

CHAPTER - II

NASHYA SHEIKH COMMUNITY OF NORTH BENGAL IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Standing in front of the map of unbroken Bengal, one can see the river Teesta on his forehead. The face of that Bengali mother's '*Jhapta Sinthi*' is North Bengali. Adjacent to the Himalayas, it is located between 24 to 27 north latitude and 88 to 90 longitudes. In the distant past, this region was also known as '*Pundra*' and '*Barindra*'. *Mahasthanagarh*, Brahmalipi of the 2nd century BC mentions '*Pundakal*' or *Pundnagar*. Later it came under the jurisdiction of the Gupta State. The undivided Rajshahi division of 1872 had an area of 17694 square miles. After the partition of 1947, the area became North Bengal with 21625 sq km out of 87853 sq km, a quarter of the part of West Bengal. The area of the northern part of the other side (now Bangladesh) is a quarter of that country i.e., 36369 sq. km out of 147570 sq km. We can imagine a united North Bengal with 5 districts on the other side of the country after the partition of the country. Here Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Bihar, West Dinajpur (later became 2 separate districts) and Malda. On the other side are Rajshahi, Bogra, Pabna, Dinajpur and Rangpur.¹

There are six districts in North Bengal namely Malda, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar. Its geographical location is Ganges in south to Himalaya in north and Bihar in West to Assam in east. The residential Muslim population is one of the most important indigenous people of this region. They are 25 percent of the total population in North Bengal in census 2001. 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. In large area of North Bengal, a large portion of indigenous Hindu population converted in Muslim in 15th to 18th century. So naturally they are very close to the indigenous Hindu population. Without the difference of religious faith there are various similarities in occupations, culture and tradition between the Muslims and Hindu population of North Bengal.²

Reference is made to the present North Bengal, as the eight northern districts of West Bengal. Ganges is the division of South Bengal and North Bengal. Past North Bengal has three districts in present day Bangladesh of Rajshahi, Dinajpur and Rangpur. However, the subject matter of this chapter is the Nashya Sheikh Muslim community in fragmented of Historical perspective of North Bengal. Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Malda and newly formed two districts Kalimpong, Alipurduar are the residents of these eight districts. Muslims make up a quarter of the Mate's population, or about four million. Their outward identity is that Islam is a minority community, but they are divided into a few notable communities. They have the opinion of the other ten people, individual ethnographic, historical and social context. It is in this overall being that they are basically known and flowing in the flow of time. The Growth of Islam in North Bengal in the early thirteenth century. Accordingly, the history of the Muslim population is the last seven or eight hundred years. But the pre-history of the people who converted to Islam at that time can be traced back to Pre-Vedic times. From time immemorial, the descendants of the people who survived pre-astrological, *Pundravardhana* urban civilization, and fought many natural disasters and wildlife in the revering geographical terrain, were once the Semitic Arabs of Islam. While sitting, entered a new spirituality and social life by finding peace and in the secret faith of the mind. But their history was not lost in it, the inhabited land was not extinct, it was not erased. Physical structure likeness, language, profession and culture have

not changed. Their position and existence in the Museum of Anthropology is still important today. On the way, they have been accompanied by the neighbouring people, the foreigners, and the various Muslim nations of the foreign kingdom. Today, they seem to be one in harmony, but the language, the culture that has not been erased, does not have to end, the storm survives and somehow, they can be recognized. When touched by a skilled and artistic researcher, the picture of these familiar people can be very clear, their walk, society and life can be seen in the paintbrush.

Prag-Jyotishpur in North Bengal is a mythical name. No detailed history is available. However, '*Pundravardhana*' is the symbol of the ancient urban civilization and towns of North Bengal. The area adjoining *Pandua* in the present Malda district is the ancient city of *Pundravardhana*. Grip is believed to have existed from 1500 to 320 B.C. There are no traces of urban civilization among the Austronesians and Mongolians among the three major ancient human ghettos in North Bengal. But the Dravidians, according to the Indus region, also developed urban civilization here. These Dravidians were the ones who challenged the external Aryan Civilization. These were identified by the Aryans as the main enemies and referred to in their texts as the '*Durshujati*' or bandit nation'.³ They called the other two humanistic octopuses and Mongoloids '*Nishad*' and '*Kirat*' respectively.⁴ Again, their language is incomprehensible. Aitareya Aranya has been called '*Pakshikalpa*' as it sounds like the sound of a bird. However, in the eyes of the powerful Aryans of the higher religions, cultures and languages, the ancient inhabitants of North Bengal were reprehensible and inferior. Therefore, the inhabitants of this region have crossed the historical centuries with mythological, classical and historical condemnation and neglect. Today, no matter what name they are known as Rajbangsi, Muslim, Baro, Santal, Nepali, Polia, the tradition of contempt and neglect seems to be going on equally. The Muslim communities of present-day North Bengal are mainly descendants of the ancient Austro-Dravidian-Mongolian people. The main

peoples' intoxication bears the identity of the Nashya Sheikh Mongoloid human race. Dravidian influence can be seen in Shershahbadia, Khotta, Momin etc. And the Austronesian influence is evident in a few small Muslim communities. Ansari, Hajjam, Khotta, Beldar etc. people from Bihar have taken their place next to them. The hill Muslims of Darjeeling could not leave the hill and go elsewhere. The mountains are their ghost-future, the refuge of their livelihood. The Bhatia Muslims of Sylhet, Mymensingh and Pabna in East Bengal seemed to be trapped in a delusion at the beginning of the twentieth century in the Kaljani river valley land of Cooch Bihar. While dreaming, they settled in Barai Bari of Cooch Bihar district and Mainaguri village of Jalpaiguri district. They make a living by selling snakes, amulets and stealing. At one time Islam became enchanted with the mantra. Today, their identity is Muslim.

Those who practice history are helpless in the face of a mysterious maze, the Arab general Mohammed bin Qasim conquered the Indus in the second decade of the eighth century and Bakhtiyar Khalji came to Bengal in the first decade of the thirteenth century. Sometimes there is a gap of 500 years, but Bengal has the highest proportion of Muslims in the country as a proportion of the population.⁵ Why this abnormal swelling? Various kinds of interpretations are there, some talking about the influence of Sufi saints, some talking about the greed for high position in the royal court, some talking about converting to Hinduism due to the oppression of the upper caste, some talking about the theory of coercion. But none of them could be established on the basis of information. However, in terms of the history of the English, the practice of history in the 'Middle Ages' has been very extensive. Historians like Ramesh Chandra Majumdar say, "One of Bakhtiyar Khilji's national servants became the emperor of Gaur."⁶ It is not surprising that all these instances encouraged the conversion of lower-class Hindus to Islam." However, it is difficult to accept that one person converted to Islam in droves, inspired by the example of receiving. Recently, Nazrul Islam, a writer and

essayist, in his book *'Hindu-Muslim Relations'* opined that 'as a result of propagating these devout Sufis for hundreds of years, people converted to Islam in groups.'⁷ Surjit Dasgupta sought to present a materialist explanation by refuting the views expressed in his books *'Bharatvarsha' and 'Islam'*. We know that under the pressure of multidimensional events, history turns its face, and with it comes culture, geographical location, public life, socio-economic conditions, and so on. If you want to know the nature of an event, you have to look at everything. During the Maurya rule in India, Buddhism also spread in Bengal. During the Gupta reign of the fourth and five Centuries, Brahmanism was favoured by the Raj, but there was no impediment to the practice of Buddhism.⁸ But in the reign of Shashanka in the seventh century after the fall of the Gupta Empire, this religious generosity was not maintained. According to Dinesh Chandra Sen, Shashanka had issued an order to kill Buddhists as soon as they saw them. He wrote, "The way in which the Hindus defeated Buddhism and destroyed Buddhist history is shameful." Harprasad Shastri, said with the information of that Janapada (East Bengal) where more than one crore Buddhists and 11500 monks lived, not a single Buddhist scripture was found after thirty years of effort." Buddhist monks were forced into the lowest strata of society. Even then, hopefully, the Buddhist Palas ruled Bengal from eight centuries to four hundred years. On the occasion of the decline of the Pala kingdom in the twelfth century, the Sena dynasty of southern India first spread to West and East Bengal, then to North Bengal.⁹ However, it is important to remember that at that time the whole of Bengal was not identified as an integral political territory. That episode of Bengali identity is quite shaky. Bakhtiyar Khalji captured Nadia in 1204 AD and Muslim rule began in Bengal.¹⁰ According to Sukhmoy Mukherjee, a large number of Muslims entered Bengal from that time. M.A. Rahim, thinks that "a large number of Iranian businessmen, saints, preachers, teachers and fortune tellers came and settled in Bengal after the conquest of Bengal by the Muslims."¹¹ The description of Bakhtiyar's expedition to the north is found in

Minhaj-i-Siraj's Tabakat-i-Nasiri: "After a few years, he got the news of the areas around Lakhnauti and began to aspire to occupy Tibet and Turkestan. For this purpose, he formed an army of about ten thousand cavalries. There are three races of people living in the mountains between Tibet and Lakhnauti. One is called Koch, the second is called Mech and the third is called Tharu. They all look like Turks, but they speak different languages – a lot between Hindustan and Tibetan. Ali Mech, one of the chiefs of the Koch and Mech tribes, was converted to Islam by Muhammad Bakhtiyar; this man agreed to drive him through the mountains." The subsequent history is of the tragic consequences and destruction of Bakhtiyar's desire for conquest. On the way back from Kamarupa, a river bridge was destroyed and most of his soldiers drowned while crossing the river. Bakhtiyar along with a few soldiers somehow managed to cross the river. Relatives of Ali Mech served the devastated Bakhtiyar. And fell ill and died. The modern name of the town of Bardhankot which Bakhtiyar reached after leaving Lakshnavati is Bardhankuti. The place is on the border of Bogra district in Rangpur district. Many have said that the spread of the Muslim religion began as a result of Bakhtiyar's campaign. North Bengal is an important region of Bakhtiyar's expedition. However, even before his arrival, Bengal had contacts with the Muslims, they also had settlements, the ancient coins of the Abbasid Caliphs were found in Paharpur of North Bengal, the coins of 788 AD In 1204, Bakhtiyar Khalji conquered *Nodirah*

¹² During his short reign he also established some Mosques, Madrasas and Khanqahs. In the context of Khanqah, Sukhmoy Mukherjee, M.A. Rahim thinks that if the saints were not in this country before Bakhtiyar, then why the need for the abode of the saints? Among the early Sufi saints in Bengal are Kazi Rukmuddin Samarkandi, Maulana Tafi-ud-Din Ardhi, Sheikh Sharfuddin Abu Tawasah, Baba Adam Shahid, etc., who initially played a role in the spread of Muslim religion in Bengal.¹³

Muslim arrivals and settlements have continued in North Bengal since the thirteenth century. People of different races and castes have come to Bengal from Turkey, Arabia, Iran, Khorasan, Afghanistan, Abyssinia, etc. and have assimilated into Bengal.¹⁴ Combining Indigenous Peoples with External Muslim Populations, the issue of Muslim population has been debated since British rule. The wall of the Murshidabad estate, Khandaker Fazle Rajbi, in his book *Haqiqate Musliman-i-Bangala*, mentions the successive reign of 76th Subedars, Raja Namiz, from Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji in the early thirteenth century to the next six and a half years of Muslim rule.¹⁵ All of them except Raja Qays, Jalaluddin Shah Ahmad Shah, Raja Todarmal and Raja Man Singh were Afghans, Mughals, Turks, Persians or Arabs. Bakhtiyar was a writer from Turkey, the last Nawab Mir Jafar Ali Khan from Arabia. They were accompanied by many religious and patriotic soldiers, administrators, officials and employees. All the Muslims who came to this country have remained united. The Muslim rulers of Gaur Bengal also welcomed them, gave those jobs and donated free land. In Rajshahi, Bogra, Dinajpur and Malda in North Bengal, there are numerous examples of such 'Madad-i-Maash' or Ayma help.

