

ABSTRACT

THE NASHYA SHEIKH COMMUNITY OF NORTH BENGAL IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: A STUDY OF THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS

The spread of Islam and the development of Muslims in India were a multi-layered 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 than 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 may change to suit the latter. The building up 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.

This thesis begins with an explanation on the Growth and development of Muslim society in Bengal. Following this, *Nashya Sheikhs* community of North Bengal in historical perspectives is vividly described. The trunk of the discussion consists of how Islam in popular culture is practised by *Nashya sheikh* of North Bengal along with the socio economic as well as the changes and continuities with special focus on political participation identity formation and *Nashya sheikh* and others communities a comparative study is conversed.

This thesis looks into the formation of *Nashya sheikh* Bengali Muslim identity in North Bengal in the 20th century, who was a numerically dominant Muslim group resided in the sub-Himalayan North Bengal 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. They are also designated as *Babe Musalman* or Rajbangsi Muslim.

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 Rahaman, Ahmed, Uddin, Bapari, Pramanik, Sarkar, Sardar, etc. The socio-economic condition of the *Nashyas* is miserable and deplorable in compared to the other Muslim communities. Gradually under the pressure of a big culture and lack of consciousness their (*Nashyas*) own culture, tradition, beliefs, rituals etc. were pushed to the verge of endangerment rendering them socially, economically, culturally, educationally extremely backward. 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. 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 introduction of Urdu word such as *Abba*, *Amma*, *Chacha*, *Gosul* etc.

In any society the system of education plays an important role in training, development and allocation of its manpower resources. The average educational standard of the *Nashya Sheikh* class is also very low. The materials on record and field work performed indicates 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 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.