

NASHYA SHEIKHS OF NORTH BENGAL IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: A STUDY OF ETHNICITY & IDENTITY DYNAMICS

Md Nabiul Islam¹

Abstract

North Bengal comprises of Malda, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Alipurduar and Kalimpong districts. The residential Muslim population is one of the most important indigenous people of this region and all together as per census encompasses 25 percent of the total population in North Bengal. In this context the Muslims are the most important minority religious group in this region. They have been living in this region, even before their conversion to Islam and a large portion of indigenous Hindu population converted to Islam in 15th to 18th century. This research paper deals with the Nashya Sheikh of North Bengal with special reference to their ethnicity and Identity dynamics.

Keywords : *Nashya, Nasto, Gentiles, Bhabo Musalman, Rajbangshi Muslim.*

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

¹ Md Nabiul Islam, PhD scholar, Dept. of History, North Bengal University

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 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 Afganisthan, 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

In this regard the famous politician and social worker Upendranath Barman wrote that, 'originally the Rajbangsi Muslims were converted from Hindu society and they entitle Nashya Sheikh. In this regard we have to mention another eminent writer's view about Nashya Sheikh. Panchanan Barma an eminent Rajbangsi leader in colonial North Bengal also noticed the conversion of Rajbangsi into Nashya Sheikh in large number, since the heydays of his career as an advocate. The term Nashya was came from the word '*Nasto*' as such kind of community were converted from conservative Hindu society that's why they were announced by the Hindu as diluted or *Nasto*, even in the government records, Gazette, *Dalil* etc. Nashya Sheikh however speaks in Rajbangsi language. Not only in language their food habits, dress up, culture, profession etc. are very much similar that of the Rajbangsi's. Nashya Sheikh are peace loving and has a cordial relation with their neighbours. Religiously

they are also liberal and less orthodox, even they are also very much close to Hindu Rajbansi people and it is remarkable that among them the Purdha system was very rare. But economically Nashya Sheikh were dependent on village Cultivation, very few among them were service holder as the same time they were not interested in business, Small handicraft Industry. Though cultivation was their main profession yet they were mostly landless. As a result most of them are below the poverty line.⁷

To Risley goes the credit of first making anthropometric studies that strengthened the hands of sociologists, anthropologists and historians concerned with Indian phenomena, Risley took special interest in the Bengal situation. Among other things he contended, on the basis of anthropometric data on a limited scale, that the Muslims of Bengal were primarily local converts from the lower rungs of the Hindu caste ladder. It is understandable, if undeniable, that Ripley's pioneering venture is not above criticism. But there is little sense in treating his work as a mere scrap of paper, as both Fazle Robbie and Rahim would have us do. It would be a mistake to think that Riley made a generalisation about the whole Muslim community in intended to do was to show that the Bengal. All that he lower strata of both the Muslim and the Hindu society of Bengal sprang from the same ethnic stock. This is why he relied on the anthropometric data regarding Muslims collected from some one hundred and eighty-five jailed convicts belonging to lower echelons of the social structure. This again is Risley's Tribes and Castes of Bengal is a monumental work in two volumes, each volume being further sub-divided into two parts. Vol- I contain the Ethnographic Glossary and the second one contains detailed tables of Anthropometric Measurements. the reason for the corresponding measurements of the Hindus being taken caste wise to establish the identity of the former group not with the upper section of the Hindu society but the lower one, which is quite evident

