

The Mahimal Community of Sylhet-Cachar Region: A Historical Study with Special Reference to the Regional Ecology

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Abstract:

The Sylhet-Cachar region was characterized by the presence of large numbers of flowing rivers along with their tributaries formed the vast alluvial plain. The heavy seasonal rainfall (about 4,000 mm.), and flowing rivers from the neighbouring hills caused severe annual flood. The rivers and large numbers of *hawars*, *beels*, lakes and vast wet lands were abundant with palatable fish. The primitive communities like *Nishadas* were perhaps among the first settlers in the region. With the passage of time, sedentary agriculture developed based on wet rice cultivation, but a section of people remained dependent on fishing and hunting. Therefore, since the time immemorial, along with the cultivating communities, large numbers of fishing communities constitute the population of the region. The Mahimals or Muslim fisherman caste, an inland fishing community, was a dominant Muslim group, mainly converts from Hindu fishing and boating castes such as Kaiberta, Patini and Namasudra. They constituted a sizeable segment of population in the region. A historical study of the Mahimal community may provide interesting insight into the issue of conversion to Islam, emergence of social stratification and caste among Muslims in the region.

Key words: *Nishadas*, *haors*, *anuwa*, *beel*, Aryanization, *nauka puja*, *Khanquah*,

Methodology: Descriptive and analytical

Introduction:

The lower valley of the Barak and the Surma rivers consist of Sylhet, a vast alluvial plain bounded in north and south by hills, and opening west towards the delta of lower Bengal.

¹ The greater Sylhet region or Sylhet division at present constitutes Sylhet, Sunamganj, Habiganj and Moulvibazar districts of Bangladesh. It was a district of the province of Assam during colonial period. The area was bounded by the hills of Meghalaya and Tripura in its northern side while eastern border was without any natural barrier with Cachar plain. It formed

the north-eastern part of the territory of Bangladesh, homeland of a distinct group of *Banglee* speaking a local Bengali dialect called *Sylheti*. Cachar plain on the other hand formed erstwhile Cachar district of southern Assam at present comprise Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj district of Assam adjoining the Sylhet region. (Karimganj had been a part of Sylhet district during pre-partition period and formed a part of Cachar after partition) Absence of any natural barrier between the Sylhet and Cachar region resulted in the wave of migration of people from Bengal towards Cachar. The principal river Barak flowing across the area, hence, came to be known as Barak Valley was culturally, geographically and ethnically an extension of Bengal. The *Bengalees* speaking a local Bengali dialect called '*Sylheti*' pre-dominated in the entire region. Geographically and ecologically, therefore, the Sylhet-Cachar region had unique characteristics leading to the growth of distinct social and cultural life.

The advent of Islam in Sylhet, following the coming of famous Sufi Saint Shaikh Shah Jalal (d.1346 C.E.) resulted in the large scale conversion to Islam, among other, by the despised section of the of the society in order to get rid of inequality and injustice. But Islam could not prove to be religion of social liberation for them rather pre-existing social stratification was further proliferated along with the emergence of Muslim caste groups, Mahimal among others on the basis of occupational specialization and elaborate practice of endogamy.

Ecology and Geography of Sylhet-Cachar Region:

The Sylhet division of Bangladesh with its hills and basin constitutes one of the most distinctive regions of Bangladesh. It formed the north-eastern part of the territory of Bangladesh. It was flanked by the Indian state Meghalaya in the north, Assam in the east, Tripura in the south and Bangladesh district of Netrokona, Kishoreganj and Brahmanbaria in the west. It covers an area of 12, 569 Sq. Km. The area experiences predominantly hot and humid summer having high rainfall during June to September (about 4, 000 mm.) and relatively cold winter. The region has distinct landforms such as eroded hills, alluvial hills, alluvial fan and basin plain. At the centre, there was a vast low laying flood plain of recent origin with saucer shaped depression or swamps locally called *haors* (a corrupt of *Sagar* or sea). ² Available limestone deposits and discovery of sea shell in different parts of the region suggests that the whole area was under sea in the remote past. ³