H. Riverley in 1872 and Rizli of 1901 commented that the Muslims in the region had converted from lower caste Hindus, but many modern sociologists disagreed. Riverley, argued in favour of his view, citing deep similarities in body features. However, many believe that the Muslim population in this part of Bengal increased significantly during the period and the Hindu-Brahmanical domination was not likely to be as strong. A historian like J. N. Sarkar has given this opinion. Mark Polo mentioned a lot of idolatry in the region. There is disagreement as to whether these idolaters were '*Hindus*'. This worship was performed by the people of the oppressed nation. Harprasad Shastri, believed that religion came from Buddhists. It may be mentioned that the practice of *Tantra* and the worship of gods and goddesses according to the practice of *Mahayantantra* in this region can still be seen in

folklore. Tantra influence can be seen in ancient *Tuksya* songs. According to Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay, *Dharmapuja* is an unorthodox ritual, derived from the Austronesian National Indigenous Society. According to J. Sarkar, the worshipers were ‘people of the oppressed society.’ They became true Hindus or their Aryanization took place in the middle ages, that is, when Islam was spreading in other parts of Bengal. Hinduism was not so strong before the arrival of Muslims in Bengal. He argued that temples of the pre-Muslim period were rare in Bengal. The temple was built even after the middle ages. He emphatically writes in his book ‘*The Construction of the Hindu Identity in Medieval Western Bengal the Role of a Popular Castes*’ that there is no evidence of the destruction of any temple when Muslims initially came here. Many have grown up in the unhistorical belief that "Bengal, like the rest of India, had a quiet golden age of prosperous Hinduism before the advent of Islam." In fact, North Bengal was the abode of *Paundra, Shabor, Koch, Mech, Rajbangshi*, who were religiously omniscient or Animist. Hinduism or Vedic rituals were rarely adopted in this region. Dr. Niharranjan Roy also thinks that at that time i.e., before the arrival of Muslims most of the Bengali society was outside the caste system. "There is no evidence that any temple was destroyed when the Muslims first came here," he wrote in "*Popular Cants*". Many people have grown up believing that Bengal, like the rest of India, had a peaceful golden age of prosperous Hinduism before the advent of Islam." In fact, North Bengal was the abode of Pound, Shabor, Koch, Mech, Rajbangshi, who were religiously Omniscient or Animist. Hinduism or Vedic rituals were rarely adopted in this region. Dr. Niharranjan Roy also thinks that at that time, i.e., before the advent of Muslims, most of the Bengali society was outside the caste system.¹⁶

One thing is clear, however, that even if a large number of ‘newcomer Muslims’ build permanent settlements in North Bengal, the number of this class can never surpass the mainstream population. The converted people of this country have played a major role in the

formation and development of the Muslim society. Many believe that most of these converts came from Buddhists. Many influences of Buddhist culture are present in the folklore of this region. Many identify the Shivling of the Jalpesh temple as a symbol of Vajrayana Buddhism. Khan Chowdhury Amanatullah Ahmed wrote in his *'History of Cooch Behar 'section of 'Islam Pracharak'*: It can be said that the spread of Islam in West Kamrup started in the beginning of the 13th century AD and later many saints and monks came to this region. The spread of Buddhism and Tantra in this western Kamarupa was in the past.¹⁷

According to Dr. McFarlane, the characteristics of blood that are found in caste, caste and invisible Bengali Hindus also prove in Bengali Muslims that Bengali Hindus and Muslims are a problem nation. Dr. Buchanan Hamilton also thinks that the Muslims of North Bengal are converts. It is not right that the majority of ordinary Muslim Muslims in North Bengal have converted to Islam because of the coercion of the Muslim rulers, nor is it right that they have become Muslims in groups from within Hinduism. The Muslims of this region are not a stranger nation or community alone. In fact, the people of the present Hindu and Muslim communities in North Bengal originate from the same biological source. However, an exceptional case can be noticed in the case of the Muslims of the Himalayan-adjacent Bengal. The physical characteristics of the Muslims here are identical with those of the dynasties. In fact, it seems to be the main force of human culture that binds society together through the construction of a mixed culture. The common man gives a new dimension to his culture through this mixture. The folk life that is the foundation of the northern village society, the folk sports, the festivals, the sources, the free spheres of drama music, breaking the fence of religious ties, everyone is one.¹⁸

Hindus have equally participated in Cooch Bihar and adjoining areas with Muslim singing in the songs of the one-time era or the song of the four ages. *Indra, Alla, Mahadev or Fatissa* is mentioned in this physiological song. Similar customs of the two communities can

be observed in the folklore of marriage, as a result of which the harmony is noticeable in yellow on the body, red sari from *chaulon* lamp etc. The Muslim wedding song firmly establishes this harmony. This loneliness can be seen in other folk rituals as well. *Goraksanatha's* song is about the arrival of the saints:

Ottar Hote Ashilo Pir Mukhe Champabari

Dudh Mangite Gelam Nanda Gowaler Bari.

(Champabari in the face of Pir come from the North I went to Nanda Goyal's house to ask for milk.)

The similarity of '*Bipasa*' of the Muslim society with the '*Bishuya*' or type of food of the Hindus on the day of *Chaitra Sankranti* is noticeable. In Bengal, adjacent to the Himalayas, all the rituals of Hindus and Muslims seem to be in harmony. Even in the case of such unclean observance of the dead, there are various conformities in the observance of rituals. Both communities observe 'Annuals'. It is a common practice in the rural Hindu-Muslim society to make a vow to the Pir by offering earthen horses or by tying a stone to a large ash tree or making a vow to the *Kanipir*. Signs of origin and coexistence can be seen in many reforms like waterfall, amulet taking.¹⁹

The largest component in the population of the North Bengal region was composed of Muslims. Taking the district as a whole Muslims constituted a minority, just one fourth of the total population. This was in marked contrast to the religious community wise composition of population in most of the districts in North Bengal including neighbouring Rangpur and Dinajpur in which Muslims formed a large majority.²⁰ In Jalpaiguri district the Muslims were in majority only in Boda, Pachagar and Tetulia *thana* areas adjacent to the districts of Rangpur and Dinajpur and had large concentration in two more *thana* (police stations) areas- Debiganj and Patgram which were transferred to East Pakistan (modern Bangladesh) after independence and partition in 1947.²¹

The Muslims of North Bengal however, did not constitute a homogeneous community or group. They had two major segments (a) the local Muslims the bulk of whom was composed of converted *Rajbansis, Koches and Meches* and (b) the Muslims who had migrated mainly from the east Bengal districts.²² It can be said beyond doubt that local Muslims were preponderant among the Muslim population in Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, North Dinajpur, south Dinajpur and Malda districts and particularly in the rural areas. It is mentioned well-intentioned that the local Muslims are in all respects identical with the local *Rajbansi Hindus, Meches, Koches* etc. except in religious beliefs.

The early history of the local Muslims is obscure. It is said by J F. Grunning in the District Gazetteer, Jalpaiguri (1911) that sheiks and Nashyas forming more than 99 percent of the Muslim population were native to the district.²³ About the Nashya Sheiks, it is believed that these people embraced themselves into Islamism, perhaps attracted by the humane appeal and preaching made by the *Pirs, Darbeshes* etc. According to Harendra Narayan Choudhury the title "*Nasya*" is significant. It is generally believed to be the corrupted form of "*Nasta*" means fallen or degenerated'.

It is evident from history that Muslim rulers and their lieutenant governors along with military army troops invaded the kingdom of Kamrup or Kamptapur and Cooch Behar in many a time. In the course of their invasion, they must have taken water, food etc. from the inhabitants in their way. Not only that they had conducted loot & robbery village after the village. These areas, after the departure of the troops, were declared by the upper caste Hindus as '*Nasta*' or corrupted, because they came in touch with the '*Mlecchas*' or untouchable Muslims. These people being ignored by the caste Hindu society gradually inclined to Islamism. Thus, the native autochthonous group people comprised themselves into Islamic fold. Thus, in course of time, these people gradually came in touch with the Sufis (who were aristocrat migrants), and inspired by these Sufis, they threw off their lower caste,

untouchable identity and got encouraged to take the title 'Sheik' as they are the disciples of the pir or sheik. Among the Muslims of the northern region of west Bengal particularly North Bengal the largest section of them is Nashya Sheikhs.²⁴ It is worth mentioning that though theoretically Muslim society does not believe in caste system, yet it has argued by scholars that even after conversion they could not throw away their previous socio-cultural practices and believing. Therefore, amongst the Muslims of the region also a tendency was there towards upward mobility.²⁵ The following poem which became an adage during that time proves the fact.

Aage chilam Tulia Ulla

Pare holam Uddin

Tabar pare Choudhury Saheb

Kapal firlo seidin'.²⁶

(Free English translation: At first, I was 'tulla', 'ulla' which were the surnames of the Muslims, then I got the surname as choudhury sahib and with this my social prestige has become upgraded.)

