



## Muslim Fishermen in North-East India: A Sociological Study

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### Abstract

Muslim fishermen mainly live in the three districts of Barak Valley region of Assam in North-East India bordering the Sylhet district of neighbouring country of Bangladesh. They are the converts from Hindu fishing castes of the region. In the regional Muslim society they occupy distinct position which often resembles to a caste. Important social markers differentiate them from other Muslim groups in the region and officially they are recognised as OBCs. My research article attempts to investigate into status of Muslim fishermen in the regional society and find out the dynamics of community identity among them.

**Keywords:** Fishermen, caste among muslims, community, social status and social change.

### Introduction

The Muslim fishing community or the 'Mahimals' has occupied a particular position in the regional society of Barak-Valley through a long process of historical development. The Bengali Muslim society as a whole, and the regional Muslim society of Barak-valley in particular emerged during the medieval period as a result of migration of a small number of Muslims from northern India and largely as a result of mass conversion of local people pursuing Hindu, Buddhist and Animistic beliefs and practices. The Mahimals or Muslim fishermen as a community consists of converts from Hindu fishing community of Kaivartas, Patnis and Namashudras. Though a section of the neo-elite among the Mahimals trace their origin from the Pathans who had to take shelter in disguise among the local people after Mughal occupation of Bengal by dislodging the Pathan rulers thereof or from the so-called *Ashraf* or *Sharif* Muslims because of fall from the high status due to one or the other reason. This is evident from the fact that even after conversion to Islam and taking up agricultural and other occupation, the Muslim fishermen or Mahimals are given a low status in the Muslim society supposedly because of their traditional association with the occupation of fishing. With the passage of time and changes in the ecological set-up due to extension of cultivation to watery and marshy region, the fishing community took up agricultural activities mainly as tenants and labourers.

**Theory:** The tradition of community studies in sociology can be traced back to the efforts of the anthropologists to the study of modern society. It involved the utilization of anthropological techniques in the study of the current scene as well as the application of anthropological understandings to the behavioral sciences in general. In 1930s when the scholars began to make ethnological investigations of modern European and American Communities it was regarded as a

radical departure, because so far researches in anthropology had been concerned with primitive and preliterate societies<sup>1</sup>.

The community – study approach was the product of links between certain trends in sociology and anthropology to which we have already referred briefly. The ground breaking work in community study – Robert and Helen Lynd's *Middletown* – was a description of community life of a small-town in America<sup>2</sup>. Almost concurrently, the anthropologists began to study modern peasant communities in different parts of the world. It was Robert Redfield, who under the influence of "human ecology" school of urban sociology, developed at the University of Chicago, examined village life among farmers of literate, politically oriented society like Tepoztlan, Mexico, in 1928<sup>3</sup>. However, behind this development the influence of Redcliffe-Brown was crucial, because his definition of social anthropology as "comparative sociology" was an invitation to extend the theoretical framework of his structural-functionalism in to the study of literate societies<sup>4</sup>. In this regard the study of urban community in America by W. Lloyd Warner under the long-term project on "Yankee City" was an important example<sup>5</sup>.

Robert Redfield in his study followed an anthropological perspective and developed the "folk" depiction referring to both the peasant and primitive societies. For the study of folk society the theoretical orientations emerged from 'pure functionalism' of Malinowski and "Structural-functionalism" of Radcliffe-Brown<sup>6</sup>.

In India, the initial response to the community study approach emerged with the contribution of M.N. Srinivas. His book *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (1952) became a 'classic' within a few years of its publication. In this book Srinivas propounded his ideas about the 'spread' of Hinduism and the process of 'Sanskritization' i.e. imitation of

the way of life of 'topmost', twice-born castes by lower castes for raising their social status. He later on basing on his coorg experience developed his ideas regarding the process of 'westernization' i.e. changes in Indian society and culture as an impact of British rule. The notion of 'Sanskritization' is associated with the name of Srinivas and it has become a common concept in various studies on India and has generated related concepts such as islamisation and de-sanskritisation<sup>7</sup>. In a way it was one of the most prominent community studies in India<sup>8</sup>. To this end the works of A. R. Desai, P.C. Joshi, D. N. Dhanagare T.K. Oommen and M.S. A. Rao may be mentioned out of many studies<sup>9</sup>.

