

# REPORT ON POPULATION MATTERS OF INDIGENOUS **MUSLIMS**



## List of members of the committee on Population Stabilization of Assamese Indigenous Muslims, Govt. of Assam

Sl.	Name	Designation
1.	<b>Prof. (Dr) Ilias Ali, MS.</b> Former Professor of surgery cum HoD Emergency Medicine, Gauhati Medical College, Guwahati, (Padma Shri Awardee 2019)	Chairman
2.	<b>Mr Kauser J. Hilaly, ACS</b> Chief Executive Officer, Guwahati Metropolitan Development Authority (GMDA)	Member Secretary
3.	<b>Dr. Akabbar Ali Ahmed, MA, LLB, Phd</b> Retd. HoD Department of History, Bholanath College, Dhubri	Member
4.	<b>Dr. Syed Tanwir Alam, MD</b> Associate Prof. of Microbiology, Gauhati Medical College, Guwahati	Member
5.	<b>Mr Shahabuddin Ahmed, MA</b> Senior Sub-editor, Dainik Agradoot (News Paper), Guwahati.	Member

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to take this opportunity to express my deepest gratitude to all the persons with whose guidance, suggestion, constant encouragement, co-operation and help has made this work fruitful.

I and all the esteemed members of the committee for population stabilization of indigenous Muslims of Assam, are privileged and honored to express our sincere respect to Honorable Chief Minister of Assam, Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, for directing the Assam Government to constitute seven sub-groups/committees to suggest measures and recommendations to bring about overall futuristic development for indigenous Assamese Muslims living in the State.

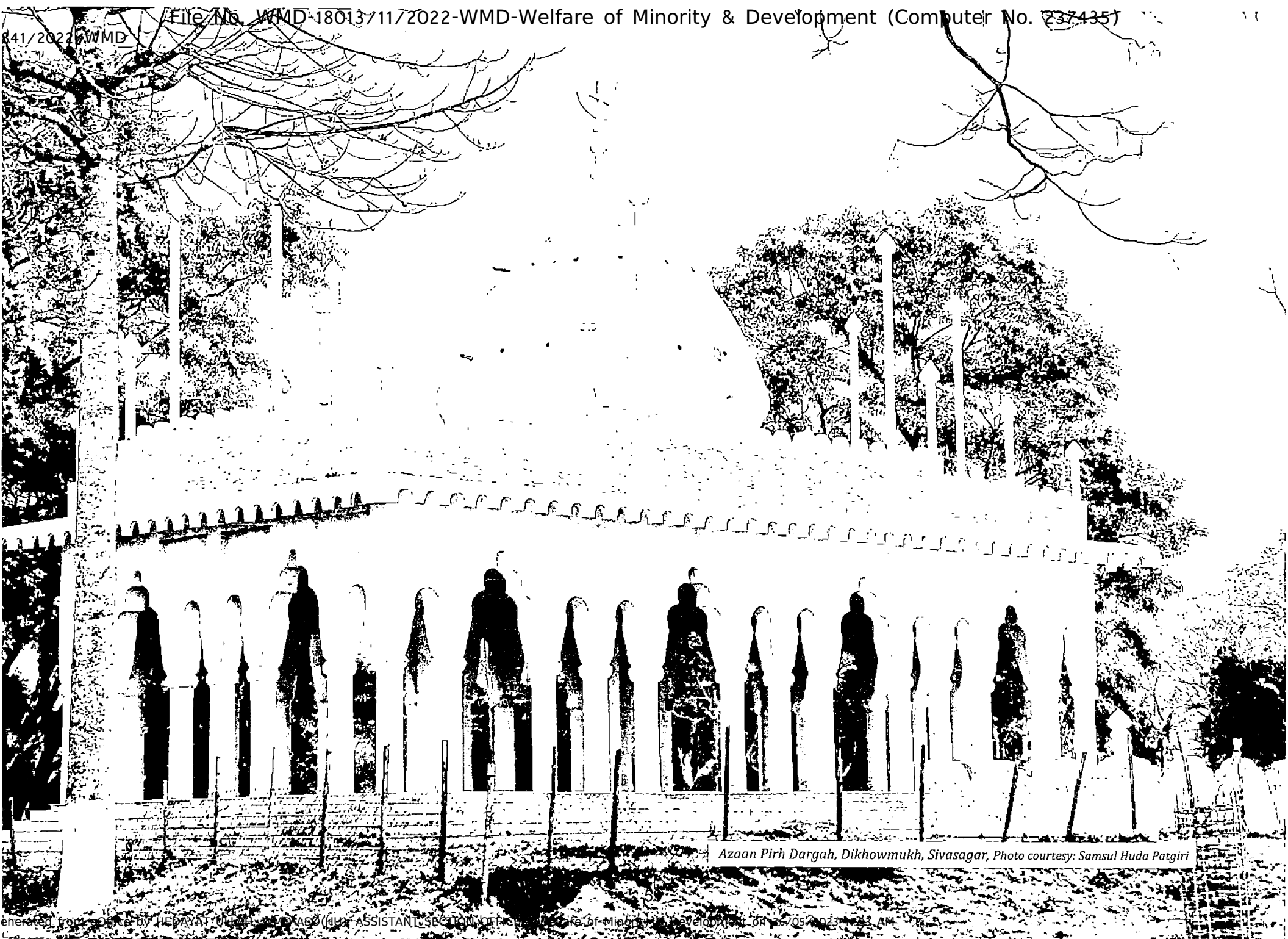
I would like to express my deepest respect and gratitude to all the committee members for their constant guidance, help and support throughout, without which it would not have been possible to complete the random study of indigenous Muslim population. I extend my special thanks to K.J. Hitaly, ACS, Member Secretary (CEO GMDA), for his constant support, encouragement, guidance and valuable suggestions without which this work would not have been possible.

I extend my sincere thanks to Mrs. Safra Banu Begum, Managing Director, Global Hospital of Surgery, Haugaon-Strubani, Guwahati for allowing us to arrange the meetings in the hospital premises. I thank all the staff members of Global Hospital of Surgery for their support and help to complete the study. I express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Nuruddin Mohammad Iqbal, for supervising the data analysis as well as for formulating and finalizing the results and observations of the study.

My sincere thanks and gratitude to all the volunteers in various districts of Assam who helped in carrying out the survey.

Lastly, I extend my thanks to all the respective families for their cooperation. They were an integral part of this study and without them it would not have been possible.

Prof. Ilias Ali



Azaan Pirh Dargah, Dikhowmukh, Sivasagar, Photo courtesy: Samsul Huda Patgiri

## INTRODUCTION

Prof Ilias Ali

The historical milieu of Assam is the union of various races from the east, west, south and the north; the intermixture of diverse ingredients of the Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan cultures.

