

Chapter – II

ADVENT OF ISLAM IN SURMA-BARAK VALLEY

It is considered that Muslims came in India during the life time of Prophet Mohammad. Islam arrived in this Sub-continent long before Muslim political settlement in India. In the early seventh century Islam was introduced through Arabian traders who visited the Malabar region, linking them with the ports of South East Asia. With the advent of Islam, Arabian traders served as the messengers of the new religion and they propagated it wherever they visited. It is said that the ruler of Malabar Cheraman Perumal visited Arabia to meet with Prophet Mohammad in 628 A.D. and it was after his return his friend Malik bin Deenar built the first Indian mosque ‘Cheraman Juma Masjid’ at Kodungallur in Kerala in 629 A.D. during the life time of Mohammad (570–632).¹

In the 1711-12, Muhammad bin Qasim made conquest and conquered the province of Sindh and with this Muslims politically arrived in India.² In the first half of the tenth century, Mahmud of Ghazni added the Punjab to the Ghaznavid Empire, conducting several raids deep into India. Muhammad of Ghor conducted a more successful campaign at the end of the twelfth century, leading to the creation of the Delhi Sultanate.

The advent of Islam in India and Bengal were mainly through the traders, through the invasions of princes, nobles, chiefs and missionary activities of Sufi saints. Ikhtiyar-ud-Din Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji, founder of the Muslim rule in Bengal. Hearing about Ikhtiyar-ud-Din’s military success in Bihar, many men belonging to Khilji tribe flocked to his standard. It was this increase in the number of his followers that encouraged him to extend his sway in to Bengal. The size of his followers may be guessed from the fact that ten thousand chosen troops accompanied him in his Tibet

¹ Syed Amirul Islam, *Bangladesh O Islam*, Jatiya Granta Prakashan, Dhaka, 2009, p.21

² *Ibid*, p.15

expedition.³ The adventure failed and majority of them perished, but a good number of survivors returned to Deokot to join their families and the others remained in Bengal for ever. Moreover, three of Ikhtiyar-ud-Din's principal lieutenants, Muhammad Shiran, Husam al Din and Ali Mardan remained in Bengal, each with sufficient number of troops to look after the administration and defense of the newly founded Muslim dominion.⁴

The establishment of new dominions of Islam in the east at a time when the Mongols were carrying everything before them in Iran and Central Asia offered a welcome opportunity to many uprooted families, merchants, learned men, artisans, craftsmen and others to move out of troubles and to find shelter and homes in north India and Bengal.⁵ Thus, besides military adventures and troops, persons of peaceful pursuits, learned men and *shaiks* came almost immediately in the wake of Ikhtiyar-ud-Din's conquests.

Before going to discuss the advent of Islam in Surma-Barak Valley, it is important to focus a brief light on the existing theories of the advent of Islam in Bengal and Assam to some extent.⁶ Although Islam came in Bengal formally in 13th century, but it came to be known to the people of Bengal even before that through Arabian merchants, who came through trading purpose and settled in the different ports and adjoining areas of Bengal.⁷ Ikhtiyar-ud-Din Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar established Muslim rule in Bengal in 1203 AD and with this Islam began to grow in Bengal. Number of factors contributed behind the rapid growth of Muslims in Bengal and basing on these factors several theories have been developed by the scholars in late 19th and 20th centuries. Surma-Barak Valley which was politically divided in medieval period was ruled by different rulers. Surma Valley which is consisted with broader Sylhet in pre-independent India was ruled by the Sultans and Mughals where as Cachar, which is consisted with Cachar and Hailakandi was never under any Muslim ruler. Before the British, it was ruled by the

³ Muhammad Mohar Ali, *History of the Muslims of Bengal, Vol. – IB, Survey of Administration, Society and Culture*, Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, Dhaka, 2003, p.760

⁴ *Ibid*,

⁵ *Ibid*,

⁶ The name of the river Barak is derived from the word 'Bara-Bakra' which denotes wide curve of the river.

⁷ Dr. A.K.M. Ayub Ali, M. A. Aziz & Prof. Shahed Ali (ed.), *Islam in Bangladesh Through Ages*, IFB, Dhaka, 1995, pp.11,12

Tripura and Dimasa rulers respectively. However, advent of Islam in Surma-Barak Valley was not an isolated development but was integrated with the rest of Bengal. The socio-cultural aspects and prospects Surma-Barak Valley were almost similar with the rest of Bengal. On the other hand Islam had been widely spread in the Brahmaputra Valley from 16th century onwards. The Ahom king for maintaining good relations with the Mughal administrators of Bengal employed a good number of Muslim administrators, military adventurers, artisans, craftsman and as such to the Ahom Kingdom.⁸ This secular attitude of Ahom kingdom also attracted the Sufi saints to come over here for their missionary activities.

Theories of Islamization:

Richard Eaton in his *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204 - 1760* tried to explore the reasons for the expansion of Islamic in Bengal through a comprehensive historical examination of the economic, political, social and religious developments. Eaton addresses the four primary theories that may possibly explain how and why Islam expanded into the Bengal frontier: (1) The Immigration Theory, (2) Military Conquest; (3) Economic and Social Mobility; (4) Liberation Theory. In 19th century during the high tide of European imperial domination, Islam was considered as the religion of sword and stresses the role of military force in diffusion of Islam in India which was opposed by Richard Eaton.⁹ To Eaton the proponents of this theory were probably confused due to a literal translation of primary Persian accounts narrating the “Islamic” conquest of India.¹⁰ Khundakar Fuzli Rubbee, a Muslim of foreign origin,¹¹ on the basis of contemporary sources wrote his Persian work, *Haqiqat-i-Musalman-i-Bangalah* (1893)¹² stated “that the natives of this country, either from compulsion or free will, were converted to Islam, in any appreciable number at a time.”¹³ He pointed out

⁸ Dr. J. Bimal Dev and Dr. Dilip K. Lahiri, p.2

⁹ Eaton, Richard M. *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*. Berkeley: University of California Press, c1993., <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft067n99v9/p.55>

¹⁰ Richard Eaton, pp.55,56

¹¹ Khundakar Fuzli Rubbee served as ‘Dewan’ under the nominal Nawab of Murshidabad.

¹² English translation of the book, entitled, *The Origins of the Musalmans of Bengal*, was published in 1895

¹³ Khondkar Fuzli Rubbee, *The Origin of the Musalmans of Bengal* (1895; 2d ed., Dacca: Society for Pakistan Studies, 1970), pp.40-41.

among other historical facts, that if such was ever the case, the higher classes would also have been forced to do so, for the latter in reality, “held a position of rivalry with the Muslims.”¹⁴ He pointed out among other historical facts, that if such was ever the case, the higher classes could also have been forced to do so, for the latter in reality, “held a position of rivalry with the Muslims.”¹⁵ On the other hand if geography of India is considered, it is surprising that the area from where Muslim rule were conducted, for about six centuries, Muslim never became a majority in population and the areas where the most dramatic Islamization occurred such as Eastern Bengal or western Punjab where Muslim militancy or the ‘Sword’ was weakest.¹⁶ It is found in the first Census Report that Muslim contains in these areas 70-90 percent of population and on the other hand in the areas like Delhi, Agra from where Muslim administrative mechanism was conducted where percentage of Muslim population ranged from 10-15 percent. Even within Bengal this principle holds true. As the 1901 Census of India put it:

“None of these [eastern] districts contains any of the places famous as the headquarters of Muhammadan rulers. Dacca was the residence of the Nawab for about a hundred years, but it contains a smaller proportion of Muslims than any of the surrounding districts, except Faridpur. Malda and Murshidabad contain the old capitals, which were the center of Musalman rule for nearly four and a half centuries, and yet the Muslims form a smaller proportion of the population than they do in the adjacent districts of Dinajpur, Rajshahi, and Nadia.”¹⁷

Another theory of Islamization which Richard Eaton termed as ‘Immigration Theory’. In this view, the bulk of Muslims of Bengal are descended from other Muslims who had either migrated overland from the Iranian plateau or sailed across the Arabian Sea.¹⁸ Khondkar Fuzli Rubbee stated that from 1203 to 1765, during the long period of 562 years 76 Muslim rulers successively ruled Bengal. The 76 rulers were all Afghan, Mughal, Iranian or Arab origin except Jalal-ud-Din Shah, Ahmad Shah and Raja Todar

¹⁴ *Ibid* p.30

¹⁵ *Ibid*,

¹⁶ Richard Eaton, pp.55-56

¹⁷ Census of India, 1901, vol. VI, The Lower Provinces of Bengal and Their Feudatories (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1902), p.156

¹⁸ Richard Eaton, p.55

Mall and Man Singh. Owing to this foreign of its sovereigns number of Musalmans of all classes and conditions came from Afghanistan, Turkistan, Iran, Arabia, distant parts of India and other countries and settled in Bengal.¹⁹ These rulers to induce men of their own race and creed from their own native places and settle in their dominions with a view to increasing own power and position. However, considering that there are no records of a mass migration of Muslims moving into the Bengal delta, Eaton dismisses this theory as a feasible explanation.

Another theory of Islamization was 'Religion of Patronage Theory' emphasized by the western scholars. To them, in order to receive non-religious favour from ruling community such as - relief from taxes, promotion in the bureaucracy, and so forth a good number of people embraced Islam. Number of such instances are there in Indian history that support this theory. In the beginning of the fourteenth century, Ibn Battuta mentioned in his '*Rehla*' that Indians presented themselves as new converts to the Khilji sultans, who in turn rewarded them with robes of honor according to their rank.²⁰ The Census Report of 1891 states that many landholding families of Upper India converted themselves to Islamic faith to keep their ancestral lands in the family and to escape from imprisonment for non-payment of revenue.²¹ The theory also included groups employees engaged in Muslim Courts which assimilated much Islamic culture even if they did not formally convert. The Kayasthas and Khattris of the Gangetic Plain, the Parasnīs of Maharashtra, and the Amils of Sind all cultivated Islamic culture while meeting the government's need for clerks and administrative servants, a process that Aziz Ahmad once compared with nineteenth- and twentieth-century "Westernization."²²

Another most popular theory, which Eaton called as the 'Social Liberation Theory'. The theory postulates that tight and rigid Hindu caste system led discrimination against its own lower orders. They had been suffering for centuries under the crushing burden of oppressive and tyrannical high-caste Hindus especially the Brahmins. When

¹⁹ Khondkar Fuzli Rubbee, pp. 23, 11-12

²⁰ Ibn Battuta, *Rehla*, Translated by Mahdi Husain. Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1953, p.46.

²¹ Census of India Report, 1891, Vol. -II, p.3

²² Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment*, Oxford, 1964, p.105.