To study the relative status of various Muslim social groups present in a locality / province in India, the sociologists and social anthropologists have often taken the help of the concept of 'Caste' The Caste system in India provides the basic principle in terms of which the various social groups are arranged in rank-order. The scholars and students of the caste system in India always asked the question – whether there is caste among non-Hindus like Muslims and Christians? According to Louis Dumont the caste system rests on the ideological foundation of Hinduism or Hindu religion and the existence of caste-like groups among Muslims in India is because of the influence of largely Hindu milieu. In his introduction to Caste and Social Stratification Among Muslims in India, Imtiaz Ahmad held the view that one can observe the existence of some caste-like features among different Muslim communities of India<sup>10</sup>.

## Methodology

This research article is based on the study which is descriptive and exploratory in nature. Both primary and secondary data are used for the study. Primary data are collected from the field by fieldwork. Secondary data are collected from books, journals, news papers etc. Secondary data is also collected from Cachar Karimganj Muslim Fishermen Fedaration, a socio-cultural organisation of the Muslim fishermen in the region. Primary data is collected from six fishermen inhabited villages of Cachar, Karimganj and Hilakandi districts of Assam. Observation and interview schedule are used as tools for primary data collection.

**The Study:** In order to understand the location of the Mahimals in the regional society of Barak Valley, let us consider the socio-cultural and politico-economic milieu of the region. At present the Barak-Valley region in the Southern part of the Indian state of Assam comprises three districts of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi having a total area of 6922 Sq. Kilometers. It is situated between longitude 92.15 and 93.15 East and Latitude 24.8 and 25.8 North. The Valley is bounded on the North by North Cachar Hills (Dima-Hasao) district of Assam and the Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya, on the east by hilly region of Manipur State. On the South by hill state of Mizoram, South-West by Tripura state and on the

west by Sylhet district of Bangladesh. Geographically, the Barak Valley is a landlocked region, crisscrossed by a large number of rivers and natural water bodies (locally called *haor*, *beel* and *anua*) and surrounded by hills and mountains. The Valley is surrounded by hills on three sides and has a riverine international border with Bangladesh on the other side. The plain tract is a geographical extension of the Eastern Bengal plain through Sylhet without any natural barrier intersecting the landscape in between.

From table-1 we find total area of the Barak Valley region comprising three districts of Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj is 6922 Sq. Km. Area wise the Cachar district is the largest, then comes the Karimganj and Hailakandi districts respectively. Out of the total area of the three districts 6884.98 Sq. Km. i.e. 99 percent are rural areas. As such the population of the three districts of the Barak Valley region is predominately rural.

From, table-2, it appears that the total population of the Valley is 2988797 persons as per Census of 2001. Out of three districts of the Valley the district of Cachar is the most populous followed by Karimganj and Hailakandi. In the valley the urban population is 10.72 percent and rural population constitute 89.28 percent of the total population. As such the population of the valley is predominantly rural in character and most of the people are engaged in agricultural activities.

