



Changing faces of religions in Assam and its socio-political implication.

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Abstract

History of ancient Assam is reconstructed from epics and literatures like the *Mahabharata*, *Kalika Purana*, *Yogini Tantra* etc. The *Kalika Purana* and the *Yogini Tantra*, both composed in ancient Assam, describe the country as *Kamarupa*. Most of Assam's ancient and medieval religious history, though not fully evidence based, has been found in the *Kalika purana* and the *Yogini Tantra*. From the historical review it is seen that, though Hinduism was the single major religion in the ancient Assam, in the process of time it has become the meeting ground of diverse religions and cultures. Currently almost all the major religions of the world are practiced in Assam. According to the 2001 census, there were 17,296,455 Hindus, 8,240,611 Muslims, 9,86,589 Christians, 51,029 Buddhists, 23,957 Jains, 22,519 Sikhs and 22,999 belonging to other religious communities, which includes Animism and worship of nature in its various forms practiced by some tribes. The Paper tries to reveal the changing faces of religions in Assam and its socio-political implications.

Keywords: *Kalika purana*, *yogini tantra*, religion, socio-political implications.

1. Introduction

The state has evidence of human settlements from different periods of the Stone Age. The Australoids or the pre-Dravidians were the earliest inhabitants of this state. But, it was the Mongoloids who entered Assam through the eastern mountainous passes and overrun the land much before the Vedic period. In the Vedic literature, Assam was mentioned as Pragjyotishpura (literary meaning "place of eastern light or astronomy"), and has been described as the land of *Kirats*, whom the *Yajurveda* calls as "cave-dwellers". According to modern scholars like K L Barua they were "Mongoloid people" of Tibetan or Bhutanese origin.

History of ancient Assam is reconstructed from epics and literatures like the *Mahabharata*, *Kalika Purana*, *Yogini Tantra* etc. The *Kalika Purana* and the *Yogini Tantra*, both composed in ancient Assam, describe the country as *Kamarupa*. The name *Kamarupa*, according to these texts is associated with 'Kamadeva', the god of love. It is here that Kamadeva, persuaded by Lord Brahma, came to put an end to Siva's mourning after the death of *Sati*, and to awaken in him the passion of creation again. However he was burnt to ashes at the

angry glance of god Siva. Subsequently he recovered his original form (*rupa*) by the grace of Siva, thus became the name *Kamarupa*.

As depicted in *Kalika Purana*, first known ruler of Assam was *Mahiranga Danava* of Danava dynasty. Later king *Naraka* removed the danava dynasty and established his *Naraka dynasty*. *Naraka's* successor, *Bhagadatta*, figured in the *Mahabharata* war fighting against the Pandavas.

Varman dynasty (350–650AD) was the first royal family, from which epigraphs are available. In the reign of the Varman king, *Bhaskar Varman* (600–650 AD), Chinese traveler *Huen Tsang* visited the region (640 AD) and recorded the socio-political and cultural details of then *Kamarupa*. Other subsequent dynasties of ancient Assam were the *Salstambhas* (*Mlechchha*, 655–900 AD), the *Palas* (900–1100 AD) and the *Khen dynasty* (1185–1498AD). However, after King *Bhaskar Varman* there was a gradual decline of this region till 13th century leading to its fragmentation.

Two later dynasties, the *Ahoms* and the *Koch* again revived the Assam History. The *Ahoms*, a Tai group, that migrated from presently Yunan area in

China and ruled Assam for nearly 600 years (1228–1826 AD). The entry of Ahoms in Assam started a new beginning of socio-political history, and many scholars opine that the state was named “Assam” after this dynasty. Though initially they had their own religious faith, yet they accepted Hinduism after coming to Assam. With the advent of the Ahoms, the center of power shifted from Kamrup in Lower Assam to Sibsagar in Upper Assam. The importance of Lower Assam declined sharply, except for some period in the 16th century when the Koch dynasty (1515-1600 AD), a *Tibeto-Burmese* origin, extended their western limits considerably under king *Naranarayana*. Subsequently Koch kingdom split in two parts *Koch Hajo* and *Koch Bihar*, one merged with the Ahoms and the other with the Mughals.