So, the bulk of the local Muslims were converted to Islamised autochthons like Rajbangsi's, Koch's, Paliya and Meches. However, a fair number of the Muslims in Jalpaiguri came originally from Dinajpur, Rangpur and Purnea districts and from the Cooch Behar state. The Baikunthapur Zamindars encouraged migration of Muslims from Dinajpur and nearby districts to facilitate extension of cultivation. Colonel Hedayat Ali of Patna, who took an important part in the Anglo-Bhutan war, also helped migration and settlement of some Bihari Muslims in the scantily populated Duars.²⁷ Some accounts also suggest that many of the Muslims of the district were most probably a mixed group with converts and immigrant Muslim soldiers and colonizers, who came in the wake of the Pathan and Mughal conquests, by living side by side and intermarrying with each other. It has also been viewed

by scholars that Islamization could notably progress because Hinduism was not deeply rooted among the autochthons of this part of North Bengal. In the Dooars region of Jalpaiguri a few Bihari Muslims are found who perhaps embraced Islamism during the period between 13th to 16th centuries.²⁸ With regard to the religious beliefs and practices it needs to be observed that the Islamized Rajbangsi's, Koches or Meches were not very strict in adhering to orthodox Islamic faith and tradition. Many of their observances had a folk form characterized by worship of Pirs and Mursheds and contained elements of nature worship and of non-orthodox Hinduism.²⁹

Islam spread in many contexts of social evolution in North Bengal. In addition to this, Islamization is also associated with some political events. Although the Nashya Sheikhs live in all the districts of North Bengal, Darjeeling and Malda have very few. They live only in the plains of Darjeeling and in the Ghazal and Chanchal blocks of Malda. According to historians, the origin of these Nashya Sheikh Muslims is Rajbangsi, Koch, Mech and Polia. There is no difference except in religion. English writer and government employee J. F. Grunnings mention in the 1911 report- "The Sheikhs and the Nashyas, who composed the majority of the Muslims of the district (Jalpaiguri), were in the main, natives of the district and in their appearance, dress and customs differed very little from the Rajbangsi's".³⁰ In fact, Nashyas are the sons of the soil in the North Bengal. All the traces of the local Koch-Rajbangsi's people are present in them. Mr. Grunning also mentions - "They were very much the sons of the soil". However, to know the context of their conversion, let's take a look at the history. However, the location of the famous Pir Sheikh Jalaluddin Tabrizi in the Gaur area is known even before this period. However, Minhajuddin's book refers to the inhabitants of marginal North Bengal as Koch, Mech and Khen. From this time onwards, Brahmin scholars from Mithila Kanauj and other places came to Kamatapur. Kamateshwar kings and subjects gradually converted to Brahmanical religion. This process was further accelerated in the next

Coach monarchy. Vaishnavism, Shaiva, Shakta religions are established. The Koch community, similar to the tribes, became known as Rajbangsi through the adoption of Brahmanical religion and Sanskrit language. Government documents support this, “The *Koches* and Rajbangsi’s and the *Meches* were speakers of the Boro-Sub-family of the Tibeto-Barmas family of languages. With Their Hinduization they have gradually shown preference of the Bengali, The Bengali written prose was introduced in the Cooch Behar court after the *koches* had become Hinduism founded a kingdom and became Rajbangsi.”³¹

However, the dynasties fell victim to the racism of Hinduism. Priests and socialist Brahmins neglected them as inferior. He also expressed reluctance to perform *puja-parvan* in their house. The Rajbangsi’s used to elect priests from among themselves without seeing *Upayantar*. Social discontent began to develop among them. And it is against this background that one Muslim campaign after another took place in North Bengal. Turkish-Pathan-Mughal generals have touched the soil of North Bengal many times. Hussain Shah, Kalapahar, Mir Jumla are especially notable among them. During the long journey, this Muslim army drank water from many ponds, collected food from many houses, looted many houses. Soldiers would leave at one time, but people would become irreligious, fallen or ruined. During these times, foreign Sufi saints used to appear as ambassadors of liberation under their rule. He used to attract the irreligious fallen people with the sublime message of monotheism, equality and brotherhood of Islam. Gradually these *pir* saints converted to Islam or became Muslims with initiation or mantra. However, it cannot be said that there was no coercion anywhere in the army operation. But looking at the tombs of innumerable saints, *dhams* (astanas), *chillas*, the location of *khanqahs* and the devotion of the people to *pir*, it is conceivable that the spread of Islam in North Bengal was mainly due to Sufi propaganda. However, the people who were identified as 'fallen' or 'ruined' on that day are said to be Nahsya Sheikhs, according to official documents. There is a text recognized by the

government of Cooch Bihar state “By far the majority of the Mahamedans are the Sheikhs, or as the popularly called *Nashyas*. They are like the greater portion of the Mahamedans of India descended from the Hindu converts to the religion of Mahammad. The title ‘*Nashya*’ is significant. It is generally believed to be corrupted from ‘*Nashta*’ which means “fallen” or “degenerated”, and thus appears to be the most probable nickname which the Hindu subjects of the Hindu principality would give their converted Co-religionists,”³² Eminent politician, writer, Constituent Assembly member and lawyer Upendranath Barman has unequivocally said, “There is no doubt that the Rajbangsi are the main inhabitants of Siliguri, Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, Dinajpur in North Bengal, the north-eastern part of Purnia district in Bihar and the western part of Goalpara district in Assam. The Muslims have mainly converted from among the Rajbangsi’s”³³ W.W. Hunter Says almost same thing-“The larger person descendent of Mahamedans in Rajsashi as on other neighbouring Districts (Districts of North Bengal), is to be attributed to the conversion to Islam of the numerous low castes which occupied it...the large number of Mahamedans found here is the present day who occupy the same social position as their Hindu niobous.”³⁴ Eminent anthropologist Dr. Atul Sur, following the opinion of English researcher Dr. Buchanan Hamilton, mentions that the Muslims of North Bengal bear the physical traits of the Mongol Koch nation, the Bengali newcomers (Turkish-Mughal-Pathan). ” That means they are strange to be a converted Koch (current Rajbangsi) nation.³⁵

In fact, 95 per cent of the Muslims in Indian society are indigenous Muslims. But they were not freed from the dominant racist practices of Hinduism. The process of caste mobilization was also transmitted from Hinduism to Islam. In the, only the Shudras are divided into three categories *Sat Shudra, Asat Shudra and Antyaja Varna*. The description of *Brihatdhoram Purana* is almost the same. The *Brahmavaivarta Purana* competition between these characters was who would be 'water-moving' and who would be 'water-immobile'. That is to say, the upper caste Brahmins would drink water in their hands, they would eat food in

their hands - in terms of which social status would rise and fall. The upper caste Brahmins were also accorded status in the categories of *Radi*, *Barindri*, *Purohit*, *Shvashan* etc.

From the time of Muslim rule there were two classes in the Muslim society of Bengal according to their social status. Such as *Asraf* and *Atraf*. To put it bluntly, "Muslim society was led by a handful of Turkish, Afghan, Iranian and Arabic Muslims from abroad. Others referred to it as *Atraf* or *Ajlaf*, meaning non-born. The *Ashraf* class consisted of Syed, Sheikh, Mughal, Pathan."³⁶ On the other hand, there were different sections even among non-Muslim Muslims. Of course, this section is based on profession. Converted Muslims did not usually change the profession they had before conversion and according to the name of the profession they were called as Gola, Jola, Hajam, Barber, Butcher, Tailor, Farmer etc. in the society.³⁷

Those who send the title of Khan. The officer in charge of the army was called Khan. Many Muslims and Hindus in this country have received the title of Khan due to their service in the army. Again, many have artificially used the title Khan to express aristocracy without any clues. Whether or not the Shersabadis of Malda Murshidabad are with the ethnographic, linguistic, cultural and professional Yagsutra Pathans, many of them identify themselves as Pathan descent from a few sources of history. And with that the aristocratic accessible Khan or Khan, Mandal, Sarkar, Chowdhury, Sardar, Biswas etc. are used.

Dai, a Muslim community in South and Uttar Dinajpur, is a sub-branch of *Nashya-Sheikh*. The word *dai* is synonymous with mother or milk mother. Milk-Mother was introduced in Arabia. Those who have completed the condition are breastfed for a few days to raise children in tradition and history, North Bengal was handed over. Hazrat Mohammad (*PBUH*) himself was brought up with a stepmother named Halima. This custom is not known to have been prevalent in the Muslim society of Bengal. But it is known that the women of the midwifery community were once skilled at delivering pregnant women and neonates and took it as a profession. But the older Lakers of this society call themselves the descendants of

that Arab midwife Halima *Bibi*. The present generation, however, does not want to introduce 'Dai', even if someone says it is dissatisfied. The main occupation of the Zola Muslims was weaving. It is said that during the reign of Bakhtiyar Khalji, these weavers were the first to convert to Islam in groups and later became known as Muslim Jola. In Islamic terminology, those who have unwavering faith in Allah, those who are polite in their conduct are *Momin*. However, the loom weaving profession is on the verge of extinction among the local *Momins* of Malda district and the *Momins* of Uttar Dinajpur from Bihar, mostly small farmers and agricultural labourers, but they are satisfied with the identity of the *Momins*.

The Muslim society of Bengal, as with varying degrees of importance in other parts of India, was composed of both immigrants and indigenous converts. The question of local conversion presents a historical complexity that has given scope for some intellectual wrangling. The controversy centres round whether or not the bulk of the Muslim people in Bengal are autochthons, and if so, what social and economic strata they were mostly derived from. When the British administrators first came in contact with the people of Bengal, they arrived at the conclusion that the Muslims constituted an insignificant number in the population. Their estimates, formed on very insufficient grounds, were generally assumed to be approximately correct.³⁸ Adam in his Education Report notes about the district of Rajshahi: Before visiting Rajshahi, we had been led to suppose that it was a peculiarly Hindu district.³⁹ Hamilton on official authority [the estimates of 1801] states the proportion to be that of two Hindus to one Musalman; and in a work published by the Calcutta School Book Society for the use of schools (1827), the proportion is said to be that of ten Hindus to six Musalmans. Adam's own investigations led him to reverse this to seven to three, or the proportion of 1,000 Musalmans to 450 Hindus. The first census of Bengal found 1,000 Muslims to 288 Hindus.⁴⁰ In 1830 the first census of the city of Dacca was taken by H. Watters, who estimated the native population at 66,667, of whom 35,238 were Muslims and 31,429

Hindus.⁴¹ In 1839 Taylor observed that the population of the district of Dacca consisted of Hindus and Muslims in nearly equal proportions. Even as late as 1860, the Revenue Survey arrived at the conclusion that the population of the Dacca district consisted of 455,182 Hindus and 449,223 Muslims. These estimates indicate the general conviction of earlier administrators until the first census of the whole of Bengal in 1872 revealed that, in Lower Bengal alone, there were 17,608,730 Muslims, of whom 7,948,152 or 45 per cent resided in the nine eastern districts, while the total number of Hindus in the same province was 18,100,438. Throughout the central and eastern districts, with the exception of 24-Parganas, the Muslims constituted at least one-half of the population. Within these districts is a central tract running from Rangpur and Mymensingh on the north to the Bay of Bengal, in every part of which the Muslims were in a decided majority. The discovery was too revealing to pass without an attempt to comprehend the phenomenon. The British administrators and observers strongly believed that this Muslim preponderance in the Bengal population resulted largely from the fact of local conversion.⁴² Early observers like Hodgson and Buchanan-Hamilton had already paved the way for Beverley, Wise, Risley and who argued strongly in favour of the theory of local conversion. But it is not so much the local conversion as such, as their opinionated view about the conversion from the lower rungs of the Hindu social ladder that drew stiff opposition from some quarters and led to sharp diatribes from either side.⁴³

