to the Nawab of Dhaka.¹² Cachar was made a district of Assam in 1874 after its annexure to Bengal in 1830. The fertile Barak Valley of Cachar attracted mass migration of peasants from overpopulated Sylhet who were mostly Muslims.¹³ Till 1874 Muslims constituted only 5.9% of the population of Assam. But the reconstitution of Assam with addition of Goalpara, Cachar and Sylhet districts in 1874 increased the number of Muslims to 28% of the

⁷ K.L. Baruah, *Early History of Kamrupa*, Gauhati, Lawyer's Book Stall, 1966, *Second Edition*, p. 175

⁸ Dr. Mohini Saikia, *Assam Muslim Relations and its Cultural Significance*, p. 132

⁹ S.K. Bhuyan, *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, Gauhati, Deptt. Of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, P XXX

¹⁰ M Kar, *Muslim Immigration to Assam*, Social Scientist, Vol. 8 No. 7, February, 1980, p. 68

¹¹ H.K. Barpujari, *Assam in the Days of Company*, Gauhati, Lawyer's Book Stall, 1963, First Edition, p. 264.

¹² *Physical and Political Geography of Assam*, Shillong, 1896, p. 80.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 78.

total population. The abrupt increase of Muslim population in Assam therefore can be attributed to the colonial past of India.

The Muslim subjects under the Ahom rule were allowed to follow faith. Some of their religious leaders, known as *Dewans*, were granted revenue free lands called *pirpal* to settle on.¹⁴ They were engaged in various services particularly in the armoury and espionage sector as the kingdom faced frequent wars with the invading forces. They also imported many Muslims from the Mughal Empire and employed them as masons, engravers, spinners and workers in state arsenals¹⁵. It is said that Muslims employed in the Ahom arsenals displayed a high order of efficiency and the cannons and gunpowder manufactured in Assam during the Ahom period were considered to be of very high quality¹⁶. The highest number of Muslims employed in various capacities in the guilds of masons and artisans (*khanikar khel*), weavers, Parsi readers, falconers, poultry keepers and even as bodyguards (*daa dhara*). During the decisive battle of Saraighat it was Bagh Hazarika alias Ismail Siddique who acted as the deputy to Ahom commander Lachit Borphukan to defeat the Mughal navy led by Ram Singha. Earlier Rupai Daadhara or Rupai Gorai, an officer of the Ahom king Pratap Singha suspected the great Sufi saint Azan Pir to be the spy of the Mughals despite the king's refusal to believe. Shihabuddin Talish, the chronicler who accompanied Mughal general Mir Jumla to Assam had to make the bitter remark about the Muslims of Assam saying that they were not true Mussalmans, because they in their heart and soul loved the Assamese people and not the Mughals¹⁷. Ahom chronicle, the *Barpahi Buranji* says that Sotora Molona (Maulana) instituted a coup against King Laxmi Singha (1769-80) to install a prince from the Tungkhungiya dynasty with the help of several nobles, all non-Muslims. This indicates that Muslims did enjoy considerable respect and reverence among the public in the Ahom kingdom. Ramzan Khan Hiloidari was the commander of last Ahom monarch Chandrakanta Singha who lay down his life fighting the Burmese forces in 1825, the last battle for the independence of Assam. During the first anti-British peasant revolt of 1840 in Patharughat, Darrang, Muslims laid down their lives for the cause of this land. Later during the first war of Independence in 1857 against colonial British East India Company Bahadur Gaonburha and Farmud Ali were the comrades of legendary Assamese revolutionary Maniram

¹⁴ M. Kar, *op. cit.* p. 69.

¹⁵ W.W. Hunter, *Statistical Account of Assam*, Vol-I, p. 245-363

¹⁶ B.K. Barua, *Asomiya Bhasaa aru Sankskriti*, p. 121

¹⁷ Dr. Mohini Saikia, *op. cit.* p. 305

Dewan. The British hanged Maniram and Piyali Phukan and exiled Bahadur Gaonburha to Andamans. Thus the past history of Assam is studded with many glorious engagements of Muslims in every aspect of life and society.