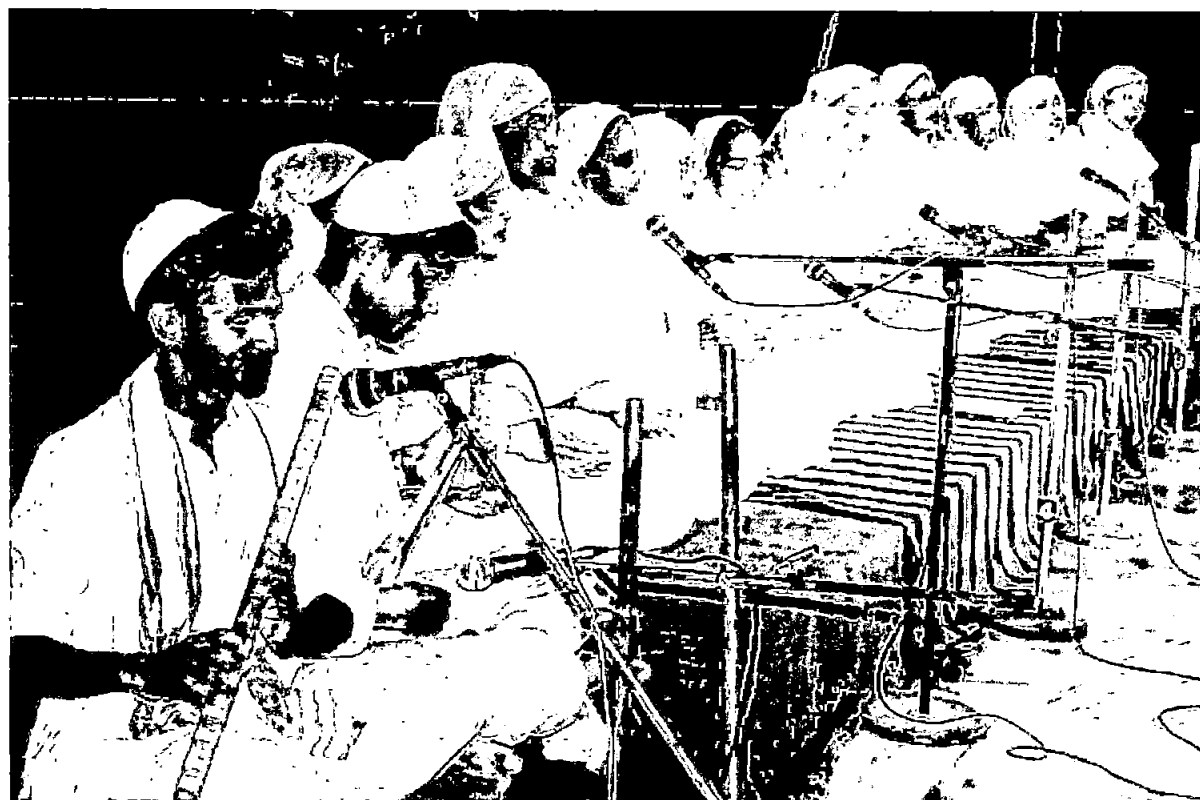
'Pre-historic archaeology and other evidences prove that the land (Assam), lying in one of the migration routes of mankind, received wave after wave of immigrants and perhaps sent out emigrants from prehistoric times onwards.'- The History of Civilisation of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century A.D. by Pratap Chandra Choudhury.

Migrants from Pre-historic as well as BC, medieval and early modern era constituted the various indigenous races of Assam. Later in the last decade of 19th and 20th century the migrants popularly known as the settlers (of immigrant background) from undivided pre-independent Bengal and subsequently from Bangladesh settled in most parts of lower and middle Assam and in sand bars of river Brahmaputra. Indigenous races and settler communities enrich the demographic mosaic of Assam.

'Nowhere else in India has there been such a mixture of races as in the Assam valley and nowhere have the peoples lived in more harmony'-- Sir Andrew Clow, Indian Civil Servant, Governor of Assam (1942-47), British

Rule. (Pratap Chandra Choudhury, The History of Civilisation of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century A.D.).

Assamese culture is fascinating combination of all these races evolved through a long



Zikir recital by Gaaria singers, Sivasagar, Photo courtesy: Samsul Huda Patgiri

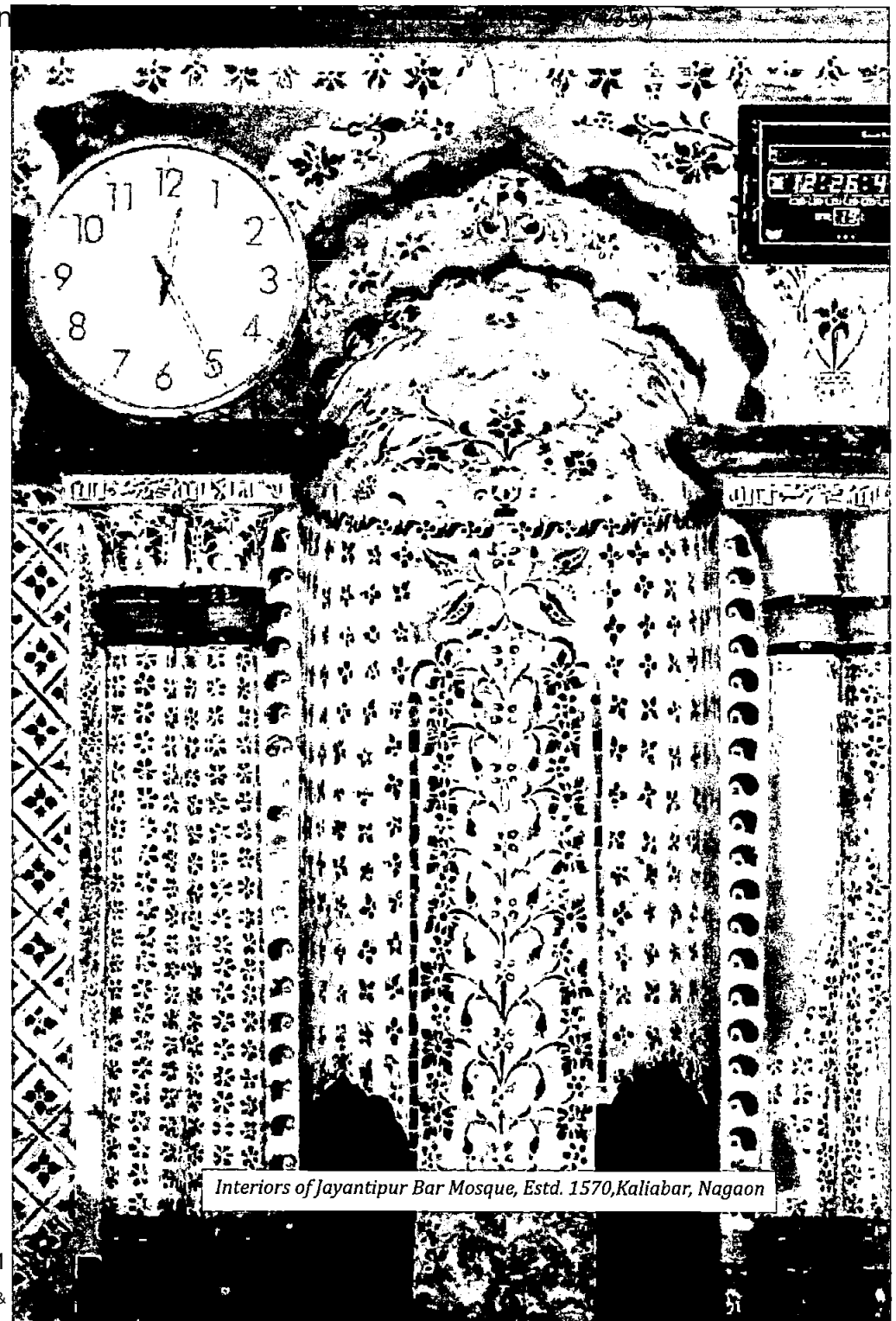
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assimilation process. Over eight centuries old indigenous Muslims are the inseparable and intermingling threads that augment the beauty of Assamese culture. Assam first came in contact with Islam in 1206 when Muhammad bin Bakhtiar Khaliji, a general of Delhi Sultanate, Governor of Bihar and Bengal, led an unsuccessful military expedition to Tibet through this region.

