

The Economic Life of the Nashya Sheikhs of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar Districts: A Study of the Historical Perspective

Md Nabiul Islam¹

Abstract:

The economic condition of the Nashyas is miserable and deplorable in compared to the other Muslim communities. Gradually under the pressure of a big culture and lack of consciousness their (Nashyas) own culture, tradition, beliefs, rituals etc. were pushed to the verge of endangerment rendering them socially, economically, culturally, educationally extremely backward. This paper we will attempt to show the economic life of the Nashya Sheikhs of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts. Their main occupation is cultivation, but cattle farming, small scale business, selling of fish, mutton, chicken etc. are also other source of their income. Nashyas are mostly interested in cow trading. They were always a subject of subjugation and hatred by the higher class Muslims. The literacy rate among the Nashyas, especially among the women is a matter of grave concern. Superstition and lack of consciousness is another impediment to the growth of this community.

Keywords: Nashya Sheikh, Rajbangsi Muslim, Economic Backwordness, Jotedars, Masoning etc.

Economic life of the Nashya Sheikhs:

A big portion of the converted Muslim community in North Bengal are being victimised in terms of economic stability. They could not think the alternative source of income within the social dieseling. Now a central question emerges that – “who are the *Nashyas*?” The Muslims who resided in Koch, Mech, Polia, and Rajbangsi societies etc. were basically converted in Muslims from these communities, who later on were known as *Nashyas*. It is these *Nashyas* who are popularly known as *Nashya Sheikh*.¹ During the period of 13th to 17th century Muslims attack occurred frequently in Kamrup, Kamtapur and Koch Behar. Perhaps for this might be the reasons for which Islam entered in North-Eastern part of India? The Brahmans, who were the holder and protector of the society, announced the indigenous peoples as a fallen group for the untouchability problem with Muslims. Sometimes the villages become fallen by the entrance way of Muslims soldiers.² These outcaste peoples become spoiled (*Nasto*) and religion less. These peoples were compelled to convert into Islam. Still they were spoiled (*Nasto*) and religion less to the upper castes people. Gradually the word ‘Nashya’ had originated from the above mentioned term ‘*Nasto*’ as a distorted pronunciation.³ We found the name of “Panbor Nashya” as a recipient, fathers name “Asaru Nashya”, caste Muslim from a reference of

¹ Md Nabiul Islam, UGC Research Fellow, Department of History, University of North Bengal.

document in 1901(Koch Behar state). Now I would like to shed light on “Sheikh”. The word Sheikh means “Greatest”. The Sufi saints like Sheikh Jalaluddin Tabrizi who came to the undivided Bengal from Afganistan, used the word Sheikh in front of their name. The Nashya Muslims protested about their dishonourable title and after refusing that title they introduced them self as Sheikh as the disciples of “Sheikh” and used the title Sheikh. For an example we can say that we found the name of Mamud Sheikh whose father name was Tangru Nashya, caste Muslim.⁴ But here it’s noticeable that the migrated Sheikh use the title Sheikh in front of their name and the Nashya used title after their name. For an example we can say the name of Jalaluddin Tabrazi and Piyar Mamud Sheikh. With this respect it may be mention that after the conversion into Islam, the Nashya Sheikh started ideological struggle with Sufism by the influence of Shariatism and got change their names and title. After changing the names like Tangru, Sandu, Domashu, Pedda, Tonda which belongs to Rajbansi community, they started to use the name like Hajrat, Suleman, Abubaquar, Osman which belongs to Arabian origin. Vis a Vis they started to refuse their title Nashya and also they refuse their title sheikh as the title of “Shia community”. They started to use of surnames like Rahaman, Ali, Main, Hussain, Sarkar, Islam, Ahmed, Uddin, Hoque, Abedin etc. At present simultaneously they are also using their previous surnames.⁵ If we look for the answer for this, then we have to go through the anthropological study of the community. The similarities we find among the people of six districts of North Bengal, Purnia district of Bihar and Dinajpur and Rungpur districts of Bangladesh with Nashya sheikh to some extent reflect their old connection with each other. The Mongoloyed community and Rajbangsi community people had been living in this particular area. There are four kinds of people like Koch, Mech, Polia and Rajbangsi indigenous people. The various kind of reason were responsible for the conversation of huge numbers of people four community such as oppression and suppression of Brahmanism, social untouchably and economic and political. This process of conversion in Bengal continued from Sen. Period to British period. The new converted Muslim community wanted to prove them self as an indigenous community. Because the indigenous community felt themselves as a upper class within Rajbangsi society.⁶