Khan Bahadur Dewan Fazle Rubbie of Murshidabad wrote a book *Aqiqat-i-Musalman-i Bangla*, which was translated into English as *The Origin of the Musulmans of Bengal* (1895) to focus attention on the Muslim immigrants in Bengal at different periods of history. Fazle Rubbie's stand was strongly upheld as late as our own decade by Rahim, who along with Fazle Rubbie smells at the back of this 'low class theory' a 'definite intention of lowering the prestige of the Muslims of Bengal. The rejoinder from the other side is no less sharp: The dislike which educated Muhammadans have for the theory that most of the local

converts in eastern and northern Bengal are of Chandal and Cooch origin seems to be due to the influence of Hindu ideas regarding social status, according to which these tribes occupy a much-degraded position. The root of the controversy lies in the fact that the history of the spread and dissemination of Islam in Bengal, as elsewhere in India, is largely shrouded in obscurity. Historical allusions are sporadic and inadequate for framing an incontrovertible picture. Understandably enough, inference and imagination have taken the place of factual analysis. Fact of local conversion seems fairly despite this, the well-established; there are quite a few references in historical works to local conversion. The earliest is about the conversion of a Mech chief, 'Ali, at the hands of Muhammad bin Bakhtyar Khaljl during his march through North Bengal against Tibet. We are also told about the conversion of a Yogi of Kamrup named Bhojar Brahman; who arrived at Lakhnauti in the reign of 'Ali Mardin Khalji (1210-3 A.D.) in search of a Muslim scholar for the purpose of holding a polemical discussion. He was thoroughly impressed by Qal-Rukn-ud-Din Samarqandi and accepted Islam. From the same source we come to know about the conversion of another religious personality of Kamrup, Ambabha-natha. The conversion of Sultan Jalal ud-Din Muammad, son of Raja Ganesa, has already been discussed in some detail. Kalapahar, Alias Raju, the famous military commander in the Karrani regime is known the name, which sounds rather strange, can very well be an Arabic or Persian corruption of Vajra Brahman, a name quite appropriate for a Hindu Yogi or a Buddhist *Tantrist*: Rahim takes him to be a 'Vedantist Brahmin' for reasons not clear to his readers to be a Brahmana converts. Kalida sa Gaj adani, abais Rajput immigrant in Bengal during the reign of Islam Shah - 2- Sur (1545-53 A.D.), who had been converted to Islam, left a long line of illustrious successors including his son, Eshsa Khan and grandson Musi Khan, 'Masnad-i Ala', two of the leading Barobhuiyas of Bengal, who identified themselves strongly with the local interests and culture. During the governorship of Islam Khan (1608-13 A.D.) Raghu-Raya, the Hindu chief of Shahzadpur in

the Pabna district embraced Islam. A number of medieval family histories record Brahmana and Kayastha antecedents of some converted Muslim families. The Pirali, the Sarkhanl and the Srimanta-khani Brahmanas were thrown out of the pale of orthodoxy for having family antecedents who had been converted to Islam. Kamaluddin Caudhuri and Jamaluddin Chaudhuri, the zamindars of Singhatia, were known to be Brahmana converts to Islam. The Raj is of Kharagpur were originally Khetauris, and became Muslims. The Dewan family of Pargana Sarail in Tripura was of known Hindu origin. The family of As'ad Musa Khan had a great Sanskrit scholar, Mathuresa, as his court-poet. 'Ali Khan of Baranthan in Chittagong is by origin a branch of the Srijukta family of Naupara. Their ancestor Syama Rayachaudhuri was converted to Islam. The ancestors of Asdullah, the zamindar of Birbhum in the time of Murshid Quli Khan, were known to be Hindus, the genealogical table of the Miyan family of Srirampur, in the subdivision of Patua-Khali, Bakla, shows their Brahmana ancestry. Ivananda-Majumdar was converted to Islam and came to be known as Sibani Khan. The same is known about the Rajas of Rupsi in the thana of Jhalkathi and the Khan family of Sirjug in Bakla. The Muslim Chaudhuri family of Shahbazpur in Sylhet traces its origin to the Hindu Jangdar family of Panchakhanda. Svaruparama, son of Syama-rama Jangdar of this Hindu family was converted to Islam and became known as Shahbaz Khan. The Muslim Caudhuri family of Daulatpur in Sylhet is also known to be a noted founder branch of the family of Anandapur, of Ananda-riya, the Medieval Bengali literature also alludes to the fact of local conversion. *Seka-Subhodaya*, one of the earliest literary works of medieval Bengal, doubtfully ascribed to *Halayuctha*, who was one of the court-poets of king Lakmaan Sena, shows the possibility of conversion at the Contemporary foreign travellers did not fail to observe the phenomenon of local conversion.⁴⁴

Barbosa, who visited Bengal in 1518, noticed that of the 'Gentiles' Hindus 'every day many turn Moors [Muslims] to obtain the favour of the kings and the governors. All this

tends to show the trend of local conversion. This conclusion is further strengthened as tests of other disciplines such as anthropometry and serology are applied to the case. There has always been a general impression of common physical appearance between the bulk of Hindus and Muslims. Charles Grant was attracted by the fact that 'a. a great number of the poorest or the rural classes of Muslims are so mixed up with their Hindu fellow-labourers as, in social habits and appearances, to be half-amalgamated. Wise observes: ... if we examine a crowd of Bengali villagers Nat the present day, one and only one type of features, of complexion, and of physique pervades them all, and it is impossible for the most practised observer, setting aside the different styles of dress, the beards, and the hair, to distinguish between a Muhammadan and a Hindu peasant.⁴⁵ Referring to the 'Nashya' and 'Sheikh' groups of Muslims *in* the Jalpaiguri district of northern Bengal, who together comprised, according to the census of 1901, 226,379 of the 228,487 Muslims in the district, J.F.Grunning remarks, 'In appearance, dress and customs, they differ little from the Rajbangsi (Hindu). The same view is reiterated by J.N. Gupta, 'In North Bengal, the Muslims resemble the Rajbangsi. With reference to the Indo-Mongoloids of north and east Bengal, Chatterjee notes: The masses, which are the descendants of the Bodos, pure or mixed, in North Bengal and East Bengal - in Rangpur, in Bogra, in Maimansingha, in Comilla, and in Sylhet are now largely Mohammedan in religion. Beverley writes: If further proof were wanted of the position that the Musalmans of the Bengal delta owe their origin to conversion rather than to the introduction of foreign blood, it seems to be afforded in the close resemblance between them and their fellow-countrymen. That both were originally of the same race seems sufficiently clear from their possessing identically the same physique. The general impression of physical resemblance and affinities is reinforced by the findings of modern anthropometric and blood-group studies relating to the people of Bengal.⁴⁶

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 subdivided 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 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 process of inquiry which was carried on and stage for application to the Bengal situation by P.C. Mahalanobis, B.S. Guha and others. The 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 Bengals 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 Candelas have changed their caste name to Namasudra since the census of 1901.⁴⁷

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.⁴⁸

Beverley raises and tries to answer a pertinent question in this connexion. He writes: All this, it may be urged, can be sufficiently explained by long residence of Hindus and Muhammadans side by side and their frequent intercourse with each other. It was thus, it will be said, that the original tribes became so Hinduised, that in the present day it is difficult to know where to draw the line between them and Hindus. This no doubt is true enough, but the case is very different in regard to the Bengali Musalmans. In the first place the introduction of the Muhammadan faith into Bengal is an event which has occurred within historical times; whereas no one has yet succeeded in determining the date of the Aryan Glazier, E.G.: A Report on the District of Rangpur, JASB, 1872, 83. immigration, Moreover, even after the lapse of ages, the aboriginal element has not yet been so thoroughly effaced from the low-caste Bengali as to conceal his origin from the most superficial observer, But place a Chandal or a Rajbangsi and a Bengali Musalman together, and were it not for some peculiarity of dress or the mode of cutting the hair, it would be difficult to distinguish the one from the other, The probability is, they are one and the same race, and only within the last few centuries have they ceased to profess the same religion.⁴⁹ On the same point Gait argues: It is sometimes denied that the prevalence of Hindu superstitions is a proof of the Hindu origin of the people who believe in them, and it is urged that this may equally well be due to the religious torpor amongst the Muhammadans which prevailed at the beginning of British rule, This might possibly explain the facts in places where Muhammadans are in the minority but

it could never do so where they form the bulk of the population. The two religions would doubtless affect each other to some extent, but a strong monotheistic religion like that of Islam would never give way before a tolerant, amorphous and polytheistic creed like that of the Hindus.⁵⁰

As still another proof of the local origin of the Muslims, in some parts of Bengal especially in the north-eastern areas peopled chiefly by Koces, Mececs, Bodos and Dhimals, in the early years of this century the great mass of the Muslims had no designations or surnames of Arabic or Persian origin. In these parts there were few Shaikhs and Khans, whilst the great majority were called by a common but unexplained name of Nasyi. Besides this, Hindu names and titles were very common. Names such as Kali Shaikh, Kalacand shaikh, Vraja Shaikh or Gopala Aula were regularly met with. The prevalence of Hindu names among Muslims was also observed in Nassya. In Noakhali 'Muhammadans with surnames of Chanda, Pal and Datta are to be found to this day. The foregoing discussion has made it abundantly clear that local conversion was a significant strand in the process of expansion of Islam in Bengal, which, in its turn, shaped the mould in which their religion was cast. It is evident that a considerable number of Muslims of various racial affiliations settled down in Bengal at different times. But our knowledge is next to nothing about their numbers and proportion to the other elements in the population. It may not be reasonable to think that the Muslims, who flocked into this country from the triumph of Muammad Bakhtyar Khalji onwards, all settled 'Noakhali is known throughout East Pakistan for the pervading influence of the priestly class called the Mullahs and "pure" Islam'. Webster, writing in 1911 about Noakhali, remarks: 'Formerly, it is said, the Mohammedans kept too many of their old Hindu customs, but about the middle of last century they came under the influence of a reforming priest, Maulavi Imamuddin, and are now, almost to a man, Faraizis. They abhor all innovations ... and the worship of saints, down in the land. We have absolutely no knowledge