Ali Mech, a tribal chief and the first convert to Islam in Assam, guided Bakhtiar and his army through Kamrupa. E.A. Gait, a famous historian mentioned: 'Guided by a Mech Chief, Muhammad Bakhtiar marched northwards along the right bank of this river (Karatoya) for ten days, through a country inhabited by the Koch, Mech and Tharu (Terai) tribes' (E. A. Gait : A History of Assam).

Bakhtiar's Tibet expedition ended with disaster as while returning the army had to face the army of Kamrupa. In a fierce battle Bahktiyar's army was defeated and hundreds of Bahktiyar's army men were captured. Only Bahktiyar along with a few of his soldiers managed to escape and reached Gaura (Bengal). Later, the captured army men gradually started to settle in Assam. The most significant aspect of Bakhtiar's expedition was the conversion of Ali Mech to Islam. Ali Mech, the founding father of the Muslim community of Assam, was the torch bearer for hundreds of fellow community members to adopt Islam. This historical event was the beginning of the journey of Assamese Muslims getting gradually amplified and brighter.

After failed expedition of Muhammad bin Bakhtiar Khaliji in 1206, other rulers from Bengal and North India continued their struggle to rule Assam till 1682 A.D. at the Battle of Itakhuli between the Mughal and the Ahom. Over 400 years since 1206 to 1682, thousands of captured army personnel settled in different parts of Assam and married local Assamese females.



Interiors of Jayantipur Bar Mosque, Estd. 1570, Kaliabar, Nagaon

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Simultaneously, migration or importation of Muslims as travellers, religious preachers, artisans, craftsmen, engravers and skilled workers in different fields continued. In addition, numerous locals had converted to Islam in different times and constituted over two third volume of the Muslim mass. Moreover, the converted Muslims accelerated the process of assimilation of foreign Muslims settled in Assam.

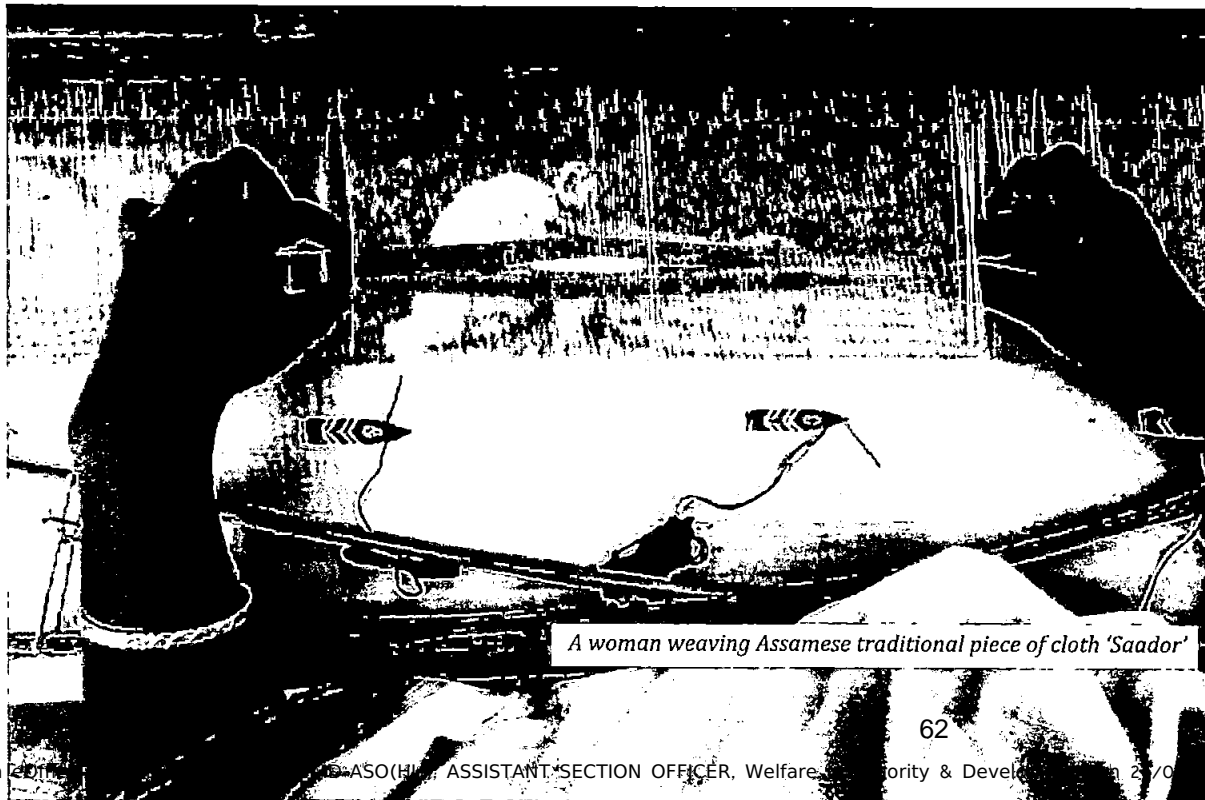
It is interesting to note that most of the Ahom rulers had appointed a good number of Muslim officials in their court who had worked as

translator, interpreter and drafter of Persian correspondence received from foreign rulers. Besides, the Ahom ruler encouraged the study of Persian language in Assam and even multiple posts of Persi- Porhiya (Persian reader) were created in the royal court to assist the Ahom administration's diplomatic relation with foreign Muslim rulers. It is said that Ahom king Rudra Singha (1696- 1714) had brought eight Muslim families (professions of different fields) from outside Assam viz. Persi Porhiya (interpreters and decipherers of Persian documents), Akhor Kotiya (letter engravers),

Khonikar (masons and artisans), Sil Kotiya (stone engravers), Guna Kotiya (gold and silver thread makers), Negeriya (drummers), Dorji (tailors) and Julha (weavers). The royal promotion of Indo-Arabic culture and Persian language in particular helped significantly in assimilation of Muslims with other ethnic groups of Assam. Assamese language is enriched with addition of Persi-Arabic words. Even many suffixes and prefixes became part of Assamese language. Few examples are: suffix- sutkhor, haramkhor, dagabaz, pheriwala, dadagiri, dildar etc, prefixes - kamzor, darker, badnam, badhazam, beiman, garmil, bedakhal etc (Contribution of Persian to Assamese Culture & Society by Dr R Ahmed).

One of the most significant decisions of Ahom King Rudra Singha (1696-1714) was the introduction of Islamic prayers in the royal court that his successors continued. Rudra Singha accepted a Muslim named Shah Newaj as a priest in the court, who used to pray for the prosperity of the kingdom in Islamic form. Later on, this custom introduced by Rudra Singha was followed by his successors. (S L Baruah 1978).