The Sylhet region lying in the foot hill of Meghalaya had its deep impacts on the ecology of the region. The heavy rainfall in the hill caused huge flow of water towards the plain of the regions. The principal river Surma and Kushiya, originating from river Barak in association with other minor hilly stream like Manu, Khowai, Jadukata, Mogra, Mahadao, Lubha forms the dense drainage network primarily responsible for developing low flood plains in Sylhet. The flood plain remained deeply flooded for about 7-8 months. During the rainy season, the *haors* turn into a vast sea, the villages appearing as islands.⁴ There were other water bodies such as lakes or horse shoe lakes or abandoned parts of rivers locally known as *anuwa* and *beels*, permanent water bodies within the swamps. There were 35 big and 475 small *haors* in the greater Sylhet region covering an area of about 6,000 Sq. Km.⁵ The most important *haors* were SaneerHars, hail haor, Hakaluki hoar, Maker hoar, Chayer hoar and Tengua hoar. *Hoar* was a Bengali corrupt of *sagar* or sea. Sylhet was country comprises both hillocks and *haors* and *beels*. Hoar was a saucer shaped shallow depression or a bowl of wetland ecosystem. The large areas of seasonally cultivated plain include variety of wetland habitat, rivers, tributaries, irrigation canals, *beels* and *haors*. The permanent water bodies within *haors* were called *beels*. During the summer the low land of Sylhet took the shape of a sea.⁶ W W Hunter in his account describes Sylhet in the following words, “ During rainy season from about June to October - the torrent that pour down in the cataract from hills, together with the heavy local rainfall, converts the entire surface into boundless sea of waters, amid which the raised village site appears as islands and the only means of communication was by boat...The bank of the rivers, as was the case in all alluvial tracts, are raised by the annual flood deposits to a higher level than that of the surrounding country. The low strips behind the banks were every year subject to a protracted flood and was usually covered merely with reed and grass. Another portion was only liable to slight or occasional inundation and here the village are built on higher spots. While the rest, which was very fertile, was under continuous rice cultivation.”⁷ Robert Lindsay in his autobiography writes that on entering Sylhet, he went across a *haor*, which was not less than one hundred miles, where he had to use sea compass and telescope to find way.⁸ Colonel Bruce, the Inspector General of police in India in 1864 writes that there was flawless flood during summer months and the chief means of communication were boats even in dry season. He further states that the population generally were of aquatic in habit and almost everyone understood more or less the managements of boats.⁹ It was due to the ecological background that along with the presence of pre-dominant fishing communities, boating and boat making was also excelled in the region. Lindsay in his autobiography mentioned that they became sophisticated boat builder with fineness and

consequently enabled them to build the ships of burthen.¹⁰ A ceremony called *Nouka Puja* or boat worship was performed by the people.¹¹ The fishing and hunting castes also acquired the art of converting fish into dry fish, when the catch was excess, they preserved it in the form of dry fish. The dry fish called *Sutkii* and a processed dry fish called *Shidal* has been very much popular among the people of Sylhet-Cachar region

The Cachar plain or Barak valley constitutes the southern Assam districts of Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj (the later has been a part of Sylhet district pre-partition period and formed a part of Cachar after partition) bordering Sylhet. The Cachar plain was surrounded by the hills of Mizoram, Manipur, Meghalaya and North-Cachar in its three sides while the western

Table 1: Distribution of small *Haors* in the Sylhet region

No	Name of District	Total Nos of <i>Haors</i>
1	Sylhet	162
2	Sunamganj	207
3	Moulavibazar	62
4	Habiganj	44
5	Total Nos of <i>Haors</i>	475

Source: Mohd. Samsul Alam et al., Sylhet and its Evolving Geographical Environment.