about the movement and mobility of population in medieval Bengal.⁵¹ We do not know how far the 'proverbial bad climate of Bengal had discouraged the prospective settlers of the upper strata of the Muslim society, The settled Mughal administration in Bengal caused on the one hand and undoubted inflow of Muslims of rank, but on the other 'the viceroys and nobles governing Bengal amassed wealth rapidly and returned to spend it in the luxurious palaces of Delhi and Agra. In the circumstances, any attempt to break their proportion into figures, as Rahim has chosen to do, appears bizarre and confounding. For reasons not at all clear to his readers, he takes the total Bengali Muslim population' in 1770 for 10, 6 million of which '3.27 million belonged to the stock of the immigrant Muslims and 7.33 million were from the converted Muslims'. He moves further: Calculating on the basis of 100 per cent increase on account of birth-rate, we find that the stock of the immigrant Muslims and the converted Muslims numbered about 8 lakhs and 9 lakhs, respectively, two centuries before. With a view to giving 'an idea about the increase of the immigrant Muslims, he draws on purely conjectural basis a chart of the 'Original Settlers', breaking them down racially, with actual numbers on their arrival and showing their respective positions in 1770 A.D. after centuries of growth, which, according to his calculations, comes cumulatively to 3,271,500 Thus in 1570 the Bengali Muslim population was 27 lakhs and the Hindus were 41 lakhs, in a total population of 68 lakhs, say 70 lakhs with the Buddhists and others, in Bengal. The Muslims represented 39.5 per cent of the total population of the province. In the growth of this Bengali Muslim people, the foreign element contributed 29.6 per cent and the local converts 70.4 per cent It is needless to point out that no reasonable attempt to deduce demographic conclusions for medieval Bengal is warranted by the extant historical materials. All that can be done about this is to make an attempt, with all its limitations, at comprehending the phenomenon in the light of actual positions revealed by much later census enquiries. There we may have a better 'idea' of the Muslim immigrants categorised under the title of Saids, Mughul, Pathan

and partially Shaik, partially because; we have already noted the tendency of Bengali Muslim aspirants to social promotion towards assuming the title of Shaikh. Gait's Report sums up the position very well, although he sounds a note of caution that 'no exact estimate is possible'. He writes ... it may be said generally that almost the whole of the functional groups, such as Jolaha A large number of the Muslim agriculturists also bear the designation of Shaikh as noted earlier. Similar tendency was noticed among the Hindu aspirants to social position in Bengal, who assumed mostly the caste designation of Kayastha. For this reason, Kayastha is sometimes called the 'national caste' of Bengal. On the same analogy Sheikh may be viewed as the national social group of the Bengali Muslims and Dhunia, throughout the province, the great majority, probably nine-tenths, of the Sheikhs in Bengal proper are of Indian origin.⁵²

In 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 million, 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 Gait, 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 Rajbari Isis 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 Rajbamsis (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 has 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.⁵³

The Rural Character of the Muslim Masses:

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.⁵⁴ 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*⁵⁵

The first point to be noticed is the very large proportion of Musalmans who subsist by agriculture, and the small number engaged in intellectual pursuits. No less than 7,316 In every 10,000 Muhammadans are cultivators, compared with 5,555 amongst the same number of Hindus ... it may be said generally, that the occupations, other than those connected with agriculture, in which Muhammadans preponderate are very few. The chief is those of tailors, dyers, silk-worm rearers, operatives in silk filatures, cotton cleaners and pressers, butchers,

hookah-stem farriers, makers and sellers of glass bangles, and book-binders. Although they do not outnumber the Hindus, the proportion of Muhammadans is also high amongst vegetable and fruit-sellers, thatches, silk spinners and weavers, and cotton weavers.⁵⁶ East Bengal, where, according to the Census Report of 1901, two-thirds, and in north Bengal, three-fifths of the inhabitants are Muslims, has a characteristically rural landscape. It is again extremely significant that the Muslim preponderance was not met with in the vicinity of the centres and seats of Muslim power. In some districts like Rajshahi, Pabna, Noakhali and Mymensingh they formed three-fourths of the population, and in Bagura as much as four-fifths. None of these districts contained any of the places famous as the headquarters of Muslim rulers. In Dacca, which for a long time contained the seat of government, Muslims were very slightly in excess not Hindus. In Maldaha and Murshidabad, which contained the centre of Muslim rule for quite a few centuries, the Muslims formed a smaller proportion of the population than they did in the adjacent districts of Dinajpur, Rajshahi, and Nadia. In Bakarganj, Tripura, Rangpur, they constituted two-thirds of the population and in Jessore and Faridpur more than half. This characteristic pattern of distribution of Muslim population in Bengal was a surprising revelation for the British administrators and observers.⁵⁷ What was more surprising for them was that the Muslim preponderance, even in Bengal, did not, as we have already noted, thrive under the shadow of the seats of political and military power of the Muslim rulers, Underlying this line of thinking is an implied belief that Islamic expansion is better understood in the framework of force and militancy. The Bengal phenomenon proved shattering for the believers in brute force and persecution as significant factors in the expansion of Islam. This characteristic distribution of Muslim population in Bengal is indeed significant in the context of the broader question of the methods of conversion. If there is any question concerning Islam in India which has drawn universal attention and elicited a motley variety of individual pinions, but has remained as dark as ever, it is that of how Islam secured

the adherence of its indigenous followers. Far greater than the fact of local conversion, the motive forces behind it remain a vast open field for historical speculation. For a long time, the success of Islam was generally associated with the 'Fire and Sword' carried by the Muslim conquerors as we have just alluded to. The extension of political authority of the Muslim conquerors in the territories which their armies overran, occasional plunders, pillages and destructions following upon military victories, and stray and isolated references to cases of oppression and persecution by the Muslim members of the ruling class have often been resorted to in accounting for the expansion of the religion.⁵⁸ Beverley believes: The Mohammadans were ever ready to make conquests with the Koran as with the sword. Under Sultan Jalaluddin (Jadu), for instance, it is said that the Hindus were persecuted almost to extermination. Gladwin mentions a law enforced by 'Tyrannical' Murshid Quli Khan that any Amal or zamindar, failing to pay the revenue that was due or being unable to make good the loss, should with his wife and children be compelled to become Muslims. If it is a matter of listing similar instances, we need not depend on such doubtful historical evidence. Sporadic occurrences of this nature whose historical accuracy is less open to question-may easily be gleaned for medieval Bengal through other sources. The cases of conversion recorded in the family histories are mostly results of compulsion or accident, rather than of a voluntary adhesion to the faith. Some ancestors of the 'Piralis' the Ser-khanis and the sri manta-khanis' for example, became Muslims because they were outcastes on account of having been forced to taste or smell forbidden food cooked by the Muslim.⁵⁹

The role of Pir, Ghazi and Darvesh of North Bengal in conversion into Nashya Sheikh Community:

The *Pir*, *Ghazi* and Darvesh had communities of North Bengal have played a significant role in the conversion of the Nashya Seikhs. These liberal saints did not discriminate between people. Attracted by their sense of equality, unity and brotherhood, a

large number of people converted to Islam. In this context, it cannot be said that Islam has been propagated only by Sufism. There were also political and economic reasons. Sufi saints entered the country before the establishment of Muslim rule in Bangladesh. In this context, the role of *Pir, Ghazi and Darvesh* of North Bengal is under discussion.

Only a few years after the establishment of the Muslim Empire in Northern India, at the time of Muhammad Ghori, Muslim kingdoms were established in the Western and Northern parts of distant Bangladesh. An extraordinary military genius who made this difficult task possible was Ikhtiyar ud-Din Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji. The story of Bakhtiyar ud-Din Khalji's victory campaign has been found in '*Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*' by Minhaz uddi Siraj.⁶⁰

From two points of view, it seems that the Muslims of this country used to come before Bakhtiyar Khalji occupied a part of Bengal and many of them settled in this country. Prominent professor and researcher, Sukhmoy Mukhopadhyay has said that the ancient coins of the Abbasid Caliphs were first found at Paharpur in North Bengal and Maynamati in East Bengal, the coin at Paharpur being dated 788 AD. Secondly, a summary of a letter written by the famous saint Nur Kutb Alam in 1415 AD had been found '*Banglar Itihase Dusho Bochor*'. (3rd edition, p. 109-110), (in Bengali). It says that after almost 300 years, the Islamic land had become dark and the perpetrators cast a shadow over the faith (religion) of Bengal. Bakhtiyar's arrival in Bengal took place 210 to 211 years before 1415 AD. So even 80 to 90 years before that, it seems from the letter that Islam was in this country.⁶¹

In short, the social establishment of Islam began within a century of the Bengali expedition of Bakhtiyar Khalji. The Sultans of Delhi, at that time, sent the Pir Darvesh Ghazis to the interiors of Bengal in order to conquer Bangladesh. Tantra practice and mysticism were rampant and widely practiced in Bengal at that time. The number of village deities and ghost worshippers had also increased in rural Bengal. In this situation, the Pir

Ghazis, with their unwavering faith and devotion, character strength and great virtues, successfully diverted the common people from their psychological inclination towards transcendentalism and conquered the minds and mentality of the people. In the service of the afflicted people, they had succeeded in restoring worldly confidence through their medical procedures. As a result, under the influence of the ongoing and rigorous Buddhist and Hindu domination, the converted Muslims were easily attracted to Sufism and *Pir* theory. The basic norms did not create any barrier for the oppressed and socially afflicted people.

The real meanings of the word '*Pir*', among Muslims, are those who are God-born men or pious souls. '*Pir*' is a word of Persian origin. Their main goal is to achieve and show miraculous power. They stood apart from the ordinary crowd by way of their extraordinary and unworldly powers. No earthly power can bring them down to their knees. Their belief and way of life was self-purification through sacrifice and austerity. Even though they had astonishing spiritual powers, yet their main objective was the pursuit of truth and the attainment of salvation. Spiritual life in Islam dates back to the time of Prophet Muhammad and his companions. The main motto of *Pir* Ghazis was to reflect and propagate the *Tasawwuf*, that is, the method of spiritual pursuit taught by Hazrat.⁶²

There was a time when the common people believed that the saints of *Pir Darvesh* had miraculous powers. That belief is not something that has been destroyed in the mindsets of the people. People from both the Muslim and Hindu communities still know the possibility of these miracles and still seek their help and intervention. They look up to these saints with the strong hope and belief that the Pirs can save the people from their hardships and troubles if they wish to, and can also raise the dead. Such is the faith that they bestow upon these Pirs.