The Mughal Empire was at its summit in the Indian subcontinent during this period. They invaded Assam several times. Ahom-Mughal conflict finally ended in 1682AD with a Mughal defeat. But with the waning of Ahom power due to multiple Mughal invasions and civil war, the Burmese invaded and overran the territory in the early 19th century. However, they could not rule the region for long. In 1826, the British forced the Burmese to leave Assam by the *Treaty of Yandaboo* and Assam became part of the British India. It was declared a state under the Union of India after its independence in 1947. At that time, except Manipur and Tripura, the whole of the Northeast region was called Assam. However, due to strong regional and political distinctions, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh became separate states, starting with Nagaland in 1963 and ending with Arunachal Pradesh in 1972.

2. Religions of Assam- historical review

2.1 Hinduism

Ancient history of Assam is the story of confluence of peoples from various racial stocks such as Dravidian, Mongoloid, Indo-Tibetan, Indo-Burmese, Indo-Iranian and Aryan; and thus, Assam has become the meeting ground of diverse religions and cultures.

Though the prehistoric period of ancient Assam has been largely left untouched due to lack of sufficient evidence, yet, it is believed that primitive religion in Assam was *nature centric*. Perhaps the Matriarchal worship was prevalent among the aboriginals in the form of fertility cult. Women were believed to be especially related to the Earth. Also there was belief

in the after- life and immortality of the stone. This is substantiated by the fact that those people installed megaliths at the site of the burial and offered food and drink to the dead on specific days.

Most of Assam’s ancient and medieval religious history, though not fully evidence based, has been found in the *Kalika purana* and the *Yogini Tantra*. The *Kalika Purana* is a *Hindu* religious text of unknown authorship, composed during 7th to 11th century AD. It is considered as one of the 18 *Upapuranas*. This text describes in details the geography of ancient *Kamarupa* and glorifies the goddess *Kamakshya*. It details the rituals required for worshipping the goddess-oriented *Shakta* branch of *Hinduism*.

Yogini Tantra, a work of about 16th century AD, is a voluminous *Tantra* composed in *Assam*. It is especially important in the *vamachara* form of tantric worship. It comprises of twenty-eight chapters of unknown authorship. To a great extent the text deals with the worship of the goddesses Kali and Kamakhya and contains some historical information. The text has a number of recommendations concerning the five makara and about sexual rituals. It also gives examples of Tantric visualization.

It is difficult to ascertain precisely the origin of Hinduism in Assam. Also there is lack of sufficient evidence when the Aryans came to this place. But there is hardly any doubt that they settled in Assam at a fairly early period either by successful invasion or by peaceful colonization. According to the *Kalika Purana*, *Narakasura*, established in his kingdom, a large number of Brahmin families originating in Kanauje who were masters of Vedas and other *Shastras*. Eminent Scholar Maheshwar Neog has noted that there has been infiltration of Sanskrit-oriented classical culture of Aryavarta into Assam, at least from the initial centuries. Hindu priests or Brahmins continued to come to Assam with each wave of immigrants of Hindus. Immigration of the Brahmins had great significance in socio-religious history of Assam as they received the royal patronage, and also the process of conversion of non-Aryan tribes into Hinduism began.

The Hindu influence on the ancient religion and also a tribal influence on Hindu religious ceremonies have been noticed from the very beginning in Assam history. Eminent historian and scholar Dr H K Barpujari in his book, ‘The Comprehensive History of Assam’ has noted- “This process of mutual influence was obviously preceded by the introduction of the Hindu religion in Kamrupa. The religious leaders

responsible for the import of the Hindu rites and rituals were the Brahmins. The type of religion propagated by them in those days may be designated as the Brahminical religion. The worship of innumerable Gods and Goddesses came to occupy important position in the religious system. Some of these Gods and Goddesses gave rise to special cults and sectarian rites and beliefs. There arose various religious myths in connection with these sectarian deities.”