In the socio-cultural front also Muslims in Assam has always been very participatory since the past. The great Vaishnavite saint of the sixteenth century, Srimanta Sankardev's liberal views on divinity attracted many Muslims as his disciple and the prominent among them was Chand Sai. The inclusive doctrine of Sankardev made such a penetrating influence among the public in Assam that the Sufi saint, Azan Fakir or Azan Pir adopted his footsteps in preaching Islam among the Assamese Muslims. He wrote Zikirs and Zaris to preach Islam in the form of folk songs of local Assamese language. The integration mission by Azan Fakir between Muslims and other faiths (mainly Hindus) has been the cornerstone of Assamese cultural identity and spirit endorsed by all even today. Thus Muslims in Assam bears the legacy of unity and integrity and an all inclusive tradition deeply rooted in Assamese consciousness since a very long period.

The annexure of Assam to British Indian administration after 1826 brought pan-Indian Muslim elements to Assam—in the form of more Muslim traders, professionals, Urdu and clergy from North Indian Seminaries. These elements brought some pan-Indian Muslim identities to Assam introducing Assamese Muslims to the Islam of outside world albeit in cultural or ceremonial form. However Assam witnessed the existence of Muslims of an altogether different background with the coming of East Bengali peasants from the turn of the twentieth century.

After the amalgamation of the districts of Goalpara, Cachar and Sylhet in 1874, peasant migration from various parts of Bengal to Brahmaputra valley started steadily. The landless peasants of the densely populated districts of East Bengal were always attracted by vast wastelands of Brahmaputra valley. By 1875-76 there were 67, 79, 978 acres of cultrable waste land in the five districts of Brahmaputra Valley where only 12, 58, 277 acres were cultivated. The then Chief Commissioner of Assam, Sir Charles Elliot (1881-85), had observed that this huge area of good, flat, alluvial land had been awaiting the sickle and the plough.¹⁸ The Mymensingh district of Bengal was the worst hit by increasing population and less land. In 1900 Muslims constituted 67% of total population of Mymensingh of which 95% were landless

¹⁸ Kedar Nath Mazumdar, *Mymensingher Biboron*, Calcutta, Kemcelin Press, 1907, *Administrative Reports of Mymensingh, 1873-74, Assam Secretariat File No. Rev. A, November, 1898 Nos. 128-138*

labourers. They were very much attracted by the vast wastelands of Brahmaputra Valley and a mass migration of Muslim landless agrarian labours from Mymensingh to Brahmaputra Valley started from 1910 onwards firstly to Goalpara, then to Nagaon, Kamrup and Darrang districts. This migration contributed to the growth of Muslim population in Assam to 150% (including natural growth of 20%) between 1901 and 1931.¹⁹ At the same time the *Grow More Food Scheme* of the Assam Government of 1930-32 settled peasants from land scrapped East Bengal in the river banks of Brahmaputra and in the government reserves to increase revenue of the state. That moved was then welcomed by the leading Assamese social organizations like the *Assam Sahitya Sabha*. Side by side buying of thousands of acres of waste lands from natives by those immigrants generated enthusiasm among the locals to earn money. Even when the Assam government wanted to impose restrictions for the transfer of lands to immigrants which could have stopped migration, the local people oppsed it vehemently.²⁰ Those East Bengali peasants were Muslims mostly from the Mymensingh district who were totally different from the local Assamese Muslims both linguistically and culturally. These settler Muslims, commonly known as the *Miyans* or *Charuas* for their settlements in the river banks and river isles indeed contributed immensely towards the economy of the state by producing the bulk of all the agricultural products and its allied goods like poultry and livestock. The then Chief Minister (at that time called the Premier), Sir Sayed Shahdullah, who is squarely blamed for that import of East Bengali peasants to Assam, however opposed to giving land certificates to them and had given clear instructions to confine those people in natural ghettos, far away from the mainstream settlements or villages. Sir Shahdullah, who is also alleged to be the mastermind of the Muslim League's plan of including Assam into Pakistan by settling those Muslims in the state, was in fact not a member of that party responsible for Partition. His party's name was Assam Valley Muslim Party which was forced to align with the Muslim League due to political compulsion to save his government. It was the later Congress government in the independent India's Assam that an order was passed to entertain land right certificates to the settler Muslims of East Bengali descent in 1950s.