from his figures" This resolves the doubt raised by Rahim as he points out: Risley took the measurement of the nose of very lower [sic] class Muslims, while, on the other hand, he had the nasal examination of the persons of all classes of the Hindus, The real point of weakness in Risley's work lies in the extreme meagreness of his data and the lack of adequate scientific method and equipment necessary for such investigations. Risley, however, had set the a process of inquiry which was carried on and stage for applied to the Bengal situation by P.C. Mahalanobis, B.S. Guha and others. he most systematic and adequate study has, however, been made through the collaboration of an anthropologist, D.N. Majumdar, and a statistician, C.R. Rao, under the auspices of the Indian Statistical Institute. The result of their work has been computed, analysed and incorporated into a quantitative study entitled Race Elements in Bengal. The most important feature of this investigation is that they proceeded independently on the basis of common data and arrived at similar conclusions. Among other problems, which they set themselves, one was whether Muslim and non-Muslim groups can be said to belong to two different populations Beverley, and if not, what was the relative place of Muslim groups, vis-a-vis the Hindu castes and tribes. It is not our purpose to go into the main lines of their investigations. We content ourselves with certain broad conclusions with closest bearing on our problem, which vindicate the position of Risley. To quote from the Report: As regards the relative position of Muslim groups, we notice that nine groups out of a total of fifteen fall within a narrow range of mean nasal height (21.80 to 22.20). All these nine groups have almost identical mean values as the two Namasudra groups, five have lower mean values and stand very close to tribal cluster and only one, i.e. Muslim of Dacca [the name applied to a group under study] occupies a position close to the caste groups. The Report proceeds: If we agree as to the competence of nasal height in defining group divergences, I feel that we should

look among the tribal and scheduled caste non-Muslim groups of Bengal for a possible origin of Muslim population of Bengal, and not in the high caste groups, a fact which differentiates the Muslims of U.P., who cluster with the higher castes in nasal height from those of their co religionists in Bengal. The serological data collected by Majumdar from practically all the districts of Bengal lead to the same. The Candalas have changed their caste name to Namasudra since the census of 1901.⁸

Referring to the Koch women of north Bengal with special reference to Rangpur, Glazier observes: the women of the common people wear the old Kamrup dress, which offers a marked contrast to the common Saree of Bengal. It consists of a square piece of coloured cloth, indigo-striped, passing under the arms and round the back, so as to cross in front where the upper corners are tucked in, leaving the head and shoulders bare, and reaching to the knees below. All women, Hindus and Muhammadans alike, dress in this fashion; and they also attend the markets and transact the buying and selling, to the almost total exclusion of men. Shihab ud-Din Talish writes, The Muslims whom we met in Assam are Assamese in their habits and Muhammadans but in their name, In fact they liked the Assamese better than us.⁹

Foreign elements must be looked for chiefly in the ranks of the Saids, Pathans and Mughals. Even here there are many who are descended from Hindus, and ... high caste converts are often allowed to assume these titles, and, in some cases, to intermarry with those who are really of foreign descent, their number, however, is possibly only a small proportion of the total, and may be neglected. If the above estimates be taken as a basis, it would appear that the strength of the foreign element amongst the Muhammadans of Bengal cannot, at the most, exceed four millions, or say, one-sixth of the total number of persons who profess the faith of Islam, Besides

local conversion, the other aspect of the question, concerning the social and cultural background of the majority of the indigenous converts, is also a very complex one. History does not help dispel the mist surrounding the actual process of conversion of such a vast number of people in the country, beyond a few recorded sporadic cases; these are quite inadequate for making generalizations on their basis. Besides, those cases have elusive reference to the upper sections of the Hindu society. Not much can be made out of this. Common knowledge and impressions, backed up by ethnological facts, point strongly to a conclusion about which history maintains an unfortunate silence, this need not take us by surprise nor drive us to wrong premises. If the conversion of the masses does not find place in history, the history of the masses is of recent development. The affinities of the Muslim masses of east Bengal have been observed with the Chandalas and the Pods, and those of north Bengal with the Rajbansis and Koces. The conclusion is based not only on their striking physical resemblance, but also on the fact that the proportion of Hindus of other castes in these parts of the country has always been very small. The Koces are generally supposed to have spread in any numbers only as far westward as the Mahananda, which runs through the Purnia district. East of that river, where the bulk of the population was Koch, no less than two-thirds were Muslims, while to the west of it, where the Koch element was weak, less than one-third of the population was returned under the religion. The main castes were the Rajbansis (including the Koces) in north Bengal, and the Caalas, 3rd and others in east Bengal. It may also be recalled that the Report of Maunder and Rao points out that nine out of the fifteen Muslim groups spread over the different districts of Bengal studied by them have almost identical mean values in the matter of nasal height as the two Namasdra groups, and five have lower mean values and stand very close to the tribal cluster. The Muslims belonging to this social and economic level constituted, at the census

of 1901, about five-sixths of the total Muslim population of Bengal. Here again Rahim as his own statistical figures and conclusions. We quote him without comment: of the 70 per cent converted Muslims, at least half of them came from the upper strata of the Hindu and the Buddhist communities and the rest was recruited from the lower class. Thus the Bengali Muslim population was formed of about 30 per cent converts from the upper class non-Muslims and 35 per cent converts from the lower strata of the Hindu society. This explodes the theory that the Bengali Muslims were converts mostly from the low caste people of the Hindus. No society of the sub-continent could claim to represent a larger percentage of the immigrant Muslims and converts from the upper class Hindus as well as the Buddhists.¹⁰