Western part of the valley bordering Sylhet was without any natural barrier covering 6941.2 sq. k.m. The valley of Barak was dotted with hollows, *beels* and swamps. The valley reared fertility and the *beels* abounded with palatable fish. But the unhealthy climate, devastating flood and frequent raids by the hill tribes were mainly responsible for scanty human settlement during the medieval period.¹² But the absence of any natural barrier towards the Sylhet frontier allowed large scale migration of people from Bengal, Sylhet being the nearest, during pre-colonial and colonial period.

The Cachar plain was watered by principal river Barak and numbers of hilly streams causing severe seasonal flood inundating whole valley along with the *haors* and *beels*. An illustration of famous Chatla fan was given by W.W. Hunter in his account.¹³ Besides the *haors*, there were innumerable *beels* and lakes (horse shoe lakes or abandoned parts of the rivers) served as the source of abundant fish. It was due to this factor that many fishing and

boating castes migrated from the neighbouring districts of Bengal during pre-colonial and colonial period. There were eight big *haors* in Cachar plain, besides Chatla fan, covering a vast area.

Table 2 : List of *Haors* in Cachar plain

No	Name of <i>Haors</i>	Area in Sq. miles
1	Chatla Fan	About 24 sq. miles
2	BakriHaor	10 sq. miles
3	BowaliaHaor	6 sq. miles
4	Dubri Hoar	1 sq. miles
5	Puma beel	2 sq. miles
6	Thapanihaor	4 sq. miles
7	Koyabeel	1 sq. miles
8	Karkari	0.5 sq miles
9	Kalong	6 sq. miles

Source: WW Hunter, A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol. II

Present Karimganj district has been a part of Sylhet during pre-partition period and formed a part of Cachar district during the post independent period, had also numbers of *haors*, *beels* and lakes that experience severe flood during long rainy season with numbers of flowing rivers and their tributaries. The most prominent hoar, among others is San *beel*, the largest wetland in Assam covering an area of about 48.75 sq. Km. and played a very significant role in the regional ecology.

The geographical, ecological and ethnic nature of the both Sylhet and Cachar was characterized by remarkable uniformity. The Barak plain was a natural extension of the Bengal plain.¹⁴ Srihatta or Sylhet in ancient time, perhaps denoted the territory now covered in the Sylhet districts of Bangladesh, Karimganj, Hailakandi and Cachar districts of Assam (India) and the adjoining Kailashar-Dharmanagar areas of Tripura (India). It was a single valley formed by the river Barak and its branches, viz, Surma and Kushiara, with uniform physical features that make it a distinct geographical division and the homeland of a homogenous group of people speaking a common Bengali dialect called Sylheti... Srihatta in ancient times must

have been the common nomenclature for the entire Barak-Surma Valley.¹⁵ The ecology of the Sylhet-Cachar region shaped the socio-cultural life of the people leading to the growth of wet rice cultivation and fishing and hunting along with boating developed as the chief occupation of the bulk of the population. The occupation of fishing was one of the most widespread professions perused by a large segment of people in the region.

Social Development:

It was opined by the scholars that in the ancient period, Austric speaking people belonging to the Proto-Australoid racial types- popularly known as *Nishadas* were perhaps among the first settlers in the plains and swampy low-land of the Sylhet-Cachar region and other parts of Bengal. These early settlers though introduced primitive agriculture, some among them remained dependent on gathering of food, hunting and fishing.¹⁶ The people were mostly settled in raised riverbank but gradually extended their settlements in the marshy forested land leading to the extension of agriculture. Therefore cultivation and fishing remained the principal occupation of the people of this region. Along with the agrarian communities, the fishing and boating castes constituted the sizeable segments of the population that were settled in the area since the unknown period of history. The census of 1872 reveals that there were a good numbers of fishermen Castes with sizable segments of population both among the Hindus and Muslims.

