

CONCLUSION:

The spread of Islam and the development of Muslims in India were a multilayered phenomenon and followed different patterns in different regions of the country. The bulk of the Muslims in India have been drawn from the diverse segments of the Indian population. It was spread by other means rather by the sword and the conversion to the faith (Islam) was not a sudden switchover of faith. It was a process of two ways, in one way, Islam itself undergoes a change in the process of converting the Hindus or others and on the other the former changed to suit the latter. The Muslim rulers in India took both the militant method and peaceful proselytizing way for conversion of the people to the Muslim faith. During the total period of Islamic rule, thousands of Muslim immigrants settled all over the India and their numbers were swelled by local converts. Trade served an important passage for the spread of Islam in Indian peninsula. Much before the era of Muslim rule, west Asia merchants came to Malabar Coast and other Indian coastal parts to purchase spice and aromatic woods. They were not only enterprising merchants but also had devotion and responsibility to spread the message of Islam in India. The building of Muslim society in Bengal was a long process of gradual growth. The composition of the society quite naturally differed from century to century with the immigration of foreign Muslim and the conversion of local people. At the initial period, the propagation of Islam was not strictly guided by the principles of Islamic rules in Bengal and some wrong explanations influenced the socio-religious life of the Muslim to a great extent. The general ignorance of Islam and pre-Islamic cultural traditions constituted a complex cultural pattern among the Muslim of Bengal and moreover, the traditions of the immigrant Muslim groups enriched the Muslim society of Bengal during the course of time. Islam, which came in the wake of the Turkish conquest, changed the socio-religious pattern of Bengal. Politically, it sowed the needs of Muslim rule,

but socially it planted the Muslim society, opening the gate of Bengal to several immigrants from the then Muslim world. The Muslim rulers and officials played a great role to spread Islam and to constitute the Muslim society either by establishing marriage alliances with local people or by mass conversion of the indigenous communities.

Thus, we see that Chapter- I discuss about the growth and development of Muslim society in Bengal. After the conquest of Muslims, Bengal had become a healthy, brave and individual nation. In the age of pre-Muslims, mainly the commoners of Bengal were Hindu, Buddhist and members of inferior classes and some Jains. Although residential people were a great part of this nation but at that time they did not count as citizens. There were Buddhists in large numbers, but after the decline of the Pal Dynasty, the Sen Dynasty conquered the Gaur throne. The Brahmins were arduous to the Buddhists and they gradually became fewer in numbers. In majority, political power, social respect and economic power were enjoyed only by the Hindus. However, Hindus in due course of time lost their vitality of life because of the curse inherent caste system.

The conquest of Bengal by the Muslims was more important than military victory. The political establishments that emerged as an outcome of new victory upheld the ideals of peace, discipline, equality in religious, cultural and social life. Thus, as a matter of fact, they did not only come as a warrior tribe but also brought some new ideologies in this land. For this new ideology, a great revolution emerged in Hindu society and it was the renaissance era in Bengal history. The demographic structure was revamped with the coming of the Muslims in Bengal. The Hindu population was in majority even though a great number of Buddhists and low caste Hindus got converted into Islam. This can be established by the fact that the Census report of 1872 revealed that the number of Muslims were only 1crore 70lakhs in Bengal. However, in the census report of 1881, Muslim population rose dramatically and it surpassed the Hindu population by 5lakhs and emerged as a major community.

The initial researches in this chapter look into the formation of Bengali Muslim identity in colonial Bengal and post-colonial Bengal focusing on the period from 1870 to 1920. Muslim identity formation in colonial Bengal have repeatedly focused on the chasm between this rural, peasant *atrap* (non-elite) majority that comprised the bulk of the Muslim population in the province and the Urdu-speaking *ashraf* (elite) who traced their descent from Persia or Arabia or to the Mughal center of power in North India. The Bengali Muslim identity that emerged was a predominantly non-elite, peasant-based identity whose site of formation was the Bengali countryside. There was a critical link between the Urdu speaking *ashraf* and the non-Urdu speaking *atrap* among the Bengal Muslim intellectuals whose emergence can be traced to the first two decades of the twentieth century. The Muslim identity in Bengal was essentially a class-based identity that transmuted into the self-consciousness of being Muslim through the waves of reformist Islamic movements that swept across the Bengal countryside in the mid nineteenth century for example the Faraizi Movement and the late nineteenth.