If the indigenous element was a significant constituent in the forces of change and adjustment, the fact that the character of the Muslim masses in Bengal was predominantly rural was not less consequential for the development of Islam in the land. Islam may be characterized as 'a religion of the townspeople', and to the Muslim, 'a town was a settlement in which his religious duties and his social ideals could be completely fulfilled. While discussing the question of Indian Muslims from this standpoint, Mujeeb notes: Islam has, in all countries, promoted urban life, and Muslim civilization has everywhere been essentially urban in character ... the standards of life and culture have been urban: the ideally good life has been life 'among men', in habitations where the variety of habits, tastes and conditions has provided sufficient opportunity for cultural and spiritual experience. Educated Indian Muslims have, therefore, thought of their community as consisting primarily of city-dwellers, and judged themselves as a people setting up and conforming to standards of city-life; the Uneducated, uninformed population of the countryside has not been given the consideration to which it is entitled by the very fact of its existence. This is

understandable, because, almost the whole contribution of the Muslims in manners, in literature, in art, is seen in the cities. Bengal marks a significant departure from this pattern of Islamic culture.¹¹ In Bengal the Muslims appear to take less readily to a town life than the Wolf, E.R., *passim*; Watt, W.M. Muhammad at Mecca, *passim*; also, his *Islam and the Integration of Society*¹²

There is considerable controversy regarding origin and ethnic identity of the Nashyas. It is usually believed that they are the converts to indigenous ethnic groups of North Bengal and bear a mixed ancestry. Actually they are considered to be the descendant of those Muslims who entered the fold of Islam from some indigenous groups, namely, Mech, Koch, Rajbansi and Polia. History reveals that the Pirs and Fakirs as well as some ruling personality's of late Medieval era made a significant contribution to the growth of Nashya community in North Bengal.¹³

The etymological meaning of the word Nashya is rooted in Bengali word 'Nasto'. The Rajbansi Hindus and others Hindu caste groups of the locality regard the Nashyas as their fallen (degraded or converted) section thus called them as Nasto-jati, which in local colloquial popularized is as Nashya Jyati. Since the Nashyas are converts of recent past they also known as Nao-Musalman, i.e., the new Muslim. They are highly integrated with the local population, i.e., Rajbansis, particularly in respect to their language and little traditions. Thus, at first sight they appear to be Rajbansis (a local Hindu caste group), but are really an indigenous Muslim group. Considering their ethnic origin and social culture history the Nashya are popularly known as Rajbansi Musalman or Rajbansis.¹⁴

They are also designated as Bhabbe Musalman. It was only a few decades before the Independence that the Nashyas were en masse exposed to and influenced

by the process of Islamization. As a result, in recent times, they are integrated with the structural framework of Muslim society in Bengal. But they still retain many elements of their pre-Islamic past (tradition) which gave them a unique identity. Considering their ethnic origin, social history, cultural attributes and retention of many elements of pre-Islamic traditions the Nashya are not favourably looked upon by other Muslims (Asraf or Khas) of the region. In this regard it may be noted that there is a Persian word 'Nosb' meaning a drinker. The Nashya perhaps had the drinking habit which is forbidden in Islam. Hence they were treated as a fallen Muslims. But the empirical reality of such a view of the higher status Muslims is difficult to establish.¹⁵

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 labourers. Once there was many Nashya Jote-dars, but nowadays for various reasons they have lost their big holdings. The Nashyas living in urban areas are engaged in shop-keeping, tailoring, masonry, 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 Nashyas of both the rural and the urban areas are poor. The Nashya community is endogamous in character. The community is further sub-divided on the lineage which is reflected by the use of their surnames. The most popular surnames among the Nashya are Bapari, Pramanik, Sarkar, Sardar, etc. Intermarriages take place among them. Hence there is no social differentiation on the basis of surnames.¹⁶