From table-3 we find religion-wise distribution of the population of our study area. The Muslim population of the region under study constitute 46 percent of the total population. The total Muslim population amounts to 13,62,114 persons as per Census of 2001. Out of this total Muslim population of the region approximately 1,00,000 persons belong to Manipuri Muslim and Hindi speaking Muslim communities. (as per a rough estimate) The rest are Bengali speaking Muslims belonging to variously named groups like *Syed*, *Choudhuries*, *Talukdars*, *Tapadar*, *Mazumdars*, *Barbuiyas*, *Laskar*, *Mazarbhuiyas* etc. (the so-called *Ashrafs* or (or high born) Muslims and the so-called non-*Ashrafs* or *Atrafs* (*Ajlaf*) like *Kirans* (ex-ryots and agricultural labourers), *Mahimals* (traditionally fishermen), *Hajam* (barbar), *Patikars* (makers of bamboo mat), *Gayan* (sellers of bangles) etc. In terms of numbers the district of Karimganj has the largest number of Muslims, then comes Cachar and Hailakandi respectively. Under the heading Bengali (Muslim), the People of India Series mentions thus. "There are seven endogamous groups, *Sayeed*, *Chowdhury*, *Talukdar*, *Kiran*, *Maimal* and *Hajam*. The Sayed were traditionally expert in theology. Both the Chowdhury and the Talukdar formed gentry, owning most of the arable land. In terms of their occupational specilisation, the *Kirans* are agriculturists, the Maimal are fishermen, the Hajam are barbars, and the Badyars are engaged in the castration of animals" (Singh, K.S., 2002: 95).

**Table-1**  
**Area of the districts of Barak Valley**  
 (In Square Km)

Name of the Districts	Total Area	Rural	Urban
Cachar	3786	3769.92	16.08
Hailakandi	1327	1318.25	8.75
Karimganj	1809	1796.81	12.19
<b>Total for the Barak Valley</b>	<b>6922</b>	<b>6884.98</b>	<b>37.02</b>

Source: Census of India, 2001.

**Table-2**  
**Population of the districts of Barak Valley**

Name of the Districts	Rural			Urban			Grand Total (1 + 2)
	Male	Female	Total (1)	Male	Female	Total (2)	
Cachar	638561	602162	1240723	103019	98399	201418	1442141
Hailakandi	257601	239820	497421	23311	22246	45557	542978
Karimganj	478582	451549	930131	37826	35721	73547	1003678
<b>Total for the Barak Valley</b>	<b>1374744</b>	<b>1293531</b>	<b>2668275</b>	<b>164156</b>	<b>156366</b>	<b>320522</b>	<b>2988797</b>

Source: Census of India, 2001

**Table-3**  
**Population by religion (Hindus and Muslims) of the districts of Barak Valley**

Name of the districts	Hindus		Muslims	
	Persons	Percentage	Persons	Percentage
Cachar	886761	61.49	522051	36.20
Hailakandi	223191	41.10	312849	57.62
Karimganj	471728	47	527214	52.5
Total for the Barak Valley	1581680	53	1362114	46

Source: Census of India, 2001.

According to the leaders of the organisation of the Muslim fishermen or Mahimals like Muslim Fishermen Federation, Maimal Welfare Society etc., the Muslim fishermen (Mahimals) would constitute a population of 6 lakhs out of the total Bengali speaking Muslim population of 12,64,114 (excluding Manipuri and Hindi speaking Muslims) of Barak Valley region as per 2001 census.

However, as the census does not enumerate Mahimals as a separate Muslim group it would be reasonable to estimate (on the basis of our own survey) that their population would be about 40 to 45 percent of the total Bengali speaking Muslim population of the present Barak Valley. Moreover, as a distinguishable social group among the Bengali Muslims of Barak-Valley, the 'Mahimals' are the largest, followed by groups like *Kirans*, *Talukdars* and other respectively.

As we have already noted the Bengali Muslims in the Barak Valley region are divided into various groups. From sociological viewpoint it is very difficult to classify them. However, the Bengali Hindus of the region can be easily classified into different castes. Similarly, we have classified the Muslims into different status-groups or castes and economic classes, as most of them are converts from local Hindu castes.

In the villages of Barak-Valley we can now find the following Muslim groups, constituting the social milieu in which we are trying to place our object of study, the Mahimals, the Muslim fishermen of Barak-Valley.

Syeds – They claim their descent from the prophet of Islam through his daughter Fatema. They are found only in some select places, mostly within the district of Karimganj. The claimants of this status are generally religious preachers or scholars like Suifs, Ulema, Pirs mostly claiming descent from some companion of Shah Jalal Mujarrad of Sylhet.

