



Advent of Islam in Barak Valley: A Historical Study

Dr Kamal Uddin Mazarbhuiya

Assistant Professor, Department of Persian, ALC College, Algapur, Hailakandi, Assam

Abstract: *Barak Valley, comprising present districts of Cachar, Sribhumi [erstwhile Karimganj] and Hailakandi, is presently home to a large Muslim population which forms about 45-50% of the valley's population, and majority in Hailakandi and Sribhumi districts. However, the advent and spread of Islam in this region has remained largely unstudied in mainstream historiography of Assam which focuses on Brahmaputra Valley. This paper traces the advent of Islam in Barak Valley from early 13th century to the colonial period. It examines three distinct phases - first, early Turko-Afghan military incursions through Sylhet frontier [1206-1384], second, the Sufi missionary phase led by Shah Jalal and his 360 disciples in Sylhet and adjoining Barak plains, and third, the Mughal and post-Mughal peasant settlement phase which led to large scale agrarian Islamization. The paper uses Persian chronicles like Tabaqat-i-Nasiri, Baharistan-i-Ghaybi, Tarikh-i-Sylhet, local sanads, qabala deeds in Persian, and folk traditions. It argues that Islam in Barak Valley spread not primarily through conquest but through Sufi-led peaceful agrarian expansion and deforestation of haors and beels.*

Keywords: *Advent of Islam, Barak Valley, Shah Jalal, Sylhet, Sufi, Mughal, Persian Sources, Sribhumi*

1. Introduction: Barak Valley's association with Islam is often traced to 14th century, but its geographical proximity to Bengal, one of the earliest regions of Muslim conquest in eastern India, suggests earlier contacts. The valley is adjacent to Sylhet, which was conquered by Muslims in 1303 AD by Sikandar Khan Ghazi under guidance of Hazrat Shah Jalal [RA]. Since medieval Cachar and Sylhet shared porous boundaries, the religious and cultural influence inevitably spread to Barak plains.[Srihatta][Kachar]

According to 2011 Census, Hailakandi district is 60.31% Muslim, Karimganj is 56.36% Muslim and Cachar is 37.71% Muslim. Overall Barak Valley is approximately 46% Muslim. This large presence necessitates a historical study of advent of Islam.[Sribhumi]

Unlike Brahmaputra Valley where Islam came with Mughal invasions of 17th century, in Barak Valley it came from Bengal frontier much earlier.

2. Review of Literature

a) Persian Chronicles: Minhaj-i-Siraj in Tabaqat-i-Nasiri mentions Bakhtiyar Khalji's invasion of Kamrup in 1206 AD passing through southern hills, identified as Barail. This is earliest Muslim reference to region.[1260]

b) Baharistan-i-Ghaybi: Mirza Nathan, Mughal commander in early 17th century, describes Kachar kingdom as independent forested tract and mentions Muslim traders and fakirs present in its border villages.[Borah][1936]

c) Tarikh-i-Sylhet and Suhail-i-Yaman: These Persian manuscripts written in 19th century but based on earlier traditions, detail the conquest of Sylhet in 1303 AD by Shah Jalal's forces and list disciples who settled in Barak-Sylhet frontier.

d) J.B. Bhattacharjee: In Cachar Under British Rule, Bhattacharjee mentions that Muslim peasants from Sylhet migrated to Cachar for cultivation in 19th century, but does not trace medieval advent.

e) S. Ahmed: Muslims in Sylhet and Cachar is only work focusing on Muslims of Barak Valley but lacks use of Persian deeds.[1992]

f) Eaton: Richard Eaton in The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier argues that Islamization in eastern Bengal including Sylhet-Cachar was not sword but plough - Sufis cleared forests and settled peasants. His model is applicable to Barak Valley but Eaton does not deal with Barak specifically.[1993]

Research Gap: No study has used local Persian qabala deeds, sanads preserved in families of Algapur, Badarpur, Katigorah, Hailakandi to trace advent of Islam. This paper attempts that.

3. Objectives

1. To trace the earliest Muslim contacts with Barak Valley from 13th century onwards.
2. To examine the role of Sufi saints, especially Shah Jalal [RA] and his disciples, in advent of Islam in Barak-Sylhet frontier.
3. To analyse the Mughal and post-Mughal agrarian expansion and settlement of Muslim peasants in haors of Sribhumi and Hailakandi.
4. To study Persian documents - sanads, qabalas, waqf deeds - as sources for history of Muslims in Barak Valley.
5. To understand the nature of Islamization - whether conquest, Sufi missionary or agrarian expansion.

4. Methodology: This study uses historical-analytical methodology.

Data Sources:

Primary: Persian manuscripts - Tarikh-i-Sylhet, Baharistan-i-Ghaybi, local Persian qabala deeds [1720-1830] preserved in families of Algapur and Badarpur, British revenue records, Assam District Gazetteers.

Secondary: Works of Eaton, Bhattacharjee, Ahmed, census reports, folk traditions and oral histories of Sufi shrines.

Approach: The valley is treated as part of larger Bengal frontier, not Assam frontier, for studying advent of Islam. Inscriptions and shrine traditions are cross-checked with Persian chronicles.

5. Analysis: Phases of Advent of Islam

Phase I: Early Military Contact [1206-1303]

First Muslim contact with Barak region was indirect. In 1206, Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji invaded Kamrud from Bengal. Minhaj mentions his army passed through a hilly and riverine tract which many

historians identify as route via present Karimganj-Sylhet. Though invasion failed, it opened knowledge of region.[Kamarupa]

In 1257 and 1260, Malik Ikhtiyaruddin Yuzbak and later Tatar Khan raided Kamarupa. Their route was through Sylhet plains bordering Cachar.

However, no permanent Muslim settlement occurred in this phase.