Table 3: List of Hindu Fishing and boating castes in Sylhet in 1872

No	Name of Castes	Occupations	No of population
1	Gonri	Harpoon Fisherman	18
2	Jaliya	Fisherman	5,652
3	Jhal	A sub-division of foregoing	4230
4	Machua	Fisherman	37
5	Mala	Fisherman and Boatman	1,290
6	Patuni	Fisherman and ferry keepers	41,855
7	Pod	Fisherman	147
8	Tior	Fisherman	772
9	Pundari	Sellers of fish and	91

		vegetables	
10	Chandals	Fisherman, cultivators and labourers	117, 457
11	Dom	Fisherman and mat makers	35,528
12	Koch	Fisherman and cultivators	5
13	Kaiberta	Fisherman and cultivators	134, 523
14			

Source, WW Hunter, A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol. II

From sixth century onwards, Brahminical influence began to strengthen in the social sphere with emergence of rigid caste based social differentiation. The fishing, hunting and boating occupation were considered as low. The occupational castes were assigned a low social status including fishermen. “The occupation of a fisherman was lower throughout Bangladesh.”

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The issue of Caste and conversion to Islam:

The event of Muslim conquest of Bengal, followed by the conquest of Gour by Mohammad Bakhtiyar Khilji with 18 horsemen inaugurated an era lasting over five centuries. In course of that period, eastern Bengal region emerged as an area where majority of the indigenous population adopted the religion of ruling class. Today, *Bengalees* constitutes the second largest Muslim ethnic population in the world after the Arabs. After the Mohammadan conquest of Bengal, Islam found easy converts from among the Buddhist and other low caste Sudras as a result of strict enforcement of Brahminical rule of caste rigidities. The issue of conversion to Islam in India has been a significant question in the history and was examined by many scholars in different ways. The approaches to study of conversions to Islam in India were examined in terms of elaborate theories. One such popular theory was the theory of ‘Blood and Sword’ which upheld that Islam in India was spread by the invading armies with the help of force of sword. But such theory cannot be accepted as realistic because of the fact that even after the Muslim rule for more than five centuries, India predominantly remained as a Hindu country with considerably little Muslim population at the heartland of Muslim rule. Another theory suggests that Islam in India was accepted by the people for political patronage and material gain. Such explanation had its relevance in very limited occasion. Other theories such as Religion of Social liberation and Holy man Theory had their greater relevance in the

conversion to Islam in India. According to the former, Islam was embraced by the Indian in order to get rid of social inequality and injustice and Brahminical oppression under caste ridden Hindu social order and the latter suggests that the Islam in India was spread and propagated by the Sufis. The Brahminical oppression and social inequality and injustice was obvious and the role played by the Sufis to spread the message of equality and brotherhood enshrined in holy Qur'an that attracted the non-Muslims particularly the low castes to free themselves from century old social slavery. But Brahminical oppression was an all India phenomenon and there were sufficient evidences that former Hindu castes after embracing Islam remained despised and discriminated, and above all, the theory failed to explain the large scale conversion that took place in Bengal hinterland and western Punjab.¹⁸

Richard M Eaton (1994 C.E.) examined the spread of Islam in Bengal in terms of his 'Frontier Theory' and the process that followed the acceptance of Islam by the overwhelming majority of the people of eastern Bengal was Islamic Proselytization, which was not intended to the spread of Islam rather associated with the extension of agriculture in the hitherto uncultivated forested hinterland leading to the emergence of agrarian village community. According to this, certain pre-existing frontiers were extended in the process such as economic frontier from field to forest, political frontier from Mughal territory to non-Mughal territory and religious frontier from Non-Islam to Islam. The Mughal authorities entrusted the task to the Sufis and pioneers of Islam to recruit people for the extension of agriculture to the hitherto uncultivated forested hinterland leading to the emergence of village community capable of paying revenue that resulted in the extension of Mughal administration in the forested areas. The Mughal authorities also allotted revenue free estate for construction of mosque, shrines and khanqahs and other religious institutions which disseminated the message of Islam among the agrarian village communities. Therefore, the people of eastern Bengal adopted Islam as a religion of plough rather than a means of social liberation.¹⁹