Choudhuries, Talukdars, Mazumders, Laskar, Barbhuiya and Mazarbhuiya – They claim to have once been the Zamindars or big-landlords. Now mostly absentee landlords, wealthy peasant proprietors or middle peasants as well as diversified into other occupations.

Kirans – They were once the ryots or tenants of the former group. At present, peasant cultivators, Share-croppers, agricultural labourers and wage-earners.

Occupational groups like Hajam (Barbar), Patikars, Gayan, Bajnias etc.

The Mahimals: Whose traditional occupation was fishing but now mostly agriculturists and diversified into other occupations.

The highest status in the regional society is occupied by the Syeds because of their descent from Prophet's family. The next position is occupied by the Choudhuries because of their supposed purity of blood and economic power due to land ownership. The Mazumdars, Talukdars, Laskars and Bhuiyas also share the second position in the hierarchy along with the Choudhuries. There is no bar in inter-marriages among these groups. They resemble to the 'dwiza' or twice-born group of the Hindus and known as ashrafs. The kirans, various occupational groups and Mahimals constitute the lower strata.

## Results and Discussion

**Findings:** Our study reveals that the Muslims of Barak Valley do not constitute a monolithic community. Instead, it is clearly divided into two broad strata of '*Ashraf*' and '*Atraf/Ajlaf*' denoted in local language as the '*Boro-Jat*' or '*Jathila*' i.e. upper jati or caste and '*chotojat*' or '*Kamjat*' i.e. lower jati or caste. The upper section (Ashraf) of the regional Muslim society comprises the titled groups like Syeds, Choudhuries, Talukdars, Tapadars, Mazumdars, Laskar, Barbhuiyas and Mazarbhuiyas etc., while the lower section (*Atraf/ Ajlaf*) consists mostly of those groups which had traditionally been engaged in menial occupations or services, like *Hajam* (Barbar), *Kiran* (Agricultural labourer), *Gulams* (slaves or servants) and the *Mahimals* (Net workers, fishermen and boatman) etc.

It is found that the 'Mahimals' as members of the lower category or '*Atraf/Ajlaf*' group suffer from many disabilities like the Hindu fishermen and boatmen, the *Kaibartas* and *Patnis*. The practice of endogamy is most prevalent among the Muslim groups of the region with respect to the 'Mahimals'. The 'Mahimals' also do not have marital relations with other members of lower group like Hajam, Kiran or Gulam. In this way, it is found that the Mahimals constitute an important socially recognised visible endogamous group. With respect to them endogamy is so strictly observed by other groups that we have found many instances of disputes and litigation in case a Mahimal boy marries a non-Mahimal girl.

With respect to other features of the caste like hierarchy, occupational specialisation and ideological justification of the system, it is found that the position of 'Mahimals' is not very different from other low-status Muslim groups studied by sociologists in other parts of India. The hierarchy of groups is not so elaborate in the regional Muslim society of Barak Valley like the Hindu castes. Though 'Mahimals' are placed at the lower end of the hierarchy of caste-like groups in the region under study, it is not particularly based on the notion of ritual purity and pollution, as in the empirical situations, other factors like religious piety, economic well-being, educational attainment and extent of Islamisation in a family or person

intervene in the ranking process in the hierarchy. With respect to occupation, it is found that due to changes in the ecological set up of the region, there has been a gradual shrinkage of large water-bodies which once dotted the region providing livelihood to the Mahimals. As a result fishing as an occupation alone is not able to provide sustenance to the fishermen. Moreover, over the years there has been a process of peasantisation of the fishermen, which during the last fifty years has also been reversed because of pressure on cultivable land and inundation of agricultural land due to unscientific management of flood through construction of dams and sluice-gates alongwith decrease in agricultural productivity. Now, the Mahimals are found in diverse occupations mostly being wage laboureres, hawkers of finer-lings of fishes, small traders and businessmen, manual workers in private farms, self-employed through handicraft and employees in schools and offices. Thus, it is found that there is a diversification in the occupational pattern of the Mahimals. However, this diversification in the occupational pattern has mostly led to the inclusion of Mahimals at the lower levels of newly emerging occupational hierarchy. Only a few among them have succeeded to attain a higher position in the diversified occupational hierarchy.

As regards the ideological justification pertaining to the ascribed lower status of the Mahimals in the regional Muslim society, it is found that though the Great tradition of Islam disregards any ranking among the believers on the basis of descent or occupation, the local Muslims follow various discriminatory practices vis-à-vis the Mahimal and rank them at the bottom of the hierarchy of Muslim social groups present among them. The ideological justification for endogamy particularly, is put forward by the upper section of the community in terms of the prophetic tradition regarding contracting of marriages with equals (Kufv). According to the Sunni school of jurisprudence, which is followed by the Muslims of this region, out of six ingredients necessary to produce equality (Kufv), descent or lineage (Nasab) is the most important one. It appears that this principle is extended to other spheres of social life in the regional Muslim society of Barak Valley and the Mahimals, who are regarded as descendents of those who were engaged in the past in supposedly unclean occupation of fishing, are accorded a low position in the hierarchy of Muslim groups of the region. Other elements of belief of the 'folk-tradition' of the upper castes like the belief in supposed unclean nature of the fishing as an occupation, the unhygienic living condition of the Mahimals, involvement in menial labour, presence of pre-Islamic practices etc. among the Mahimal community are often responsible alongwith the above mentioned prophetic tradition for assignment of low status to the community.

## Conclusion

Muslim fishermen or Mahimals occupy a marginal position in the regional Muslim society of Barak Valley. In fact the history of the entire region and beyond, including entire Eastern Bengal was the history of marginalisation of this group of people when

in distant past these people were undergoing a shift in occupation from traditional fishing and fish business to the occupation of cultivation, by establishing their settlements near large water bodies much away from the villages established by other groups on raised and fertile land. Their overall economic position is most backward in the region. Most of them are inhabitants of remote villages spread over the three districts of Barak Valley comprising an area of 6922 Sq. Kilometers. The settlement pattern of the community reflects their liking or compulsion for inhabiting areas near rivers and large water bodies locally known as *Haors, Beels* and *Anwas*. These settlements are flood prone and remain inaccessible for nearly five to six months in a year to outsiders because of poor communication facilities. Because of this, most of the villages lack electricity and water-supply facilities. Moreover, the younger generation face hardship in pursuing education beyond Lower primary or Middle School standards.

However, it is found that the policy of protective discrimination through the reservation of seats in educational institutions and government jobs and other preferential treatments for Backward classes has not benefited the Mahimals, who was declared as an Other Backward Class (OBC) group by the state Government of Assam way back in 1966. Though the leaders of the movement claim the securing of status of OBC for Mahimals as an important achievement of the movement, our findings have shown no important improvement in the educational and occupational status of the Mahimals even after 46 years of its implementation. It appears from our findings that because of economic backwardness and low income, the people of this community are not able to send their children for education beyond classes – VII and VIII. In most of the families studied, the children enter the job market as wage earner before attaining the age of 15 to support their families. Moreover, because of the discriminatory practices of Government officials and political influences exerted by the Hindu Backward Caste leaders in the distribution of benefits like scholarships, loans, job etc. due to the Other Backward Class people, the Mahimals are often denied of these facilities. Among the Other Backward Class (OBC) groups of Barak-Valley, the Mahimals being the most backward are found as unable to compete with the relatively advanced section of the Other Backward Classes (OBC) in availing the reservation benefits. Therefore, it is found, during 1980s the Mahimal leaders raised their demand for inclusion by

government of India as a Scheduled Caste group. Quite recently, the government of Assam granted 'Mahimal Development Council', a council constituted by an Act of the State Assembly with a separate allocation of fund, for the socio-economic development of Mahimal community.

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