As the two-nation theory of Muslim League's Jinnah was getting momentum during the last years of India's freedom movement, demands were made to include Assam inside Pakistan

¹⁹ *Census 1961*

²⁰ *The Times of Assam*, 27th December, 1915

because of its considerable Muslim population of immigrant origin. Landlord and quasi-religious leader of Assam's immigrant Muslims, Maulana Bhasani led that demand for Assam's political merger with Pakistan. He even organized armed activities for that cause as far as Kamrup district. However Muslim leaders in Assam's Congress always stood for Assam's inclusion with secular India and personalities like Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, Mohd. Tayebullah and others successfully mobilized Muslims in south Kamrup to drive away the divisive forces of Bhasani.²¹

Though the Muslim peasants were brought from Mymensingh for a certain purpose, large scale immigration continued throughout the subsequent period well after the creation of East Pakistan and latter Bangladesh. The poorly managed border security system and terrain provided ample opportunities for those immigrants to infiltrate to Assam and to get lost completely among their brethren that had come earlier.

Though the settler Muslims contributed positively towards the economy of Assam since the independence their population explosion, illiteracy, social isolation from the mainstream life caused a lot of problem for them including rampant criminal activities and social injustices and a free ride of religious orthodoxy or dogmatism. Because of their overwhelming population this community became the favourite ploy for vote bank politics for all political parties who patronized the Mullah, land owners and petty criminals as their leaders and brokers for electoral sale outs. This very system facilitated the illegal immigrants from Bangladesh to enlist their names in electoral rolls to become Indian citizens, is the root cause for the foreigner's issue in Assam. In the present context of global Jihad this concern threatens the very existence of Assam, the Assamese society and its unique cultural identity demographically. But there are lot of complexities and shortcomings in the labyrinth of what the state of Assam has been facing as its problems.

Assam witnessed a six years long mass movement led by All Assam Students Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parichad from 1979-1985 for the expulsion of all illegal immigrants or foreign nationals and also for the protection of Assamese nationalism from a very regionalist point of view. In Assam there are also illegal immigrants coming from Nepal and Bengali speaking Hindus from Bangladesh. In the earlier stage of the movement the call was

²¹ Sazzad Hussain, *Asomor Bideshi Samashya aru Musalmanar Manasikata*, Prantik.1—15 Novemebr, 2003

unequivocal for the expulsion of all foreign nationals irrespective of their faith, language and nationality. But latter the leader of the movement deviated from the earlier stand and religious identity was used as the yardstick to determine a foreigner. Foreigners deemed to be Muslims or the verse-versa and even the local Assamese Muslims were not spared from that onslaught. The infiltration of right wing all India Hindu elements were to be blamed for this biased move of that agitation. This was the origin of the present religious card of the whole problem manifested in the form of vote bank politics, minority solidarity and polarization of the society that culminated in the recent Bodo-settler Muslim clashes in Darrang-Udalguri districts in 2008.

Apparently the infiltration of Bangladeshi nationals to Assam have posed greater problems like the setting of an arena of Jehadi activities as the neighbouring country has already become a hub of such operatives sponsored by various quarters. There have been reports since 1992 that Muslim youth from the *char* (river isles) areas of Assam going for armed training in Bangladesh to wage a Jihad for a Bengali Islamic homeland or to make Assam a part of Bangladesh, an Islamistan etc. There also have been reports of mushrooming of armed organizations in the *char* areas for the same purpose by Muslim youths indoctrinated in the radical Islamist ideology. Earlier during the agitation period all Muslims of the state were deemed to be foreigners, now the report of armed activities by the settler Muslims, the national level communal conflagration, the growing Islamist fundamentalism among Indian Muslims and their stereotype castigation by the Sangh Parivar, the unique identity of Assamese Muslims all have contributed in forming a very complicated and delicate issue with nuanced elements concerning the Muslim or religious context of the whole problem.