As a community the Nashya are endogamous. Marriage between Nashya with other Muslim groups, particularly with so called higher social status is not a usual

practice. Monogamy is the most common type of marriage among them, but polygamy may occasionally be found (3%). The average age at marriage of Nashya males and females are 23 years and 17 years respectively. Marriage by negotiation is a traditional practice. Widow Remarriage is allowed among them. Both surrogate and levirate systems are also followed. Payment of bride price was once prevalent among the Nashyas, but nowadays, it is completely replaced by the dowry system. The marriages are solemnized as per Islamic rules, but rites and rituals in marriage are very much governed by the local traditions. Simple nuclear families are in prevalence among the Nashyas. However, joint families are still noticed among the landowning families. The average family size of the Nashyas is of 5 members. The Nashyas follow both classificatory and denotative types of kinship terminology. Their kinship terms show a mixture of Bengali, Arabic and Urdu terms mixed with the local language. An important feature that occurs among the Nashyas as a result of Islamization is in the realm of kinship and marriage alliances with the cross-cousins (FSD and MBD) and are normally avoided the parallel cousins (FBD and MSD). But in the present time Nashya Muslims are adopting both the parallel and cross-cousin marriages.¹⁷

Traditionally, the Nashya are organized among themselves at the village and local level through elder's council locally known as paich, had multifarious roles to govern the community and to look after their socio-religio-cultural issues. But today it has lost many of its traditions due to influence of formal statutory panchayats and party politics. The Nashya today participate in modern political process, but their position in power politics is of peripheral significance. The representation of the Nashya in different political bodies at local, regional, state and national level is

however very low. The socio-economic backwardness of the Nashyas is considerable to be the primary reasons of their political marginalization.¹⁸

The state of education among the Nashyas is very disheartening. For historical, situational and socio-cultural reasons the educated middle class has not been properly developed among the Nashyas. Since the content of the middle class among them is significantly very small, the Nashyas do not figure in any significant number either in white-collar jobs or in politico-administrative matters of their locality. A case study among the Nashyas of a Village in Darjeeling district reveals that, among them 40.27 percent was illiterate and 59.73 percent literate and educated. Among the literate and educated 27.82 percent had primary education, 24.86 percent had secondary education and only 7.05 percent had higher secondary and college education. Another case study of a Cooch Behar village shows that among the Nashya 48 percent was illiterate and 52 percent was literate and educated. Of the literate 24 percent and 5.38 percent had higher secondary and college education.¹⁹

The Nashya are Sunnis and follow the tradition of Honafi School. In social-religious matters they follow the guidelines of the Barelvi School (Madrasha) of thought. But in recent times the Deobondi School (Madrasha) of thought through Tableau activities has made significant impact on them. The belief in Pirism is still a typical feature among them. Thus they are affiliated to the Muslim saints or Pirs. The Nashyas celebrate all the major Muslim festivals and perform the basic religious rites and ceremonies. But they tend to accept without much criticism the traditional social customs, which have passed to them from previous generation. This continuity of little traditions facilitates them to integrate and assimilate the local society dominated by the Hindu Rajbansis. On the socio-religious level the Nashya cultivate the traits of

Islamic great tradition to operate within the framework of wider Muslim society. The process of Islamization helped them in achieving a social position within the structure of a Muslim Society in Bengal. Local Moktabs, madrashas and masjids (mosques) which are either associated with the Barelvi or the Deobondi traditions play a very significant role in Islamizing the Nashya community. The major life-cycle rituals observed by the Nashya are on the occasions of birth, circumcisions (in case of boy), marriage and death. The basic rites in respect of all these events are followed and performed according to local traditions. The Nashya women do not follow the strict seclusion or Purdah system, which is a characteristic feature of Muslims belonging to the upper strata. The women folk of poor Nashya families participate in agriculture and other economic activities to support their family. The Nashya enjoy ambiguous social position. The Muslims of upper social strata usually keep a social distance from them on the ground of their pride being 'high-born' and attributes of Islamic culture. But the Nashya believe themselves as a part of Muslim Umma (community) and strongly condemn the ethno centric views of other Muslim groups of so-called higher status who accorded the lower social position to them.²⁰