As a consequence of late beginning of Aryanization process in Bengal and simultaneous existence of more liberal tribal culture interacted with orthodox *varna* culture and diluted caste. Besides, Brahminical religion was again disputed by Buddhism under reigning Buddhist dynasties of Bengal. Hence the rigid caste system like heartland of Aryan civilization was not prevalent in Bengal including Sylhet. However, Brahminism revived during the Senas(11th-

13th C.E.) with formalization of rigorous *varna* order. Sena king BallalSen(1160-1179 C.E.) introduced another form of social differentiation known as *Kulinism*

When Islam began to spread in the thirteenth century, the peasant residing in the periphery of the *varna* order adopted Islam as a religion of plough. It was worth mentioning that there were only two castes in Sylhet during the Aryanization such as Brahmins and Sudras.

The Mahimals of Sylhet-Cachar region

The occupation of Sylhet by the Muslims under the leadership famous Sufi saint Shaikh Shah Jalal Mozarode-e-Yamini with 360 disciples or *awlias* brought about drastic transformation in the socio-cultural life of the people. His 360 *awlias* spread towards different directions and propagated the message of Qur'an. The despised sections of society, inspired by the Islamic message of social equality and universal brotherhood, which were hitherto, suffering under Brahminical caste order, began to embrace Islam. According to Arnold, "... to these poor people, fisherman, hunters, pirates and low caste tillers of the soil, Islam came as a revelation from on high. It was the creed of the ruling race; its missionaries were man of zeal who brought Gospel of the unity of God and the equality of men in its sight to a despised and neglected population. It brought in a higher conception of God and a nobler idea of the brotherhood of man. It offered to the teeming low castes of Bengal, who had sat for ages abject on the outermost pale of the Hindu community a free entrance into a new social organization." ²⁰ In the words of Jawaharlal Nehru, "The idea of brotherhood of Islam and of the theoretical equality of all its adherents made a powerful appeal, especially to those in the Hindu fold who were denied any semblance of equal treatments...Many conversions also took place but great majority of these were from the lower castes, especially in Bengal." ²¹ The Muslim occupational castes such as Kiran, Patikar, Hajjam, Bajunia, Mirshikar, Bajunia or Dhuliya, Khaliya including Mahimal were mainly converts from the low caste Hindus engaged in various despised profession. But even after conversion, the socio-economic environment remained unchanged and they remained tied with their ancestral occupation. The occupation of musician, delver, washer man, fisherman and indigo-dyer, previously pursued by Hindu low castes were largely adopted by poor Muslims converts to Islam. ²²

The Mahimal was the largest Muslim caste group in the Sylhet-Cachar region and constitutes a sizeable segment of population. They were mainly converts from Hindu fishing and boating castes, among others, the Patini, Kaiberta and Namasudras and came to be known as 'Mahimal' or 'Maimal'. The word Mahimal derived from Persian word 'Mahi' meaning fish

and 'Malla' meaning boatman, since fishing and boating were their hereditary occupation.²³ Some scholars argued that the word 'Mahimal' or 'Mahimol' in Persian stands for fish hunter and was first used by the Mughal to mean the Muslim converts from the Hindu fisherman castes such as Kaiberta and Patnini community.