Agriculture:

Basically agriculture is the main profession of this community. Till date the bulk of the Nashya sheikh population in the above mentioned districts are mostly depended on farming and agriculture. However a shift has been noticed that there is a tendency among the educated Nashya sheikh Muslims to lean towards Government Service. In spite of that agriculture is the prime source of income for this community. Now a day’s various kind of factor is responsible for loosing up their land. Within the economically changing society a back of people who are called *Nashya Sheikh Community*.

The traditional occupation of the *Nashya* community is agriculture. But now-a-days they depend on various occupational pursuits. In rural areas they are primarily cultivators, a few share-croppers and many are agricultural labourers⁷. Once there was

many *Nashya Jotedars*. Once there were many rich Jotedar from Nashya Sheikh Community in Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri districts, such as Meehua Doni.....but now a day for various reasons they have lost their big holdings. For different monetary urgencies the land holding of the big and rich Nashya Sheikhs have gradually become fragmented.⁸ A few decade back cultivation was mainly carried out through the conventionally means which mean that it was entirely depended on manual skill and organic fertilizer. Naturally the production was less in comparison with the present time. Now it is the scenario has been changes. Today the rich Nashya Sheikh cultivator prefers to used tractor, tilling machines, chemical fertilizer, genetically muted seeds in the farming. Contrary a mediocre and poor farmer even today follows the conventional technique of production. There exist various occupational groups among the *Nashya sheikh* Muslims of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri. In rural areas the *Nashya sheikhs* are primarily cultivators and craftsmen who produce goods and services for the public. Most *Nashya sheikh* peasants are agricultural labour and some are self cultivators.⁹ There are few a big land lords among the *Nashya sheikh* Muslims of this area before the period of independence. The *Nashya sheikh* contribution to Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar's agricultural products particularly paddy, jute and tobacco are very significant. Muslims of Dinhata are considered to be the best tobacco cultivators of Cooch Behar district. Beside cultivation, some *Nashya sheikhs* are engage in making agricultural tools and other materials of domestic use.¹⁰

The *Nashyas* living in urban areas are engaged in shop-keeping, tailoring, Masoning, rickshaw-pulling and blue-collar services. Women belonging to poor *Nashya* families are engaged in various economic activities. They work as agricultural labourers, construction workers and housemaids. Economically, the *Nashya* of both the rural and the urban areas are poor. Apart from that the another interesting feature of their income is their deep engagement in cow and goat trading across North Bengal especially in two districts i.e. Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri¹¹.

Industry:

In general, it can be said that there is no big industries owned by the *Nashya Sheikh* community. Few decades ago, most of the people from Nashya sheikh has been involved with handicraft industries like Taki, Kulo, Chera etc. These handicraft articles are used to lead their daily life. There are so many people who used to lead their life depending on these small native industries. But now a day, the amount of handicraft workers is decreasing day by day. Few years ago, the people of Nashya Sheikh Community used Dheki, Sham, and Gain as to make rice from paddy. In this context male member of the family helped to do this beside the active participation of their female members. A good numbers of people were there, who has taken this job as their profession and they had to do this for the rich families. But now a day, the situation has been changed; it is hardly possible to see this technique even into someone's room at the villager. It is happened so because of the development of the modern techniques. Side by

side making net to catch fisher is also one of the techniques which few years ago were also present. They had used to make Net for their own. By this handmade net, people of Nashya sheikh community led their life keeping this job i.e Pisculture as their profession. In order to do this job female were also involved with the participation of males. Since the time immemorial to till now, most of the people of this community has taken Pisculture as their profession. But the popularity of this profession is getting low for the development of some modern techniques. As result, this profession has lost his prominence and they are compelled to lead out their life works as daily labour.¹²

Trade and Commerce:

Most of the people of the *Nashya Sheikh* community have been involved with agriculture. Hence, there are small sections who are involved in trade and commerce. In addition those who has been with these professions are not strong share holder rather they had many small business. Among these groups, many people were involved with the business of Cow, Mosh and Goat. They did not able to make them profound business because their social framework is depending on agriculture. The businesses of Cow and Mosh have very influential among the Muslim communities because of the deep relationship between agricultural sectored Cow and Mosh. Because Cow and Mosh vastly could use for ploughing the land. In the markets of Booch Behar and Jalpaiguri, still we can see severally that most of the people involved with selling Cows and Moshes. Some important markets of the district of Jalpaiguri are – Dhupguri market ,Nathuahat, Jateshwar and Jaigaon. And on the other hand some front rank markets of Cooch Behar district are Haldibari, Mathabhanga ,Sitalkuchi, Tufanganj ,Dinhata etc. Apart from these regions these are also some places outside the state of west Bengal such as Bihar, Uttarpradesh, and Jharkhand with who's the native inhabitants of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri district maintained their business.¹³

Apart from these businesses, the people of *Nashya Sheikh* Community are also attached with some other business like paddy, Jute, Potato, Oil, Betel-Nut, Tobacco etc. A good number of people of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar though attached with these professions their amount are low in comparison to other communities. These small businessmen sell their good to the big *mahajanas* for their small profit. They are forced to sell their goods not keeping into store because they have the luckiness of capital. Hence, highest profit on these goods comes only by the big *mahajans*. Because they stores +the goods and in later when the crisis arise they sells their stored goods to the market. Besides these business there is one another business called betel-nut which is quite popular not only among the communities of Nashya Sheikh but other communities also. In most of the cases through this business, people get huge benefit. The businessman buys the betel-nut and then boils these and at the end they export their goods outsides the districts and even outside of west Bengal for the shake to make more benefit. Here also the producers of the betel-nut also to make less benefit than the big *mahajans* (or businessmen). The maximum benefit from this business got by the big

marwaris of Dhupguri region. The people of the villagers apart from doing such business are also involved with some other business like keeper of small shops, mudikhana and the shop of different type of vegetables.¹⁴

Labours:

Most of the people of the Muslim community are poor and agriculture is their main profession. Till the end of 7th decades of the 20th century, there was no alternative profession than the agriculture among the Muslim communities. During this time most of the people were the daily labour that had worked on land. During the time of sixth-7th decades, the value of daily labour was one rupee for 1 kilogram rice. It was applicable for both Hindu and the Muslim communities. In the later period, the value of the money decreased but one kilogram rice as the value for one day labour remained unchanged. The daily labour work was seasonal. The duration of the work was from the sunshine to sunset. Main works that they are used to do are –ploughing land, *Nirani*, *Bona*, *Kodaler Kaj*, Jute cutting, Paddy cutting, soil digging etc. They were used to wear share and frequently it was not possible to recognize that who are the Hindu and who are the Muslims. Their dress up and language is same. Without wearing *shaya* (lower long innerwear) and *blouse* (upper innerwear). They were to do their work outside their own house. If someone makes rice from paddy of 10 Kilogram then he/she had to pay 3 *poya* or 1 Kilogram rice. The female of the Muslim Community also forced to do so service for the share to maintain their economic situation of the family. As that were uneducated, they had no knowledge of family plan that is why until and unless has to give birth of the child. This has made a very horrible situation in the society, although there were no restrictions provided by the authority of the village.¹⁵

Most of the people of the Nashya Sheikh Community of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts are labours. During the period of the second half of the 20th century many families had huge amount of land. But through the passes of time this situation has been changed. And most of them lost their stable economic identity. The lack of education and social consciousness were played a pivotal role behind this unorganized and static situation. As a result they migrated from the village to the towns in order to search for work.¹⁶ After being jobless they have arrived to different towns and they forced to take the work of rickshaw puller, some works as the servant to some rich families and some people are also involved with the small shopkeeper. Thus the people of this community fulfilled the needs of the increasing demand of labour class. During the recent time, a few number of tea garden getting stopped in which generally the tribal people involved. As a result the tribal people are migrate everywhere outside the tea garden in searching work and people who used to work at different towns or place for the work like house construction etc have become jobless. By this situation they started to migrate outside the state such as Gujrat, Kerala, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh etc. Still many young people from Nashya sheikh and Rajbanshi community are migrate to other states. It is not only

confined with the district of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar but also some other regions of Assam also. A woman of the Nashya sheikh helps men in the work of agriculture.¹⁷