The colonial censuses of Bengal were instrumental in creating new identities for the Bengali Muslims. It can be argued that due to categories invented by the colonial censuses for defining people, the Bengali Muslims in response to categorization developed a new narrative of themselves in which their '*Muslimness*' became central to their identity. This was a break from pre-colonial Bengali Muslim identity, where religion was the only boundary for the purpose of self-definition. The colonial project of categorizing people heightened religious awareness in contrast to other cultural commonalities between Hindus and Muslims in Bengal. The Bengali Muslims increasingly started identifying with Islam only, foregoing other cultural markers as part of the Bengali Muslim identity. The opposition between Bengali and Islam was to a large extent a fall out of the operations of colonial census, which set the limits of the discourse of defining Bengali and Muslim identities. The tension between

Bengali and Muslim as projected in the census had to be addressed, which in turn led to new definitions of what it meant to have a Bengali Muslim identity. The Bengali Muslim identity was constructed with religion as the locus of the community. New definitions of Muslims emerged in response to census enumeration, and how the debates and responses these descriptions generated altered the people's understanding of community identity.

The chapter one is followed by Chapter- II, which discusses about the *Nashya Sheikh* community of North Bengal in historical perspectives. Looking into the *Nashya sheikh* of North Bengal, the principal theme of the research, it has been discovered that the great number of Muslims of North Bengal was *Nashya Sheikh*. The *Nashya Sheikhs*, a numerically dominant Muslim group resided 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, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur districts. Some of them are also found in Chachol and Gajol as well as in Malda district and all-over North Bengal. This community in general were local converts of Rajbangsi, Polia, Koch, Mech community etc. Due to lack of census data, it is very difficult to state the exact population figure of *Nashya sheikhs* of North Bengal. They are also designated as *Babe 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 per-Islamic traditions the *Nashya* are not favorably 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. The *Nashya Sheikh* community is endogamous in character. These communities are further subdivided on the lineage which is reflected by the use of their surnames. The most popular surnames among the *Nashya* are Ahmed, Rahman, Islam, Mia, Hoque, Uddin, Bapari, Pramanik, Sarkar, Sardar, etc. Intermarriages take place among them hence there is no social differentiation on the basis of surnames.

The *Nashya Sheikh* Muslims of the North Bengal are not very different from the indigenous Rajbanshi's or Paliyas but they are undoubtedly Muslims who show signs of foreign extracts. There are many other observations which go to show that the physical features, socio-cultural characteristics of the Koch, Rajbanshi (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 caste Muslim community who in the past centuries have emerged as a result of conversion from the low ranked communities (Rajbanshi, Mech, Koch and Paliya). The ideas discussed in this chapter two are further convoluted in the next chapter number three which studies on how Islam was perceived in popular culture and society of the *Nashya sheikh* community?

Chapter-III, looks into the approach on how Islam was practiced by the *Nashya Sheikh* Community. The *Nashya Sheikh* use *kamtapuri* or *Rajbangsi* language and use *Rajbangsi* customs and manners. They like to carry on their life as same as *Rajbangsi* use to only different *Roza*(Fasting), *Namaz* (Prayer) and later on there have been introduced some Urdu word such as *Abba*, *Amma*, *Chacha*, *Gosul* etc. There is no any special feature in their House or cottage making this are same as *Rajbangsi*, some House are in Aligned and some are scattered manners. Previously they use to make their House with bamboo and jutes trick.