The Mahimals were thus inland Muslim fishermen and indigenous converts recruited from their Hindu counterparts of the region. When Mohammadan armies invaded Bengal, they were perhaps welcomed by the hunters and fishermen, and many despised caste like Chandalas and Kaibertas wholeheartedly embraced Islam which proclaimed social equality and universal brotherhood. Hinduism had forbidden the untouchables to live in the same village with the Brahmmins and compelled them to pursue the most menial and despised profession and treated them just as an animal unworthy of any kind treatment. But Islam, on the other hand, proclaimed the equality of all mankind, irrespective of rich and poor, slave and master, prince and peasant, in the eye of God.²⁴ Since the fishing and hunting were most primitive of all occupations of Bengal, the invaders of Bengal always regarded these occupations of the original inhabitant as low. The Mughal officials of sixteenth and early seventeenth century associated Bengalis with fisherman.²⁵ Therefore, even after conversion to Islam, the Mahimals were assigned a low social status which was looked down upon by the upper strata of the Muslim society. They remained tied with their ancestral occupation of fishing and socio-economic condition remained unchanged. The bulk of the population of this region were engaged in fishing. They were considered as untouchables and outcaste by the Hindus. Those people embraced Islam in large numbers after the coming famous Sufi saint Hajrat Shah Jalal and formed the Mahimal or Maimal. Even after conversion, they remained tied with their ancestral occupation. They were considered as low caste by the upper caste Muslims and Hindus.²⁶

Due to absence of any data relating to the population of Mahimal in Sylhet-Cachar region, it was hard to make any authentic estimate about their population, both in the Indian part of Cachar and Bangladesh part of Sylhet. The present censuses do not enumerate them separately. Author like Abdullah Mohammad Bin SayedJalalabadi claimed that at present their total population comprises about 20% of the present Sylhet region of Bangladesh. The census of 1901 returned the population of Mahimal with 35,195.²⁷ But here has been some interesting fact that many Mahimal including Kiran registered their name in the census as 'Sheikh'.²⁸ According to the census of 1872, total number of Shaikh was only 371 and in the census of

1901 census, total Shaikh were 11, 26, 649, unimaginable increase in their number. Therefore, the question naturally arise, how can it beamec possible that only within twenty eight years, the population of Shaikh reached from hundred to lakhs without any evidence of significant numbers of migration of foreign Muslims to Sylhet from other parts of India. Indeed, it was a fact that when the lower caste Hindus converted to Islam, they reportedly changed their name with titles. The Census Report of 1872 mentioned a semi-Hinduized converted Muslim group titled as 'unspecified' and their population was 8, 54, 131 persons. It was evident that those unspecified people started to adopt the title 'Shaikh', a move to raise their status in social scale. Generally, the converts from low caste Hindus used the Bengali word '-pM' while the upper caste Muslims including some Talukdars in Sylhet used the Bengali word '-nM', an indicative of social differentiation as visible in the context of Hindu 'cjp' and 'cjn'.

The Mahimals in Barak Valley were mainly migrants from erstwhile Sylhet who later settled largely in the low laying areas or river banks of Cachar region due to occupational cause. Because of the absence of any census data, it is also difficult to make any clear estimate about their population. However, their community leaders claimed that at present their population is more than four lakhs.

Caste and Social Stratification among the Muslims of Shylhet-Cachar region:

Scholarly writings on Indian Muslims mentions about the distinctions that is made between the so called '*Ashraf*' (*Shareef* or *Khandani*) or noble and that of *Ajlaf* (*razil*, *kamin*) or 'inferior'. This *Ashraf-Ajlaf* division was not the creation of modern social scientists, rather repeatedly mentioned by the *Ashraf* scholars themselves. To these writers, the Muslims of Arab, Persia, Turks and Afghan extracts were superior to the Muslims of indigenous converts. The *Ashraf* or elite class claimed their foreign descents like *Sheikh*, *Sayed*, *Mughal* and *Pathan* and converts from high caste Hindus formed nobility while the, in the context of Sylhet-Cachar region, *ajalf* comprises the converts from various occupational caste such as Mahimal, Kiran, Patikar, Mirshikar, Hajjam, Khalia, Bajunia or Dhuliya and Ghulam. A third category called *Arzal* meaning lowest of all was mentioned in some places. They comprise the out castes such as Abdal, Bediya, Halalkhors and Lalbegi and were prohibited from entering mosques and use public burial ground. No other Muslim used to associate with them.²⁹In the context of Sylhet, the word *atrap* was widely used for the *ajalf* and *arzal*. Marion Smith in his study of the