Islam arrived with its liberal message of social equality as preached by Sufi shaikhs, these people denying their Brahmanic authority “converted” to Islam on large scale.²³ Eaton also disagrees with theory; although he agrees that this may have occurred, but it could not be considered the sole or primary reason for conversion to Islam.²⁴

Higher rate of Muslims percentage in Bengal first came to be recognized in the very first census of 1870 which led to a heated debate that lasted to the 19th and 20th centuries. The debate began with the publication of the Census Report in 1872. H. Beverly, Superintendent of the Report of the Census of Bengal 1872’, noted “The discovery that nearly one-third of the population of these provinces (Bengal, Bihar and Orissa) profess the Muhammadan faith,.....is not only interesting in itself, but puts the character of the people in a new light altogether.”²⁵ He sought an explanation of this that “the conversion in to Islam of the numerous low castes” which inhabited the land suggesting that the “exclusive caste system of Hinduism” led them to embrace Islam, “which recognized all men as equal.” Beverly was unable, however, to find any concrete historical support for his supposition and also to offer any satisfactory answer to the question that, if the rigorous caste system was the main reason for the low class Hindus to convert in to Islam in Bengal, why such should not have been the case in other areas of the subcontinent where Muslim had ruled for an equally long period. Beverly was quite aware about this weakness of his approach, so he stated that “It is not clear indeed that this conversion of the lower castes was more general in the part of the country of which we are treating than elsewhere.”²⁶ E.T. Dalton however, supported Bevelry’s theory. He in his *‘Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* which was published from Calcutta in the same year and when the two subsequent censuses taken at ten years intervals in 1881 and 1891. He showed that Muslims in Bengal were really more numerous than Hindus-in the former year the recorded number of Muslims being 17,863,411 as against 17,245,120 Hindus, and in the latter year the number of Muslims being 19,582,481 as against 18,068,655 Hindus. C.J.O. Donnell, Superintendent of the Census Report for 1891 wrote,

²³ Richard Eaton, p.57

²⁴ *Ibid*, p.56

²⁵ *Report of the Census of Bengal, 1872*, Calcutta, p.525

²⁶ *Ibid* p.348

“In 1872 Mohammadan were merely a million less than the Hindus in Bengal proper. Now they surpass them by a million and half...It is satisfactorily proved that since 1872, out of every 10000 persons, Islam has gained 100 persons in north Bengal, 262 in Eastern Bengal and 110 in Western Bengal-on the average 157 persons in the whole Bengal proper.”²⁷

Even W.W. Hunter’s ‘*Indian Musalman*’ has also agreed with this fact of low class conversion in to Islamic faith. What Hunter said about the spirit of equality in Islam is undoubtedly true, but the paradox in the discussion lay in the fact that it was elicited not by what had happened in the distant past but by the supposed increase of Muslims in Bengal during the period from 1872-1891 when neither were Muslims the rulers of the country nor were there any organized Islamic missionary activities comparable in any way to those of the Christian Missionaries. Nor, as pointed out already, was any single instance of such conversion of a low-caste Hindu during the period mentioned by any of the writers.²⁸ Beverley concluded that “the existence of Muhammadans in Bengal is not due so much to the introduction of Mughal blood into the country as to the conversion of the former inhabitants for whom a rigid system of caste discipline rendered Hinduism intolerable.”²⁹

Beverley’s interpretation of the Census Report of 1882 was opposed by Abu Ghuznavi, a Muslim gentleman of Mymensingh District who instead as quoted by Richard Eaton proposed that “the majority of the modern Mahomedans are not the descendants of low class Hindus but are of foreign extraction, though in many cases it may be of more or less remote degree.”³⁰ In favour of his argument, Ghuznavi cited Arab migration before the Turkish conquest, land grants made by Sultan Husain Shah to foreigners, the dispersion of Afghans “in every hamlet” after the Mughal conquest, the

²⁷ *Census of India Report, 1891, Vol.-II, p.2*

²⁸ It is to be noted that the conversion of even a single Hindu of the lowest class to Christianity at the time occasioned loud protests and discussions in the Hindu owned Calcutta News Papers. Any such conversion to Islam would not have gone unnoticed if not challenged.

²⁹ H. Beverley, *Report on the Census of Bengal, 1872* (Calcutta: Secretariat Press, 1872), p.132

³⁰ Richard Eaton, p.58

greater fertility of Muslims owing to their practices of polygamy and widow remarriage, their greater longevity, and the absence among Muslims of a caste system or institutionalized celibacy.³¹ Although he conceded that there had been “some” conversions, Ghuznavi insisted that they had not been among low-caste Hindus. “Why should we speak of conversion of low-caste Hindus only?” he asked, “Why should we forget the Musalman Rajput diwans of different districts and notably of Maimensing...Similarly, there are Mozumdars of Sylhet, Raja Sahebs of Faridpore, Gangulies of Bikrampore, and a host of others.”³² Number of upper caste conversion supports Ghuznavi’s claim. The Raja of Kharagpur (Midnapur) converted to Islam on the condition for retaining their family estates after being defeated by one of Akbar’s general. Similarly, the Muslim Dewan families of Sarail Pargana in Tippera, and of Haibatnagar and Jungalbari in Mymensingh, were originally Brahmin and the the Pathans of Majhouli in Darbhanga were from the families of the raja of Narhan.³³ These instances, are however, only small fraction of the total Muslim population and that cannot explain the large number of Muslim peasants and cultivators as recorded in the census figures.

James Wise,³⁴ elaborated his views in an important article entitled “The Muhammadans of Eastern Bengal” (1894) put forward number of reasons for the growth of the Muslim of Bengal.³⁵ He advocated both sword theory and social liberation theory for the large-scale Muslim settlement in Bengal through Arab merchants, through capturing from village of eastern Bengal. He further suggested that Hindus might have converted “as the only means of escaping punishment for murder, or adultery, as this step was considered full atonement for either crime.”³⁶ He further stated “When the Muhammadan armies poured into Bengal, it is hard to believe that they were not welcomed by the hewers of wood and drawers of water, and that many a despairing Chandal and Kaibartta joyfully embraced a religion that proclaimed the equality of all

³¹ *Ibid*

³² *Ibid*

³³ E. A. Gait, “The Muhammadans of Bengal,” in *Census of India, 1901*, vol. 6, *The Lower Provinces of Bengal and Their Feudatories*, pt. 1, “Report” (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1902), p.170.

³⁴ James Wise was a veteran official who had served ten years as civil surgeon in Dhaka.

³⁵ James Wise, “The Muhammadans of Eastern Bengal” in *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* No.63 (1894), pp.28-63

³⁶ *Ibid* pp.28-30

men, and which was the religion of the race keeping in subjection their former oppressors. Islam announced that the poor, as well as the rich, the slave and his master, the peasant and the prince, were of equal value in the eyes of God.³⁷

Abdul Munim Choudhury in his recent article on “Reflection on Islamization in Bengal”, also condemns the Rubbee’s claim of the Bengal Muslim’s foreign originality. On the basis of the Census of Report 1872 which contains the table, the division-wise figure of the Muslims who claimed that their ancestors had come from lands in the west, only about two percent of the total Muslim population of Bengal claimed foreign origin³⁸

Thus historiography of Islamization in Bengal shows that number of factors contributed behind the rapid growth of Islam in Bengal. Several scholars emphasized on various trends of the Muslim settlement and Richard Eaton summarized these under four theories viz. Sword, Immigration, Patronage and Social Liberation Theories. Scholars are unanimous that Islam began to grow long before the political conquest of Muslim on Bengal but they did not made attempt to establish exactly when and where Islam first became a mass religion. Muhammad Mohar Ali quoted from the report submitted in 1901 to the government by A. A. Ghuznavi that,

“...perhaps the majority of the Mohamedans of the present day have an admixture of foreign blood in their veins though that might have undergone a great many dilutions.....I think it will not be unsafe to conclude that roughly speaking 20% of the present Mohamedans are lineal descendents of foreign settlers, that 50% of them have an admixture of foreign blood and the remaining 30% are probably descended from the Hindu and other converts.”³⁹

Describing the growth of Muslim population in pre-colonial Bengal R. C. Mazumder wrote in 1973:

³⁷ *Ibid*, p.32

³⁸ Abdul Munim Choudhury’s article, “*Reflections on Islamization in Bengal*”, published in ‘Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology’, Vol. – 8, Number1, 2011, p.46

³⁹ Muhammad Mohar Ali, p.788

“The Hindu and Muslim communities resembled two strong walled forts, standing side by side, each of which had only one gate,—that of exit in the case of the Hindus, and that for entrance in the case of the Muslims. Even for the slightest deviation from the rules of touch and purity the Hindus were cast out of society, with no chance of re-entry, and once they entered the fort of Islam the door of exit for the new-comer was forever barred. This, together with forcible conversion, and voluntary acceptance of Islam by temptation of material gain or benefit, rarely by conviction, resulted in the steady flow of the Hindus to the fold of Islam, which constitutes the most important change in the Hindu society during the middle age.”⁴⁰

Instances of Conversion:

Propagation of Islam was doubtless an important aspect of the activities of the settler-preachers. In fact it was a recognition of their intellectual status and their services to the society as teachers and preachers that many of them were patronized and granted rent free lands by the rulers. A number of the *shaiks* and their teachings and example must have contributed to the expansion of Islam among the local population. This was however only gradual and slow as occasional references in the contemporary sources to instances of conversion to Islam indicate. It is noteworthy that there is no mention in the sources, literary or otherwise of any large scale conversion of any class of people, high or low.⁴¹

It may be assumed that Islam with its teachings of one Creator for the entire universe and of equality of all men before Him must have appeared as a revolutionary force to the people who were acknowledgedly degraded and divided by iniquitous social divisions and disabilities. Yet the earliest reference to conversion is not that of any section of the population over whom the Muslims had established their immediate political authority, but a Chief of the Mech tribe in north Bengal. It is stated that after having fallen in to Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khilji’s hand in course of his Tibet expedition, the Mech chief professed Islam, assumed the name of ‘Ali’ and then acted for

⁴⁰ R. C. Mazumder, *History of Medieval Bengal*, G. Bharadawaj & Co, Calcutta, 1973, pp.196-97

⁴¹ Muhammad, Mohar Ali, p.782

sometime as a guide for the Muslim forces. There is, however, no evidence of the conversion of his fellow members of his tribe in to Islam.⁴²