But at present they use make their House with Tin on the roof and wall and Bricks Houses also noticeable. Though at present Earthen House are found in Malda and Dinajpur district among the *Nashya sheikh* community. They give more important to the northern side cottage of a House. It is revealing that they are not confined by the rules of *Shariat*, Islamic customs and Islamic rules. They always maintain the Hindu Rajbangsi culture but need not to justified the culture in following as same as Muslims or not. Even they used to follow the Hindu good day in these special days for their marriage, birth ceremony etc. They always avoid the Hindu evil month for their occasion such as *Poush mash* (month), *Chaitra mash*, *Bhadramash* etc and they also avoid the *Ramjan* month (Fasting) and *Maharam* month for their marriage. They also make bargaining in their marriage for dowry. Brides wear red sharee in their marriage like Hindu. So, they are not lagging behind to maintain the Hindu customs and culture. Apart from few educated *Nashya Sheikh* Family most of the family who are comparatively less educated or illiterate do not subscribe to the notion of birth control. They follow the four obligatory acts of *Ohju*: washing the face with clean water, washing both hands up to the elbows, wiping a quarter of the head with wet hands and washing both feet including the ankle. Of all the rituals in the life cycle, *Nashya Sheikh* Muslims especially extol their funeral rites as very distinctive and sophisticated. They maintain that they are very dissimilar to the Hindu and tribal in treating their dead. They wash the body of the dead person with perfumed soap, taking special care to wash the mouth, clean the teeth, nostrils and lower parts of the body, dress it in new clothes, smear scented oil (*atar*) on it and then, instead of burning the body as most Hindu do, put it in a grave. Close relatives of the dead person perform the task of washing and dressing the body. Villagers co-operate with the relatives in washing or *gosol*. There are always a few persons in the village especially skilled in such jobs. They take special care in digging the grave, so as to keep the walls inside smooth. In fact, there are always certain experts among the villagers whose help is sought for

this kind of work. The grave has to be deep enough that one can comfortably sit upright inside. They believe that after the grave is filled in and the mourners have left the cemetery, an angel of God awakens the dead person and makes him sit up in his grave. One of the reasons for washing and perfuming the dead body is to ensure that the angel may not abominate the dead person seeing dirt on his body. The corpse is carried on a bier to the graveyard by pallbearers who have to bathe before touching it. Before entering the dead all the assembled Muslims say *janajanamaz* for the dead person, facing westward. The body is placed inside the grave with its head to the north and feet to the south, its feet turned towards the west. All *Nashya Sheikhs* Muslims, irrespective of any social and class status, come and join *Janaja* and throw fistfuls of earth on the grave. Even *Nashya Sheikh* passing by on such occasions are supposed to join in the *janaja* and throw earth on the grave. This is considered a meritorious act. Before putting earth on the grave, they make a flattened roof of bamboo and boundless of paddy stalks, the object being to leave sufficient space within for the dead to sit up. The roof is constructed level with the ground. On this roof or platform, they put earth and raise a mud plastered tomb in the shape of a triangular prism. Women never accompany a dead body to the graveyard. *Nashya Sheikh* keeps a dead body for twelve or thirteen hours before burying it. It takes a long time to arrange all the paraphernalia connected with burial-digging a grave, washing and dressing the corpse and so on. Moreover, they often wait for the relatives, who are immediately informed of the death, to come and pay their last respects. Villagers and relatives of the dead within the village go to other villages where close kin of the deceased live to inform them of the death. Hindu low caste villagers often act as messengers for their *Nashya Sheikh* co-villagers, conveying such news.

Thus, in retrospect the *Nashya* are *Sunnis* and they follow the tradition of *Hanafi* School. In social-religious matters they trail the guidelines of the Barelvi School (Madrasha) of thought. But in recent times the *Deobandi* School (Madrasha) of thought through the

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 Rajbansis. On the socio-religious level the *Nashya* cultivate the traits of Islamic great tradition to operate within the framework of wider Muslim society. The process of Islamization helped them in achieving a social position within the structure of a Muslim Society in Bengal. Local Moktabs, madrasas and masjids (mosques) which are either associated with the Barelvi or the Deobandi traditions play a very significant role in Islamizing the *Nashya* community.

Chapter-IV, discusses the social life of the *Nashya Sheikh* and special emphasis is given to education, literacy and women of this community. In any society the system of education plays an important role in training, development and allocation of its manpower resources. A few numbers of people are educated in the *Nashya sheikh* society. Before the independence the changes of Govt. service were uncertain in the community. They could not realize the value of education because they were confined to agriculture. The average educational standard of the *Nashya Sheikh* class is also very low. The materials on record goes to indicate that their participation in the field of education is not up to the mark; about 10% read up to primary stage, 8% up to secondary level, and 3% up to Higher secondary level, percentage of Higher secondary Education among them is quite negligible, (Graduation-2%, Law-0.5% and post Graduate-0.5%). The spread of education among the female is extremely low; primary -6%, secondary -4% and Higher secondary -1%. One percent only reached up to Graduation level. Due to poor socio-economic conditions the percentage of dropouts at different stages of education is quite high. It is 50% at the stage of

primary level, 80% at the secondary stage, 90% at higher secondary level, 95% at the Graduation level and 99% percent at the post Graduate level. Their poor economic condition forces the children to join either their family occupation or other than family occupations and thereby assist their parents in managing the family. The sample survey conducted reveals that out of the surveyed population, 9% of the females were literate against 23% of the males. About 17% of the children (5-14 years) had school education. The sample survey further revealed that the dropout rate was as high as 89% at the primary stage and 80% at the secondary stage. Abbasuddin Ahmed is one of the prominent people of this community in the field of culture. He has always been remembered as the Bhavaya emperor. His daughter Firdausi Rahman has gained a special reputation in Bangladesh as a musician. Naib Ali (Tepu) was another well-known artist in Bhavaiya music. It is to be noted that the abode of the above three refers to Balarampur. Other members of this community who have made or are making significant contributions in other areas of society especially in education, literature, culture, sports etc. are educationist Bajle Rahman (well known as a writer-essayist), former athlete Maqsoodar Rahman (played at Calcutta Mohammedan Sporting), journalist poet M. Akshar Ali (Editor, Meghla Akash), Helen Nuri Azad (writer), Mastira Chini (Poet-Storyteller), Moinuddin Chisti (Journalist), Azizul Haque (Essay), Poet Aminur Rahman (Editor, Handwritten Magazine). 'Baitha' drama personalities such as journalist Fazlul Haque (Haldibari), Azimuddin Mia (renowned Dotra musician and radio artist), Muha Abdur Rahman (writer and author), Jinat Aman (folk Singer). Literacy rates are low among the *Nashya sheikh* in the state and it is worse in those areas where it constitutes half or more of the population of the North Bengal. The study also reflects that educational attainment of this minority community is much less as compared to the state average. The study found that as the level of educational level increases the percentage of *Nashya sheikh* educational attainment decreases sharply. This trend of course puts an impediment in the development of

the community as education is supposed to be the main instrument for bringing about social, economic and political inclusion and durable integration of people particularly those 'excluded', from the mainstream of any society.

The women in *Nashya Sheikh* Community are suffering from several social disabilities. The girls are mostly married at a very early age, immediately after puberty. Unilateral from of divorce and polygamy etc. are also prevalent. The education had been a serious problem among the *Nashya Sheikh* women in Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Darjeeling, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur districts and as well as Malda. The literacy rate of women among the *Nashya Sheikh* Community is still very poor. Women are under their father at their childhood stage at the younger age under their husband and at the older age under their sons. The women could not come out of the social structure to forward. However, a little number of Muslim girls goes to the school but they have lack of mentality be educated. Firstly, they have no educational environment in their home. Secondly, they could not purchase books for the lake of many. Not only the problem is found in Muslim girls but also, it's found the enter *Nashya Sheikh* Students. The thesis is incomplete without discussing the economic life and the political participation of the Nasya Sheikh community. The next chapter underscores these aspects.