For achieving higher social status Nashya followed the path of Islamization in various aspects of their social-cultural life even in naming and designating their own community. They claimed themselves as Nashya-Sheikhs to elevate their social position within the larger framework of the Muslim society. They have adopted the title sheikh in the ground of their affiliation to Pirs who happened to be the said social (ethnic) category. Apropos the Sufi sheikh they named their community Nashya Sheikhs and thereby justified their social position in the local society. But the high status Muslims in general are not ready to accept the Nashya Sheikhs at their par. This is because of the fact that the Nashyas used the title 'Sheikh' as suffix,

but not as a prefix, which has been a normal practice among the higher status Sheikhs of India. This debate and counter-debate lead to a very complex social situation and it motivated the Nashya community to think about themselves in respect to their social position in Muslim Society.²¹

A cultural-duality is extremely visible in Nashya community. As a Muslim group, the Nashya have been Islamizing some of their cultural traits to get a social status (recognition) within the larger framework of Muslim society, and for this they interact with the other Muslim groups of their locality. On the socio-religious level the Nashyas cultivate the traits of Islamic great tradition for achieving a wider Muslim identity. The institutions through which they cultivate the Islamic great tradition are the Mosques and Madrashes. In recent times the most important organization of the Nashyas is Tablique-Jamat. This is purely a religious mission and a movement, and its basic goal is religious devotion rather than Jihad. While on the other hand, the backward socio-economic condition of the Nashyas and the ethno-political situation of the region have made them ethnicity conscious, and forced them to sink into the cell. As a matter of fact on the politico-cultural level the Nashya emphasized to revive and cultivate the traditional cultural traits of their pre-Islamic past as a mark of their ethno-cultural identity and community solidarity. The media through which they revitalize their tradition are dialect, material culture, food habit and various elements of the little tradition. These they follow along with their non-Muslim neighbours. For various reasons an ethnic trend is getting prominence in the Nashya society. A very small section of their leadership has been demanding Kamatapuri language as their mother tongue. These two social processes of different nature i.e. universalistic Islamization (Muslimization) and particularistic traditionalization among the Nashya of the present times. These unique features of

social organization and cultural dualism are maintained by them through the process of compartmentalization.²²

The socio-economic life of the Nashya which we have examined in the foregoing sections clearly reveals that they have been suffering from the stigma of backwardness. Their low social position, lack of educational advancement, political marginalization and inadequate representation in the fields of trade, commerce and government service have put them in to a precarious social position and emerging ethno-political situation of the country made the Nashya Sheikhs ethnic as well as class conscious. This mind-set has motivated them to sink into the cell. As a result, socio-politically the Nashyas have been emphasizing to revive their indigenous cultural traits of pre-Islamic past as a mark of their ethnic identity and community-based class solidarity. The media which they follow along with their neighbouring non-Muslim communities are the Rajbansis. The emerging ethno-political movement of North Bengal and neighbouring areas of North-East India as well as other parts of the country have made a great impact on the Nashya community. The backward class movement and the State recognition of the OBCs have also influenced the said society. In recent times the Nashya Sheikhs living in different parts of North Bengal are very much aware of their ethnic, social, economic and political positions. Various obstacles to social uplift gradually strengthening their 'in-group' ('we') feeling. This has made them ethnic as well as class conscious. Consequently ethnicity is getting prominence in the Nashya society.²³

The government of West Bengal so far identified 8 Muslim Group as OBCs on the basis of their occupation and socio-economic condition. These groups are Jolha (Ansari/Momin), Fakir (Sain), Howari, Dhunia, Patidar, Kasai, Nashya Sheikh and Pahadia Muslim. The Muslim OBC movement in West Bengal is slowly but

gradually gaining momentum. Although there is no strong state-level organization of OBC Muslim in West Bengal, but the evidence of their activities are very often noticed at a local and regional levels. The most notable among them is Uttar Bongo Anagrasar Muslim Sangram Samiti (UBAMSS). The Samiti is Government Registered Social Organization of OBC Muslim in West Bengal (Reg. No. S-95179). The community leader of the Nashya Sheikh sans many other Muslim groups are now the active members of UBAMAA and through which they raised their own profile. The Samiti has recently entered into the political scene and has been demanding reservations and other benefits for the Muslim OBCs, especially of North Bengal region. The Samiti has developed a strong organizational network at micro- and macro-level by constituting the village, block, district and control committee within the region of North Bengal. The activities of the Samiti are very much enthusiastic in organizing movements to protect the interests of the Nashyas and Sheikhs and other indigenous backward Muslim groups of the region. The leader of the Samity are ended very successful in scheduling the Nashya Sheikh as one of the Muslim OBC group in West Bengal (Notification No. 84-BCW/RC-302/97, dated 1 march 1999). The Samiti is taking much initiative to help the members of the Nashya Sheikhs and other Muslim OBC groups (Ansari, Momin, Pahadia Muslims) who face several difficulties at the ground level to obtain OBC and other benefits. The activities of the Samiti have created an atmosphere, which encourage youths of the Nashya Sheikh community to strive for economic and educational benefits like reservation of seats in government jobs, political bodies, and educational institutions. The Samiti is very successful in awakening the indigenous and backward Muslim groups of North Bengal.²⁴

Ethnically, most of the Muslims of the district are not very different from the indigenous Rajbanshis or Paliyas but they are undoubtedly Muslims who show signs of foreign extracts” (Page -88). There are many other observations which go to show that the physical features, socio-cultural characteristics of the Koch, Rajbanshis (Scheduled Caste) resemble with those of their Muslim counter-parts here, majority of whom have been converted from the Rajbanshis. Deeds of land produced show the names recorded as Saban Nashya, Jamir Nashya, Sayam Nashya etc. All the above records and evidences to show that they are an identifiable low social Muslim community who in the past four centuries have emerged as a result of conversion from the low ranked communities (Rajbanshi, Koch, Paliya). They speak the local Rajbanshi dialect in North Bengal. Their life style resembles in every respect, such as, dress, food, occupation, physical features, beliefs, customs, socio cultural and economic activities etc. with the Rajbanshi and the Paliyas. Although the Nashya Sheikhs are Muslims they have still retained their traditional customs, rites and rituals followed in connection with birth, marriage, death and in different festive occasions. Majority of them live in villages. A few, who reside in town due to their employment there, still have close connection with their relatives and fellow people in villages.²⁵

REFERENCES

1. Fulchad Barman, 'UttarbangerRajbansi Muslim Samaj: Prosango Nashya Sekh,(in Bengal) 'Angikar'(Sharad^oankhya), Arbinda Press, Cooch Behar, 1417(Bengali Year), pp.181-184.
2. Suraj Chandra Ghoshal, 'A History of Cooch Behar' (Translated from original Bengali) Chudhary,Khan Amanatullah, 'Coochbeharer Itihas' ,(Ed) Hiten Nag, National Library, Siliguri, Reprint, 2005, pp. 257-259.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Land document of Tungru Nashya, Asaru Nashya, Piyar Mamud Sheikh, (Koch Behar State in 1901).
5. Fulchad Barman,*op. cit.*
6. Bishnu Prasad Mukhapadhaya, *op. cit.*
7. *Ibid.*, p. 316.
17. Herbert Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal, vol. 1, 1892,* pp. 45-65.
18. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 136-138.
22. M. Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslims*, London, 1967, pp. 122-130.
23. *Ibid.*
30. Sheikh Rahim Mondal, *op. cit.*, p. 315.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*,p.317.
34. Sheikh Rahim Mondal, 'Emerging Ethnicity Identity among the Nashya shaik of North Bengal,' of Bhadra, R. K, Bhadra, Misra(Ed.) *Ethnicity, Movement and Social structure contested cultural Identity*, Rawat Publication, Jaipur, 2007, pp.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 318.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 318-319.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*, p. 320.
39. *Ibid.*, pp. 320-321
40. *Ibid.*, p. 321.
41. *Ibid.*, p.322
42. West Bengal commission for Backward Classes-Report-8, 29th Oct, 1997.