However, in the light of the main discussion, it can be said that there are various folk tales and legends about the famous and infamous *Pir Fakir* Saints of Bengal and a wide area of North Bengal. Memories of their great and noble fame can be found between the

dilapidated, half-broken, extinct, half-secret shrines, Dargah, Chilla and their inscriptions. Satyapir, Tenapir, Ghorpir, Dhaelapir, Dariyapir, Kalipir, Manikpir, Madaripir (fishes and tortoises) were present here besides Mowajpir, Jaethapir, Dhakarpir, Laengrapir, Chelpir, Sekendarpir, Mokdumpir, Mushkilasaanpir, Akinpir, Shahpir, Pir Ataullah etc.⁶³

First, in six districts of North Bengal viz Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Coochbehar, Malda, Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur, many Pir, Ghazi and Darvesh were seen to develop. First, I will determine their location in Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts. After the conquest of Nadia, when Bakhtiyar Khalji marched towards Tibet in 1206 AD, a local tribal leader converted to Islam and took the name of 'Alimech' and became Bakhtiyar's guide. It is believed that he established the first Dargah Mosque in Jalpaiguri district. From here he converted many people to Islam. He had many disciples. Another pious person in this district was Dinu Gomasta. He was a generous devotee. He built a mosque at Ghumti No. 4 on the outskirts of Jalpaiguri town. There is a lake situated next to the mosque. Devout Islam devotees perform ablution in the water of that lake. Two Muslims named Maulavi Muhammad Ibrahim and Makku Khan, accepted some land in way of charity from Baikunthpur's Raikat King Phanindradeb and this land was situated on the borders of Dinbazaar. Afterwards, they built a mosque here. This mosque is now known as Sonallah Mosque. Many devout Muslims pray here, and during Eid and Muharram, they offer Sinni in reverence to Muhammad Ibrahim and Makku Khan. The folk festival begins at that time. The mosque of Nawab Bari of this district was built in 1885 AD by the religious and devout Khan Bahadur Rahim Baksh. Sufi scholars from different parts of India come here and perform Fateha. The mosque is associated with the history of communal harmony in the city of Jalpaiguri and there with the help of pious people like Sader Mahmud, Fakir Khan, Tasdudak Ahmad, Muhammad Ismail Gani Sardar, mosques were developed in Nayabasti, Pilkhana and Daptaripara and the arrival of Sufi saints took place.⁶⁴

There are shrines of Pir-Chand and Pirkayet in the vast areas of Dhupguri, Falakata and Alipurduar in Jalpaiguri district. Their shrine is situated at Majid Khana, a few miles from the town of Alipurduar, near Salsalabari. Pilgrims pay homage to the two saints with perfume, rosewater, candles, incense sticks, various flowers, sweets etc. In the mountainous region, these saints preached the infinite glory of the theory of Allah, His ways and commandments, and set a great example for the people of the world in the correct path of spirituality and hence the attainment of Moksha, that is, salvation. In the deep forests of Dooars, we get to hear of another great saint, whose name was Darvesh Shah Zafar. He was an elderly man of very high value. He was the shepherd king of a huge herd of wild elephants and Sardar used to walk around sitting on the head of an elephant. Another devout warrior who appeared in this region was Hedayet Alimaan. He has become a legend in the region with his glorious achievements in the Bhutan War. This devout man is also remembered with reverence and respect by the people of the Muslim community.⁶⁵

There are several ancient mosques of Muslims in the hilly areas of Darjeeling district. The oldest mosque is on Cart Road between Sukna and Sonada. In the first decade of the nineteenth and twentieth century, Sufi saints from different parts of India came here. The mosque has now been reduced to rubble by the ravages of time. The Juma Mosque on Darjeeling's Botanical Garden Road is a holy site for Muslim pilgrims. Sufi saints used to come here on the holy occasions of Muharram and Eid. There is another small mosque in Butcher slum. It is said that the mosque was built for the use of Ilyas Shah's troops. There is also a Madrasah which was run for a long time by *Anjuman-e Islamis*. Sufi saints attend this religious institution. In the plains of Siliguri, the festival of a saint named '*Chehelgazi*' is solemnly celebrated. He is honoured too on the occasions of Eid and Muharram. During the reign of Sultan Barbak Shah of Gour, this pious saint preached the message of monotheism and advanced civilization in the whole province of Assam.⁶⁶

In the context of the district of Cooch Behar, it can be said that from the beginning of the thirteenth century to the beginning of the fourteenth century, the kingdom of Kamarupa (which includes many parts of the modern Cooch Behar district), three Muslims in a row were attacked by the king. But the armies of the Kamarupa king defeated the Islamic army because of their excellent warfare tactics, valour and for local geographical advantage. In the same century, just as the state of Assam was established on the east bank of the Brahmaputra River, so was the state of Gosanimari or Kamtapur near the present city of Cooch Behar. At this time, the state of Kamtapur was almost destroyed by the attack of the Muslim rulers. Many heroes with the title of '*Bhuiyan*' then established their own rights in the Koch territory. In 1498-99 AD, the Sultan of Bengal, Hussain Shah won over Kamrup and Kamtapur. Thereafter, there was no pause between the subsequent attacks by the Pathans, the Mughals, the Nawab of Afghan named Subedar and the Faujdars. These campaigns and attacks of the Muslims played a significant role in the propagation and noteworthy growth of Islam. In 1661 AD, the Mughal army crossed the borders of Cooch Behar State and captured the capital and Mirjumla renamed the capital of Cooch Bihar as Alamgir Nagar. From this time onwards, missionaries began to come here for the development and spread of Islam, and attracted by the miraculous glory of Pir Ghazi Darvesh saints, many followers and devotees of Hinduism converted to Islam. There is a shrine of Pir in Maharaniganj under this district. Numerous devotees, Hindus and Muslims alike, pay their respects to Pir here by offering sugar, sweet candies, milk latex, raw milk, flowers, perfumes, etc. At the beginning of the 18th century, a Pir saint with miraculous powers lived a religious life here on the banks of the river Torsa. The king of Koch, Harendra Narayan was an ardent follower and devotee of him and had donated seven bighas of land as 'Pirpal' for the daily service at that Pir's shrine. The real name of this Pir is not known. Folklore has it that this Pir used to drown himself in the depths of the river Torsa and performed his rituals and worship. A fair is held here on the

occasion of Muharram. Four miles southeast of the hollering suburbs of Cooch Behar, in the regions of Dhaluabari, there lived a devotee named Shah Ikram. He was quite an old man with a high stature. At one time this area was full of deep forests. There was a giant snake that made its way out of the mountain and since then a big tunnel had been created there. Saint Shah Ikram is said to have performed his *sadhana* inside that tunnel. He was said to have destroyed the diseases that used to all mankind, their fears, droughts, excessive rainfall, natural disasters and its dreary wreck. Fascinated by the miraculous splendor of this Pir, the kings of Koch donated 77 *bighas* of land in his name.⁶⁷

The shrine of Shah Sufi Ikramul Haque is located in Haldibari area of this district. He was born in 1851 AD at his Laljaan's house in Jhaljhalia state of Cooch Behar district. He has innumerable followers and devotees all over Bengal. Devotees built a shrine over his grave at Haldibari. Every year in the month of Falgun, a large number of devotees, both Hindus and Muslims, gather on the occasion of the festival of Uras (the fair of Huzoor Sahab). Many stories of Shah Sufi Ikramul Haque Darvesh are scattered and prevalent in the lives of the people of Cooch Behar district. He crossed the mountain forest and stayed at the old mosque in Cooch Behar. He used to come out once at the end of every Friday's prayers. Upon receiving the news, many sick people would gather there and everyone was healed by his miraculous grace. Even today, that same belief resides in the hearts of the people. Sufi Ikramul caged two genies in a bottle and threw it down a river. Since then, he had thrown so many bottles caged with genies that there was a shortage of glass bottles in the area at the time. Taking the opportunity of serving Saha Ekramul, a brother of the king of Cooch Bihar was cured of a serious illness. Sufi Ikramul is known as 'Pagla Pir' in various regions of Cooch Behar. Thus, in the folk society of North Bengal, various legendary stories spread far and wide regarding all these Pir Ghazi Darvesh saints.⁶⁸

The Pir Ghazi saints have played a significant role in the history of Maldah district. Most of the Pirs who came to Gour and Pandua in Maldah came from outside India and settled here. Pandua Baradargarh under Gazol Police Station of Malda is famous all over India. There is a special place of worship in memory of the saint Hazrat Makhdoom Shah Jalal ud-Din. He came to this country with the aim of preaching the religion during the reign of Lakshman Sen. Gradually; he gained an unparalleled fame as the '*Sheikh*' of Gour. Through miraculous deeds and rigorous austerities, he became a proprietor of Gour and was loved and respected by its entire people. Maharaja Lakshman Sen donated a large number of villages and lands to him unconditionally and for the sake of charity. A notable example of this is 22 Hazari Waqf Estate. The estate has vast tracts of land in Maldah, undivided Dinajpur and present-day Bangladesh. Lakshman Sen's Chief Justice Halayudha Mishra wrote the book '*Sheikh Subhodoya*' (in Bengali) based on the greatness and life events of Sheikh Jalal ud-Din. On the 22nd day of the month of Arobi Rajab, a fair is held here for about a month. Gatherings and competitions of *Milad Sharif*, *Ghazal Geeti*, and *Qawwali* is a unique spectacle of folk culture in this fair. Hindus and Muslims swear allegiance to the shrine of the *Pir* and offer the dessert *Sinni*. The devotees hang rags from pomegranate and pineapple trees so that all the evil doings of the celestial bodies are resolved in their favour. It is believed by the people that if they visit this *Pir's* shrine 7 times, and behave in certain religious ways, then the virtue of performing Hajj in Mecca is acquired there itself.⁶⁹

One of the other holy places in this district is the *Dargah* of Shayak Akhi Firoz ud-Din. According to the historian Block man, he was a worthy disciple of the famous Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya of Delhi. In the folklife of Maldah, he is noted as Pirana Pir or the Pir of Pirs. There is a shrine in the north-west corner of Bara Sagardighi near Sadullapur, in imitation of Ajmer Khwaja Babar Chillar. Here, the attendants sing *Qawwali* and put-on new sheets in a grand procession at the tomb of the Pir. During the reign of Sultan Ilyas Shah, the

famous Pirs of Bangladesh appeared. Among them are Pir Alaul Haque and Sheikh Raja Biyabani. Not far from Adina, in Bolbari, there is a shrine of Raja Biyabani. The dense forest is the abode of the Pir and hence his name is *Biyabani*. '*Biyara*', in Persian, means remote, solitary forests. He died during the siege of the historic Ekdala fort in Delhi by the Sultan. Sultan Ilyas Shah, who was an absconder at the Ekdala fort, was his greatest devotee. He came out of the fort in the guise of a fakir and arranged for his master's funeral and last rites.⁷⁰

Not far from Chanchal lies the tomb of Pir Sikandar Shah. Both Hindus and Muslims pay homage to this saint by offering *Sinni*. A fair is held here on this occasion, popularly known as *Ghazi Pir's* fair. Folklore says, Pir Sikandar Shah came to India from the distant lands of Mecca in Arab in the mission to preach their religion. Later, he came to Bengal and established a *Dargah*. Many people think that the real name of this Pir is Shah Ismail Ghazi. On the other hand, '*Zindapir*' has been gaining the respect of both the Hindu and Muslim communities in Kaligram, near Chanchal police station, for a long time. The real name of that saint is Suraj Khan. Like Yogi Men, he once entered the tomb in order to meditate and carried with him enough food to sustain him for six months.