Chapter-V, draws attention to economic life and political participation of the *Nashya Sheikh* community. The bulk of the *Nashya sheikh* populations are mostly dependent on farming and agriculture. However, a shift has been noticed that there is a tendency among the educated *Nashya sheikh* Muslims to lean towards govt. Service. In spite of that agriculture is the prime source of income for this community. The *Nashyas* living in urban areas are engaged in shop-keeping, tailoring, masoning, rickshaw-pulling and blue-collar services. Women belonging to poor *Nashya* families are engaged in various economic activities. They work as agricultural labourers, construction workers and housemaids. Economically, the

Nashya of both the rural and the urban areas are extremely poor. Apart from that another interesting feature of their income is their deep engagement in cow and goat trading across North Bengal especially in the districts i.e., Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur and Malda districts as well as whole North Bengal. Economic roles of the *Nashya Sheikh* women were very significant in nature. They were basically engaged in domestic works and child rearing, keeping of fowls, ducks, cows and goats was a common practice of the *Nashya Sheikh* households and the women were mostly engaged in such activities. A few of the *Nashya* women were also engaged in certain craft works such as weaving, cane basket making etc. The women who belong to the *Nashya Sheikh* community are mostly in isolation. They were ignorant, illiterate and confined in their homes due to strict rules of *Purdha* or seclusion. Instead of equality and justice, their position in society was exploitative in nature for various reasons such as performance of excessive labour, negligence, avoidance, Fremantle fortune and separation or divorce even in sexual matters. However, widow remarriage was allowed and usually practiced by the people. The birth of the girl was looked down upon as very unfortunate and their opinion in family matters and other social affairs. The system of dowry though prevalent was not very high and compulsive as at present. The sample survey reveals that 53% of the males married before the age of 17 as against 89% of the females in that age group. The materials on record go to indicate that the rites and rituals followed by them at different stages of life cycle (birth, marriage, death (excepting burial) are similar to those prevalent prior to their conversion, i.e., these are still followed in accordance with their traditional heritage.

It may once again be emphasized that socio-economic backwardness and political alienation have given rise to some important questions as far as this minority community is concerned. After Seven decades of independence, *Nashya sheikhs* in West Bengal are lagging behind other communities in terms of socio-economic condition and political representation.

Being a rural community in the context of West Bengal, they are bound to be socio-economically and politically are very poor. Balance sex ratio is an indicator of equal status of men and women. Moreover, it also indicates the level of socio-economic development in a society or within a community.

Their political participation in mainstream politics is minimal. *Nashya sheikhs* are under-represented in the parliament and state legislature. Their participation in the political process did not increase to the extent that it should have since the inception of the first general election. Their political participation is also less in proportion with their population share in the state. Democracy has no meaning if minorities are not secure and also do not get proper share in economic, social and political development in proportion to their population. However, it needs to be pointed out that without political empowerment, socio-economic development of Muslims will be a utopian approach and vice versa.

Individuals from the *Nashya Sheikh* community who later played are playing significant roles in politics, in Cooch Behar district. Among them are Dr. Mohammad Fazle Haque, Ainuddin Miah, Nuruddin Miah (former president of the District Primary Education Parliament), Tamser Ali, Matiar Rahman, Abdul Jalil Ahmed and others. Dr. Fazle Haque was elected MLA from Sitai Assembly constituency in 1967, 1969, 1971, 1972, 1996 and 2006 respectively. He was the Minister of State in the Home Department of the State Cabinet from 1972-1976. Ainuddin Mian was elected to the district council as a candidate of the Forward Bloc party of the Left Front and held the post of chairman of the Cooch Behar district council from 1978 to 1983. He later died in a road accident. Tamser Ali is a prominent leader of the CPI (M). He was elected MLA from Natabari Assembly constituency in 2001 and 2006. Matiar Rahman is a well-known face of left politics. He was associated with the CPI (M) and was the nominee of that party as the President of the District Primary School Parliament. Abdul Jalil Ahmed is a prominent leader of the present ruling party