The next recorded instance of conversion to Islam is that of the Yogic (mystic) Bhojar Brahman of Kamrup, Assam, who came to Lakhnawati during the time of Ali Mardan Khilji, had an open discussion with the Qadi Rukn al-Din al-Samarqandi about the merit of Islam and being convinced he embraced Islam. The conversion of Bhojar Barman is significant. It shows that within a short time after the arrival of the Muslim in Bengal Islam had aroused the curiosity and interests of the leaders of Hinduism even at far off places like Kamrup which was not till then in any way under the jurisdiction of the Muslims.⁴³

In fact all the specially known instances of conversion are from among the Brahmans and other men of position in the Hindu society. The most remarkable instance in this series is the conversion of Kan's son Jadu and his accession to Muslim Bengal throne in 1415 AD under the name Jalal-ud-Din Muhammad. Jadu's conversion marks the significant stage in the expansion of both Islam and the Muslim power in Bengal.⁴⁴ Another king belonging to the Koch tribe, is said to have embraced Islam at the instance of Shah Sultan Rumi who settled at Madanpur in Mymensingh district early in the Muslim period. Even in mid eighteenth century two Hindu zamindars of Tirhut embraced Islam and accompanied Alivardi Khan in his march against Sarfaraz Khan.⁴⁵

Hinduism was not a proselytizing religion. It was easy for any body to go out of the religion on small pretext but there was no way to come in as the religious leaders did not permit the fresh entries. In Sylhet, an established Kayastha family (Dutta Choudhury of Karimganj) got converted when the head of the family lost in a bet.⁴⁶ The superstitions, compulsion and complete lack of rational outlook ran very high in medieval times and the conditions remained unchanged during the British colonial rule. Raja Subid

⁴² Muhammad Mohar Ali, p.782

⁴³ *Ibid*, p.783

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, pp.783-784

⁴⁵ *Ibid*,

⁴⁶ Prof. Tanmoy Bhattacharjee, p.98

Narayan's sons in the Manu river region in the early 17th century purchased peace through conversion of themselves in to Islam. Their father was killed in the battle against Khawaja Osman. Raja Subid had quarreled with the Hindu Dewan Ananda Narayan of Sylhet who invited Khawaja Osman to annihilate Raja. The Raja's brothers too purchased peace and were settled in neighbouring villages, they never tried to bring back the converted nephew in to their own fold again as the society prohibited such practice.⁴⁷

As persons from highest class of the Hindu society embraced Islam, it may be assumed that others from the generality of that community must have also entered the new faith. It has already been pointed that we do not have any specific information on this point in the sources and all that is available is some general allusions to the spread of Islam among the population without any further indication about its actual extent. Thus Ibn Batuta states that the people of Sylhet accepted Islam at the instance of Shaikh (Shah) Jalal.⁴⁸ Batuta who met with Shah Jalal at Sylhet in 1345 later recorded in his account that, "*the inhabitants of these mountains had embraced Islam at his hands and for this he stayed a midst them.*"⁴⁹ Mohammad Mohar Ali quoted from the Portuguese merchant Duarte Barbosa who visited Bengal in 1518 and wrote, "*that the king who was a 'Moor' (Muslim) had an extensive country under his rule inhabited by 'Gentiles' (Hindus), of whom every day many turns 'Moor' (Muslim), to obtain the favour of the king and the governors.*"⁵⁰ It is also well known that many Buddhists because of their rivalry with the Brahmins and their discriminatory practices welcomed Muslims and embraced Islam.⁵¹

It is interesting to note that the advance of Aryan culture 'purified' western branch of the Ganges while the eastern branch, the Padma, and the Jumna / Brahmaputra and Meghna streams, formed the abode of non-Aryanised people of Bengal. During the late Pala period a new sect of Buddhism called Vajrayana or Tantrayana took its birth and it is from this part of Bengal that this form of Buddhism spread to the eastern countries,

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, pp.98-99

⁴⁸ Muhammad Mohar Ali, p.785

⁴⁹ Ibn Batuta, *Rehla*, p.239

⁵⁰ Muhammad Mohar Ali, p.786

⁵¹ *Ibid*,

Tibet and China.⁵² During the Muslim rule the Sufistic form of Islam, as preached by the Muslim saints attracted the Bengalees of this region. They created their own rituals and practices that distinguish their religious culture from the common types seen in other Muslim countries or even in other areas in northern and western India. It is worthwhile to note that the worship of Buddha's footprints was transformed into veneration of the holy Prophet's footprints (*qadam rasul*) and the five Bodhisattvas may have inspired the new concept of *panch-Pir* (five saints) in eastern Bengal. It is from these points that one has to understand the conversion of the Buddhists to Islam.⁵³

Islam in Bengal attained a character quite different from its exogenous fundamental entity which Abdul Munim Choudhury quoted, 'Regional type of Islam'. This characteristic can be explained by assuming that Islam had to accommodate a wide variety of local religio-cultural elements. The masses of Hindu-Buddhist and tribal peoples with their inseparable links with past traditional cultural and religious practices came under the influence of the newly arrived Islam. But they retained their old ideas and customs and assimilated to a new faith their earlier socio-religious experience.⁵⁴

Muslim settlement in Assam:

The settlement of Muslims in the Assam can be traced to as far back as the eighth century CE. Early Muslim settlers of Assam consisted of "Turks" who came to China from Turkistan, and of Arab traders, sailors, saints and travelers who visited Burma and the Gangetic valley of Bengal. The Turks had come to Assam through China crossing over the Himalayas and had settled in Darrang district of the state.⁵⁵ In the eighth century, many Arab traders and sailors had settled in Arakan in Burma. They established matrimonial relationship with local people and their descendants, in course of time,

⁵² Abdul Munim Choudhury's article, "Reflections on Islamization in Bengal", published in '*Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology*', Vol. – 8, Number1, 2011, p.47

⁵³ *Ibid* p.48

⁵⁴ *Ibid* pp.46-47

⁵⁵ M. H. Rahman's article "Muslims in Assam", published in *The Milli Gazette*, August 16-31, 2012, p.7

became known as Rohingya Muslims. Some of these Muslims, later on, migrated to Bengal and different parts of North-East India.⁵⁶ However, formally the Muslim settlement in Assam can be clearly traced back to the last decade of the 12th century. Since then, this community has been evolved gradually over a long stretch of time. The history of origin, growth and development of the Muslims of Assam can be attributed to four different major developments.⁵⁷

1. Various Muslim Invasions,
2. Propagation and Conversion,
3. Import of Muslim Artisans and learned men by the Ahom rulers.
4. Migration and Immigration.

Shihabuddin Muhamad Ghori's general, Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khilji led the campaign in to Bihar and Bengal and defeated the Palas and Senas respectively. With the annexations of these eastern states the conquest was completed.⁵⁸ Kamrupa or old Assam came in to contact with the Muslims for the first time in 1198 AD, (some historian recorded this date as 1205-06 AD), when a Turkish army led by Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji conquered Bengal to overthrow Lakshman Sen, the last Sena King of Bengal. It has been recorded that during the reign of Lakshman Sen, western Kamrupa was under his domination. The following copperplate inscription which was found in the Madhai town of Pabna district in East Bengal (present Bangladesh) furnishes invaluable information in this regard.⁵⁹ This copper plate inscription corroborates the fact about the first contact of the Muslims with the old Assam and it establishes their antiquity. After a few years of conquering North Bengal (Gauda) and West Bengal (Nadhiya), Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji set out on a filibustering expedition to the North and invaded Kamrupa with a view to conquer Tibet and this was actually the first Muslim invasion of Assam.⁶⁰ But he was defeated and most of his soldiers lost their lives due to unfavourable

⁵⁶ Farooque Ahmed, "Tracing early Muslim settlement in Manipur", in *Muslim and Arab Perspectives*, New Delhi, Vol. 4, 1997, pp. 1-6

⁵⁷ Kasim Ali Ahmed, *The Muslim of Assam*, EBH Publishers, Guwahati, 2010, p.3

⁵⁸ Dr. Mohammad Yahya Tamizi, *Sufi Movement in Eastern India*, Idarah-I Adabiyat-I Delhi, 1992, p.40

⁵⁹ Kasim Ali, p.5

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p.5, Edward Gait, *A History of Assam* 3rd edition, 1963, p.37,

circumstances. Some of his men were taken prisoners. These prisoners of war and the local converted Muslims are the actual indigenous Muslims of Assam.⁶¹ They were assigned to various jobs, for example, supplying grass to royal elephants and then as cultivators but they proved indifferent and ignorant in both. So, they started manufacturing brass vessels and came to be known as Mariyas.⁶²

Minhaj Uddin tells us that the Koch and the Mech tribes of the territory to the east of the Gaura displayed their appreciation of Islam so much so that one of their chief named Ali Mech even adopted Islamic faith from Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khilji as early as 1198 AD. These Koch and Mech people were the inhabitants of the western part of the old kingdom of Kamrupa. This shows that with the first political contact of Assam with the Muslim powers, the Islamic faith found its way in to this land through the process of conversion.⁶³ There is no proper evidence of the existence of Islam in Assam before the invasion of Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khilji. On the other hand, it can be assumed that the influence of Islam on the people of East Bengal and western Kamrupa was felt some extent since few centuries back, before the first Muslim contact with Assam. Kasim Ali argues that Ali Mech converted in to Islamic which indicates that there was the existence of Muslim from whom he was inspired and converted.⁶⁴ On the other hand Dr. Abu Hanifa says that in 1203 when Bakhtiyar Khilji on his way to invade China and Tibet he was guided in his journey through Kamrupa by Ali Mech, a local leader of Mech community who later embraced Islam and most likely was the first person to recite '*Qalima*' and became a Muslim.⁶⁵ It can be inferred that when a community leader like Ali Mech embraced Islam, in all probability, more people of his community might have followed suit.

During 1204-1679, Muslim rulers and governors of Bengal sent as many as nineteen military expeditions to Assam. During this period, thousands of Muslim

⁶¹ Dr. Mohammad Yahya Tamizi, p.41

⁶² H. K. Barpujari, *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol. II, Publication Board, Assam, Guwahati, 1992, p.142

⁶³ *Ibid*, p.6

⁶⁴ Kasim Ali, p.11

⁶⁵ Dr. Abu Hanifa, "Muslims of Brahmaputra Valley in Assam: A Historical Perspective", <<https://indianfolklore.org/journals/index.php.Ish/download/498/580>> 2008

soldiers, and military officers settled down in different parts of Assam. Muslim saints and preachers also came to the area and spread over different places for preaching the message of Islam and delivering religious instruction to the new converts and early Muslim settlers. Many Muslim traders also visited Assam and settled down in various towns.⁶⁶ The soldiers and others who stayed back here got married local Assamese girls and were assimilated into the greater Assamese society.⁶⁷ Sikandar Shah, Sultan of Bengal attacked Kamrupa (Sylhet) and conquered a part of Kamrupa or the whole Kamrupa because of the fact that he issued coins from his camp in Kamrupa. The Muslim historians give the names of Kamru, Kamrud and Kanwru for Kamrupa.⁶⁸ The famous traveler Ibn-i-Batuta, who visited Kamrupa and had met with Shah Jalal Mujarrad, wrote in his account the socio-political and natural condition of this region.⁶⁹ In 1345, Ibn Battuta (d. 1377) met Ghiyasuddin, at Hajo, while on his way to China. He incorporated an account of the then Kamrup in his famous travelogue, *Tuhfat al-Nuzzar fi ghara'ib al-Amsar wa 'aja'ib al-asfar*. In this account, he recorded that while he was returning from China, he saw people living in the Kamrup Mountains who resembled Turks and were capable of hard work.⁷⁰

The arrival of some of the Sufis in Assam and their activities are historical fact. They mostly came here with the invading Muslim army, a few of them entered Assam along with the traders; while some of them were especially sent to this land by their spiritual guide with the particular intention of preaching Islam and its doctrines.⁷¹ In his work, 'Asomiya Bhasa Aru Sanskriti', B. K. Baruah has observed that Muslim saints, preachers and others came to Assam between eleventh and twelfth centuries C.E.⁷² Dr. S. K. Bhuyan refers in his *Annals of Delhi Badshate* that,

“Muslim maqams or darghas are scattered in Assam Valley and their maintenance was encouraged by the state as we know from the assignment of the

⁶⁶ M. H. Rahman's article "Muslims in Assam", published in *The Milli Gazette*, August 16-31, 2012, p.7

⁶⁷ Y. Tamizi, p.41

⁶⁸ S. K. Bhuyan, *Annals of Delhi Badshahate*, Gauhati, 1957, pp, 2-3

⁶⁹ Y. Tamizi, p.41

⁷⁰ M. H. Rahman, p.7

⁷¹ Y. Tamizi, p.85

⁷² M. H. Rahman, p.7

perquisites of a number of maqams in Kamrup to Anwar Haji Faqir, and the custom of dispatching annual presents from the court of Poa-Macca shrines at Hazo. An examination of the maqams in Assam is bound to add our knowledge of the careers of eminent Muslim saints who came to this country from outside to minister to the spiritual needs of the people. The religious songs composed by Assamese Muslim Pirs, known as Zikirs, are heard even till this day.”⁷³

In 1321, a Muslim saint named Giasuddin Aulia had come to Kamrupa with the invading army of Sultan Giasuddin Bahadur Shah.⁷⁴ Giasuddin Aulia Tabrizi established a dargah at Pua (Pawa) Makkha in Hajo about 30 km west of Guwahati, and he was the first person engaged in Assam to propagate Islam. Under his influence, some local people also changed their religious faith. His birth place, name, time, activities and place of death have always been controversial. He first stayed in the Garigaon area to the west of Guwahati but later on he made on the top of the Garudachal hill at Hazo (on the north of Brahmaputra) his abode. Another tradition says that Hazrat Giasuddin came to India from Arabia round about 1244 AD (642 AH). It is said that he came to the Brahmaputra Valley with three of his companions viz. Hazrat Jamal, Hazrat Shah Gadar and Shah Buzurg and lived on the top of 750 feet high hill Hazo till his death. We find references in a land grant issued to the Hazo dargah by Shah Suja, son of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, that Gias ud-Din Balwan was buried on the hill of Garudachal and hence the tomb on the hill is related to him.⁷⁵ *Baharistan-i-Ghaibi*⁷⁶ stated that Giasud Din was a name of a saint whose tomb is at Hazo. The detailed account of his life is in obscurity. But a local tradition says that he was a great saint and devoted his life to the propagation of Islam in Kamrup. He built a mosque at the top of the hill at Hazo, near which he was buried. This place is held in great esteem and considered sacred by the Muslims as a place of pilgrimage and his shrine is called ‘Powa-Mecca’ i.e. one-fourth of Mecca.⁷⁷ However, due to the paucity and non availability of authentic records we do not have any clear

⁷³ Y. Tamizi, p.85

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p.91

⁷⁵ *Ibid*,

⁷⁶ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaibi* (translated in to English by Dr. Maidul Islam Bora) Vol. II, p.848

⁷⁷ Y. Tamizi, p.92

information about the tomb of Hazo or Powa Mecca. There is a Persian inscription on a stone plate attached to the mosque, near the tomb which states,

“In the name of Allah, the Most Beneficent and Most Merciful: Thanks to God who is the Lord of the Universe. May the blessings of God be on the Holy Prophet Mohammad, to his house and his holy associates and the companions, Almighty God says: Those who construct mosques of God (on earth) and firmly believe in Allah and on the Day of Judgment, offer prayers and zakat (religious tax) and fear none except God are verily the people who receive guidance from Allah. And the Holy Prophet (may the blessing of God on him) says: He who builds a mosque in this world, God builds seventy mosques for him in the next world. During the reign of Abdul Ghazi Shuja-ud-Din Muhammad, the Just, the Emperor of the world, the centre of bounties and religion, the king and the auspicious prince, the holy mosque was built by Lutfullah Shirazi in a land noted for peace among the entire Muslim world, Shuja Abad. May God protect it from all calamities. It was built at a time when the royal banner was on march towards Bengal. May this religious centre flourish and survive with all its honour and glory for ever. May this religious centre flourish and survive with all its honour and glory for ever. May this country live long all the munificence of God in consonance with the Almighty’s glory of the Prophet. O Intellect, Declare the date of its construction. The voice came, ‘The house of religion came in to being’ – 1067 A.H. (1657 AD).

This inscription fails to supply any information regarding the tomb except the mosque where it is attached. It is also interesting to note that this tablet was originally attached with the old mosque. And when the mosque was renewed this tablet was attached to new wall of the mosque. Azan Faqir⁷⁸ was another most prominent and celebrated Sufi of Assam and his sufistic poems are very popular among Assamese Muslim even today. He came to Assam in the middle of the 17th century, most probably 1635 AD, during the reign of Raja Pratab Singh (Susengpha) and it is said that he entered the Ahom kingdom with his brother Hazrat Nabi Pir from a certain place of Central

⁷⁸ His original name was Shah Miran, Azan was his nickname. It is said that as he used to call the people to offer prayer by calling azan (prayer call) they began to call him by the name of Azan Faqir or Azan Pir.

Asia.⁷⁹ With a view of propagating the teaching of Islam Azan Faqir had composed a number of *Zikirs* and *Zaris* in Assamese language because by that time he had not only established himself but also had become well versed in Assamese folk songs and other religious literature. He preached the teaching of Islam, namely, *Kalima*, *Namaz*, *Roza*, *Hajj*, *Zakat* and the principle of *Shariat* and *Tariqat* through Assamese folk songs.⁸⁰ Some of his poems are cited here as example:

	(English translation)
<p><i>“Kalima haqiqat, kalmia shariyat Kalima taribar upay. Gate asman gate zamin Akale malila puli. Ridoyor bhitorot ulal sauddo sakhi Olaise ei buli buli. Sunnate faraze hale akemat, Duijanak manichu guru. Ajana haqiqat ajana sariat Madhyat jiu amru. Amru jiu ew fure dhar salai Dhuikhan duwarak pai.”</i>⁸²</p>	<p>(The article of faith (kalima)⁸¹ is the truth from the law (Shariyah) emanates: The article of faith is the means of salvation. Earth and the heavens are within the senses and are sprouting forth. Now, within the mind are the fourteen witnesses the (senses) vouchsafing The Unity of the Law (Shariya) and the word of Allah, Both of which commands equal observance. The Law and Truth merge in to one abiding Reality, Wherein man grows in eternal life moving from one stage To another in its spaciousness).</p>

Besides Giasuddin Aulia and Azan Faqir some other religious leaders like, Khandakar Peer, Manik Fakir, Nawaz Peer, Khawaja Khidr, Pir Shah Madar, Pagal Pir also came to Assam to propagate Islam.⁸³ It is known from the Damdama Sikh Gurdwara in Goalpara district that Raja Ram Singh, a Rajput General of Aurangzeb, during an expedition against the Ahom king Chakaradhwaja Singha in 1667 AD brought with him five eminent saints namely Shah Akbar Shah, Shah Bagmar, Shah Sufi, Shah Sharan and Shah Kamal with a view to overcome Assamese black art magic. Generally it is believed

⁷⁹ Y. Tamizi, p.96

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p.97

⁸¹ Kalima: There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Prophet.

⁸² *Ibid*, p.98

⁸³ *Ibid*, pp.89-90, 101

that these five Sufis lived together till their death at the place where Panch Pirer Dargah (shrine of five saints) of Dhubri is now located.⁸⁴ These religious leaders adopted the Assamese language and culture and inspired many local people to embrace Islam.

During the reign of Swargadeo Rudra Singha in the early part of the eighteenth century, some Muslim families proficient in different crafts and arts were invited from Delhi to reside in Assam and offer their services. These families were Pharsiparia, Aakharkatia (experts in making canon balls, locally known as hilo), Silakatia, Khanikar, etc. In course of time, these families became a part of the greater Assamese Muslim society.

Commenting on the growth of the Muslim population of Assam Gait writes that the great majority of the persons professing the Islamic faith in Assam are as in Eastern Bengal, local converts from the lower castes and aboriginal tribes who on conversion described themselves as Sheikh. Gait also mentioned that the process of conversion did not occur in the country until the later dates.⁸⁵ In fact there was no large scale conversion of the native people in Assam and converts did not form the major bulk of the Muslim population as in Bengal. But, it is also apparent from the fact that good number of the Muslims in Assam, especially in Western Assam have designated themselves as Sheikh and many of their ancestors appear to have been early local converts as manifested through their physical features, manners and customs.⁸⁶

The Assamese people with their heart and mind have readily accepted the newcomers as an integral part of the Assamese society. The Muslims have very sincerely reciprocated this warmth and kindness being truly loyal to the interests of Assam.⁸⁷ The Assamese Muslims fought hand-in-hand with the Hindus against the invading Muslim army led by Mir Jumla. When Swargadeo Chakradhwaj Singha refused to pay tax to the Mughals, the Mughal force led by Firoz Khan attacked the Ahom kingdom. The

⁸⁴ Y. Tamizi, p.90

⁸⁵ E. A., Gait, p.89

⁸⁶ Kasim Ali, p.14

⁸⁷ Dr. Abu Hanifa, p.2

marauding Mughal force faced stiff resistance from the Ahoms led by Madhab Charan, and Sultan Garia, Firoz Khan was defeated in the war. In the battle of Saraighat under the leadership of the Ahom general, Lachit Barphukan, Bagh Hazarika Alias Ismail Siddiqui led an Assamese force of one thousand soldiers against the Mughals.⁸⁸

In the “Assam Buranji”, a history of Assam written by Gunabhiram Baruah, an instance has been cited when a lady Muslim fishmonger gave shelter to the Ahom prince Gadadhar Singha, when he had gone into hiding. The two Muslim noblemen Hilaidari Baruah Shah Hussain Khan and Ramjan Khan fought against the Burmese invaders, to safeguard the interests of Assam. Ramjan Khan had laid down his life in the war. He was the ancestor of late Abdul Quadir, a well-known leader of Nogaon. The list never seems to exhaust itself. In Hadirachaki war, the local Muslims fought against the Burmese forces, under the command of Mirdaulla.⁸⁹ In November 1821, when the Burmese soldiers had given a permission of their future dealings by plundering and destroying a number of villages in Assam including Habraghat pargana of Western Assam, many people became homeless and fled indiscriminately out of fear and some of the Hindus and aboriginal tribes took shelter in many Muslim houses. After the restoration of peace, these people were not accepted by their families and co-religionists because of their close contact and inter dining with the Muslim people. Thus such Hindus were compelled to embrace Islam. In this way a section of the local converts also led to the gradual growth of the Muslim population in Assam.⁹⁰

Kasim Ali quoted from the Imperial Gazatter of India, Vol. – I, refers to the convert Muslim of Assam who were as ignorant of Islam as the Hinduism. “Some of them have never heard of Muhammad, some regard him as a person corresponding in their system of religion to Rama or Lakshmana of Hindus. The Qur’an is hardly read even in Bengali and in the original Arabic at all; many of those who have heard it cannot tell who wrote it....”⁹¹ During the isolation of the converts from learned Muslim, they

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p.2

⁸⁹ *Ibid*.p.3

⁹⁰ Kasim Ali, p.14

⁹¹ *Ibid*, p.15

used to borrow Hindu customs and manners and again when learned Muslims reappeared the converts were introduced to the doctrine of Islam. In the administrative enumeration of 1891, some converts Muslims of Assam were labeled as the Koch caste among the Hindus. This was because, in spite of their newly adopted faith, they still retained many non-Islamic customs and practices⁹². Hunter refers to these people as Mussalman Koch.⁹³

A large number of Muslim artisans and learned men were brought by the Ahom rulers and were appointed in various department of the State during the medieval period. These Muslims were mainly employed in the professions in which they possessed special skill, like embroidery, engraving, wood carving, cannon casting, sword making and similar fine works. Muslim artisans and craftsmen were incorporated in the *Khaniker Khel* or the guild of artisans under a superintendent known as *Khanikar Barua*. There existed a post like *Nawab Deka* in Ahom court, which appears to have been completely different form and higher than that of Barua and Hazarika. Probably the post was equivalent to the rank of Phukan. Its very name suggests that it was meant absolutely for talented Muslim nobles.⁹⁴

Barak Valley is a truncated portion of Surma Valley of the colonial period and during the medieval period, modern Karimganj⁹⁵ district being a part of Sylhet was under the Muslim rule, where as modern Cachar and Hailakandi, the two other districts of the Valley were under Tripura and Dimasa rule in succession. In other words Cachar and Hailakandi never constituted a part of the Delhi Sultanate or the Mughal Empire. But though Barak Valley was politically divided during the whole of medieval period, the process of cultural development continued almost in uniform pattern over the whole Valley through ages. It is popularly said that Cachar (Cachar and Hailakandi) is the cultural expansion of Sylhet. For this reason the story of the advent of Islam in the Valley goes with the story of the advent of Islam in Sylhet. As a matter of fact, in the process of development of Islam in the region, Sylhet proper played the role of epicenter and

⁹² *Ibid*

⁹³ W.W. Hunter: A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol. II, Delhi, 1879, p.31

⁹⁴ Kasim Ali, p.15

⁹⁵ Karimganj is named after the name of sufi saint Shah Abdul Karim, whose majar lies on 'Deli hillock' near railway line in Bonomali areas of Karimganj town.

modern Karimganj, Cachar and Hailakandi its peripheries. So, the history of the advent of Islam in Barak Valley can not be reconstituted without referring to that of Sylhet.

The great Sufi saint Shah Jalal and his disciples and companions are connected with the Muslim conquest of Sylhet and consequently with the advent of Islam in the region.⁹⁶ However, the evidences of Muslims contact with the region even before the conquest are not lacking. Arabian traders in course of their trading activities used to visit the coasts and ports of India and Bengal, and through trade they had also contact with the hilly regions of Bengal and Assam.⁹⁷ In fact the Arabian writers from Alberuni to Ibn-Batuta refer Sylhet as a part of Kamru, Kamrud or Kamrupa. The fact is also corroborated by the legend of Burhan Uddin, a resident of the kingdom of Gaur Govinda, connected with the Muslim invasion of Sylhet. S. K. Chatterjee rightly observes that Sylhet was brought under the control of the Muslim Sultan of Bengal in 1303 A.D. Prior to that, there was considerable penetration of Sylhet by Muslim traders from the West from the Eastern Uttar Pradesh, and its present day Muslim preponderance seems to go back to the end of the 13th century.⁹⁸

When Gaur Gonvinda was the king of the Gaur kingdom (modern Sylhet), a Muslim named Burhan-ud-Din used to live in his territory. He was blessed with a son after long days of his marriage and to celebrate the happy occasion of 'Aqika' (the naming ceremony) of the new born baby he sacrificed a cow. Suddenly, a kite (/a crow) took away a piece of flesh and threw it in the house of a Brahmin or in a temple campus. The Brahmin complained to the king who ordered the hand of Burhan Uddin to be chopped off and the infant to be killed. His order was executed.⁹⁹ Bereaved and mutilated

⁹⁶ *Imperial Gazetter of India*, Provincial Series, Eastern Bengal and Assam, Calcutta, 1909, p.420

⁹⁷ Syed Amirul Islam, pp.20-21.

The information is also available in the writings of Arab geographers of 8th and 10th centuries, e.g. Sulaimans "*Silsilat-ul-Tawarikh*" written in 851 A.D. Arabian traders for their commercial purpose came to Chittagong. It is assumed that Burhan ud Din, was a descendent of Arabian trader. This assumption is because Sylhet was associated with the purpose of trade and commerce from the very beginning. Traders used to anchor their ship at Sylhet and that is why the main market of Sylhet has been still known as 'Bondor Bazar' (Port Market).

⁹⁸ *Qirata Janakrti*, Asiatic Society, 1974, p.127

⁹⁹ Dewan Mohammad Ajraf, *Sylhete Islam*, Anusha Publication, Dhaka, 2003, p.53, Y. Tamizi, p.122

Burhan Uddin went to Sultan Firoz Shah who sent an expedition with his commandant¹⁰⁰ Sikandar Shah (Saikandar Khan Ghazi) against Gaur Govinda but was defeated by the latter,¹⁰¹ Sikandar Shah tried second time but no success. The Sultan then sent another expedition under his General Sipah Salar Nasir-ud-Din as the Head of the army and was accompanied by Shah Jalal and his 360 disciples.¹⁰² Knowing that Shah Jalal was advancing towards Sylhet, Raja Gaur Govinda, removed all the ferry boats from the river Surma, thereby cutting off any means of crossing in to Sylhet. Legend has it that Shah Jalal crossed the river Surma by sitting on a *Jainamaz* (prayer rug). But recent research cleared it that when Gaur Gavinda removed all the boats, the followers of Shah Jalal and army of Nasir-ud-Din had collected bamboo and banana tree from the jungle, bundled these in such a way that floats on water and by these they crossed the river. Shah Jalal, being a great saint was honoured by the others and for his convenience they putted a *Jainamaj* on one such bundle of bamboo.¹⁰³ Hearing the news of the crossing of river by Shah Jalal and the army of Nasir-ud-Din, Gaur Govinda fled away without any resistance and Sylhet was annexed to the Sultanate of Bengal.¹⁰⁴ This tradition had been cherished very fondly by the people for centuries and on the basis of it Suhl-i-Yamin, a Persian metrical biography of Shah Jalal was composed in 1860 by Nashir Uddin Haidar. The original Persian text was published in Calcutta in 1871 and metrical translation in to Bengali named *Tawarikh-e-Jalali* by Ilahi Baksh was printed and published in 1894 A.D. on the basis of Suhl-i-Yamin, the old tradition about the conquest of Sylhet by the Muslims was collected in 1873¹⁰⁵ which has been narrated above.

As a matter of fact, ‘Suhl-i-Yamin’ places on records a legend that was transmitted from generation to generation orally for a period of four centuries before the

¹⁰⁰ Sometime it is mentioned that he was the nephew of Sultan Shams Uddin Firozeshah.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, p.53, Dewan Nurul Anuwar Hussain Choudhury, *Jalabader Kotha*, Bangla Academy Dhaka, 1997, pp.2-3

¹⁰² The total number of Shah Jalal companions is exactly not known. It is popularly believed 360 but there is no source in its support.

¹⁰³ Dewan Mohammad Ajraf, p.54

¹⁰⁴ Abdul Karim, ‘Advent of Islam in Sylhet and Hazrat Shah Jalal(R)’ in Sharif Uddin Ahmed (Ed.), *Sylhet: History and Heritage*, Bangladesh Itihas Samiti, Dhaka, 1999, pp.159, 130

¹⁰⁵ Abdul Karim – *Corpus of Arabic and Persian Inscription of Bengal*, Dhaka, 1993, p.236

composition of the book and as such the possibility of inclusion of wild exaggeration can not be ruled out. Though based on tradition and hearsay, is supported by historical evidence; the details may have been mixed up with imaginary tales but the core of the story has been proved to be true. The king Gaur Govinda, Sultan Shams-ud-Din Firoze Shah, Shah Jalal, Nasir-ud-Din Sipah Salar, Sikandar Khan Gazi are all historical personages. However the absolute credence can be given to those accounts which are confirmed by the testimony of other authentic sources. Such a primary source is the '*Rehala*', the traveling account of Ibn Batuta, the famed Moroccan traveler who traveled Sylhet and met Shah Jalal in 1345 A.D. He latter recorded that the "This shaikh was one of the great saints and one of the unique personalities. He had to his credit miracles (karāmat) well known to the public as well as great deeds, and he was a man of hoary age....The inhabitants of these mountains had embraced Islam at his hands, and for this reason he stayed amidst them.." ¹⁰⁶ A Persian inscription, now preserved in the Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka, may be referred to as an epigraphic source corroborating the arrival of Shah Jalal in Sylhet and consequently the advent of Islam in this region. It was issued during the reign of Sultan Ala-ud-din Hussain Shah of Bengal 1512-13 A.D. and records the Muslim conquest of Sylhet in the hands of Sikandar Khan Ghazi in 1303 A.D. in the reign of Shams ud-din Firoz Shah. ¹⁰⁷ This epigraphic evidence though issued more than two hundred years after the conquest of Sylhet by the Muslims accompanied by Shah Jalal and his disciples corroborates the historical event of Shah Jalals arrival at Sylhet recorded in '*Suhl-i-Yamin*'.