The famous treatise called Hastividyanava (Swargadeo Siva Sinha, 1716-1744 CE) combines Mughal painting style with topics of

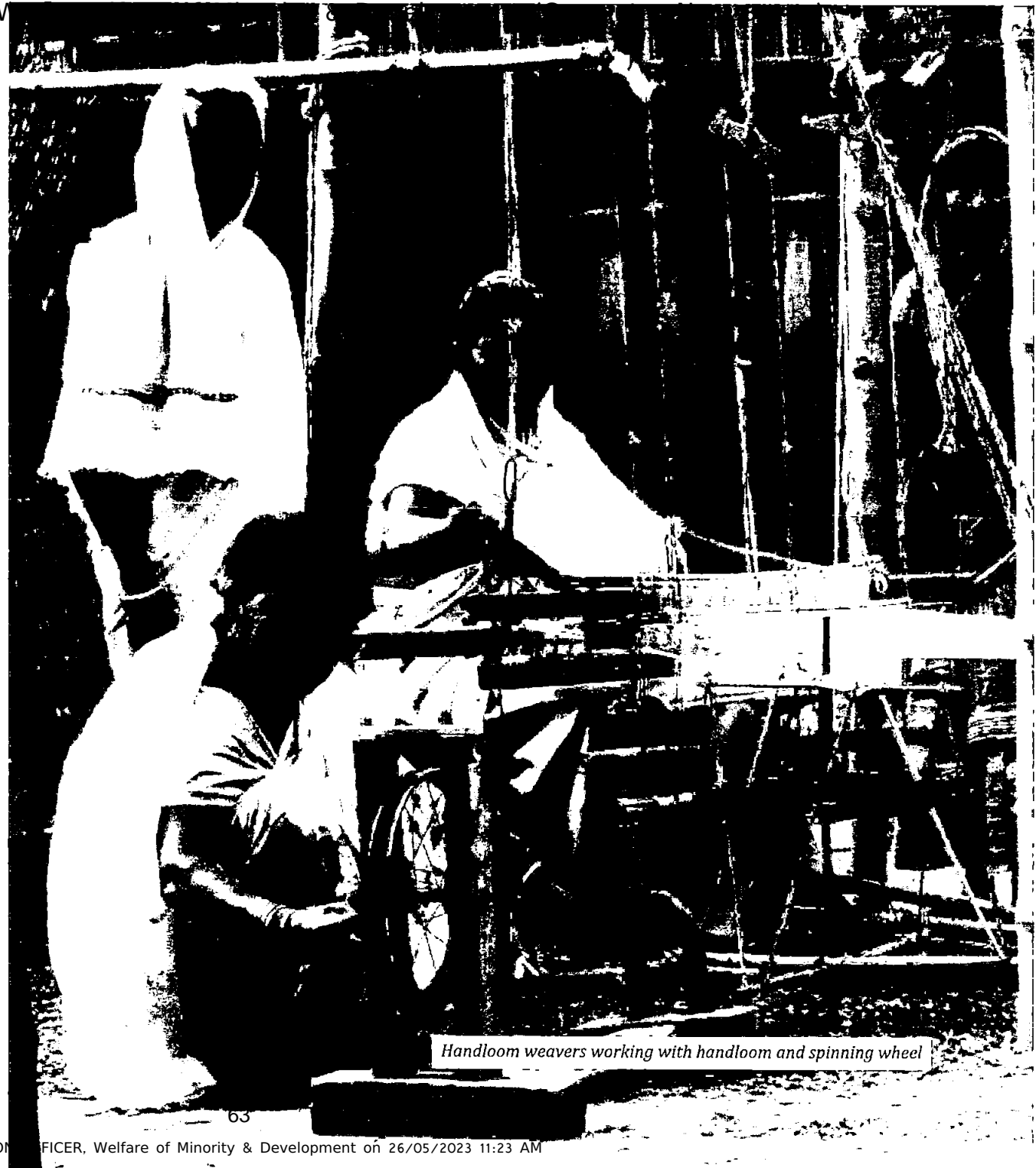


A woman weaving Assamese traditional piece of cloth 'Saador'

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concern to local culture and was illuminated by a Muslim artist named Dilwar. Likewise, in coinage, inscriptions and objects of royal use, the Muslim imprint is affirmed. Persian and Arabic scripts mingle with Tai, Sanskrit and Assamese in royal inscriptions and coins. In 1729 CE, Queen Pramatheswari (wife of Swargadeo Siva Sinha) issued a coin in Persian, which read 'Shah Shiva Simha Sikka, Zad Chow Mohur, Bahukum Begum Pramtheswari Shah.' (The Muslims of Assam Present/Absent History, Yasmin Saikia, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, United States).

Commenting on assimilation of Muslims with other communities of Assam in pre British Assam, renowned historian S.L. Baruah stated in her article - 'The Muslim Population in Pre-British Assam: Their Social Status and Role in Cultural History (1978)' that 'the Muslims, though a minority community, occupied a significant position in the society of pre-British Assam. A new element in the population of Assam in the early part of this period, they soon got assimilated with the Assamese people, adopting their mode of living, sharing their superstitions and social rites, speaking their language and accepting this land as their motherland and contributing towards her development. The wide social outlook of the



*Handloom weavers working with handloom and spinning wheel*



Ahoms and the teachings of the neo-Vaisnavism sponsored by Sri Sankaradeva and his disciple Madhavadeva in the 16th century brought the Hindus and the Muslims in Assam closer to one another. Through the social intercourse with the Muslim settlers, the people of Assam became acquainted with Islamic religion and culture and accepted some elements'.

Dr S K Bhuyan, noted writer and historian had given the graphic description of the status of Muslims during the Ahom rule: "The Muslims and in fact all non-Ahoms, did not suffer any disability on account of their religious faiths. Up to the year 1772, the Gohains and the Phukans were all appointed from among the Ahoms; and the highest office to which a non-Ahom, whether he was a Hindu or Muslim, could look forward to was a Baruahship. A large number of Muslims were appointed in several departments of the state, minting of coins, painting, carpentry, embroidery work, sword-making, gun-casting and the manufacture of gun-powders. Several learned Muslims generally known as 'parisi-parhias' or Persian documents, drafting and supervision of the Persian correspondence of the government. Muslims religious leaders or pirs paid visit to Assam to minister the spiritual needs of their co-religionists. The Ahom rulers encouraged these pirs to settle in Assam by the grant of revenue-free land known as Pir-pal land. Some of the them were known as dewans and they exercised great influence upon the masses. Dr J. P. Wade, (A British geographical and historical investigator under East India Company) who stayed in Assam from 1792 to 1794, has referred to a Muslim, 'the gooroo-general of his persuasion in Assam from about the time of Rudra Singha. He had numerous attendants dressed in the high Musalman dress. He resided at or near the capital and frequented the durbar and the Swargadeos used to despatch him to pray at Hadjoo after the Musalman fashion for their prosperity. He was usually succeeded by his nearest relations". The same writer found ten or twelve houses of instruction for Muslim children (Islamic study centre) at Gauhati, and more than twenty at Rangpur, the capital of Assam. The



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Hindus and the Muslims lived in harmony and peace as Shihabuddin Talish, who came to Assam with Nawab Mir Jumla, stated, -"As for the Musalmans who had been taken prisoner in former times and had chosen to marry here, their descendants are exactly in the manner of the Assamese and have nothing of Islam except the name; their hearts are inclined far more towards mingling with the Assamese than towards association with Muslims"(Anglo-Assamese Relation, Page 14-15).

Hundreds of years of journey through the assimilation process, Indigenous Muslims have become an integral part of Assamese society. They never hesitated to stand and fight together with extreme valour and even to lay their lives down whenever there was threat to the integrity and independence of Assam.