Trinamool Congress and a member of the steering committee of the North Bengal State Transport Corporation. His wife Amina Ahmed is currently the Vice Chairperson of Cooch Behar Municipality.

The contribution of *Nashya Sheikhs* or *Bhumijo* Muslim community in the formation of society in the state-ruled Kochbihar state or district Cooch Behar is sufficient. This community has many accomplished children who are not only established in their own field, but they have also left a mark of considerable achievement in various fields of society. The best people in this episode are Khan Chowdhury Amanatullah Ahmed, Ansharuddin Ahmed, Naib Ali (Tipu), Hussain Muhammad Ersad, Firdausi Rahman, Ahmad Hossain Pradhan, Maulvi Fakiruddin Ahmed, Kashimaddin-Mohammad and others. Among them Khan Chowdhury Amanatullah Ahmed has become immortal as the author of the book "History of Kochbihar (Vol. 1)". Mr. Amanatullah was an important minister in the royal court of Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur. During the Raj, the influential landlord Amanatullah Saheb was the president of the local people's organization 'Cooch Behar Hit Sadhani Sabha' in Cooch Behar. Besides, Ansharuddin Ahmed was well known as an important politician of Raj Amal and District Cooch Behar. He has been the finance minister in the royal court. Later, in 1951, he became the district president of the Cooch Behar district of the National Congress Party and in 1958; he was elected a member of the Rajya Sabha as a candidate nominated by the National Congress. Another important person of the district was Mojiruddin Ahmed. He was a member nominated by the royal court in Cooch Behar municipality. He was elected to the Legislative Assembly in 1952 and 1957 from Cooch Behar (General) constituency as a Congress candidate. In 1972, he became the district president of the Cooch Behar district of the Indira Gandhi-led Congress party. Another influential person at that time was Maqbool Hossain, a lawyer from Dinahata. His son Hussein Muhammad Ershad later graced the post of army chief and president of neighboring

Bangladesh. Ahmed Hossain Pradhan (Naib Ahilkar or Sub-Divisional Ruler), Maulvi Fakiruddin Ahmed (Naib Ahilkar), Kashimuddin Mohammad (Tufanganj) Municipality Chairman, etc.

The last chapter number VI tries to make a comparative study of Nashya Sheikh and other communities. The socio-economic condition of the *Nashyas* is miserable and deplorable in compared to the other Muslim communities. Gradually under the pressure of a dominant culture and lack of consciousness their (*Nashyas*) own culture, tradition, beliefs, rituals etc. were pushed to the verge of endangerment rendering them socially, economically, culturally, educationally extremely backward. Their main occupation is cultivation, but cattle farming, small scale business, selling of fish, mutton, chicken etc. are also other sources of their income. *Nashyas* are mostly interested in cow trading. They were always a subject of subjugation and hatred by the higher-class Muslims. The literacy rate among the *Nashyas*, especially among the women is a matter of grave concern. Superstition and lack of consciousness is another impediment to the growth of this community. Other dogmas of this community are *purdah* system (veil), child marriage etc. The marriage between *Nashya Sheikh* and another upper-caste Muslim group is prohibited and strictly followed.

Thus, in retrospect this thesis adds new knowledge by making an in-depth micro study of *Nashya Sheikh* Community. Methodologically it discusses about rooting of Islam in the rural fringes of North Bengal and empirically it looks into the *Nashya Sheikh* community of North Bengal.