Pir Shah Abdullah is situated at a nearby distance from Sadullapur of Maldah, and Muchipir is located in the jurisdiction of Haribpur police station. In the village of Bachamari in Old Maldah, there is Pir Shah Ibrahim, who came from distant Lanka. Manik Pir's Dargah is located on the banks of Mahananda, in Sahapur. Pir Qutb Shah's Dargah in Saralpara, which comes in the jurisdiction of Gazol Thana, is a holy place of the Hindu and Muslim communities. There exist many stories of fame about the miraculous powers of this Pir.⁷¹

Dhaldighi and *Kaldighi* are two huge lakes located at the end of Gangarampur in Dakshin Dinajpur district. Surrounding these two lakes, various legends and stories are scattered in this region. A saint named Maulana Ataullah used to live here. Through various

miracles, he was revered and became trustworthy to both the local Hindu and Muslim communities. Karim Ali Fakir was one among many of the servants of this saint. Every year, on the 25th of the month of *Magha*, on the south bank of *Dhaldighi*, on the occasion of *Pir Sahab's* death anniversary, the people of the Hindu-Muslim communities visit the grave of Karim Ali and pay their homage and pray to him. This is named as the Uras festival. This nearly 200-year-old festival goes public with an all-embracing feast. About twenty to twenty-five manas of rice pulao is cooked here and is eaten by people from both the Hindu and Muslim communities sitting together. On the 25th of *Magha*, the Muslims pay their respect and homage to *Pir Sahib* with *Sinni* and earthen horses. On the occasion of this Uras festival in memory of the Pir, a huge fair is held at the banks of *Dhaldighi* for almost a month. On the occasion of this fair, millions of visitors and devotees come and gather here from different parts of India. The fair is a wonderful example of Hindu-Muslim unity. Pir Karim Ali, when alive, had written a book named '*Marphat Bichar*' (in Bengali). In that book, it has been mentioned that, "*Allah ji* has two races, Hindu and Muslim. The two documents of these two races are the *Quran* and the *Puran*." It is noteworthy that in 1808-09 AD, Francis Buchanan, in his mention of Dinajpur and its description, had mentioned the reference of this *Dargah*. In the year 1912 AD, F. W. Strong Sahib identified this Pir as Mollah Ata ud-din. Next to his mosque there is a mention of the mosque 697 *Hijraddh* dated 19th October 1297 AD. There is a legend about this Pir that Ban king had two queens, named Dhalarani and Kalorani. It was the wish of the minds of these two queens that the king leaves behind a signature of great fame for the two of them. When the queens expressed their wishes, the king was satisfied with it and dug two lakes. One was named *Dhaldighi* and the other was named *Kaldighi*. When the excavation work of *Kaldighi* was completed, it became full of water but *Dhaladighi* did not bear water at all. Disappointed, the workers informed the king that they would not dig the lake. The king was very upset to hear this from the workers. Seeing this

situation, the workers informed the king that they had seen a stranger passing by the lake while they were digging it up. The next day, the king, together with the queens, began to search in the forest. After much searching, they saw the man worshipping under a tree. When the worship was over, the king asked him, "Are you a Saint, or a Prophet?" The man replied that he was Pir Ataullah. Then the king asked him if he could fulfil a wish in his mind. The Pir asked what he wished for. The king said that *Dhaldighi* should be filled with water. The very next day, the king saw that *Dhaldighi* was full of water.⁷²

Now that the king's wish had been fulfilled by the Pir, it was the king's turn to fulfil a wish of the Pir in return. The Pir sent his nephew, Sultan Shah to the king's court. He told the king that Pir Ataullah only wanted a quarter of a handful of space. Hearing this, the king was upset. Because he was both surprised and scared to see the infinite power of the Pir, and yet again he thought that the Pir had to be given a place in his kingdom? He said he would not give any place for the Pir, at which Pir Ataullah got angry. As a result, a dispute broke out between the king and the Pir. After this incident, no trace of the king or his family was found.

It is said that the Kasbah Mahsho village near Raiganj in Uttar Dinajpur district was the capital of a Hindu king named Ganesha. The ruins of King Ganesha's homestead are still found here in the bushes in the jungle. Ganesha's son, Jadu, converted to Islam, and he became known in history as Jalal ud-Din. According to some, Ganesha's father's name was Mahesh Narayan and the place was named Maheshpur after his name. Later, the place was identified as Kasba Mahshopur. It was in this village where Pir Makhdumi Gayadul Hussain lived. Folklore has it that Pir Makhdum was a man with miraculous powers. He came with 72 comrades and fought with King Ganesha. When King Ganesha was defeated in the battle, he widely preached Islam in that region. At this time, Ganesha's son Jadu, converted to Islam, and married Asman Tara for Hussain Shah. When Hussain Shah established the capital of Pandua from Chhota Pandua, Jalal ud-Din came to Kamalabari and established the capital

there. King Ganesha's wife's name was Kamal and the place of Kamalabari was named after her. As soon as Jalal ud-Din reached Kamalabari with his wife, he was plunged into the hands of death. The newly widowed Asman Tara then took refuge in Pir Shah Makhdum's grave. Following the instructions of Pir Sahab, she conceived and gave birth to a son who was named 'Rumal-e-Sahab'. There is a 'white-well' here which people believe was dug by Pir Sahab on account of his miraculous powers. Many people consider the water of this well to be sacred and it is believed that drinking this water can cure severe incurable diseases. Every year in the month of Baishakh, a fair is held here on the occasion of Makhdum Pir's Uras and this fair is said to be dated 500 years old.⁷³

When Shah Shuja was the subedar of Bengal, a saint named Sultan Hasan Sabia Borhana, with his huge army of devotees, settled in the village of Baliya Raja near Bindol. He used to wear short clothes and a draped ochre cloak and used to talk about religion with a trident or '*Trishul*' in his hand. There is a tomb of '*Jetha Pir*' in Shasan village near Hematabad police station. Every year on the occasion of the holy month of Baishakh, people of both the Hindu and Muslim communities pay homage to Pir Sahib with Sinni, mud horses and new clothes. At the same time, they slaughter goats; roosters etc. and perform 'Fateha' in the evening. A fair is held here on this occasion. In the village of Tungail Bilpara near Kaliyaganj police station, their lives '*Kheyajpir*'. Devotees from both the Hindu and Muslim communities fast for three days to get rid of all their diseases and slaughter goats in the name of the Pir.⁷⁴

The place of Dhakar Syed Pir in the interiors of the village of Kushmandi police station is significant. Folklore says that about one and a half hundred years ago, a handsome and liberal devotee Dhak Syed, arrived at an *Arjuna* tree and performed miraculous powers to cure many men and women from incurable diseases. The area surrounding the trunk of this *Arjuna* tree had gained a special spiritual reputation, where the local men and women

considered this to be a sacred place. Here, on the occasion of the appearance of Dhak Syed Pir on the day of Chaitra Sankranti, the Hindu-Muslim community pays homage to the Pir with earthen horses. Numerous devotees from far and wide come to the Dargah of the Pir to seek healing from ailments, and swear divine allegiance to abide by their vows after getting cured. A fair is held on this occasion. Daulatpur village in Dakshin Dinajpur has a shrine and a pillar called 'Langra Pir', surrounding which, the Muharram festival is celebrated with great pomp and show in Daulatpur. Besides, Dhelpir, Shonipir, etc. are also present.⁷⁵

Ghorapir is near to Dalimgaon in Uttar Dinajpur district. During the Sinni festival in Ghorapir, the Goswami Brahmins nearby take that Sinni and start the fifth Dol solemnity. Besides, there is a shrine of Pir Baha ud-Din in Narayanpur of Gangarampur police station in Dakshin Dinajpur. The neighborhood around it is known as 'Pirpal'. This Pir is also marked by the name of 'Buranir'. Every year, except the first Thursday of the month of Baishakh, a fair is held here on every subsequent Thursday and the Pir's Uras festival is also held here. Residents of the Hindu-Muslim communities donate earthen horses to pay homage to the saint.⁷⁶ Another name of this Pir is Pir Hawa Hadi. Mentioning this Pir, his disciples preach various stories of his glory and greatness.

The worship of the Pirs is highly revered in the life of both Hindus and Muslims in Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur districts. Thakur Pir Mahamari is said to reside next to the Tulsi altar of the Hindu households. He is worshipped every Saturday by Sinni and horses. Again, the people of the Muslim community pay their respects to Pir Mahamari during the occasion of Muharram. Pir Mahamari is like a cross sign made with the help of a jute stick and he wears a crown on his head. The idea of folk life is that this Pir is said to destroy all the dangers that befall upon the village.

This Pir is no longer alive today but many shrines are still alive even after 5 to 6 centuries later. These shrines were symbols of Hindu-Muslim unity. As a result of Partition,

Muslims from many villages have migrated to Bangladesh but the shrines are still getting the status and respect of being holy places even today. In many villages, some Hindu communities are renovating those shrines of the Pirs and worshipping and offering Sinni in the name of the Pir. As a result of Ikhtiyar ud-Din bin Bakhtiyar Khilji's expedition, the upper caste Hindu community had fled from that region and hence the Pir had no influence on them.⁷⁷ Again, the influence of Pir is also less on the lower caste Hindus like the shoemakers, sweepers etc. In the middle of these two, there are some communities like the *Desi, Palia, Gauradashi, Koch* etc. on whom the Buddhist influence is quite high; and it is also on these communities that the impact of the Pir is the highest. But did the same people who were once driven by *Tantra*-based Buddhism get easily attracted and influenced by the miraculous and magical powers of the Pirs?

In this way, various legends about Pir Ghazi Darvesh have spread in the folk circles of the society. This greatness of ancient prosperity reminds us of the unity of Hindus and Muslims in the life of North Bengal.