Assam is traditionally free from the communal divide or polarization witnessed in the rest of the country. Here the Muslims are the descendants of Turkic invaders who remained as prisoners in the thirteenth century. Assamese Muslims are not distinguishable from their Hindu brethren by their looks, dresses, food habits, customs and cultures. Moreover Assamese Muslims had the unique and glorious tradition in the history of repulsing the imperial Mughal army of Aurangzeb at the famous naval battle of Saraighaat, near Guwahati in 1671. Furthermore the traditional Assamese Hindu and Muslim society has been shaped by the great Vaishnavite Saint Srimanta Sankardev and Sufi saint Azaan Fakir who both stood for amity and co-existence of all faiths in an all inclusive manner. Assamese Muslims speak the most purest and archaic form of Assamese

language and have been contributing immensely towards Assamese literature, music, culture and other fields. But the overwhelming presence of illegal immigrants as well as the huge population of settler Muslims has been causing identity crisis to this community of Assam. In representative politics too the Assamese Muslims are unable claim their stakes due to their meager population. The so called minority politics or Muslim politics, strengthened in the post-Assam Movement period has largely been played by Muslim leaders from the Bengali speaking Barak Valley of the state, a region that traditionally does not feel as a part of Assam. Branding of the Assamese Muslims as foreigners during the agitation period pushed this unique community of the state to a corner where the vacuum was filled by pure Islamist assertion and practice, the slow embracing of alien Wahhabism spreaded by Saudi Arabia for a transnational mission after the oil boom of the 1970s that came to India and Assam as evangelical activities like the Tablighs and religious congregations like the *Esteemas*, *Sillas* etc. The Mujahideen War against the Soviets in Afghanistan by American trained, Saudi funded and Pakistan supported transnational Islamists was also going on during this turbulent period whose influence could not be ruled out, though passively, among the Muslims of Assam, both Assamese and settlers who were at the receiving end.

The Assam Accord of 1985 which ended the agitation declared immigrants entering Assam before 30th April, 1971 as Indian citizens and latter entrants as foreigners who were to be expelled. The accord also paved the way for the formation of Asom Gana Parichad by the AASU-AGSP combine. The party with a hardcore regionalist character won a landslide popular mandate to form a government on the core issue of the expulsion of foreigners. But they failed to detect and expel a single foreigner during their five years term from 1985 to 1990. The Illegal Migrant (Determined by Tribunal) Act was shown as the excuse for such a gross failure of state machinery. The latter period of AGP's rule was marked by the surfacing of the United Liberation Force of Assam which called for political secession of Assam from the Indian union. In the next assembly polls of 1991 the AGP faired miserably and the Congress returned triumphantly by consolidating its traditional vote banks. In 1996 polls this vote bank was managed by the AGP and its allies to form the next government during which time, quite ironically the ULFA leadership based their camps inside Bangladesh, calling more aggressively on Assam's secession and remaining tightlipped on the foreigner's issue. The ethnic representative agitations and assertive movements for more political and executive space also erupted more violently during

this period which was further complicated by the formation of various insurgent groups based on ethnic identity in the hills and plains of Assam including the tea-garden tribes or the *Adivasis*. The regionalist politics was out rightly rejected by the common voters of Assam in 2001 and 2006 polls where the Congress won on developmental issues. Significantly enough, those two last assembly polls suggest that the foreigner's issue or the Bangladeshi problem is not an electoral issue in Assam and those who aspires to bank on this have to be careful in sorting out their strategy.

The linguistic history of Assamese, which is indeed the main component of Assamese nationalism, in the past hundred years or so has been marked by a very emotive issue of Assamese-Bengali tussle as the official language of the state. The Bengali middle class, mostly English educated Hindus from undivided Bengal, were brought by the British to work as clerks in courts and tea gardens of Assam after 1826 succeeded in introducing Bengali as the official language of the state in 1836. A consistent effort by some prominent Assamese litterateur with the help of a group of American Baptist Missionaries who printed Assamese texts, reintroduced Assamese as official language in 1873. Since then there has been a hostile attitude towards Bengali language and culture in Assamese nationalism whose eruptions were witnessed again during the linguistic movement of 1962 and some sporadic anti-Bengali attacks during the Assam Movement period. Quite significantly when the presence of Bengali speakers alarmed the existence of Assamese language to be pushed to the position of a minority language, the settler Muslims of East Bengali descent enlisted themselves as Assamese speakers in the 1971 census. This move, which saved the Assamese language from being dropped as the official language of Assam, was greatly welcomed by the rest of the Assamese society and the settler Muslims were accommodated as Neo-Assamese in the society. But this emotional and delicate turn of the Assamese nationalism is also complicated by the issue of infiltration and presence foreign nationals. However there is no such sentiments like Assamese-Bengali confrontation over language presently in Assam and the two linguistic groups have mellowed down considerably and reconciliation has been established.

