

## CHAPTER – 8

### MUSLIMS WITHIN THE LARGER SOCIETY OF DARJEELING HIMALAYA

#### 8.1: Introduction

The present chapter deals with the multidimensional processes of the Muslims adaptation and integration in general with their habitat. It also explains some of their determinants like socio-economic adaptation, social integration and their participation in inter-ethnic associations. Since historical periods Muslims are actively interact with other segments of the greater hill society rather than presenting themselves as a minority. Their existence is noticed at various levels in the society though their percentage is low. Their peculiarities in cultural tradition never make barrier in relationship and thus remain an integral part of the greater society, which has become a cultural mosaic. In the colonial past, Muslims were viewed as the most necessary group in an urban life as of their specialized services. They were considered as a part and parcel of the urban social life.

Muslim communities of Darjeeling are all from various occupational categories. Their genealogical diagrams authenticate the fact. As a gradually developed urban centre during the colonial era, the town Darjeeling along needs a large number of special services. To fill this shortage, a large number of various skilled and semi skilled occupational groups were encouraged to migrate. Their migration was beneficial to both. It allows the Muslims to accommodate a major centre of European interests in one hand and systematic expansion of their trade and business network on the other. The rich cultural traditions of the Muslims are also accommodate within the greater hill society and the Muslims became a dynamic and efficient minority of the hills.

## 8.2: Socio-Economic Manifestations – Adaptation, Adjustment and Syncretism

Muslims in Darjeeling town are of diverse caste and ethnic backgrounds. The interaction within community often plays a vital role in contributing the overall integration towards the greater society or the habitat. Stratification within community or sects and sub sects often creates barrier in collective unity. Notwithstanding as a distinct religious group they interact with each other through the common bond Islamic brotherhood. Religious organizations, mosques and *Anjuman-E-Islamia* have a good role in integration of diverse Muslim groups nevertheless a distinct community identity is being maintained through the little traditions exclusive for them.

On the question of assimilation, a plurality of Darjeeling Muslims believe that Muslims should adopt the customs and ways of life of the hills, though a significant minority thinks they should try to remain distinct. Muslim population in Darjeeling Himalaya is ethnically and linguistically diverse. There are various groups within them. Some were come much earlier in comparison to other group and their inclination towards the wider integration is much more noticed in their life ways activities. The new comers always struggling to find a balance between two different cultural traditions. The Muslims born and brought up in Darjeeling Himalaya particularly the early migrant families are assimilating fully with the hill life. Majority of the early migrant families have and had marital alliance with the native Nepali families as they believe that there is nothing significant wrong with interfaith marriages.

Due to close association with the hill society and culture, the Muslims share many cultural traits of their neighbours. The Muslim society and culture of Darjeeling hills has been shaped by the interacting forces of several set of traditions viz. Islamic, Nepali caste and tribe, Tibetan and etc. which led to propagate a meaningful

coexistence of Muslims and non Muslims in the town. The major concentrations of the Muslims in Darjeeling are in butcher *basti* which is a multi ethnic in character. Nepalis and Bhutias are the next door neighbours presently. Though they are different in religious faith, yet the participation of Muslims in their socio-religious programme and vice versa are very usual. Marriage alliance is often occurred. Some members of these non Muslim families recent past embraced Islam. But communal harmony never breaks in their locality for the occurrences. This harmonial coexistence has often enriched the secular environment which helped the Muslims in adaptation to the social environment of their habitat.

Muslims are not much different from their ethnic Nepali and Tibetan or Bhutia neighbours in respect to language, food, dress pattern, occupation, material culture, family organization, habits and customs. Their morphological similarities often made other confused in physical identification. Due to constant mixing and breeding with the ethnic Nepalis, these *paharia* Muslims are almost identical with their non Muslim neighbours. Any one can't distinguish the Tibetan Buddhists and Tibetan Muslims in respect to language, food, traditions, habits and customs. Even the Muslims often observe the major festivals of popular hill culture. Except some basic principles of Islam, the life cycle rituals have a great similarity with the Nepalis and Bhutias. Many Muslim families respect the local deities and pay devotional respect along with their next door Nepali neighbours. Due to this close association with the dominant hill culture, the Muslims in Darjeeling hills are gradually inclined towards the popular local traditions.

Majority of the Muslims in Darjeeling town are self employed and hereditary occupation. They are either in their traditional occupation or engaged in small business entrepreneurship. Still there are some sections in which Muslims are dominated or rather expert

since colonial times. Examples from Muslim occupational groups (*Kureshi* or butcher, *Mansuri* or *dhunia*, *Dorji* or tailor etc.) may authenticate the fact. Peoples are exclusively dependent over them for their particular services and they have a monopolistic control over this occupation. Say for example, the supply of meat (beef and goat) to the town is circulated by the *kureshi* brethren since the British time and this tradition is still maintained by this Muslim group. Muslims are expert in skilled or semi skilled works like mechanical works, masonry work, colouring, plumbing, repairing etc.

A large number of services are rendered exclusively by the Muslims in the town. Mechanical and semi mechanical works are largely monopolized by the Muslim occupations. Substantial numbers are engaged in food production and supply. Several specialized items of beautification and ornaments are manufactured or sold by some Muslim occupations. Their pioneering knowledge and experience in bakery and confectionary industry by some Muslim families placed the town Darjeeling in a place of excellence. They are considered experts in such job.

Muslims of the town are integrated greatly to the society by the very necessity of their services. Very often their specialized services are required to maintain the daily life way activities. From the very formation of the town, a particular Muslim occupational category or rather say *birathari* is being supplying the regular meat and fish to the town dwellers. Since colonial past meat and fish trade is being maintained by them. Meat is almost a regular item in the daily menu of the hill people irrespective of their caste and creed. Beef is edible to all of them except of some Nepali upper castes. Since colonial times, *Kureshi* families are exclusively the seller of beef and goat. A slaughter house was established by the Darjeeling Municipality after 1850 for regular slaughter of cow and goat. A formal fish market was also established in the year 1936. All the labours and beef sellers are from

kureshi family who migrated much earlier and integrated with the local culture by establishing marital alliance with Nepali girls. These Muslims later formed a separate cultural identity with in their own social group. And the families later treated as a son of the soil by their ethnic neighbours and gradually established their right over their habitation. Thus these Muslim families act as stabilizer in conflict minimization of the resource utilization between two creeds.

Bakery industry of the town is also maintained by the Muslims since colonial past. During the developing phase of this town, the British administrators encouraged Muslims to established bakery as they are skilled in such industry. H S Guramia was the first Muslim man who started a bakery at the town though the famous European bakery shop Glanery's was established much earlier but the confectionary items was manufactured and supplied by small Muslim bakery owners. And during the Christmas, these small bakery owners and suppliers circulated printed pamphlets to the dwellers as advertisement. Gradually, bakery products are preferred other that Europeans and now cake, biscuit, pastry and bakery bread is almost a regular dietary item of the Darjeeling town people. Almost all the confectionary shops are owned by Muslims. The famous shop *Walis* has their own bakery. And the other small bakery owners are all Muslims. The Muslim association with this particular industry later encouraged many non Muslims to open shops for selling confectionary and bakery products which ultimately an opportunity of self employment to the hill people. This is a typical example of building trade entrepreneurship which authenticates the necessity of Muslim occupations.

The fruit trade of the town was previously in the hand of Muslims exclusively. But after partition the trade was transferred in the hand of Nepalis. But this fruit trade of the Muslims opened an opportunity to the other hill people a method of self employment.

Darjeeling is a land of orange and presently orange trade is an important business of the Nepalis during the winter times.

A hill dweller must have the need of a man who knows the technique of repairing utensils of their daily life. The most striking features of the Darjeeling Muslim occupation is that a relatively high share of the Muslims of the town are engaged in the activity of repairing utensils though a bulk of them are not the permanent settler of Darjeeling. Yet they are continuing their services. The repairing shops at *chackbazar* and old bus stand area are all owned by Muslims. Their services have a great need to the people of the town. All the spectacles shops are also owned by Muslims. Watch repairing shops at the two sides of *chackbazar* are all owned by Muslims. But these families are not domiciled permanently at the town though some of these families are being here since colonial times. They served the town from two to three generations

Garments industry is also monopolized by the Muslim tailors. The regular dress requirements are fulfilled by the Muslim tailors as Muslims are skilled in tailoring cloths since colonial past. Some emotions are wrapped in peoples mind regarding tailoring. Families of some famous tailor masters even now maintaining their traditions and keep supplying the garments as per required necessity. The most tailoring shops are at *darogabazar* region and Muslim tailors from Bihar and UP are employed as tailor masters. These shops are all owned by Muslim families domiciled permanently at Darjeeling.

Muslims have a great role in tourism industry of Darjeeling. Tourism has long been viewed as a tool for economic development not only for the people but also for the region or locality. As one of the most important hill station of the country, Darjeeling has always been attracted by the tourists from within and with out India. Hotels owned by Tibetan Muslims and curio shops owned by both Tibetan and kashmiri Muslims influenced a lot in developing tourism in Darjeeling

town. The famous Habib Mallik shop at Darjeeling mall attracted a bulk of European and American tourists to visit Darjeeling. Darjeeling and Habib Mallik's shop almost synonymous to them. The major tourist's attractions are all covered by the chain of curio shops. Foreign tourists are really fond of Tibetan art and culture objects, James, jewelry and precious stones. And Darjeeling curio shops are very famous for these objects. Hence, directly Muslims has a major role in the tourism industry of Darjeeling. And the economy of the town is also majorely dependent on tourism. The tourists seasons are the only peak season of selling garments and commodities. Because there is no other alternative way of acquiring money as there is any other industry except tea.

Darjeeling Himalayan town is a blend of diverse ethnic and cultural elements. Integration between diverse groups would never be possible without the spirit of socio-cultural accommodation between such diverse communities which ultimately helped them to live together in harmoniously under harsh environmental condition of the mountain. The people of Darjeeling Himalayan region is an amalgamation of animism, lamaist Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. As a matter of this social-cultural amalgamation, the Muslims of the town exhibit a unique cultural matrix which reflected at the various levels of their cultural practices. There have been diverse perceptions of social relations in the context of inter-ethnic or inter-religious interaction in Darjeeling town. Some may perceive this situation as the face of tension and conflict, while the others believe it as the process of assimilation or integration. The most important manifestation of intercommunity and inter-religious interaction is the attribute of syncretism which is an old social fact among the Muslims living in Darjeeling town. It refers to the hybridization of two or more cultural or religious traditions over time. It's a result of acculturation or culture contact. It is a social mechanism to create protective defense around communities in a place and also incorporate the ideas and

behaviours from different societies living around them. Members of different communities like Bhutias, Sherpas, Marwaris, Bhojpuris, Lepchas etc. frequently participate the festivals of the Muslims with joy.

### **8.3: Inter-Ethnic Association and the Role of *Anjuman-E-Islamia***

*Anjuman-E-Islamia* is a formal social organization of the Muslims of Darjeeling town. It is a non political social organization registered under West Bengal Societies Registration Act. Vide no. S/22403 of 1978-79. But it was established in 1850 and registered under company act in December 5<sup>th</sup>, 1909. The primary aim of the institution was to maintain mosque and burial ground. But due to the course of time, *Anjuman* moves its primary object to build social harmony by their services not only exclusively for the Muslims but also for the other community members as well. *Anjuman* Guest house is open to all. Anybody can go there for his temporary stay. *Anjuman* hall room is open to all religious ceremonies. A Nepali or Bhutia can rent the hall for their own socio-religious purpose.

The Muslim society of the town is habituated with the customs and traditions of Nepalis. They have adapted themselves gradually to the dominant social environment of their habitat. Nepali is a common lingua franca of all the communities residing in the Darjeeling hills. Muslims also acquired Nepali as a medium of communication. Even a majority of them talked in Nepali at their home. Though there is no significant leadership among the Muslims, nevertheless the participation of Muslims in the present political matter of separate statehood as a consensus citizen of hills is very remarkable. They believe that the ultimate demand of state will not fulfill the development aspiration of the Muslims as a backward community. But

irrespective of this they firmly support the demand of a separate as because of their integration or inclination towards the dominant hill community. Muslims raised separate wings along with other minority community of the town to strongly support the state hood demand of *Gorkha Jana Mukti Morcha*. They closed their shops and business along with their coreligionists as a symbol of demonstration. The unique situation of this communal harmony is thereby differing from other places of India which enriched the secular environment in polity and society of Darjeeling Himalaya.

#### **8.4: Findings**

Being one of the major centres of European interest during the colonial days, Darjeeling encouraged a good number Muslims to migrate from various parts of inside and outside India whose specialized services had an urgent necessity to the urban dwellers of Darjeeling town. Within a couple of years of the development of the town Muslims were considered as an integral part of the larger urban complex of the Darjeeling Hill society. Even today, quite a number of services rendered to the dwellers are mainly by the Muslim groups. The presence of a *Dhunia* (cotton carder), baker, watch repair and very often of a butcher is a necessity of the every days life of the town. The tailors of *daroga bazaar*, bakery shop at *chack bazaar*, utensils repairing shops, fish market etc., have all largely been occupied by the diverse Muslim groups though considerable changes have recently occurred which affecting the virtual monopoly of the Muslims in these occupations. The functions of a few Muslim groups like the Tibetan Muslims and Kashmiri Muslims deserve special consideration as their traditional occupations of curio, Hotel and handicrafts trade linked the development of tourism industry of Darjeeling.

Despite the religious and ethnic differences with the ethnic Nepalis and other hill dwellers, a sense of belonging and functional interdependence has emerged due to acculturation and vice versa.

The Muslim are now habituated with the customs and traditions of the dominant Nepalis and other hill communities. Even the Nepali is considered as mother tongue to some Muslim families exclusively in case of Nepali Muslims and in many Muslim occasions or festivals a functional interdependence between Hindu-Buddhist-Christian ethnic groups and Muslims are seen which is an example of social-cultural integration.