Development of Ethnic Identity:

The converted Muslim society of North Bengal is not developing society, politically and economically like any of their counterparts. The converted Muslim community are those who could not get a proper place in Sheikh Community they claim as an indigenous Muslim community. The upper caste Hindus had given the nomenclature '*Nashya sheikh*' to the converted Muslim Community which meant the impure or diluted sheikhs. The indigenous Muslim community sought the various ways to sweep out the new given title *Nashya sheikh*, as they were ignoring *Nashya sheikh* Title. Some of them claim upper class Muslim shelter to the *Pir* and they got little prestige in the society. Apart from some of them government service and took the title like Sarkar, Khan etc, however they tried a lot but their cultural activity prevailed within their society.⁷⁸

Now a central question emerges that – “who are the *Nashyas*?⁷⁹ 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*.⁸⁰ During the period of 13th to 17th century Muslims attacks occurred frequently in Kamrup, Kamtapur and Cooch 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.⁸¹ 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.⁸² 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 themselves 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.⁸³ But here it’s noticeable that the migrated Sheikh use the title Sheikh in front of their name and the *Nashya* used the 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 the Rajbangsi 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 refused 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.⁸⁴ 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 Rangpur 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 kinds of reasons were responsible for the conversation of huge numbers of people from four communities 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 an upper class within Rajbangsi society.⁸⁵

Although the Muslims of North Bengal are closely related with each other in terms of religious belief, there are many differences with regard to their language, culture, tradition, occupation. On this basis the Muslims of North Bengal are divided into various sub-castes. The Muslims of North Bengal mainly carried the characteristics of *Austriac-Mongoloyed* race. In ancient time North Bengal was known as Pundrabardhana emerged under the supremacy of Austriac and mixture of the Mongoloyed. In this discussed region they build up an agricultural settlement and village culture.⁸⁶ Hamilton Buchanan marketed that the people of *Koch, Mech, Rajbangsi, Polia* etc. are the indigenous peoples.⁸⁷ Minajuddin-ut-Siraj in his

book '*Tabaquat-i-Nasiri*', he also marketed the people of *Koch, Mech* etc. as indigenous people.⁸⁸ During the last quarter of 15th century and first quarter of 16th century introduction of Vaisnava, Shaiva sect and the influence of the Brahmas, come from Mithila, Kanauj the indigenous people introduced with Hinduism. In this period with the introduction of Pirism and Darbeshism a remarkable portion of indigenous Rajbangsi, Polia, Mech peoples got attracted and converted into Muslim.⁸⁹

When Bakhtiyar Khalji invaded Tibet in 1205 A.D. at that time indigenous people of North Bengal came in contact with Islam. In his book '*Tabaquat-i-Nasiri*' Minaj-uddin-Siraj says that at the' time of Bakhtiyar Khaljis invasion towards Tibet a tribal chief, named Ali Mech was his local guide.⁹⁰ Most probably Ali Mech was the first person of North Bengal who converted to Islam with his followers. After the establishment of Turkey rule at Gour in 13th century the *sufi* saint came there and introduced Islam in the large portion of North Bengal. During the period of 15th to 18th century in Bengal can be called as the golden age of Islamic introduction. Especially at Dooars region Islamic introduction continued till the 19th century also. The spread of Islam religion in North Bengal among the local lower class Hindu societies were converted by the help of the sultan of Gour and the liberal humanist Sufi saint of North Bengal. They changed their religion but their language customs, cultures, food habits etc were the same. Durga Prasad Sanyal wrote in his book '*Banlar Samajik Itihas*' Mirjumla was the first ruler who forced Rajbangsi's to convert into Muslim".⁹¹

To look at the origin of the Muslim society of North Bengal, Hunter, Buchanan Hamilton argued the Muslims of North Bengal are mainly converted indigenous Muslim. Sufi saints did not impose the rules of Hadis, Sariyat on the converted Muslims community, so they easily carried on the customs and cultures. In this area Islam got its popularity, they had to confess the hated caste system among the Hindu Society. Though there is no caste system, untouchability in Islam but all of these are found in converted Muslim community. The

lower-class Hindu society who converted into Islam, they did not change themselves professionally and society instead of converted in Islam. So, they have a lot of differences. Among these language and cultural differences are main important which varied on regional variation. Among the Muslim community of North Bengal, we find a number of sub-communities which are different by their language, cultural, profession. Among these, the *Nashya sheikh* is one of them.⁹²

The great number of Muslims of North Bengal were *Nashya sheikh*, specially they are found in Jalpaiguri, Siliguri, North and South Dinajpur, Gajal, Chanchal of Maldah District. This community in general was converted from the people of Hindu religion, namely Rajbangsi, Polia, Koch, Mech etc. 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 numbers, since the heydays of his career as an advocate. The term *Nashya* 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 to that of the Rajbangsi’s. *Nashya Sheikh* are peace loving and have a cordial relation with their neighbours. Religiously they are also liberal and less orthodox, even though 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 holders as at 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.⁹³

The *Nashya Sheikhs* is a numerically dominant Muslim group residing in the sub-Himalayan North Bengal. It has synonymous names like *Nashya* or Rajbangsi Musalman. They are mainly distributed over the northern districts of West Bengal, Particularly in Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling. Some of them are also found in north and south Dinajpur as well as in Malda. Due to lack of census data, it is very difficult to state the exact population figure of the last country (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of West Bengal). The *Nashyas* speak in local dialect at home and it is narrowly away from popular Bengali. But with outsiders the *Nashyas* speak in Bengali. Nowadays most of the well-to-do and educated *Nashya* families are learning Urdu and Arabic.⁹⁴

There is considerable controversy regarding the 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, Rajbangsi and Polia. History reveals that the Pirs and Fakirs as well as some ruling personalities of the late medieval era made a significant contribution to the growth of *Nashya* community in North Bengal.⁹⁵

The etymological meaning of the word *Nashya* is rooted in Bengali word '*Nasto*'. The Rajbangsi Hindus and other 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 popularization 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 Rajbangsi (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*.⁹⁶

They are also designated as *Bhabe Musalman*. It was only a few decades before the Independence that the Nashyas were in 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 Muslim. But the empirical reality of such a view of the higher status Muslims is difficult to establish.⁹⁷

When we look at it historically it is clear that the term '*Nashya*' was used even by the administrators of the Kingdom of Cooch Behar to maintain a distinction between the indigenous Muslims and the immigrants. *Nashyas* are said to be the progeny of indigenous converts or of the place. It is evident that the political instruction of Mir-Jumla and many other Muslim rulers and administrators in the region brought along with them many Muslim subedars, faujdars and laskars. Finally, the advent of many Muslim Pirs and Fakirs into this region facilitates the growth of Muslim population from the indigenous masses. The immigrants Muslims, who moved to Northern Bengal, used to marry the local women belonging to Mech, Koch, Rajbangsi's and Polia communities, who spoke in native dialect of language. Thus, the *Nashya* Muslims came into existence in North Bengal.⁹⁸

Initially some village heads and community leaders (Sardars) of some indigenous community of North Bengal converted to Islam for various socio-cultural reasons. The most famous of them was Ali Mech. Those early converts took much initiative to propagate Islam

among their fellows. Above all, the Muslim saints who came from outside played a significant role to popularize Islam among the local people by virtue of their spiritual, theological and liberal and liberal social activities. Actually, the Muslim Pirs and the influential local converters played a great role in the formation and growth of the Nashya community in the sub-Himalayan Bengal.⁹⁹

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 shar-croppers and many are agricultural labourers. Once there was many *Nashya* Jotedars, but nowadays for various reasons they have lost their big holdings. 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 *Nashyas* of both the rural and the urban areas are poor. The Nashya community is endogamous in character. The community is further subdivided 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.¹⁰⁰

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 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 is normally avoided by the parallel cousins (FBD and MSD). But the present time *Nashya* Muslims are adopting both the parallel and cross-cousin marriages.¹⁰¹

Traditionally, the *Nashya* are organized among themselves at the village and local level through elder's council locally known as paich, and had multifarious roles to govern the community and to look after their socio-religious-cultural issues. But today it has lost many of its traditions due to influence of formal statutory panchayets and party politics. The *Nashya* today participate in the 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 considered to be the primary reasons for their political marginalization.¹⁰²

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 per cent 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.¹⁰³

The *Nashya* are Sunnis and follow the tradition of Hanafi School. In social-religious matters they follow the guidelines of the Barelvi School (Madrasha) of thought. But in recent times the Deobandi School (Madrasha) of thought through Tableau activities has made a 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 the previous generation. This continuity of little traditions facilitates them to integrate and assimilate the local society dominated by the Hindu Rajbangsi's. 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, madrasahs and masjids (mosques) which are either associated with the Barelvi or the Deobandi 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 basis 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 positions. 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.¹⁰⁴

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 a 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.¹⁰⁵

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.¹⁰⁶

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 into 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 Rajbangsi. 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 strengthen their 'in-group' ('we') feeling. This has made them ethnic as well as class conscious. Consequently, ethnicity is getting prominence in the *Nashya* society.¹⁰⁷

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 is 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 net-work 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 is 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 encourages 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.¹⁰⁸

Ethnically, most of the Muslims of the district are not very different from the indigenous Rajbanshi's 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, Rajbanshi's (Scheduled Caste) resemble with those of their Muslim counter-parts here, majority of whom have been converted from the Rajbanshi's. 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 lifestyle 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 on 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.¹⁰⁹

The above social positions were changed artificially. If the financial situation improves, if you get education, if you join the government service or the army, if they became disciples of the Pir, many would declare themselves aristocrats. And the easiest way to do this was to take the title. Sheikh, Khan, Lashkar, Mamud, Syed, etc. used to express

their aristocracy by taking titles and removing their inferiority. In this context, a few proverbs can be mentioned.

"Roza Namaz kori keho Hoilo Gola.

Taman Koriya Nam Bosailo Jola.

Bolod Bahiya keho Bolay Mukeri.

Pitha Bechiya Nam keho Bolay Pithari."

"Agea thake Ulla shese hoi Uddin

Toler Mamud Upore Jay Kopal fere Joddin."

"Last year I was a Jola, this year I will be a Sheikh and next year I will be a Syed."

This process of social mobilization can be observed in the case of the nasal population of North Bengal. They were annoyed by the title and address of Nashya. At one point they adopted the title of 'Sheikh', abandoning the title of fallen or degraded. All the saints who came to preach Islam in the region were identified as Sheikh Muslims. As a disciple of this Sheikh, the local *Nasyas* also began to identify him as Sheikh. The son of Ghuyagru Nashya is Pierre Mamud Sheikh. But there was a difference. Foreign elite Muslims used to mention Sheikh before the name - such as 'Sheikh Jalaluddin Tabrizi'. But non-native Muslims usually used to mention Sheikh at the end of the name. However, evidence has been found that some people used the word Sheikh even before the name. Again, in the early twentieth century there was a rumour that those who would use the sheikh would become Shia Muslims. Due to this rumour, many people gave up the title of Sheikh and adopted the Shariah-compliant Islamic titles of Ali, Uddin, Hossain, Rahman etc.

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