Linguistically the settler Muslims of Assam guard Assamese despite their cultural differences and social distances from the local Assamese Muslims. However this very community has been besieged by the homogeneity of Bangladeshi infiltrators who use to get

mixed up with them after entering to Assam. Secondly the population explosion and shrinking of agricultural lands in the *chars* due to flood and erosion have forced many settler Muslims to migrate to various urban and mufossil areas of Assam to work as labourers, rickshaw pullers, domestic help, rag pickers etc who are often dubbed as foreigners. On the otherhand the increased number of religious fundamentalism and Jehadi activities and their patronage by various Bangladeshi establishments to use them as an anti-Indian ploy has made their impact in Assam like other parts of India. The death *fatwa* against controversial writer Taslima Nashreen in Bangladesh was echoed in Assam when a journalist Aminur Rahman of Nagaon district was given a same *fatwa* by a cleric in 1993. Bangladeshi radio is clearly listened a large number of these Muslims, both settler and illegal immigrants and in the past there were reports of circulation of Jehadi pamphlets and audio-cassettes in some parts of Assam. The Bangladeshi Jehadi outfit, HuJI, which was formed by some Afghan Mujahideen veterans in 1992, has already made its entry to an all-India network whose presence is very certain in Assam among a section of the Muslims of east Bengali descent. On the other hand the settler Muslims has been the victim of vote bank politics with least amount of developmental work by the successive state governments and exploitation by their own leaders. During the Assam Movement period of 1979-85 they faced the wrath of some of extreme communal forces culminating in the massacre of Nellie in 1983. They were also at the receiving end during the height of the Bodoland agitation from 1987 to 1997 like other non-Bodo areas of lower Assam. The ethnic violence between the Bodo militants and that of the Adivasis in Kokrajhar district in 1999 left thousands of such Muslims homeless and they still have been living in refugee camps since then under extreme inhuman condition with no rehabilitation effort by the state governments. As religious influence is very widespread and the community is exposed to the cross border Jehadi designs coupled with influx, these Muslims of Assam are living in a very vulnerable position presently and political gambling for electoral goal could bring far reaching consequences in the state. For example the recent violences in Darrang and Udalguri district are the latest example of such developments where politically empowered section of the Bodoland autonomous system clashed with settler Muslims who are presently identified with Jehadi, Bangladeshi or aliens---though the trouble started mainly over the possession of agricultural lands. The clash was termed as the invasion by Bangladeshi Jehadis by a section of the vernacular media and the subsequent serial blasts in Guwahati, Barpeta, Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon were blamed to them. Though the probe

to the blast now points the finger of accusation to a faction of the renegade NDFB, a Bodo insurgent group presently in ceasefire with the government, Jehadi collaboration could not ruled out in this context. However to link infiltration, Jehadi network, violences in Darrang-Udalguri and blasts in several places of state is a very difficult and complicated problem and to have a very generic overview will be a layman's one.

ULFA, once the most powerful and popular representative force of the larger Assamese aspirations based on regionalism, is still calling for an independent Assam from its camps in Bangladesh. Obviously this insurgent group is alleged to have been influenced by the anti-India Bangladeshi establishments including the Jehadis to remain silent on the foreigner's issue in Assam. But one should not forget the fact that during the height of ULFA's almost over ground activities in Assam in-between 1987-90, both the regionalist politics and the vernacular press ignored the issue or the question of the foreigners who were to be detected and expelled from the state as per the provisions of the Assam Accord signed in 1985. The army operation against the ULFA from December, 1990 onwards left no space in Assam to discuss about the Bangladeshi issue when the regional political thoughts and their supportive vernacular press were preoccupied only on issues like "state terrorism", "human rights", "false encounters" etc and the whole insurgent campaign was viewed through the eyes of some renegade Naxalites like Azizul Haque of Kolkata who earned a wide media space in Assam at that time. It is still a baffling question to me that how in Assam, just immediately after a long and painful mass movement against the foreigners, a popular sentiment was roused to support for an independent Assam with millions of illegal foreign nationals who had threatened a existence of Assamese identity, culture and nationhood? I think there is a wide gap between what one regionalist sentiment has thought of a foreigner free Assam and the other of a free independent Assam or the common Assamese folk have been fooled around by both over the years and during this period the illegal immigrants irrespective of their faith have consolidated their positions in Assam by taking advantage of that gap. Further the emergence of armed insurgency among various ethnic tribes of the state like the Bodos, Karbis, Dimasas, Hmars, Adivasis following the footsteps of ULFA because of systematic exclusion by the regionalist ideologues, demanding a separate and independent homeland in their dominated areas pushed the Bangladeshi issue backward. The failure of autonomous rules of various ethnic tribes under the 6th Schedule and increased demands by other least forward communities of Assam for the same favoured the rule of the gun to put pressure or