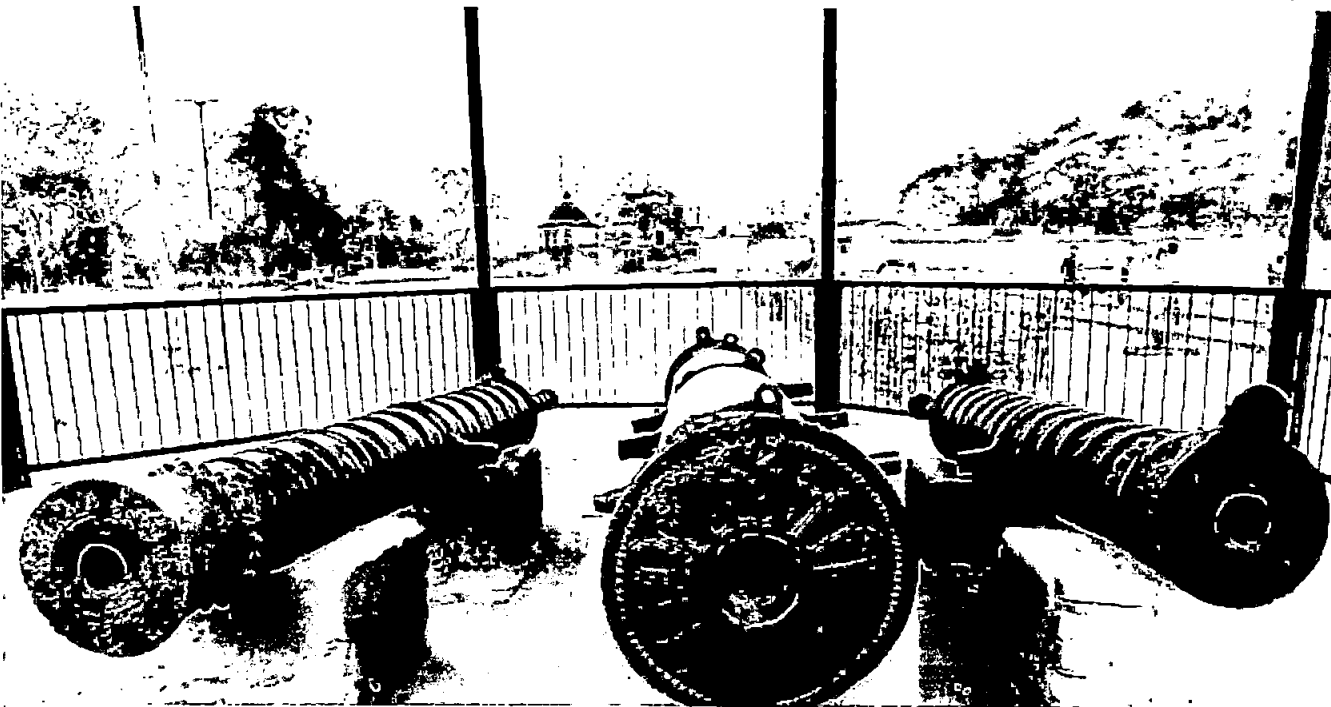
During the reign of the Ahoms, the Muslims had played a very crucial role in production of arms and ammunition, cannons, swords, hengdan, shields, gun powder, etc. by their

expertise. In this regard historians refer to the name of Gandhela Gorja who built the great Ripunjoy cannon. The great Ripunjoy cannon with inscription of the name of Gandhela Gorja is kept on displaying in the premises of Sibsagar old DC court (R.H.Barua, noted writer) and recently it is shifted to the premises of Talatal Ghar.

The glorious historical events of Assamese Muslims are marked by their participation with dedication and heroism in the wars fought hand-in-hand with their other Assamese brethren to defend the independence of Assam. In the decisive battle of Saraighat (1671), Bagh Hazarika alias Ismail Siddiqui had played a very crucial role in leading one thousand Muslim soldiers against the Mughals under the command of Lachit Barphukan. Moreover, Bhakua Kha and Gathua Kha were trusted proud body guards of Lachit Barphukan. It was said that Gathua Kha fired the first cannon against the Mughals in the battle of Saraighat.

On March 27, 1817, at Ghiladhari, the first battle against the Burmese was fought because of their invasion. In this battle, Jama Kha, one of the army chiefs along with Daman Gogoi and Hau Bora led the Ahom force (S L Barua).

In April, 1822, the 3rd battle against Burmese



*Cannons used during Ahom reign, 'Bortop' at Talatal Ghar premises, Sivasagar. Indigenous Muslims were entrusted by Ahom Rular to build the Bortop*

invasion took place at Hadirachaki. A Muslim contingent under the command of Mir-ud-Daula fought against the Burmese forces along with other Ahom armies including Sikh forces sent by Maharaja Ranjeet Singh to assist the Ahom King Chandrakanta Sinha. It was the last battle where Assam lost its independence to the Burmese forces. Shah Hussain Khan and Ramzan Khan, two Assamese Muslim nobles were known for their campaign against Burmese aggression.

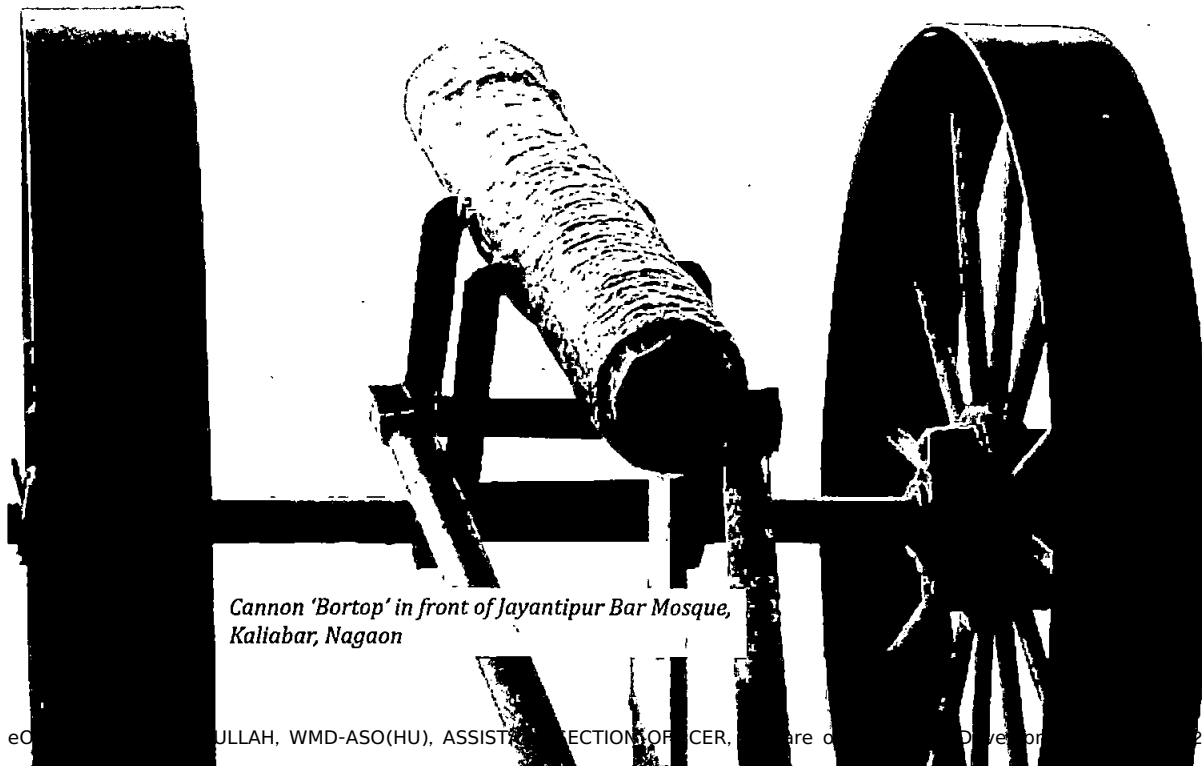
In Sepoy Mutiny (first battle of independence of India) of 1857, Maniram Dutta Baruah, popularly known as Maniram Dewan led the

uprising against British East India Company in Assam. He was later tried and hanged by the colonisers. Prominent Assamese Muslims Bahadur Gaonburha and Farmud Ali, who took part in the uprising were sent to Kalapani (Cellular Jail, a colonial prison in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands). Another Patriotic Assamese Muslim Sardar Julfikar Barua laid his life in the uprising that ended in 1858 (Rabindra Das- The Muslim of Assam -A Critical Study pp96-100).