There are number of traditions, folklore and historical documents that differs about his place of birth and date of birth. A number of scholars claim that he was born in 1196-97 ¹⁰⁸ AD in Konya, Turkey and later moved to Yemen while vast majority of scholars believe he was born in Quni, Hadramount in Yemen. ¹⁰⁹ He was the son of a Muslim clerk named Muhammad. He was looked after by his maternal uncle Syed

¹⁰⁶ The Rehla of Ibn-Batuta, Eng.translation by Mehdi Hassan, Boroda Oriental Institute, 1953, p.239

¹⁰⁷ Siddiki, Mufti Azhar Uddin, *Srihatte Islamer Jyoti*, Kotha, Calcutta, 2010, p.14

¹⁰⁸ Dewan Nurul Anwar Hussain Choudhury, "Hazrat Shah Jalal (R) and His Life: A Source Study" in Sharif Uddin Ahmed (Ed.), *Sylhet: History and Heritage*, Bangladesh Itihas Samiti, Dhaka, 1999, p.154

¹⁰⁹ Mohammad Mohar Ali, p.776

Ahmed Kabir of Mecca and got his education there. He became *Hafij* (one who has committed the Quran to memory) and was proficient in Islamic theology.¹¹⁰

The followers and disciples of Shah Jalal Mujarid pointed two reasons behind the coming of Shah Jalal to Sylhet and Bengal.¹¹¹

- 1) His maternal uncle Sheikh Syad Ahmad Kabir inspired him to propagate Islam in Hindustan.¹¹²
- 2) His *Murshid* Sultan Ahmed Yasbi inspired him to propagate Islam in Hindustan.

However, his biographers in later days views both are correct, it was his teacher who first inspired him and later his uncle gave further inspiration to him to propagate Islam in India. Shah Jalal started his mission from Yemen with 12 permanent companions including the prince of Yemen and reached Delhi via Gazni and Iran. On his way to Delhi number of people got attracted towards him and also accompanied him.¹¹³ He arrived Delhi and where he met with Nizam Uddin Aulia, another major Sufi mystic and scholar.¹¹⁴

After the victory over Sylhet, Shah Jalal sent his disciples and companions to different places of Sylhet and adjoining territories to preach Islam.¹¹⁵ It may be mention here that he sent majority of his companions and followers to present Sylhet Sadar, Habiganj, Maulabi Bazar and comparatively less number of saints he sent to Sunamganj

¹¹⁰ Mufti Azhar Uddin Siddiki, *Srihatte Islamer Jyoti*, Kotha, Kolkata, 2010, pp.26-27

¹¹¹ Dewan Mohammad Ajraf, p.51

¹¹² According to legend, one day his uncle, Sheikh Kabir gave Shah Jalal a handful of soil and asked him to travel to Hindustan with the instruction that he should settle in whichever place in Hindustan the earth of which matched completely the smell and color of that soil, and that he should devote his life to the propagation and establishment of Islam in that place. For this purpose a specialist saint named Chashni Pir came along with him.

¹¹³ Dewan Mohammad Ajraf, p.51

¹¹⁴ It is believed that Nizam ud Din Auliya gave a pairs of pigeon (blue colour) to Shah Jalal brought this pairs of pigeons to Syhet and the offspring of this pairs are still there at Shah Jalal Dargah in large number and also available in Surma Barak Valley and some other parts of Bangladesh and are famous in the name of 'Jalali Kabutar' or 'Jalali Paaro.'

¹¹⁵ Achyut Charan Choudhury, *Srihatter Itibritta*, Vol.-I, Ed. Sujit Choudhury, Guwahati, 1995, p-75

and Karimganj.¹¹⁶ At first Syad Nasir-ud-Din made expedition over Taraf (Habiganj) along with the 12 followers of Shah Jalal to take revenge against local ruler of Taraf Raja Achak Narayan who tortured a local Muslim nobleman named Qazi Nur ud Din.¹¹⁷ The followers who accompanied Nasir ud Din were Syad Badar ud Din (Shah Badar), Fateh Gazi, Shah Arefin, Shah Majlish Amin, Shah Gazi, Shah Shahid, Shah Mahmud, Syad Ahmed (Geju Daraj), Shah Rukan ud Din, Shah Sultan and Shah Taj ud Din Quraishi. Raja Achak Narayan without any resistance left the place and took shelter in Tripura.¹¹⁸ Thus Taraf (Habiganj) came under Muslim rule and the place is still known as the “Baaro Auliyar Muluk”¹¹⁹ (Land of twelve Saints). Tradition says Sheikh Torab and Sona Gazi, two followers of Shah Jalal propagated Islam in Jaintia area presently located in the Meghalaya border of Bangladesh.¹²⁰ Sheikh Torab, companion of Shah Jalal propagated Islam in Jaintiya for the first time.¹²¹ Subsequently, descendent of Jafar Gaznabi, another companion of Shah Jalal, visited Jaintia Rajbari and established a matrimonial relation and since then Muslim settlement had been taking place in Jaintia. However, large scale Muslim propagation began in Jaintia only with the efforts of Fateh Khan who brought Maulana Qasim from Murshidabad and preached the teaching of Islam. Fateh Khan was murdered but his effort brought fruit in Jaintiya.¹²²

Shah Jalal also sent number of his companions and followers to Sunamganj to propagate Islam there. Some of the prominent saints who preached Islam in Sunamganj are Sheikh Kamal, Sheikh Arefin, Daor Boksh Khatib, Gayebi Pir, Sheikh Kaalu, Salim Khowaza, Sayad Shams Uddin, Sheikh Sams Uddin Bihari, Sayad Yusuf Iraqi and others.

¹¹⁶ It may be because Sunamganj was flooded area and habitation was not dense as the other parts of Sylhet and Karimganj was border area with Cachar, and people of this area were culturally to some extent not similar with the rests of Sylhet. However, number of saints came in the plains and populated areas of both Sunamganj and Karimganj.

¹¹⁷ Dewan Nurul Anwar Hussain Choudhury, “Hazrat Shah Jalal (R) and His Life: A Source Study”, Sharif Uddin Ahmed (Ed.), *Sylhet: History and Heritage*, pp.159-160

¹¹⁸ Dewan Mohammad Ajraf, pp, 59-60, 89

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.60

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, pp.68,72

¹²¹ *Ibid*, p.110

¹²² *Ibid*, pp.111, 113

Sheikh Kammal propagated Islam in Atuaganj Pargana of Sunamganj and his *majar* is located at Tilak Saha Para. One of his descendents named Maulana Jia-ud-Din established a madrassa at Dargah Mahalla in Sylhet which became prominent during Mughal period.¹²³ Sheikh Arefin (Shah Arefin) who was a companion of Shah Jalal went to Taraf (Habiganj) along with Nasir ud Din in his expedition against Achak Narayan, later on returned to Syhet and Shah Jalal sent him to Laur to propagate Islam. His *majar* is located at Laur. Gayebi Pir also preached Islam in the same area and his *majar* too is located in the same place of Shah Arefin.¹²⁴ Daor Boksh Khatib propagated Islam in Atujan porgana of Sunamganj. It is said that he was a good orator. He got married a Hindu girl and his descendents are the inhabitants of Daorai.¹²⁵ Other Sufi saints who propagated Islam in present Sunamganj were Sheikh Kalu (Jagannathpur), Salim Khowaza (Singhchapgor), Sayad Shams ud Din (Aurangpura and then Atujan). Sheikh Shamsuddin Bihari (Sonaitta, Aatghor), Sayad Yusuf Iraqi (Chatak, Singchaipgor).¹²⁶

Like other parts of broader Sylhet Hazrat Shah Jalal sent number of his followers to present Maulabi Bazar area to preach the teaching of Islam. With the order of Shah Jalal, Shah Mustafa went to Borshijura and then to Deorachora and settled there. He propagated Islam there and under his guidance huge number of people converted in to Islam.¹²⁷ Shah Helim-ud-Din Qureshi Narnuli was another sufi saint who accompanied Shah Jalal from United Province on his way to Sylhet. He visited Kanihati to preach the teaching of Islam. Tradition says that feudal lord of Kanihati, Aslam Roy was impressed with his magical power of tiger's submission to him. He requested Raja Aslam Roy for a piece of land, Raja asked him for choosing land. He then told Raja that he would throw an arrow where the arrow will reach he will settle there. Accordingly he threw his arrow and the arrow reached on the left of the bank of river Manu. He settled there, and place was named as 'Tir Poucha' and later changed in to 'Teera Pasha' and now the place is popularly called Tarapasha.¹²⁸ Sheikh Helim-ud-Din Qureshi also propagated Islam in

¹²³ *Ibid*, p.76

¹²⁴ *Ibid*,

¹²⁵ *Ibid*

¹²⁶ *Ibid* pp.77-78

¹²⁷ *Ibid* pp.80-81

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, p.82

Kulaura and Langla. Sayad Nosor Ullah another Sufi saint also preached Islam in Langa but his *mazar* and place of death is not known.

Shah Hamid Faruki, another Sufi saint who first went to Monorapur to propagate Islam and later settled and preached Islam at Kaukapin. His descendents are still the inhabitants of Kaukapin. Sheikh Darang another sufi saint propagated Islam in Monumukh area. He and his brother settled in Bekamura village and preached Islam.¹²⁹ Sheikh Kamal Uddin propagated Islam in Chuallish Pargana and Kamalpur *Mauja* was named after him. Sayad Rukan Uddin with the instruction of Shah Jalal propagated Islam in Ita Pargana. It is said that on his way in a place his foot (*kadam*) was stopped (*aatka*) and this incident led its name Kadamhata located in between Kulaura, Maulvi Bazar Road. He settled and preached Islam here and also died and was buried too.¹³⁰ Besides, them some other Sufi saints also propagated Islam in Maulvi Bazar area. Some of the saints were followers or companions, some others were the descendents of Shah Jalal and while some others came in late and propagated Islam there. Among them important saints were Shah Nur, Sheikh Garib Khaki, Sheikh Sayad Abu Bakkar, Sayad Yakub, Shah Kutub, Sayad Yasin, Sayad Ismail, Sayad Shefakot Shah, Sayad Nur Ali Shah, Shah Hilal, Pir Shah Wali Mohammad, Sheikh Shihab Uddin, Shah Momruj, Shahnur Biabani and others preached Islam even in later days.

According to a tradition recorded in '*Suhl-i-Yamin*', Shah Jalal sent one of his disciples named Jia-ud-din to Bundashil (Badarpur). At that time Bundashil was the eastern most boundary of the Gaur Kingdom.¹³¹ Jalal-ud-din informed Shah Jalal that the people of locality were the victims of regular nocturnal attacks of a demon named Deorai and that the water of Barak was not drinkable as it was polluted by the demon. Shah Jalal led a campaign to Bundashil, suppressed the demon and returned to Sylhet by putting one of his disciples, Shah Badar ud-din, in spiritual charges of the locality. After Badar-ud-din, the modern town of Badarpur was named subsequently. The historicity of this

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, p.84

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, p.85

¹³¹ Achyut Charan Choudhury, p.76

tradition may be interpreted in the light of Shah Jalal's suppression of a tribal group who regularly troubled the inhabitants of Badarpur.

After the advent of Islam, Muslim began to grow throughout the Surma-Valley including the Karimganj part of present Barak Valley. According to this tradition, the advent of Islam in the modern Karimganj district goes back to the life time of Shah Jalal, i.e. the early 14th century A.D. With the propagation of Islam by the Sufi saints, *Khanqas* were established centering round the saint, where he (Sufi) used to preach his followers and the method sufi used is generally called '*Maarifati*'. On the other hand Ulemas also propagated Islam centering round mosque, they used to preach Islam among the Muslim in mosque, and the method they implied is called '*Shariati*'. Sometimes, they taught Islamic fundamental education in the extended part of mosque, often called '*maqtab*' to the young learners. We have archaeological evidences, remains of *Khanqas*, mosque and inscriptions of medieval period including epigraphs and coins that proves beyond doubt that Islam makes its headway in the region before the 15th century A. D.

The oldest inscription so far discovered in Karimganj district as well the pre-partitioned Sylhet is a stone inscription, now placed on the wall of a recently built mosque at village Hatkhola near Asimganj, about twenty-five kilometer south of Karimganj town. The inscription was issued in Arabic language and was dated 868 A.H. (1463 A.D.) by the care-taker of the royal palace of Sultan Rukn-ud-din Barbak Shah (1459-1474).¹³² The inscription refers that a mosque was built by the Care-taker on the find spot which is situated near the southern boundary of Sylhet district of the British period. Another inscription engraved on a piece of black stone in Arabic language and character found in the remains of a mosque unearthed by a local excavation at a village named Surjadas (locally called Furuzdha) near Kaliganj bazaar about 15 km. south-east of Karimganj town, now preserved in a local Madrassa named "Madinatul Ulum, Baghbari". This inscription issued in 909 A.H. (1502 A.D.), clearly shows the extent of the Bengal Sultanate during the reign of Ala-u-din Hussain Shah and consequently the

¹³² Kamal Uddin Ahmed, "Sources of History of Medieval Sylhet", in Sharif Uddin Ahmed (Ed.) *Sylhet: History and Heritage*, p.21

extent of Islam in the region. The remains of the mosques and its architectural style which falls under the Bengal Provincial style of the Indo-Islamic Architecture¹³³ clearly indicate that Islam could make its headway in this region even before the 16th century A.D.

An inscription preserved in a Kali temple at a village called Pir-Nagar (now called Pinnagar) about 10 km. south-ward from Karimganj town¹³⁴ is also an important source of the study of the advent of Islam in the western part of modern Barak Valley. It states that one of the generals of Muhammad Shah, son of Hussain Shah built a mosque at this place in 1539 A.D. The remains of the mosque are no longer in extent, but the inscription is indicative of presence of Islam in the locality in the early 16th century.

In 1511, Rukan-ud-Din Khan, Fouzdar of Sylhet constructed a mosque at Sylhet and in 1668, the then Faouzdar Farhad Khan constructed the mosque of Shah Jalal Dargah. He also constructed two more mosque at Rai Hussain Mahallah and western side of Police Line. Later, another Fouzdar, Abdullah Siraji constructed a mosque in 1699.¹³⁵

Khoja Mosque (1476AD): The mosque is situated at Gaighar, 4 km southwest of Maulvi Bazar town. The mosque was built during the time of Sultan Shamsuddin Yusuf Shah in 1476. The builder of the mosque was Majlish Alam, great grandson of Hazi Amir and son of Musa. According to an inscription in the Dargah of Shah Jalal a mosque was built during the time of Sultan Shamsuddin Yusuf Shah in 1472 AD only four years before the construction of Khoja mosque The builder of Khoja mosque and Dargah mosque was Majlish Alam most probably the same person.¹³⁶

¹³³ Kamal Uddin Ahmed, *Art and Architecture of Assam*, Spectrum Pub. New Delhi, 1994, p.167

¹³⁴ Kamal Uddin Ahmed, *Sources of the History of the Medieval Sylhet*, p.23

¹³⁵ Sayad Murtaja Ali, "Bangla Academy Patrika" Chaitra, 1368(B.E), p.98, Dewan Mohammad Ajraf, p.98

¹³⁶ Ayesha Begum, "Architectural Heritage of Sylhet", in Sharif Uddin Ahmed (Ed) *Sylhet : History and Heritage*, p.647

Shankar Pasha Mosque (1493 – 1519): It is situated at Uchail, 8km southeast of Shahazibazar Railway Station in Hobiganj. It was built during the time of Hussain Shah. It is one of the finest monuments of the Sultanate period.¹³⁷

Puran Bagh Mosque: The mosque is situated at the locality of Purana Bagh on the northern side of Baniachong Jamia Alia Madrassa and is about one kilometer southwest of Baniachong Thana Council. A basalt stone inscription can still be seen fixed over the central archway of the Mosque. The style of the writing of the inscription is shikasta and the language is Persian. According to the inscription the mosque is dated 1150 A.D. (1737 AD)¹³⁸

Bibir Dargah Mosque – The mosque does not contain any inscription and as such the exact date of its construction is not known. Tradition ascribes it to one of Bibi Ayesha Khanom who lies buried in the small dochala roofed oblong structure beside the mosque. Dewan Irfan Raza, a successor of the Zamindar family of Baniachong claims in his unpublished manuscripts that Bibi Ayesha Khanom, sister of Dewan Abidur Raza of this family built the Bibir Dargah Mosque.¹³⁹

There are as many as four inscriptions at the Dargah of Shah Jalal. The oldest of these recorded the construction of a mosque by Majlish Uzir during the reign of Sultan Shamsuddin Yusuf Shah (877AH/1472AD). The inscription indicates that the mosque was quite large in size and it is believed that it was struck in the Chouki Dighi Mosque at Chouki Dighi where Shah Jalal first settled before moving to present site.

The archaeological evidences thus corroborate the tradition about the advent of Islam in the western part of Barak Valley during the 14th century and in all possibility,

¹³⁷ Ayesha Begum, p.648

¹³⁸ Jayanta Singh Roy, “*The Unnoticed Mughal Mosques of Baniachong*”, in Sharif Uddin Ahmed (Ed) *Sylhet : History and Heritage*, p.689

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, p.696

preached by Shah Jalal and his disciples, otherwise mosques would not have been built at different places of the region early in the 15th century.¹⁴⁰

Hazrat Shah Jalal sent a number of his companions to modern Karimganj to propagate Islam and the first among these companions who came over here was Sheikh Badar.¹⁴¹ Sheikh Badar who took part in the expedition under Nasir-ud-Din Shah against feudal lord of Taraf (Habiganj), Achak Narayan. After the victory over Achak Narayan, Shah Jalal sent him to Karimganj.¹⁴² The statement of Suhail Yemen is said to be correct that Shah Jalal had come to Bundhasil village, near present Alia Madrassa of Badarpur accompanying Sheikh Badar and other companions.¹⁴³ Sheikh Badar settled down in a place and from where he propagated Islam. It is believed that he settled down at Badarpur and so the place is named after him. We have no detail information regarding the life and activities of Shah Badar (Sheikh Badar) who is regarded as the first Sufi of this area. His shrine is situated in the old fort of Badarpur Ghat, near the present Dak-Bunglow.

Shah Diyauddin, another companion of Shah Jalal Mujarrad especially sent to this place to impart education and training among the people, was a Sufi of high rank and position. He acted upon the order of his Sheikh and propagated Islam among the people till his last days. A madrassa and a mosque founded by him near the Khadiman village of Badarpur was swept away along with his tomb by the waters of the Barak river.¹⁴⁴

Among other companions of Shah Badar, Mir-ul-Arefeen deserves special mention. He was a Sufi of a higher order. The place where he passed a part of his life in prayer and austerity has become a centre of pilgrimage. A prayer place on the top of a hill and a ablution house on the bank of Dhaleshwari river are still preserved. Near the site of the ablution house are a musafir khana and a mosque. People visit this place and offer

¹⁴⁰ Kamal Uddin Ahmed, 'Sources of the History of the Medieval Sylhet,' p.24

¹⁴¹ Dewan Mohammad Ajraf, p.92

¹⁴² *Ibid*,

¹⁴³ Y. Tamizi, p.86

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*,

there *nazr-o-niyaz* to get their desires fulfilled. The place where Mir-ul-Arefeen used to offer prayer is situated on the top of the hill.¹⁴⁵

Among the contemporaries of Shah Badar whose names were available mention may be made of Shah Adam Khaki, whose Dargah is situated at the western part of Badarpur, adjacent to the PWD Road, Badarpur, Karimganj. Both the Hindus and the Muslims visit and offer *nazr-o-niyas*. It seems that he was a living symbol and embodiment of Hindu Muslim unity.¹⁴⁶ Other Sufis who propagated Islam in this region were Daria Pir (Patharia, Chandpur village), Jahan Sayad (Pratapgarh), Sheikh Sikandar (Deorile, Badarpur), Sheikh Jia-ud-Din (Deorile, Bundasil), Shah Abdul Malik (Badarpur). It is believed that Shah Jalal came to Deorile with his request.¹⁴⁷ Shah Natawan, whose dargah falls at Natanpur and which is famous after his name was also a reputed saint. It is said about him that having crossed the river Barak, he had gone to Jalalpur, Gumra in the district of Cachar with the intention of propagating Islam among the people. He lived there till his death.¹⁴⁸ However, we do not have any information whether he was a companion of Shah Jalal or not.

The history of the advent of Islam in a region is generally attributed to the expansion of Muslim rule to the region. But it has already been referred to that the sway of the Muslim rule was never extended to the region now covered by Hailakandi and Cachar district of Barak Valley which had successively been under Tripura, Koch and Dimasa kingdom during the medieval period. The Muslim settlement in Cachar took place not much earlier than the British occupation of Cachar in 1832. However a small section of Muslims in Cachar were from foreign origin. It was during Mughal-Afghan war in 1608 at Paanushar of Maulvi Bazar in Sylhet, a good number of Afghan Chiefs marched towards Cachar when their commander Khaza Usman was killed in the battle field.¹⁴⁹ Two Mughal invasions in the Dimasa kingdom are recorded in primary sources, but these are only passing phases in the history of the region. Information provided by

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p.88

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p.86

¹⁴⁷ Dewan Mohammad Ajraf, p.93

¹⁴⁸ Y, Tamizi, p.88

¹⁴⁹ Dewan Nurul Anwar Hussain Choudhury, *Jalalbader Kotha*, pp.135,137

Mirza Nathan in his '*Baharistan-i-Ghayabi*' that the Dimasa or the Kachari kingdom was invaded by the Subadar of Bengal, Qasim Khan in 1612 A.D. and the king Yasa Narayan purchased by offering huge tributes to both the Subadar and the Thanadar of Bandashand (Bundhashil/Badarpur) who was in the immediate command of the Mughal invasion.¹⁵⁰ The river Surma had since become the boundary between the Dimasa kingdom and the Bangla Subah of the Mughal and a Thanadar was posted at Bandashil (Badarpur).

Another Mughal attack led by Nawab Jamal Khan, most probably the Thanadar of Bundashil (Badarpur) who occupied Khaspur, was repulsed by the Dimasa king Yasa Narayan promising to pay tribute to him in addition to the regular tribute to the Subadar of Bengal. These historical events were passing phases in the history of the Dimasa kingdom and could not contribute any remarkable influence of Islam to the population of the region. No archaeological evidences or contemporary source is available to prove the influence of Islam in the region before 17th century A.D. In all possibilities, the preponderance of Muslim population in Hailakandi and presence of a sizable number of Muslim in Cachar go back to the policy of the Dimasa kings who encouraged peasants' migration from neighbouring regions, particularly from Sylhet for developing wastelands and jungles in to the arable lands.¹⁵¹ Some authors while painstakingly identifying the traces of Sufi movement in the plains of Cachar and Hailakandi want to indicate the advent of Islam in this region goes back to the 14th century when Shah Jalal and his disciples were active with their mission in Sylhet proper and adjoining territories. This line of qualification cites a place near Panchgram and a 'dargah' at Natanpur under Kathigora Police Station in support of their assertion. The former is under the district of Hailakandi and latter in Cachar. The identification of a place on the top of a hillock near Panchgram as the place where Mir-ul-Arefin, popularly attributed to be a direct disciple of Shah Jalal, is said to have stayed for a period of his life and the 'dargah' of Shah Natwan, traditionally regarded as the disciple of Shah Jalal at Natanpur in Cachar¹⁵² are generally cited as infancies of the advent of Islam in the region in 14th century A.D. But these two names are not included in the list of disciples of Shah Jalal provided with by

¹⁵⁰ M. I. Borah, (Tr.), *Baharistan – i- Ghayabi*, Vol. – II, Guwahati, 1936, pp.158-75

¹⁵¹ S. K. Bhuiyan (Ed.), *Jayantia Buranji*, Guwahati, 1963, p.12

¹⁵² Y. Tamizi, p.88

“*Srihatter Itibritta*”, of Achyut Charan Choudhury¹⁵³ who assiduously collected the names by visiting the places connected with the legends. However he admits that he could not collect 61 names of Shah Jalals disciples which would have completed the list of 360 disciples so popularly known.¹⁵⁴ But these two places do not provide us with any archaeological remains. The popular traditions are the only clues which are not corroborated by the historical sources. It is not unlikely that during the lifetime of Shah Jalal some of his direct or distant disciples might have visited the places of Cachar and Hailakandi in the close neighbourhood of Badarpur. But these occurrences can not be taken for certainty as the evidences of advent of Islam in the districts of Cachar and Hailakandi as a whole.

As a matter of fact, no tradition or historical evidence is available to prove the exact time or period of the advent of Islam in the whole region. It is not unlikely that when Islam attained a prominent place among the agrarian masses of Sylhet including Karimganj, groups of Muslim peasants began to enter the plains of Cachar and Hailakandi with the economic goal of transforming wasteland ‘rapidly covered with jungles immediately after the end of the Tripura domination in Cachar’¹⁵⁵ into arable land. The end of Tripura domination in the region took place in the sixties of the 16th century when Chilarai, the general of the Koch king Naranarayan, extended his sway up to the border of the modern Tripura state by defeating the Tripura king.¹⁵⁶ It is said that some Muslim soldiers came to Barak Valley with the troops of Koch General Veer Chillaroy during his expedition of Cachar in 1562. They were left here when Chillaroy returned back. Muslims of Cachar bearing titles like ‘Sadial’ and ‘Hazari’ including many established families of Borkhala and Udharband area claim such descendency.¹⁵⁷ With the end of the Tripura domination the plains of Cachar (Cachar and Hailakandi) began to depopulate due to attacks of tribal people who took the advantage of anarchy

¹⁵³ Achyut Charan Choudhury, pp.78-83

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid* p.88

¹⁵⁵ U.C. Guha, “*Cacharer Itibritta*”, (Ed.) Sujit Choudhury, Asom Prakashan Parishad, Re-print 1971, p.39

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p.30

¹⁵⁷ Ali Haidar Laskar, “*A History of the Muslims and the Barak Valley*”, Prithibi Prakashan, Guwahati, 2013, p.107

precipitated by the fall of the Tripura kingdom.¹⁵⁸ The alluvial land on the plateau of Barak rapidly indulged in luxuriant vegetation and the plains were soon covered with jungle.

This state of affairs attracted the Muslim peasants of Sylhet in early 17th century. But in the 18th century when the capital of Dimasa Kingdom shifted to Khaspur, the Muslim peasants were settled in the plains of the state by the king Lakshmi Chandra (1745-1780) abundantly with a view to reclaiming the wasteland into arable land. This policy of the king increased the number of Muslim population in the state and also innovated a permanent source of flourishing the royal coffer. The number of Muslim population in the Dimasa Kingdom was not so reckonable at the time of the establishment of capital at Khaspur. But during the reign of Lakshmi Chandra it increased to a great extent.¹⁵⁹ During the reign of Krishna Chandar two Muslim saints Ferutupi and Ali propagated Islam in Cachar. Ferutupi along with a good number of his followers arrived from the western boundaries of Cachar. Hearing the information regarding the arrival of Ferutupi Kachari king Krishna Chandra fled to North Cachar. Many Hindus and Muslims also without knowing anything details also fled from their houses and took shelter in the jungle of Sylhet.¹⁶⁰ During this period many Muslims also came to Cachar and many peoples got converted to Islam.¹⁶¹ Another saint named Ali also came from Bhuvan Hill area also propagated Islam in Cachar and later went to Tripura via Hailakandi.¹⁶²

Muslims of Surma-Barak Valley that so far has been discussed were mainly the Bengali Muslims. However another section of Muslims settled in Barak Valley are called 'Meiti' Muslim, are Islamic by faith and by religion, Muslim by culture and Manipuri by race and language. They migrated in Barak Valley during the 'Seven Years Devastation' after the Burmese invasion of Manipur in 1818. Cachar was divided between four

¹⁵⁸ Sujit Choudhury, p.39

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p.97

¹⁶⁰ Amalendu Bhattacharjee and Sanjib Deblaskar (Ed.), *Cacharer Itibritta: Sri Upendra Chandra Guha*, Parul Prakashani, Agartala, p.76

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, 77

Manipuri brothers Sourjit, Marjit, Gambhir and Bishwanath Singh driving out Gobinda Chandra the rightful king of Cachar.

Gobinda Chandra took shelter in Sylhet, but failed to get British help to drive away the Manipuris from Cachar. Finding no other alternative he requested the Burmese king who promised to re-instate him. Accordingly the Burmese invaded Cachar in 1824. The Manipuri brothers fled to Sylhet and took shelter there. After the re-occupation of Manipur with English help, many fugitive Manipuris returned to Manipur. The present Meiti Muslim and Manipuri population of Barak Valley are the descendents of those Manipuris who did not return to Manipur.¹⁶³ It may be mentioned here that Hazi Akbar Ali of Lamba Basti was the founder of the famous ‘Dar-ul-Ulum, Banskadi’ who belonged to Meiti Muslim community.

British started tea cultivation in the Barak Valley during the middle part of the 19th century. A large number of labourers were brought for tea cultivation from Bihar, Chotonagpur, Orissa and other places among them there was a small percentage of Muslim labourers.¹⁶⁴ Presently their descendents are found in some tea garden areas specially, Lalamukh, Gaaglachera, Kalachera, Aynarkhal, Borakhai, Dolu, Silcoorie Tea Estate and other areas.

The facts lead us to conclude that Islam began to appear large scale in modern Surma-Barak Valley early in the 14th century. Muslim came here as merchants, preachers, conquerors, administrators, traders, workers, cultivators, soldiers and invitees of local kings. Sufis played a vital role in the spread of Islam in this region. Islam developed centering round Sylhet and subsequently grown in peripheries. Present Muslims of Surma-Barak Valley are mainly of foreign origin, converted and migrated Muslim. However, a small section of Muslim came from Manipur and still a smaller number came from Bihar, U.P. and other parts of India and came as tea garden labourers and settled in this area. We can conclude with the thesis articulated by one of the most influential

¹⁶³ Quazi Hamid Ali, “*The Manipuri Muslim*”, Published by the author, Banskandi, p.19

¹⁶⁴ Mahbubur Rahman Laskar, “Advent of Islam in Barak Valley” published in *Sitara-i-Subah*, vol.III, Department of Persian, Gurucharan College, Silchar, 2013, p.86

Bengali historians of the post-independence period, Abdul Karim, who in context of Bengal wrote: “The facts that the Muslims settled in this country, learnt the local language, lived in harmony with the local people, accepted local wives, adopted various professions suited to their genius, and that in their dietary system and dwelling houses they depended on materials locally available, bear out that they considered Bengal as their homeland. Side by side they adhered to the Islamic religious principles and built religious institutions of their own. There is, therefore, good ground to suggest that a Bengali Muslim society already passed its formative stage, took a definite shape, and breathed a new spirit of tolerance, equality and universal love in the country so much so that large masses accepted Islam and even the then Hinduism was deeply affected as traceable in some of the elements of the Chaitanya movement.”¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ Abdul Karim, *Social Histroy of Bengal*, p.210-11