Service:

The numbers of the Government service holder among the Nashya Sheikh communities are very less in comparison to other communities. Because in the field of Education, the representation of the people of Nashya Sheikh Community are very few. On the major important factor behind this static situation was they keep their traditional identity as the farmer and as they involved in the agricultural activities they had no profound economic condition to take the further studies. It is very shameful to say that still they remain as the believer on some traditional superstitions belief. What will be the benefit to take higher studies? As they are the sons of the farmer so they are have to take agriculture as their profession.¹⁸ Even if we look after into the modern situation we can easily find out this situation among the people of Nashya Sheikh Community. This situation can severally seen not only in the cases in Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar Districts but also in other regions. There are very few candidates who got the Governments service as the representative of Nashya Sheikh Community. For instance, few names of the people of the Nashya Sheikh Community who got the Government service are as follow- Abdul Karim of Duramari (Retired serviceman of Government Hospital in Group-D), Aminur Rahaman of Deomali (Retired Teacher of Primary School), Jogbar Rahaman of Dhupguri (Retired High School Teacher), Hyder Ali of Deomali (Retired high School), Musaraf Karim of Duramari (Retired Primary Teacher), Bakkas Rahman of Kalirhat (Retired High School Teacher), Shahinsa Hossain of Saptibari (High School Teacher), Karim Rahman of Nathua Hat (High School Teacher), Raju Rahamn of Nathua Hat (High School Teacher), Maminul Islam of Duramari (Uttar Banga Unnayan Parshad-Group-D), Rafik Hossain of Deomali (G.P. Sahayak), Mainul Haque of Deomali (Indian Army), Mumin Islam of Dhupguri (Municipality), Rinku Islam of Nathua Hat (Assam Riffle), Bapi Islam of Duramari (Indian Army), and many others.¹⁹

There hardly possible to find out the woman candidates of Nashya Sheikh Community in the sector of Government service. The main reasons are that they are usually did not get good chance to take their education. In this context it is to say that the policies and regulations implemented by the Government authority are not sufficient or adequate to eradicate this static condition. They do not feel comfortable in this sector as their social condition and the consciousness of civil society are not notable. Although there are some candidates who are able to take Higher studies as they lives in town or such proper location. But the situation has been different in the case of villages. Here it can be say from one of the Government field study that, some Muslim women who are involve with as Mahila Sasthya Karmies are as follow- Saphiya Khatun of Nathua Hat, Meherrunnisa of Nathua Hat, Merina Begam of Duramari, Shiuli Begam of Dhupguri, Shahanaj Begam of Dhupguri, Anjuma Begam of Dawkimari and many others. Apart from this report some Muslim women School Teachers of Dhupguri Block are Maheda

Banu of Deomali, She was the First woman of Nashya Sheikh community who got the School service job in 2007 under SSC. In later time after reservation of OBC-A category by the Government of West Bengal, some more Nashya Sheikh Muslim women able to get the job under SSS i.e. School service Commission.. Among them some names are Beauti Begam of Dhupguri, Suriya Begam of Dhupguri, Aruti Parvin of Dhupguri, in 2013. In the present situation it is needless to say that after making reservation in the Government services for the OBC-A communities like Nashya Sheikh it is quite easier to get Government Service than earlier. Both in the cases of Male and Female of Nashya Sheikh community, the present situation in the sector of Government service are being changed.²⁰

Most common occupation pursuits of the *Nashya sheikh* living urban areas are; medium or petty businesses, hawking, tailoring, driving, Masoning, binding, packing, mechanical works, electrical works, leather and rubber works, bakery, crafts work, riska pulling and low grade services at organize and unorganised sectors of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar.²¹

Quite a number importance services are rendered by the *Nashya sheikhs* living in urban and rural areas of this two districts, which are either their traditional or non-traditional occupations. The most famous *Nashya sheikh* Muslims occupational groups in this area are cotton carders, bearing makers, butchers, tailors, mechanics, electricians, mason etc. The *Nashya sheikhs* have a monopolistic control over the trade of cattle, hide and bone. Garage wining and repairing of motor vehicles is specially monopolized by the Muslims. *Nashya sheikhs* in substantial numbers are seen involved in leather works. The function of the Nashya sheikhs named *Dhunia* (cotton carder) and *Darji* (trailors) deserve special mention. Several specialized items of decoration are also made by Nashya sheikhs who are mostly used in *pujas* and other festivals. *Nashya sheikhs* are considered as expert in mechanical works, electrical works, and masonry and colouring activities.²²

TABLE-1.1

Occupational Condition of Nashya sheikh Muslims in Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri Districts

Occupation	Percentage
A) Agricultural labour -	52%
B) Marginal unskilled labour-	26%
C) Bargadar, small famour-	17%
D) Solvent groups including service-	5%
Total	100%

Source: Occupational Condition of Nashya sheikh Muslims as per survey report: Anagrasar Muslim Sangram Samiti (U.B).²³

A survey was conducted by the *Anagrasor Muslim Sangram Samiti Mancha* and the data were placed before the commissions. The said sample survey was conducted among the Muslims covering a few *maujas* located in Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri districts. Total population cover was 6471. Data represent reveal that 2.26% of the sample population were employed in government services. Of the total sample population 52% survived as 'agricultural labourers' and 26% were 'marginal farmers'. The Bargadar or small Farmers 17% and 5% were Solvent groups including Service.²⁴

According to the West Bengal Commission for Backward classes Report- 8, the economic condition of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri district in general of this classes is not at all satisfactory. Most of them are very poor and 35% of the population lived below the poverty line. It has been submitted that they mostly pursue the lower graded profession as agricultural labour, cultivator, ricksaw pooler, mason, unskilled day-labour, craftsmen etc. There females are also completed to work in the field to assist in the running their families. As per their submission only 5% of them own land mostly below the ceiling, 20% have their own land below the ceiling and work in others'-land also, 20% are share cropper and about 50% service as agricultural labourers. Only 5% of them are engage in businesses; petty family businesses 3% and small trader /businessman 2%.²⁵

In field of Government employment the historically pathetic situation of Muslims did not change much even today. As per a non-Government statistics covering India from 1970 to 1980.

TABLE-1.2

Occupational percentages of Nashya Sheikh Muslims in various sectors

Occupation -	Percentage of Muslims
Doctor	2.5%
Engineer	2.0%
I.A.S.	2.86%
I.P.S.	2.00%
Income Tax Officer	3.06%
1 st Grade State Level officer	3.3%
Bank	2.18%
Private corporation	4.08%
Project on Low Interest	3.76%
Direct of Government Sponsored	1.8%

Sources: Rahaman, Bazlay, Mondal Kamishaner Report O Uttar Banger Muslim Samaj, Anagrasar Muslim Sangrami Mancha, Uttar Banga, 1996, p. 26.

Additionally national per head income is 4.147(all India level). The per head income among Muslims is 5% lower than this. Their financial capability is down by 20-25%.²⁶

Due to lack of adequate education among them, their representation 'services are also very significant'. The percentage with regard to doctors, engineers', chartered accountants, other professionals etc from their class is almost 'Nil'.²⁷

In recent times there has been a considerable change in above set pattern owing to increase of these districts populations due to ongoing migration of outside people, especially the immigrant population of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The emerging situation has mostly affected the virtual monopoly of the Muslims in those trade and occupations.²⁸

For various reasons, the educated middle class has not been properly developed among the *Nashya sheikhs* of present areas. Since the content of middle class among them each significantly very small the Muslim do not figure in any significant number either in white colour jobs or in political and administrative matters of the Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar. There are only micro scopes few *Nashya sheikhs* who are known to be higher status service holder. They are least organized and their commitment to their society is very significant. There is no reputed *Nashya sheikh* entrepreneur in Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri. It is to be noted here that accepting a very small section, majority of the Muslim are self employed and they engage in economic activities of marginal nature. A simple survey of rickshaw pullers of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri town reveal that seventy percent of rickshaw-walas of the town were of *Nashya sheikh* community.²⁹

The Muslims are the largest Minority Community in India and Bengal they constitute nearly twenty-three percent of the total population of the state. For various reasons Muslims in general are a traditional and Conservative community. The economic backwardness of the Muslims and their problems of modernization and change offer an interesting area of social science research. A study of nature and character of the Muslim social Mechanism of this community inhabiting various parts of the subcontinent but in the present case it is confined to the Muslims of Koch Behar and Jalpaiguri in West Bengal.³⁰

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