On January 28, 1894, twenty-five years before the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre, about 140 unarmed peasants fell to the bullets of the

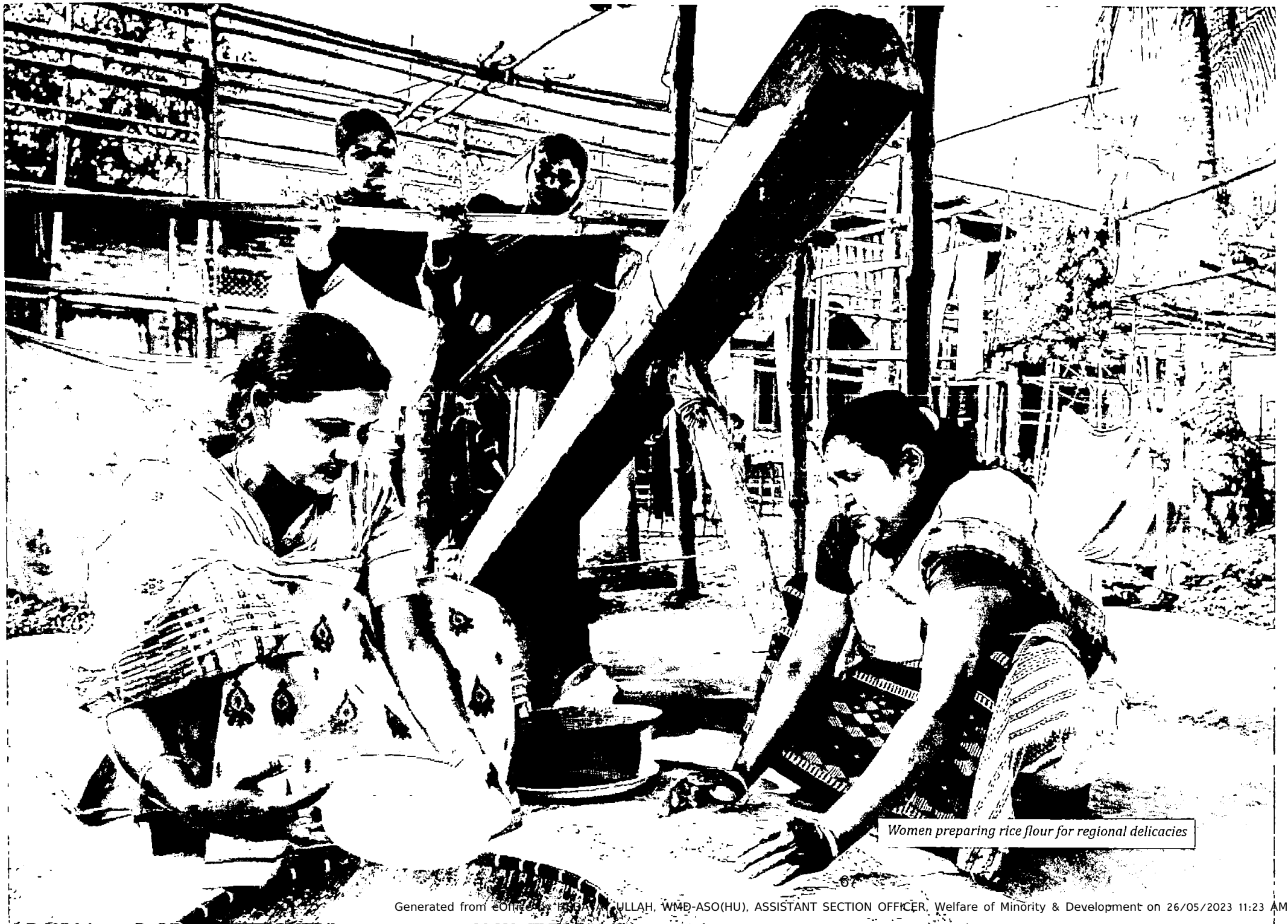
British at Patharughat, a small village in Darrang district of Assam who were protesting against the increase in land revenue levied by the British administration. 'Pothorughat' embodied the ideal of religious harmony and cooperation when Hindus and Muslims fought and died side by side for a common cause. This was in conformity with the age-old tradition of Hindu-Muslim unity that had prevailed in the region. That members of both religious communities had fought shoulder to shoulder and suffered together further strengthened fraternal bonds, which prevail to this day and offer a shining example to the entire nation' (Pothorughat, Arup Kumar Dutta, Padmashri Awardee, 2018).

"That was a shiny morning of Jan 28 (of 1894)  
They (Hindus and Muslim) march together  
Young, adult and old  
With joy and cheer.  
Marched together towards the white man  
And asked him and his accomplice to vacate  
their land.  
The white man lost his temper  
All of a sudden, he passed his order  
'Greet the barking dogs  
With volleys of bullets.'



*Cannon 'Bortop' in front of Jayantipur Bar Mosque,  
Kaliabar, Nagaon*





*Women preparing rice flour for regional delicacies*

Bullet shattered their head  
 Bullet penetrate their heart and lung  
 But bullet failed to touch  
 Their undaunted spirit.”  
 (Ode to liberty, Dr Ilias Ali).

Assam is a land of unity amidst diversity. This sacred land has imbibed various races, colour and creeds to her heart without discrimination since time immemorial. The cultural icon of Assam Jyotiprasad Agarwala sang -

“I am a Hindu  
 I am a Muslim,  
 I am the new generation  
 My God is in temples, mosques  
 My God is in namghars  
 My God is in my heart, outside  
 My God is in rivers and the forests  
 And in sky above...” (Quoted from book ‘The Identity Quotient’ by Zafri M Nofil P64).

Indigenous (tholua or khilonjia) Muslims of Assam particularly of Brahmaputra valley can be categorised as Goria, Moria, Syeds, Deshi and Julha. Goria is the largest community among them and inhabits almost all over Assam. The Indigenous Muslims of undivided Goalpara district are known as Deshi which mean “Native” and most of them are descendants of earlier converts from local tribes centuries ago. Though this community constitutes the second largest Indigenous Muslim

community but they are not well-known in Assam and even they are regarded as Bengali speaking Muslims. Fortunately, though it is late, the community leaders have been striving to establish the cultural identity of Deshi people. The good news is that the government of Assam has already recognised this community as indigenous Muslim of Assam.

The Morias are mainly descendants of Muslim soldiers who were part of Turbak’s invading army and captured by Ahom king Suhungmung and they were settled mostly in Nagaon district. Morias were well known as expert brass craftsmen.

Syeds are one of the smallest Muslim communities of Assam. They claim to be the linear descendants of a very prominent Muslim saint, who is said to have come from the Arabian region to preach and propagate Islam in Assam. Many believe them to be a branch of Goria community.

Julha are the labourers brought by the British to work in tea gardens of Assam.



*Deshi cultural group of Goalini Nritya*



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They were mainly weavers by profession. It is also said that 120 families of Julha were brought by Ahom King to engage in weaving and tailoring activities.

During last few decades the indigenous Muslims have been under constant fear of losing their socio-cultural identity and political influences. Besides, the economic condition of indigenous Muslim is very appalling. Fortunately, in the recent past Indigenous Muslims have been able to draw the attention of the Government of Assam.