to derive gains. But such demands of separate ethnic based homelands brought the danger of Balkanization in Assam. Amidst this shadow of Balkanization the issue of infiltration or the Bangladeshi nationals has been laying with occasional projections to the media and public life in the last two decades.

Over the years it seems that once hardcore regionalist politic of Assam has failed to sort out measures to solve the prolonged foreigner's issue. It is now succumbing to the religious card played by the BJP by forming electoral alliances with them. The lone and most vocal stand has only been played by the AASU. The AASU has been unequivocally calling for the expulsion of all foreigners entering the state after 30th April, 1971 irrespective of their faith and language. But like the rest, they have not gone to one very important option for this albeit taking a sustained campaign on this issue over the years. That is to open a dialogue with democratic, secular and liberal blocks and establishments of Dhaka. The liberals of Bangladesh, who despite the growing power of the Islamists and the army, have been relentlessly upholding the secular and democratic values of that country. They understand our sentiments and problems back home and share our views. So a direct exchange of views and ideas would pave the way for a better platform to address this problem jointly through which any breakthrough can be possible. Secondly India's border with Bangladesh in Assam and other NE states should be managed and guarded strictly with zero tolerance for any infiltration bid. Setting up of a marine unite of the armed forces in the Dhubri-Mancachar area should be one such measure to check infiltration. Similarly issuing of work permits for foreigners, settling the inter-state border disputes of Assam with its neighbours, especially with Nagaland where a large number immigrant Muslims of doubtful origin have been settled by the NSCN on the Dhansiri valley. Further a genuine all inclusive Assamese national identity accommodating equitable space to all ethnic groups, religious and linguistic minorities; inland migrants would protect Assam from any kind of alien aggression both from within and outside.

If we look at the state of Muslims in the so called Islamic world we will find that conditions of Muslims in India are far better than the rest. At least Indian Muslims are enjoying the rights of a democratic country with equal opportunities and exercises. In Assam the case is much better. Because of the traditional co-existence of Hindus and Muslims in Assam in the last eight hundred years, Muslims have a fair and better life and status here. The moderate Islam practiced

by Assamese Muslims has been a catalyst for the inclusive nature of Assamese identity. The immigrant Muslims too brought the most diverse form of Islam from the Bengali heartland to Assam. Both of them overcome the evils of Partition. But presently all the Muslims of Assam have been exposed to global Islamist expansionist designs of certain outside elements. Particularly the extension drives by global Sunni Islamic forces to homogenize Muslims of different parts of the world by erasing their own diversity and local elements are slowly affecting the Muslims of Assam like rest of India. As historically proven, the Muslims of India or Assam were descendants of some central Asian ethnic groups like the Turks, Uzbeks, Pathans and local converts. There was no link to Arabia. But in this age of globalization expansionist Sunni groups from Saudi Arabia have been preaching radical Islam of the Bedouins known as Wahhabism to be the purest form of Islam negating all our native and local forms which have developed during long years of mutual and peaceful co-existence. The radicals are also waging war against our great Sufi saints and their idealism who contributed immensely for the growth of our composite culture. This is the greatest challenge that Muslims of Assam has been facing presently. To shrug off this outside pressure should be the prime object of every Muslim of Assam. They should come forward from their mental ghettos to participate in all the public spheres of the state, mostly by taking educational benefits and continue to co-exist peacefully with other fellow Assamese people by taking inspirations from the past history.

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