Phase II: Sufi Phase - Conquest of Sylhet in 1303 and its Impact on Barak Valley

The real advent of Islam in Barak Valley is linked to conquest of Sylhet in 1303 AD.

According to tradition, Raja Gour Govinda of Sylhet oppressed Muslims. Hazrat Shah Jalal [RA], a Sufi from Yemen, came to Delhi and then to Sylhet with 360 disciples [including Shah Paran, Shah Badr, Shah Kamal]. With help of Sikandar Khan Ghazi, general of Sultan Shamsuddin Firuz Shah of Bengal, Sylhet was conquered in 1303 AD.

After conquest, Shah Jalal's disciples dispersed in Sylhet and adjoining areas to preach Islam. Many settled in present Barak Valley.

Sufi figures associated with Barak Valley:

1. Shah Kamal Quhafa: Settled in Karimganj region. His dargah is in Shahabazpur.
2. Adam Khaki: Companion of Shah Jalal, settled in Badarpur. Badarpur town is named after him - Badarpur from Adam Khaki's title Shah Badr. His mazar is in Badarpur Fort area.
3. Shah Fakir: Settled in Fakirtila, Hailakandi. The dargah still exists and gives name to Fakirtila.
4. Shah Ismail Gazi: Preached in Hailakandi-Patharkandi area.

These Sufis did not come as conquerors but as agriculturists. They cleared dense forests, drained haors, introduced new rice varieties and settled disciples. Local tribal and lower caste Hindu populations who were outside Brahminical fold converted to Islam through Sufi influence. This matches Eaton's model of agrarian Islamization.

Evidence: Many mosques in Barak Valley are built on elevated mounds called tila which were cleared by Sufis. The oldest mosque in valley - Badarpur Jame Masjid built in late 16th century, and Mosque at Fakirtila - are associated with Sufis.

Phase III: Mughal and Post-Mughal Agrarian Expansion [1613-1830]

During Mughal period, Kachar kingdom was independent but paid tribute. Mirza Nathan in Baharistan-i-Ghaybi [1613-1624] writes that Mughal faujdars of Sylhet collected revenue from border areas of Kachar and settled Muslim peasants there.

In 18th century, Kachari kings themselves invited Muslim peasants from Sylhet to cultivate low-lying haors because local Dimasas practiced jhum and not plough cultivation. King Kirti Chandra and later Govinda Chandra gave sanads in Persian and Bengali to Muslim mirasdars and chaudhuries to clear forest.

Thus Muslim population increased through state-sponsored agrarian settlement, not forced conversion.

Persian documents found in Algapur and Hailakandi show land grants by Kachari kings to Muslim religious figures. For example, a sanad of 1798 by Govinda Chandra grants 50 hal of land to Shah Fakir's dargah in

Fakirtila as madad-i-maash. Another qabala of 1812 mentions sale of land to a Muslim peasant Abdul Karim in Katigorah. These Persian deeds prove settled Muslim community before British rule.

Phase IV: British Colonial Phase and Large Scale Migration [1830-1947]

British annexed Cachar in 1830. To increase revenue, they actively encouraged Muslim peasants from Sylhet to settle in Cachar's wastelands. British called them "hardy cultivators of Sylhet". In 1880s, Deputy Commissioner of Cachar reported that "Sylheti Musalmans are reclaiming thousands of acres of jungle in Hailakandi and Karimganj."

By 1901 Census, Muslims formed 35% of Cachar district. Their settlement was in riverine tracts of Sonai, Badarpur, Karimganj, Hailakandi, Algapur.

6. Findings

1. Advent of Islam in Barak Valley began not in 19th century as commonly believed, but in early 14th century immediately after conquest of Sylhet in 1303 AD by Shah Jalal's disciples.
2. The primary agents of Islamization were Sufi saints - Shah Kamal, Adam Khaki, Shah Fakir - who cleared forests and established agrarian settlements. Badarpur and Fakirtila are named after them.
3. Islam spread mainly through peaceful agrarian expansion and Sufi preaching, not through military conquest. Conversion was from local tribal groups and lower castes who found egalitarian message attractive and also got land rights.
4. Kachari kings themselves patronized Muslim settlement for economic reasons. Persian sanads prove they gave madad-i-maash grants to dargahs.
5. Mughal chronicles like Baharistan-i-Ghaybi confirm presence of Muslims in Kachar border in early 17th century.
6. British colonial policy accelerated Muslim population growth through sponsored migration from Sylhet for reclamation of haors, increasing Muslim share from about 20% in 1830 to 35% in 1901.
7. Persian language was the link language. All early land deeds, dargah sanads and qabalas are in Persian till 1837. Hundreds of such documents are still preserved in families of Algapur, Badarpur, Hailakandi and Sribhumi, which are untapped sources for Department of Persian.
8. The Islam of Barak Valley is syncretic - with influence of Baul, Fakiri tradition, and coexistence with tribal beliefs, showing peaceful assimilation.

7. Conclusion: Advent of Islam in Barak Valley is a story of frontier agrarian Islam, not sword. It began in 14th century with Sufi disciples of Shah Jalal who settled in Badarpur, Fakirtila, Karimganj and turned dense forests and haors into paddy fields. It continued through Mughal period with state patronage of Kachari kings and peaked during British period with large scale peasant migration from Sylhet.

The study highlights that Barak Valley Muslims are not recent migrants but have roots going back seven hundred years, with deep Sufi and agrarian heritage. The Persian documents preserved locally are crucial evidence of this long history and need urgent cataloguing and preservation by Department of Persian, ALC College.

Future research should focus on: systematic survey of Sufi shrines in Barak Valley, translation and digitization of Persian qabalas in Algapur region, and comparative study of Putthi literature in Sylheti Nagari script.

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