It is worth mentioning that while presenting the state's budget for 2019-20, Finance Minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma had announced about the creation of a Development Corporation for Indigenous Muslims. "Assam has a rich history of brotherhood amongst different communities and one of the most important segments making up our unique social fabric, are the Indigenous Muslims. The indigenous Muslims of Assam have always played extremely important role in the social and economic progress of the state. However, this community, of late, has been facing a crisis of identity and the developmental wave seems to have skipped this community. It is high time that the state initiated a special and focused program aimed at the all-round development of this

community. As an initial step, our government intends to conduct a socioeconomic census of the indigenous Muslims of the state which will help us assess their socio-economic condition. We will also establish a development corporation for the indigenous Muslims which will take up various programs aimed at the holistic development of this section of the society. Including self-employment activities, provisioning banking linkages etc. Once the corporation is formed during the course of the year, it will immediately allocate a sum of Rs. 100-crore for taking up various developmental and employment related activities," he had said in his budget speech (The Identity Quotient, p;25-26, Zafri M Nofil).

Under the direction of Chief minister of Assam, Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, the Welfare of Minorities and Development Department has constituted the sub-groups or committees in pursuance of the decision taken during an official programme titled 'ALAAP- ALOCHANA: Empowering the Religious Minorities', which took place at the Assam Administrative Staff College at Khanapara on July 4, 2021. In the programme, Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma interacted with over 150 prominent indigenous Muslims from diverse fields and assured them to bring about the overall

development of the community.

The Committee for Population Stabilization of Indigenous Muslim under chairmanship of Prof Ilias Ali (Padma Shri awardee) was entrusted to study various aspects of population growth and to formulate the strategies to contain it. The committee has unanimously decided to do a random study of nearly 1,500 families in various districts of Assam. Accordingly, the study was done in the districts of Brahmaputra valley of Assam comprising 57 villages of 16 districts. A total of 1,525 families were studied, belonging to indigenous Muslims of Assam which was further sub grouped into Gorias (836), Morias (107), Syeds (51), Deshis (447) and Julhas (84).

This study was carried out with special focus on the following:

- a) Age of marriage of couple,
- b) TFR in respect to age of marriage of women,
- c) Education status of women and TFR,
- d) Average children (TFR) of different communities,
- e) Economic status of the individual family and TFR,
- f) Birth spacing,
- g) Bigamy or polygamy,

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*Deshi folk dance*



*Traditional pre-marriage ceremony, 'Paani Tula' ritual*

- h) Family planning status of the family and
- i) Distance to nearest health facility

Volunteers under the guidance of members of the Committee for Population Stabilisation of Indigenous Muslims, Govt. of Assam conducted the study. Compilation of various data and analysis was done with utmost care. However, it is to be acknowledged that the accuracy and reliability of this study is entirely relied on surveyor reports.

The study has revealed some interesting findings which warrants addressing at the earliest in order to accelerate the process of stabilisation of indigenous Muslim population. At the same time, this study will certainly be able to curb some myths and misconceptions prevalent among the Assamese people regarding population growth of indigenous Muslims of Assam and it will create an environment of understanding among the different communities of Assam.

We hope that this manuscript will become an important document of Assam on population matter of indigenous Muslims.



*Nikaah Ceremony*



## Population explosion, the greatest threat to India

Prof Ilias Ali

India, the second most populous country in the world with more than 1.4 billion (World meter, 9th Jan, 2022) is the only strong contender to be the most populous country in the world, a position held by People Republic of China with a population over 1.44 billion (Worldometer, 9th Jan, 2022) people till now. India will soon replace China from the top position and its head will dazzle with this undesired crown.

India's population is comprised of 623.7 million males and 586.5 million females according to the 15th Census report of 2011. India has added more than 181 million people during the last 10 years and this addition is nearly equal to the population of Brazil, the fifth most populous country in the world. India's head count is almost equal to the combined population of the USA, Indonesia, Brazil, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Japan together.

In 1900, India (undivided) had only 25 crores of people and at the time of independence it had 37.5 crores. In 1965, our population rose to 50 crores that means an addition of total 25

crores in 65 years. Unfortunately, since 1965 India has witnessed a rapid spike in population growth and it reached a billion mark with a total population of 1.075 billion in 2001. The first doubling of population since 1900 took around 65(1900 to 1965) years but the second doubling occurred in just 36 (1965 to 2001) years. Though the last census, 2011 report has shown slight decline of decadal growth rate from 21.15 percent in 2001 to 17.64 percent in 2011, but there is no decline in the addition of actual numbers, rather it is alarmingly and exponentially increasing. Because of this bitter truth, prediction of the Population Commission(2000) for population stabilization by the year 2045 has turned out to be erroneous and India will probably, predicted by many population scientist, reach this goal in 2070.

India bears only 2.4 % of world's land mass which is comparatively three times more than China's land mass. Unfortunately, India with her limited natural resources, has to bear the burden of 17.5 percent of global population

whereas China with her vast resources supports only 19.5 percent. According to the Census (2011), the population density has gone up to 382 per sq km as against 324 in 2001 with a constant land mass of 3,287,240 square kilometres. Presently India is adding nearly 35 people per minute or 1.81crore (in the light of Census 2011) people per year. If this trend of population growth continues without check India will cross China by 2027(UN, 2019).

The population scenario of Assam with a current estimated population of over 3.46 crores (Uidai, 2019) is more gloomy and more alarming. Assam has added 45,13,744 people in the last 10 years (from 2001 to 2011) to its population of 2,66,55,528 of 2001. The population density has gone up to 397 (2011) [higher than the national average of 382, (2011) per square kilometre against 340 in 2001 with no change in the State's territory of 78,438 square kilometre. The only good news for Assam is that the decadal growth rate which was registered at 16.93 % (2011) during the

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last decade is less than the national average of 17.64 % (2011) by nearly 1%. This reflects the positive direction of the population control programme of Assam which was initiated in the recent past with full steam and has made a considerable headway.

In 1952, India was the first sovereign nation in the world to implement the family planning programme but ironically, after 75 years of independence, this pioneering nation finds itself at the top of the list of the most populous countries because of improper implementation of population policies. Despite of the fact that we have achieved tremendous progress in different fields including space technology, we have failed miserably to curb poverty and illiteracy and this has been a bane to the country's socio economic growth and development. On the other hand these two factors (poverty and illiteracy) have been nullifying all our efforts undertaken since 1952 to check the population growth.

Poor parents always opt for more children. They think more children means more working hands and a generation of more income. An illiterate society always has higher fertility rates whereas the fertility rate declines strikingly with increasing literacy. Unless India pays more attention to alleviate poverty and illiteracy

the population growth will continue unabated. Apart from poverty and illiteracy, other important reasons for Indian's rapidly growing population are high fertility rate and decline in death rates. Currently, India's fertility rate is 2.4 and this rate, as per Population Commission -2000, must be lowered to 2.1 for stabilization of our population. Another important factor for population growth is underage marriage. Though underage marriages are termed illegal and banned, it is still prevalent in certain parts of the country. Teenage marriage is not only accelerating the population growth, this scourge is also increasing the maternal and infant mortality rates.