2.2 Saivism

The Kalika Purana records that before the arrival of the Aryans, *Siva* was a popular deity among the *Kiratas* who inhabited in Kamarupa. Thus, the earliest Hindu faith in Assam was Saivism. Probably *Siva's* liberal life-style in various aspects was a valuable mechanism for assimilation in a non-Aryan milieu. Also, the mythical belief of *Siva's* abode being the Himalayas, the foothills of which formed the region of Assam, probably gave the people a sense of relation with the God. To various tribal communities like the Bodos, Sonowal-Kacharis, Tiwas, Karbis and the Dimasas, *Siva* is one of the principle deities and is called by different tribal names. *Saivism* popularity was not just confined among the non-Aryans. Many of the royal dynasties as well as the *Brahmins* of ancient Kamrupa were devotees of *Siva*. For many centuries it was the dominant cult. Even in today's Assam, *Saivite* temples still outnumber temples of other Gods and Goddesses.

2.3 Saktism

According to many scholars Kamrupa was the first and foremost centre of Saktism since long time. As noted by Sir E A Gait in his book “A History of Assam”- “At this Saktism was the predominant form of Hindus in this part of India, when in fact it is believed by many to have had its origin”. Dr H K Barpujari, has also noted that traditionally Kamrupa was the principal centre of the Shakti cult with the *Kamakhya temple* being its epicenter. According to Barpujari, “The concept of Shakti or primordial energy symbolized in a woman is an amalgam of many elements drawn from various sources, pre-Aryan, non-Aryan, Aryan and aboriginal. The processes in fertility and motherhood and the active and energizing forces involved therein apparently led to the emergence of the concept of a supreme Goddess who is considered to be the repository of all energy governing the universe.”

According to eminent scholar Dr S N Sarma, “It was King Narakasura who initiated the cult of

Shaktism. Narakasur for the first time worshipped Shakti in the form of Yoni as well as Kamakhya. Subsequently Kamakhya became assimilated with Devi Durga.”

However Saktism became popular after it was patronised by Ahom king Rudra Singha. From about 13th century till 15th century, Shaktism became the dominant cult among the Hindus of Assam. There were folk variations of this worship like the Snake Goddess *Manasa*, which are still prevalent in some parts of Assam.

In Saktism, the procedure of worshipping was mainly recommended in the *Tantras*. It involved animal sacrifice. Its essential feature is known as *Pancha Tattva* or the five elements - *Madya*, (wine), *Mamsa* (meat), *Matsya* (fish), *Mudra* (parched grain), and *Maithuna* (copulation). The ritual even consisted of ‘human sacrifices’. However this ritual was strongly discouraged from the time of Ahom king Gaurinath Singha (1780–1795AD).

2.4 Vaishnavism

Vaishnavism is the cult of worshipping *Vishnu* in any of his several forms as described in *Vishnu Purana*. Many Kamrupa rulers trace their lineage to *Vishnu*. The earliest recorded reference of Vishnu worship in Kamrupa is found in ‘*Badaganga Rock inscriptions*’ which is assigned to be of 554 AD. The worship of ten ‘avatars’ of Vishnu, with more emphasis on Krishna, was the notable feature of Vaishnavism. This cult evolved probably due to the preponderance of Brahmins who wanted to curb the liberalism in Siva worship which was popular among the non-Aryans. However due to its complex rituals and Brahmin dominance, Vaishnavism remained subdued till the time of King Dharampala (1200 AD), when it received royal patronage, probably, due to the debasement of Saktism from its fusion with esoteric Buddhism.

2.5 Neo-vaishnavism

Neo-Vaishnavism as a concept came about in the 16th century. Since the beginning of 13th century till 15th century, the kingdom of Assam was going through social and political instability and disintegrity due to conflicts between different ethnic groups. As such, a chaotic condition prevailed in the cultural and religious sphere too. Castism was at its peak with Brahmin dominance. While Shaktism and Tantricism were common religious faiths with loose adherence to Vaishnavism or Saivism; evil practices like human sacrifices, magical rites and witchery were also

widespread and the socio-economically backward classes became the victims of these.

Against this backdrop, Srimanta Sankaradeva appeared in the scene. A multi faceted genius, Srimanta Sankaradeva was born in the middle of the 15th century (1449–1568) at Bordowa in the present day Nagaon district of Assam. His father Kusumbar Siromoni Bhuyan was a landlord called 'Bhuyan' and belonged to the high non- Brahmin Hindu 'Kayastha' caste. After the death of his first wife, Srimanta Sankaradeva set out for a long pilgrimage in 1483 and came back to Assam in 1495. During this sojourn of twelve years in different vaishnava cultural centres, he was influenced by the ongoing wave of the *Vaishnava Bhakti movement* and after coming back to Assam propagated his Vaishnava school of thought, the '*Eka Sarana Naam Dharma*'. An example of *Dasya Bhakti* (serving God as a servant) with devotion to a single God-Lord Krishna or Vishnu (*Eka Sarana*), there is no place for Radha in this tradition. Though worship of Vishnu was already existent in Assam, the Vaishnavism introduced by Srimanta Sankaradeva brought significant changes to the society and affected almost all aspects of life in Assam. Thus this came to be known as "*Neo-Vaishnavism*". Traditions of Neo-Vaishnavism are maintained by the '*Sattras*' ('*Sattra*' in Sanskrit means a sacrifice that lasts for days to years or more). *Sattra* is centered with a prayer hall, called the '*Kirtan Ghar*' and the religious scriptures and teachings of *Ekasarana Dharma*.

The four fundamental elements of Neo-Vaishnavism were- *Deva (God)*, *Guru (Pereptor)*, *Bhakatas (Holi fraternity)* and the *Naam* (chanting the glories of god Vishnu); where the *Shravana* and *Kirtana* modes of *Bhakti* as prescribed by the *Bhagavata- Purana* was considered to be sufficient for the religious devotion. By taking *Sarana* (religious shelter) under a *Guru through* a simple procedure, anyone could enter the fold of Neo-Vaishnavism. Thus religion was made equally accessible to every one irrespective of caste, gender or social status.

During this Neo-Vaishnava movement, a new genre of philosophy, art and music was developed. Sankaradeva paved the way for *Ankiya Nat or Bhaona* (one act play centering on themes from the *Bhagavata-Purana* and the *Ramayana*), *Bargeet* (devotional songs heralding a new classical school of music) and the *Satriya Dance* (a kind of devotional dance conveying the principles of Ek-Sarana-Nam- dharma). While his epoch making drama- *Chihna Yatra*, enacted in 1468 AD, brought about a new era in the cultural history of

India being the first play in any modern Indian language; the *Satriya Dance* has been declared as one among eight principal *classical dances* of India. Sankaradeva himself and many of his followers enriched Assamese literature with a number of immortal literary creations.

After death of Srimanta Sankaradeva, the *Eksarana Naam Dharma* fissured into four orders or *Sanghatis* due to ideological differences. Sankaradeva handed down the leadership to his chief apostle *Madhabdeva*, but the followers of Damodardeva and Harideva, two Brahmin disciples of Sankaradeva, did not accept Madhabdeva as the Guru and formed their own group or sanghati, known as *Brahma sanghati*. On the other hand, Madhabdeva at the time of his death did not name a successor. As a result, after his death three of his followers formed their own denominations: *Purusa sanghati*, *Nika Sanghati* and *Kala sanghati*. They differ mostly in the emphasis of the four fundamental principles of Neo-Vaishnavism.

2.6 Other Hindu religious traditions

Among other ancient Hindu religious traditions, 'Sun worship' and 'Astrology' were also prevalent in Assam. The name 'Pragjyotishpura' itself may be connected to the practice of Astrology. The 18th Century '*Navagraha temple*' at Guwahati dedicated to the nine planets or *grahas* speaks about the volume of Astrological study in ancient Assam. Also in '*Sankhyagrihasangraha*' it is mentioned that Sri Surya Pahar in Goalpara district was a place for Sun Worship and centre for study of 'Jyotish Sastra' (Astrology). Ganesha worship was also quite popular in ancient Assam with sculptures of Ganesha seen in many ancient temples. However there was never a separate cult of Ganesha worship in Assam.

2.7 Buddhism

Though exact period when Buddhism entered Assam is not known, yet many Scholars believe that a *Buddhist Caitya* was erected in the site of *Hayagriva Madhaba temple* at present day Hajo in Kamarupa District at around 1st century AD under the initiative of the Buddhist Philosopher *Nagarjuna* who lived in Pragjyotishpura (100 AD). As such *Hayagriva Madhaba temple* is today recognized by Buddhist from Bhutan, Tibet and Southwestern China as a sacred place. There is a strong belief among the *Lamas* that *Padma- Sambhava*, the greatest founder of *Lamaism* died here. They believe that it was the *Buddhist Caitya*, which was later converted to the present Hindu

temple by Koch king Raghudevvarayana in 1583 AD. Chinese traveler *Huen Tsang* in his note mentioned that there existed Buddhist creed in Kamrupa during his visit (640 AD), who performed their acts of devotion in secret. There are some archeological remains in Surya Pahar of Goalpara district including some rock cut *Stupas*, which are attributed to the period around 300AD. From 7th Century onwards, in Kamrupa, there is convincing evidence of prevalence of *Vajrayana* or the Tantric Buddhism. However after the Brahmins counterpoised Sakta *Tantricism*, the distinction between the two creeds became diffuse and Tantric Buddhism waned off in time leaving behind a debased form of the cult.

At present the indigenous *Tai* tribes in Assam like *Tai Phake*, *Tai Aiton*, *Khamyang*, *Turung*, *Singpho* and *Khampti* are Buddhist by religion. They mainly inhabit *Upper Assam* and also Karbi Anglong. There is also a small *Bhutanese* and *Tibetan* population in Assam.

2.8 Islamism

The history of the indigenous Muslims of Assam is a long one. Though many details are obscure, the settlement of Muslims in the valley can be traced back to the 8th century AD.

Early Muslim settlers of Assam consisted of Turks who came to China from Turkistan, and of Arab traders, sailors, saints and travelers who visited Burma and the Gangetic valley of Bengal. The Turks had come to Assam through China crossing over the Himalayas and had settled in the Brahmaputra valley.

In 1345 AD, *Ibn Battuta*, a *Muslim Moroccan* explorer, travelled through Kamrupa and incorporated an account of the place in his travelogue, *Rihala*. He recorded that he saw people living in the Kamrupa Mountains who resembled Turks and were capable of hard work.

During 1204-1679 AD, Muslim rulers and governors of Bengal sent multiple expeditions to Assam. During this period, thousands of Muslim soldiers stayed back and settled down in different parts of Assam.

In the 16th century, the great Islamic saint, *Ajan Peer* or *Hazrat Shah Miran* came from *Baghdad* to Assam. He settled down in Sivasagar district of Assam and helped to reform, reinforce and stabilize *Islam* in the region, which was pre-existent but debased. *Ajan Peer* was probably the first person to spread the teachings of Hazarat Muhammed in Assam. He tried to infuse the spiritual and moral practices in the

Muslim Community by introducing the practice of 'Namaj' through invocation of 'Ajan'. Thus he became popular as "Ajan Peer". He is particularly known for his *Zikir and Zari*, two forms of popular devotional songs composed in local musical traditions and also for his hard work to unify the society. He is till date highly revered by both Muslims and Hindus in Assam. Under his influence, some local people also converted to Islam.

Poa-Mecca (literally means one-fourth of Mecca), standing on the top of *Gaurachal hill* at present day Hajo in Kamrup district, is one of the most famous ancient Muslim pilgrimage spot in Assam. Even the Hindus treat this equally sacred. *Poa-Mecca* is noted for the tomb of Iraqi Prince turned Preacher, *Peer Giasuddin Auliya*. It is flanked by a mosque built by *Sujauddin Mohammed Shah* in 1657 AD, during the reign of the Mughal Emperor *Shahjahan*. It is said that *Peer Aulia Giasuddin Sahab* bought 'one *powa*' (one fourth of a ser) of land from Holy *Mecca* to establish a mosque on the *Garudachala hills*.

In the early part of the 18th century, during the reign of Ahom king *Rudra Singha* also, some Muslim families proficient in different crafts and arts were invited from Delhi to reside in Assam and offer their services. In course of time, these families and their descendents became part of the Assamese society.

Though the Muslims of Assam maintained their religious identity, yet they assimilated fully with the Assamese culture in all aspects and became integral constituent of the greater Assamese society.

2.9 Sikhism

Assam came in contact with Sikhism after the first Guru of the Sikhs, *Guru Nanak Dev* visited the place in 1505 AD, as recorded in his *Purantan Janam Sakhi* (the historical papers related to the visits and daily activities of the Guru). *Guru Nanak* visited the *Kamakhya temple* and had met *Srimanta Shankardeva*, the founder of the Neo- Vaishnavism in Assam.

After *Guru Nanak*, the ninth Guru of Sikhs, *Guru Tegh Bahadur* was the next to come to Assam in 1668. He came with the invading Mughal forces of *Aurangzeb*, commanded by the *Raja Ram Singh*. *Guru Tegh Bahadur* with *Raja Ram Singh* reached *Rangamati* and then came to present *Dhubri district* of Assam, where the first *Gurudwara*, *Gurudwara Thara Sahib or Gurudwara Damdama Sahib* was established by the Mughal Shoulders in memory of the Sikh Guru.

The Sikhs however began to settle permanently only after the battle of *Hadirachawki*. In the year 1820,

around 500 Sikh soldiers came to Assam at the initiative of *Maharaja Ranjit Singh* to help *Ahom* king Chandra Kanta Singha in the war against the Burmese. After the battle the survivors settled down in Assam. Their descendants are now mostly concentrated in some areas of Nagaon district in Assam. Though they are maintaining their own religious belief, subsequently they merged with Assamese life and culture.

2.10 Christianity

Two Portuguese Jesuits, Fr. Cacella and Bro. Cabral reached Assam on their way to Tibet and China in 1626 AD. Subsequently American Baptists came to establish the foundation of Christianity in North East India. In the year 1819 AD the Baptist Missionary Society had translated and published the Bible into Assamese. In 1827 AD, an attempt was made to start a Baptist church in Guwahati, though it could not make much converts in the area. Later the *American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society* could make some headway in the region primarily amongst the tribals and socio-economically oppressed classes.

As of 1991, there were more Christians in Assam than in Mizoram even though Mizoram was the second most Christian state in India as per population density. According to the 2001 Census, there are a total of 986,589 Christians in Assam. Out of this, 291,000 (29.5%) are tribals.

2.11 Jainism

Though there is Archeological evidence of long history of Jainism in Assam, yet it could not make remarkable foothold in the region. There are two images in the caves of Sri Surya Pahar, Goalpara – one of *Risabhnatha* and another of *Lord Neminath*, indicates existence of Jainism in ancient Assam. Another figure carved at the hilltop is identified as *Adinath*. Remains of some inscriptions and rock carvings affiliated to Jainism are found in the place, which are assigned to the 9th century AD.

3. Current religious scenerio and its socio-political implication

From the above historical review it is seen that, though Hinduism was the single major religion in the ancient Assam, in the process of time it has become the meeting ground of diverse religions and cultures. Currently almost all the major religions of the world are practiced in Assam. According to the 2001 census, there were 17,296,455 *Hindus*, 8,240,611 *Muslims*, 9,86,589 *Christians*, 51,029 *Buddhists*, 23,957 *Jains*,

22,519 *Sikhs* and 22,999 belonging to other religious communities, which includes *Animism* and worship of nature in its various forms practiced by some tribes. Hindus being the majority of the population includes different disciplines or cults of Hinduism. Though Islam is the second largest religion of the state, a rapid growth rate in the Islamic population has been observed in the last century with a marginal increase in the Christian community. According to 2001 Sensus, the proportion of Muslim population in Assam is significantly higher than that of the country average and Assam occupies second position after Jammu and Kashmir in this regard. During 1951-2001 the Muslim population in Assam increased by 6 percent, whereas Hindu population declined by 7.2 percent. The percentage change of Christian and other religions during this period were +1.7% and -0.5% respectively. While analyzing the cause behind this religious demographic changes; sluggish economic development, controlled reproduction rate and to some extent ongoing fanatic activities may be considered responsible for the decline of Hindu population in the state.

On the other hand, while the reason behind growth of Christian population can be attributed to the intense movement of conversion towards Christianity, particularly among the socio-economically backward classes; the cause for the disproportionate growth in the Islamic population is rather more complex.

Looking back to the history, the Muslims of Assam can be divided roughly into four groups on the basis of period of migration. The first stream came to Assam during 800-1200 AD, the second stream came during 1200-1826 AD, the third stream came during 1826-1945 AD and the fourth group coming after independence till date. Most of the descendants of the Muslims who came to Assam prior to 1826 have adopted Assamese as their mother tongue and became integral part of the Assamese culture and society. Up to this period Muslim population growth was also in a controlled manner.

However, Muslim migration took a critical turn between 1826 and 1945. By this time the socio-economic situation of Assam was devastated due to civil war, Burmese invasions and natural calamities resulting in a decline in the indigenous population and there was shortage of work force. Taking this situation in view, the British administration had to bring laborers and farmers from other parts of India for agriculture and other development works. During this process a large number of Bengali Muslims came to Assam and

legally settled in different parts of the state.

In 1874, the Muslim population of Assam was 1,104,601. However, it increased to 3,441,554 in 1941. Some pro-Islamic political moves, like the All India Muslim League (AIML), played significant role in rapid growth of the Muslim population during this period.

The Muslim League wanted to increase the Muslim population in Assam by encouraging migration from Eastern Bengal with the purpose to improve its strength in the region for political reasons. In spite of the protest of Assam Congress leaders like Gopinath Bordoloi, Bishnuram Medhi etc., the AIML led government opened a flood gate for settlement of Muslims in Assam. During the period between 1939-1941, Saadullah Government allotted huge area of land in Assam for the settlement of East Bengal immigrants. Thus started a move and a problem that has continued in some form till today.

After the 1946 general election Gopinath Bordoloi headed the Congress government in Assam. He took a stand for eviction of the immigrants. However, the AIML Legislators' Convention held at Delhi in April 1946 strongly opposed plans for eviction of immigrant Muslims and rather demanded the inclusion of Assam in proposed East Pakistan on religion basis.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in his book, *'Myths of Independence'* wrote, "It would be wrong to think that Kashmir is the only dispute that divides India and Pakistan, though undoubtedly the most significant. One at least is nearly as important as the Kashmir dispute, that of Assam and some districts of India adjacent to East Pakistan. To these Pakistan has very good claims." Mujibur Rahman Khan, a journalist and Muslim league leader, also wrote in his book, *'Eastern Pakistan: Its Population, Delimitation and Economics'*, "Because

Eastern Pakistan must have sufficient land for its expansion and because Assam has abundant forests and mineral resources, coal, petroleum etc., Eastern Pakistan must include Assam to be financially and economically strong".

Thus due to its multiplying population in the absence of any move for population planning, present day Bangladesh government also carried forward the legacy of political expansionism in Assam by promoting infiltration. On the other hand, the Government of India also adopted a reluctant gesture in this matter. Rather many political parties have started taking advantage of this issue by trying to use this ever expanding population as their vote bank. Also, as these mostly illiterate, poor and hard working people are fulfilling the need of cheap laborers, the Industrial and Agricultural sectors are also encouraging their migration to some extent. As a result, immigration from Bangladesh continued unabated taking advantage of the porous riverine border between the two countries.

As per statistical analysis by B K Nath *et al.*, in their study *'The change of religion and Language Composition in the State of Assam in North East India,*, it is seen that, if the change of proportion of religious population in the last 30 years continues, then Hindu and other religions will become minority in the state in comparison to combined proportion of Muslim and Christian population after 2040.

While increase in Christianity is yet to pose threat to the social and cultural sphere, disproportionate rise in this immigrant Muslim population has already become a problem to the culture and integrity of the state. One such emerging problem is the Sattra land encroachment.

Table 1 : Percentage of population of different religion

Religion in Assam	Assam (Percent)	India (Percent)
Hinduism	64.9	80.5
Islam	30.9	13.4
Christianity	3.7	2.3
Others	0.45	3.8

Source: Census-2001

According to a report by the *Sattra Study committee of Northeast Policy Institute (NPI)*, altogether 5,548 bighas of land belonging to 26 Satra Institutions of Assam are under occupation of Illegal migrants.

Another report by the *Assam Sattra Mahasabha*, the apex body of the State's Sattra Institutions, has shown that around 7,000 bighas of land belonging to 32 Sattra Institutions of Assam under the illegal occupation of

illegal Muslim settlers originating from Bangladesh.

On the other hand, many Muslim organizations formed with the support of immigrant Muslims have been unified to encroach economic, political and demographical power from the indigeneous people. This 'neo-Islamic' invasion has led to a fear among the indigenous people of becoming minority in their homeland. One of the history's worst violence prompted by such tension erupted during a controversial election in February 1983. Nearly 3000 people died in that episode. The indigenous people of Assam opposed the election considering that electoral rolls were full of foreign infiltrators. In subsequent periods, again in October 2008 violence in Udalguri and Goalpara districts between the Bodo Community and the Muslims and similar incidence in July, 2012 in *Bodoland* Territorial Administered Districts (BTAD) of Assam are some examples of such social fears resulting in loss of lives and property. Though these were primarily ethnic clashes, yet the role of immigration cannot be denied. Rather many fundamentalist political and religious leaders have given this a religious touch making it an issue between Hindus

and Muslims in Assam. As a result there were incidents of attacks on Hindus not only from Assam, but from the whole North East in different parts of the country.

The former Governor of Assam Lt. (Rtd.) S K Sinha has expressed grave concern over the issue of immigration from Bangladesh to Assam. He has submitted a report to the President of India in Nov. 1998 with details of the problem. The statistics provided in his report gave a shocking but true snapshot of the demographic invasion that is going on in Assam. It has shown that 57 of Assam's 126 constituencies were found to have more than 20 per cent increase in the number of voters between 1994 and 1997 whereas the all-India average is just 7.4 per cent. Muslim population in Assam has shown a rise of 77.42 per cent over what it was in 1971. It has been found that four districts in the state (Dhubri, Goalpara, Barpeta and Hailakandi) are already Muslim-majority whereas three more are fast approaching that stage. At the time of Independence, only Dhubri was a Muslim-majority district. And even by very conservative estimates, at least 1.5 million illegal Bangladeshi immigrants are said to be living in the state of Assam.

Table 2 : Hindu- Muslim growth pattern

Year	Assam (percentage)		All India (percentage)	
	Hindus	Muslims	Hindus	Muslims
1951-1961	33.71	38.35	20.29	25.61
1961-1971	37.17	30.99	23.72	30.85
1971-1991	41.89	77.42	48.38	55.04

The problem of this infiltration is depicted in the report as -"this silent and invidious demographic invasion of Assam may result in the loss of the geostrategically vital districts of Lower Assam. The influx of these illegal migrants is turning these districts into a Muslim majority region. It will then only be a matter of time when a demand for their merger with Bangladesh may be made. The rapid growth of international Islamic fundamentalism may provide the driving force for this demand."

The Government of India, though on many occasions accepted the harshness of the situation, yet has not dared to take visibly firm step due of complex political scenario of the region.

4. Conclusion

Religion is considered an organized approach for

leading a peaceful and harmonious life, and an integral part necessary for development of the society. From ancient history, being a confluence of mixture of different cultures and religions, people of Assam are always tolerant and open minded to other cultures and religions. Despite differences in religious faiths and beliefs of different communities of the region, all the people within the state are living a harmonious life with each other. Every festival, whether it is Durga Puja, Id-ul-Fitr or Christmas, is celebrated by all with equal zeal and fervor. *Zikir and Zari* of Azan Fakir are equally honored as that of *Bargeet* of Sankaradeva by both Hindus and Muslims of the state. But in the face of rapidly increasing population, changing demographic pattern, competition for land & livelihood and sprouting communal & political forces; situation in Assam has changed in the recent past. There is increasing disrespect

and disbelief among different communities of the state leading to periodic eruption of violence and blood - shed. Once harmonious and peace loving society has now become a 'tinder-box'!

It is worth remembering the well known proverb- "History repeats itself, and every time it repeats, the price goes up". Crisis of Neo-Vaishnavism once led the 600 year old Ahom rule to its end as a result of civil war. The result of this had to be born by the people of Assam during the rebellion and in the subsequent periods of Burmese invasion and also during British

rule. The similar history may repeat in near future- the price of which will have to be born by the common people of Assam. Understanding the sensitivity and vulnerability of the situation, it is necessary for everyone irrespective of individual belief to accept the truth and discard all communal and political thoughts. Also, Assam being in strategic location from the point of country's security and integrity, the government and all other political parties should visualize the complexity of the situation and come forward with utmost sincerity to solve the issue before it goes beyond control.

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