Olankar in Sylhet states that there were eight Muslim groups out of which the Maimal and Ghulam held the lowest status and distinguished from the rest.³⁰

Meanwhile the landed aristocracy developed during the pre-colonial period and unaltered by colonial ruler, further proliferated the existing social stratification and caste among Muslim. The landed elite class owing to their power and status became the most influential institution and assumed the status of higher order of the society. The *Choudhuries*, *Talukdars*, and *Tapadars* in the Sylhet region and the *Choudhuries*, *Barbhiuyas*, *Laskars* and *Mazumdars* in Cachar region became identical with the *ashraf* class and along with the *Sayeds*, constitute a single endogamous community. There was a wave of social mobility by the common farmers and especially the Kiran to adopt the titles of landed class and merged with them in significant numbers since it was an open occupation and no such social stigma is added to it. But the occupational caste such as Mahimal could not experience such mobility due to their traditional association with despised occupation which formed social stigma and remained at the bottom of the social hierarchy. They constitute a separate endogamous caste with rare cases of inter-caste marriage with the upper caste Muslims, even with the other occupational castes.

The social stratification among the Muslims of Sylhet-Cachar region was characterized by the presence of visible attributes of caste. Islam prohibited any kind of social distinctions on the basis of race, ethnicity, descent, occupation and of course caste and all the Muslims are equal in the eye of God. It suggests, the only criterion of superiority is piety. As such it provides for an egalitarian social order. But contrary to the basic tenet of Islam, the Muslim society in India including Sylhet-Cachar region in particular, came to be characterized by the presence of numerous occupational and endogamous groups, including the Mahimal. Caste may be defined as an endogamous group of people having traditional association with a hereditary occupation and assigned a particular position in social hierarchy determined by birth. Caste among the Muslims was generally considered as a cultural influence of Hinduism. But the Muslim jurists legitimized the existing social differentiation on the basis of birth, ethnicity and occupation, thereby made a considerable departure from the Qur'anic ideal of social equality. They resorted to what was called '*kufu*' in Arabic, stands for equality of marriage partners to provide legality of Muslim marriage. The Muslim Scholars of *Hanafite* jurisprudence worked out an elaborate scheme of social gradation that provides *kufu* being

determined, among others by birth, ethnicity and occupation and practically prohibited inter-caste marriages among the Muslims, since caste is, in theory, also an endogamous occupational group determined by birth. This was how we can explain the existence of numerous caste groups among Muslims. Mahimal was an endogamous group with rare cases of inter-caste marriages.³¹

Conclusion:

The above discussion suggests that the ecological background of Sylhet-Cachar region shaped the socio-cultural life of its people. The presence of a large numbers of rivers and their tributaries, *haors*, *beels* and lakes provides abundant palatable fish. The heavy seasonal rain and flowing rivers caused severe flood inundating the region for 6 to 7 months. Therefore, vast numbers of people remained dependent on fishing and boating even after the introduction of agriculture. The fishing and boating caste constitutes the bulk of the population of the region. The advent of Islam followed by the coming of Sufi Saint Saikh Shah Jalal along with his 360 disciples brought about a drastic transformation in the socio-cultural life in the region with large numbers of despised castes embraced Islam. But even after conversion to Islam, the Mahimal caste, among others, remained at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Meanwhile, the pre-existing *ashraf-ajlaf* distinction and simultaneous existence of social stratification based of the landed aristocracy, prevalent in the region proliferated existing social stratification and further reinforced the emerging caste stratification among Muslims, with visible attributes of caste, most significant being the elaborate practice of endogamy and occupational specialization, responsible for continuation of caste among Muslims in the region.

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