Most disgracefully, it has been observed that a large section of society including the educated, elite and intellectuals, have the misconception that high infant mortality decreases population growth but on the contrary high infant mortality plays a crucial role in increasing the population growth in developing as well in under developed countries. Only by reducing the infant mortality rate, which is very high in India viz 45 per 1000 live births, we shall be able to infuse confidence in the parents' mind about survival of their children and this in turn reduces the incentive to have more children. Another important social factor behind the

population growth is the preference of a male child and when daughters are born, another pregnancy is inexorably follows. Such social malpractices can be done away with by enhancing the social status of the women. On the other hand, most of the population experts opine that by enhancing women education to at least higher secondary level and empowering them will not only cut down the child and maternal mortality rate (which has been consistent in India's case), but also will be able to lower the total fertility rates to the targeted level and the population growth within a short span of time.

Though there is a remarkable decline in the incidents of polygamy, it still persists in certain parts of the country. In Assam this menace is prevalent among the settler Muslims, the inhabitants of riverine areas or river islands of mighty Brahmaputra. Childhood marriage is also rampant within this community. The twine social evils are behind the alarming population growth as well as turning out to be the causes of endless misery of the girl child and women.

Although poverty, illiteracy, high fertility and rapid decline in death rates are the main causes of India's population explosion, one should also keep in mind that influx from Bangladesh and

Nepal has also been worsening the population scenario/demography every single day.

Today, India is faced with the spectre of dwindling resources; particularly water, arable crop land, forests, energy apart from the dearth of adequate shelters, education, medical care, electricity, roads and communication for the poor. India's towns, cities, megacities and industrial hubs are increasingly facing serious social as well as health problems due to the lack of adequate water, sanitation and facilities for waste disposal. By emitting millions of tons of pollutants in the air, river, farm land and sea, India will soon find a place among the most hazardous countries of the world. Serious and irretrievable damage has already been done to the environment, natural habitats, ecology and biodiversity of the country. India has witnessed so many serious natural calamities like devastating earthquakes, severe drought, floods, cyclones and the tsunami in recent past. Such natural disasters can be anticipated with increasing frequency and disaster risk reduction. Unless we undertake tangible measures to curb the unabated and exponential population growth these problems will become uncontrollable.

Population explosion is primarily responsible for serious and intense crises of resources

that India is suffering of. There is shocking and wild competition for nation's limited and fast depleting natural resources for which India is increasingly witnessing ugly and dreadful quarrels between states, between ethno-sectarian groups, terrorists, rebellions, communalism, regionalism and social unrest are the by-product of scarcity and unhealthy competition, which are becoming the order of the day. Now all these ugly monsters have been terribly shaking the very foundations of unity and integrity of our country and they are pushing it relentlessly towards the brink of anarchy.

Every citizen, policy maker, intellectual should realize that population explosion is the greatest threat to India today and it is the central determinant of our future. Earlier, population was regarded as one of the most important resources of the country, but unfortunately this human resource comprising of unhealthy, underfed, uneducated and unskilled population has become Frankenstein for us. India should pay more attention to keep this monster in check. Let us join hands together and march towards eradicating this curse without further delay.



*Garia girls of Puroi Gudam, Nagaon*



Jyantipur Bar Masjid, estd.1570, Kaliabar, Nagaon

## Family Planning in Islam

Prof Ilias Ali

Islamic beliefs on birth control have always been a subject of controversy. In different parts of the world, there are proponents and opponents of permissibility of birth control measures and both demands their views as correct citing different Islamic sources. In India and even in Assam, the prevailing notions are reasonably similar. But in true sense, Islam has been providing meticulous guidance since its dawn with regards to planned and successful family. Contrary to belief the Holy Quran and the Hadith are not against the family planning rather endorsed.

A value-based, well-educated and a healthy and prosperous family is the cornerstone of Islamic society. A downtrodden family with several young hands which are half-clad, under-fed and under-educated cannot be the essence of a progressive Muslim community. A large family with several mouths to feed is often tied down by overbearing economic constraints. Under such circumstances, the family head is often compelled to resort to irreligious means for survival which is surely un-Islamic.

Those who have proclaimed birth control and family planning as heretical in Islam by taking recourse to Quranic 'ayats', have done so by misinterpreting the facts :

*"You shall not kill your children for fear of want, for it is We Who provides sustenance for them as well as for you, verily the killing of them is a great sin" ( Al Quran :Sura: Al-Israa, 17:31).*

This verse in fact was revealed to forbid the pre-Islamic Arab practice of killing or burying alive a newborn child (particularly a girl) on account of the parents' poverty and other social tragedy. And in the present times, apart from infanticide, even foeticide is considered as illegal and culpable under modern laws in most countries. By wrongly mixing the two issues of infanticide and family planning, vested interests have misled the gullible Muslim masses. They assert that there is no difference between the two which indeed is malafide. Birth control does not connote foeticide/ infanticide, it only prevents conception.

Allah, the beneficent and merciful, does not over-burden the believers with hardships. There is no place for coercion and persuasion in Islam. Religious practices and customs should not weigh heavy on the followers. Simplicity in life and deeds is what Allah the beneficent and merciful expects. Towards this end, the Quran instructs:

*"Allah desires for you ease; "He desires no hardship for you" (Surah Al Baqara 2:185), Al Quran.*

*"He has chosen you, and has not laid upon any hardship in the observance of your faith", Surah Al Hajj: 22-78, Al Quran.*

The Prophet said *"this religion of Islam is a religion of ease , free from narrow restriction, anyone who tries to be too strict in matters of religion will have his purpose defeated. Therefore be on the right path, as in your morning course, your evening course and in your night journey"* - Hadith: Sahih al Bukhari.

Islam doesn't call on a believer to be over-burdened with socio-religious matter. "Pushing



Muslim to continue their unregulated fertility in face of hardships is rather harsh, for Islam sponsors moderation and discourses rigidity and extremism. Thus, if uncontrolled reproduction leads to proven health risks to mothers and children, whether the life of the mother is endangered by being pregnant, or repeated pregnancies weaken her body, or it results in the inability of parents to raise their children religiously, educationally and socially, then Muslim would be permitted to regulate their fertility in such a manner that these hardships are expelled or reduced” (Islamic Principles on Family Planning by Mufti Allie Haroun Sheik).

A planned family or a limited family goes a long way in fostering the social bonds. It not only helps in maintaining the maternal health, but also in raising the child as well as the physical and mental development of the child. On the other hand, repeated and frequent pregnancies are detrimental to the maternal health. Often, such women face either multiple health problems or untimely deaths. Child deaths and unhealthy children are commonly seen in multi-gravid women. Apart from child and maternal well-being, family planning or limitation also helps in raising the economic profile of the family. Any family that considers limiting its size keeping

in mind the benefits that would accrue in terms of maternal and child health as well as upward social mobility does not infringe on Islamic tenets, rather abides by them. Islamic scholars are of the view that if a woman is prone to physical and psychological exigencies following pregnancy, then adopting birth control measures under such circumstances are wholly legitimate. If a mother with a newborn child conceives yet again, then the child may be deprived of breastfeeds and maternal care. In such a situation, Islam calls for abstaining from conception till the child at hand is well attended and grown.

A large family with several mouths to feed makes the family economically vulnerable and makes sustenance untenable. Poverty makes an animal out of a man, who becomes rudderless and irreligious. The Prophet had said, “Poverty compels man to veer away from the religious path”. One should always be cautious that life does not get mired in penury. Un-planned families must not be raised. Family size should be commensurate to the financial strength. The family head must be aware of his strengths and weaknesses in rearing a family so that no one suffers from undue constraints. The family head must step up to the plate in attending to his family’s needs and if he fails in

his binding duty, then he shall be answerable to Allah. Numerous children may act as a stumbling block in discharging the religious duty of a faithful. Those parents who opt for more children, but cannot cater to their welfare, are deemed as irreligious in the eyes of Islam. