



## SOCIO-CULTURAL PROFILE OF THE BENGALI MUSLIM AND THE MEITEI POPULATION LIVING IN TWO NEIGHBOURING VILLAGES OF CACHAR DISTRICT OF ASSAM, INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

*Present study is an attempt to understand the socio-cultural life of the Bengali Muslims and the Meiteis living in two neighbouring villages of Cachar district in Assam, India. Observation as well as interview method was followed in the present study. The study reveals that although both the Bengali Muslims and the Meiteis living in close geographical proximity, they exhibit wide differences than similarities in socio-cultural characteristics which may be due to their distinct bio-cultural identity.*

**KEYWORDS:** Bengali Muslim, Meitei, Cachar, Field work, Socio-cultural, etc.

### INTRODUCTION

Assam, a state of India is inhabited by numerous endogamous communities of diverse ethnic and socio-cultural setting. The field science, anthropology known as the science of human being, includes the physical characters and diversity of form, social organization, kinship system, marriage, religion, agriculture, material culture, etc. in short any subject related to man is the concern of anthropology. To know the way people behave one must have to study their society in site. The field investigation makes a firm impression in the minds of field workers about the various aspects of culture of the people in which the investigation is done. It bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical experience (Barbhuiya & Deori, 2012).

Cachar district is one of the largest districts of Assam covers an area of 3786 sq.km and lies between 90°4'E and 93°15'E latitude and 24°22'N and 25°8'N longitude (Srivastava et al., 2010). Cachar is considered as a plain district but a number of hills spread across and surrounding the district. It is one of the most economically backward districts of India which is largely due to geographical barrier with the rest of the country. The district has a population of 1,736,319 with a sex ratio of 958 females per 1000 males and a literacy rate of 80.36% ("District Census," 2011). Bengali is the official language in the district with majority of the people primarily speak in Sylheti (a dialect) for communication. There are different communities inhabiting in the district like Bengali Hindu, Bengali Muslim, Meitei, Brishnupriya, Dimasa Kachari (Burmans of Cachar), Rongmei Naga, Hmar, Khasi, etc (Barbhuiya & Das, 2013; Barbhuiya et al., 2016).

### OBJECTIVE

The main objective of the present study is to understand the socio-cultural life of the Bengali Muslim and the Meitei community living in two neighbouring villages of Cachar district of Assam, India.

## METHODOLOGY

The present study was carried out among the Bengali Muslims and the Meiteis of Cachar District in Assam living in two neighbouring villages like Bhaurikandi Part-II and Dakshin Mohanpur Part-V respectively. The data for the study was collected by following observation and interview method.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### A. The Village

#### a. Name and Location of the villages

The present study was done among the Bengali Muslims of Bhaurikandi Part-II and the Meiteis of Dakshin Mohanpur Part-V of Sonai Block of Cachar District, Assam. The villages fall under the jurisdiction of Kochudaram Police station of Sonai constituency in Cachar District of Assam. Both the villages are situated about 25 to 27 kilometers away from Silchar town (district headquarter) in the south-eastern direction.

The village Bhaurikandi Part-II is bounded by village Bhaurikandi Part-I, Dakshin Mohanpur Part-V, Kochudaram Part-IV and Bidruhipar respectively from north, east, south and west side respectively whereas village Dakshin Mohanpur Part-VIII, Kochudaram Part-II, Kochudaram Part-IV and both Bhaurikandi Part-I and Bhaurikandi Part-II have bordered the village Dakshin Mohanpur Part-V from northern, eastern, southern and western side respectively.

#### b. Climate, Flora and Fauna

The climate is tropical with hot and wet summer and cool winter which is more or less similar to those of the plain areas of other parts of Assam. The rainfall of the area is average or medium like the whole district. All the villages are full of floras and faunas. Apart from different wild species of trees and herbs in the village surroundings, every house has plenty of trees which include mango, jackfruit, coconut, jujube, different types of bamboo, margosa, betel nut, olive, etc. Besides, different domesticated animals like cat, dog, buffalo, cow, bull, goat, pigeon, hen, duck, etc. the fauna of the villages includes different species of snake, lizard, mouse, fowl and different types of birds.

#### c. Communication

Silchar to Aizwal National Highway (54 No.) passes through Kabuganj junction from where district roads connected the villages to the capital of the district (Silchar). The villages are communicated to Silchar town through public bus, cruiser, truck, etc. while for short distance journey auto-rickshaw, maruti-van, etc. are easily available. Apart from that some of villagers have motor-cycle, bi-cycle, etc. The impact of modern science and technology are quite visible as most of the houses have wireless mobile connection facility which makes them easier to communicate with each other. Some of the houses of both the villages have television also.

#### d. Institution and Organization

There are two lower primary schools and one upper primary school in Bhaurikandi Part-II village whereas there are two lower primary schools in Dakshin Mohanpur Part-V village. For further studies the students of the two villages go to nearby Ramdulal Roy H.S. School or Laxmi Charan Jagat Charan H.S. School. For further higher studies they go to Janata College, Kabuganj or Madhab Chandra Das College, Sonai which are approximately 6 to 8 km away from the villages.

There are three mosques in Bhaurikandi Part-II village. There are burial grounds near each mosque but at a separate place of Bhaurikandi Part-II village. There are four temples in Dakshin Mohanpur Part-V village. Apart from these almost all the Meitei houses of Dakshin Mohanpur Part-V village have their own places of worship. There is a cremation ground at the northern side of the village Dakshin Mohanpur Part-V.

### e. Market Place

Hathikhali Bazar is the main market place for Bhaurikandi Part-II village whereas Kochudaram Bazar is the main market place for the people of Dakshin Mohanpur Part-V village. There are permanent shops and business establishments dealing with cloths, grocery, hardware, stationery, medicine, electrical items, etc. in the above mentioned markets. The markets attract lots of traders mostly people from neighbourhood in all the days of a week especially on Sunday. The villagers used to sell their produces and purchase different items of necessity during evening hours of the market.

### f. Settlement Pattern and House Type

The house types that are present in both the villages are predominantly Assam type i.e. brick or bamboo wall with *tin* or C.I. sheet. The houses are arranged in linear pattern, i.e. by both the sides of the village lane and bye-lanes. The materials used for constructing houses are bamboo, wood, thatch, stone, sand, rod, brick, C.I. sheet etc. Most of the Bengali Muslim houses consist of two living rooms with an attached kitchen and a granary along with poultry pen at the backside of the living rooms. Majority of the Meitei houses consist of two to three rooms having an attached or separate kitchen and a granary at one side. Cowshed is prepared separately in all the villages of both the communities. It is noteworthy to mention that in almost all the Meitei houses are having a separate big room open from all sides which is generally utilized for welcoming general guests or for meeting purposes. There is enough open space in front of the houses as well as the houses are well ventilated having sufficient number of windows or doors.

### g. Source and Treatment of Drinking Water

The main source of drinking water is the water supplied by state public health and engineering department (PHED) in both the villages but some villagers use to drink water from pond and dug well also. Pond is extensively used for bathing, washing, etc. by all the villagers. Most of the Muslims drink normal or raw water i.e. drink water (as come from the source) without any treatment. But some of the Muslims also prefer to drink boiled or filtrate water. Whereas majority of the Meiteis prefer to use boiled or filtrate water for drinking. But some of the Meiteis also drink normal or raw water.

### h. Sanitation and Electrification

Although drainage system in both the villages is not so good but house sewage naturally flow towards low land as almost all the houses are prepared in a comparatively high land. The pit latrine is predominantly observed in both the village but there are a few sanitary latrines especially in Dakshin Mohanpur Part-V village. Latrines are prepared at one side of the house compound, generally seen in the backyards. Electricity facility is available in majority of the houses of both the villages but electrification is comparatively better in Dakshin Mohanpur Part-V village. Firewood is the primary source for cooking in both the villages but some of the houses of both the communities especially Meiteis also use LPG (Liquid Petroleum gas) for cooking.

## B. The People

### a. A brief note History and Identity of the People

Geographically Cachar district is located in the southernmost part of Assam. There are different endogamous communities inhabiting the district such as Bengali Hindu, Bengali Muslim, Meitei, Brishnupriya, Dimasa Kachari, Hmar, Khasi, etc. The people inhabiting in Barak valley (which includes Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi district) are primarily known as *Sylheti Bengali* (*sylheti*, a dialect) who mainly follow either Islam or Hinduism. The valley has a long history of Islam as half of the valley came under the rule of the Turk-Afghan dynasties of Bengal from the early 14th century and continued with the establishment of the Mughal Empire ("Cachar district," n.d.; Saikia, 2004). Meitei people got its introduction to the valley from the early part of nineteenth century when its princes made Cachar a springboard for the reinvasion of the territory after being displaced from Meitrabak, modern Manipur ("Cachar district," n.d.).

Linguistically the Bengali Muslims belong to the Indo-European ethnic group of Caucasoid racial stock while the Meiteis belong to the Tibeto-Burman ethnic group of Mongoloid racial stock (Basu, et al., 2005).

#### **b. Dialect or Language**

The Bengali Muslims of Bhaurikandi Part-II village speak in Sylheti Bengali (a dialect). The Meiteis of Dakhsin Mohanpur Part-V village speak in Manipuri language. Both the communities speak in Sylheti Bengali while dealing with others.

#### **b. Religion**

The Muslims and the Meiteis of the two villages belong to two different religions such as Islam and Hinduism respectively. The Muslims of Bhaurikandi Part-II village belong to Sunni sect of Islam while the Meiteis of Dakhsin Mohanpur Part-V village follow *Gorio Baishnab Dharma*, a sect of Hinduism (Barbhuiya, 2017; Barbhuiya & Das, 2013). The important religious festivals of the Muslims are Eid-ul-fitar, Eid-uz-zuha, Moharram, Sobe-kodor, Sobe-borat, etc. while important religious festivals of the Meiteis are Jonmastomi, Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Shivaratri, etc.

#### **c. Family System and Inheritance Pattern**

The Bengali Muslims of Bhaurikandi Part-II village and the Meiteis of Dakhsin Mohanpur Part-V village of Cachar follow the patriarchal system of family structure, where property is inherited through male lines (Barbhuiya & Das, 2013; Barbhuiya et al., 2016). In decision making process the head (elderly aged male) or principal male earner of the family plays an important role in both the communities. Although other adult members including women participate in decision making process in both the communities yet Meitei females enjoy better social status in comparison to Muslim females. Although both nuclear and joint families are present in both the communities but nuclear families are more common among the Muslims.

#### **d. Marriage System**

Monogamy is the prevalent form of marriage among the Muslims and the Meiteis of the area. But polygamy is not totally wiped out among the Muslims. Although marriage by negotiation is the prevailing practice in both the communities but elopement marriage is also observed especially among the Meiteis (Barbhuiya & Das, 2013). The Muslims of the area follow community endogamy but a form of Hindu caste system is visible among the Muslims of the area as someone doesn't like to marry a person of other class (generally very strictly followed). Although consanguineous marriage has lost the depth of preference but consanguinity (marriage between blood relatives) is still practiced by the Muslims of the area. On the other hand, the Meiteis of the area follow community endogamy and clan exogamy. Consanguineous marriage is strictly prohibited but it is not so rigid like the Bengali Hindus of the area.

#### **e. Dress and Ornaments**

Important dress items of the Muslims of the area includes *Shirt, genji* (T-shirt), *pant, lungi, punjabi, pajama, sharee, blouse, peticot, chador, salowar, kamiz, frock*, etc. Elderly Muslim males generally wear *punjabi* and *lungi* or *pajama* while other adult males wear *shirt* and *lungi* or *pant* but young boys prefer to wear *shirt* or *T-shirt* and *pant*. In special occasions like religious festivals or marriage the male members especially the elders wear white coloured dresses. It is very easy to differentiate between a married and an unmarried Muslim girl of same age simply by observing dress pattern as an unmarried girl used to wear *salowar* and *kamiz* while *saaree, blouse, etc.* are the dress of a married woman. Young girls used to wear *T-shirt, skirt* or *frocks*. Widows wear white coloured *saree* while all the women wear *chador* when move outside. Some married women also wear *burkha* (a dress which covered all body parts except eyes). Muslim women are very fond of gold ornaments which include bangles, ear-ring, nose ring, finger-ring, neck chain, etc. For everyday use they generally wear silver ornaments or imitation items available in the market.

*Kurta, dhoti, gamocha, blouse, innaphi, phanek*, etc. are the main dress items of the Meiteis of the area. On the occasion of marriage the bride wears *innaphi* and a special rounded dress (cylindrical skirt) at the lower abdominal portion known as *potloi* while groom wears *kurta* and *dhoti*. The Meitei women are also fond of gold ornaments which include bangles, ear-ring, finger-ring, neck chain, etc. Sometimes they wear silver ornaments or items available in the market in general use. A married woman used to put vermilion, *moibung khuji* (*shonko chudi* or bangles) and full *chondon* (sandal) mark in the nose which differentiates her from unmarried one.

#### f. Economy

Agriculture is the main stay of livelihood for both the Muslims and the Meiteis (Barbhuiya, 2017; Barbhuiya & Das, 2013). In both the communities, although a number of peoples are engaged in different occupations but almost every household has one type or two type of wet cultivation such as *Aush* (Ahu-April/May to July/August) and *Hail* (Sali- May/June to November/December).

Most of the Muslim males are engaged in cultivation while others are engaged as mason, carpentry, driving, wage labour, business, service (both government and private sector), etc. Muslim females are mostly concerned with household activities but few Muslim females also help in agricultural activities or business of their male counterparts. Although most of the Meitei males are engaged in cultivation but sizeable Meitei males are engaged in service (both government and private sector) and business. Apart from household activities some of the Meitei females are either fully engaged in business or help their male counterparts. Most of the Meitei females know the art of weaving which they utilize for personal use but very few females used to sell the clothes too.

#### g. Dietary Habit

Rice is the staple food of both the communities (Barbhuiya & Das, 2013; Barbhuiya et al., 2016). The Muslims are generally non-vegetarian while most of the Meiteis are vegetarian. Two major meals such as lunch and dinner are normally taken by villagers but those who are engaged in cultivation generally take three major meals. The villagers used to take either milk tea or red tea along with snacks or home-made items in breakfast. The staple food rice is boiled and eaten with soupy preparations of different leafy vegetables, leaves, etc. by both the communities. Meiteis used to take much spices and oil compared to Muslims while chilly is taken very often especially by the Meiteis. Pulse is frequently taken by both the communities. Meat (Beef, chicken, mutton), egg, dry fish etc. are occasionally taken by the Muslims but fish is an integral component of their meal while fish, dry fish, egg, etc. are frequently taken by the non-vegetarian Meiteis. The habit of chewing betel nut and betel leaf is very much common especially among the Muslims.

#### CONCLUSION

The study reveals that the Bengali Muslims of Bhaurikandi Part-II village follow Sunni sect of Islam whereas the Meiteis of Dakshin Mohanpur Part-V village follow Gorio Baishnab Dharma, a sect of Hinduism. Bengali Muslims speak in Sylheti Bengali while Meiteis speak in Manipuri. Family structure in both the communities is patrilineal in nature but the status of woman is comparatively better among the Meiteis. Nuclear families are more common among the Muslims whereas joint families are more common among the Meiteis. Although monogamy is practiced by both the communities but polygamy is not totally wiped out among the Muslims. Both the communities follow community endogamy but Meiteis also follow clan exogamy. Consanguineous marriage is preferred among the Muslims but it is strictly prohibited among the Meiteis. Both the communities exhibit differences in dress habits and wearing ornaments. Rice is the staple food and agriculture is the mainstay of livelihood in both the communities. Although most of the males in both the communities are engaged in cultivation but sizeable Muslim males are engaged in skill works like mason, carpentry and driving against engagement of sizeable Meitei males in either government or private service which may make the Meitei community economically sound in comparison to the Muslims. The

Muslims are generally non-vegetarian while most of the Meiteis are vegetarian. So the study discloses that although both the Bengali Muslims and the Meiteis living in close geographical proximity, they exhibit wide differences in socio-cultural characteristics than similarities which may be due to their distinct bio-cultural identity.

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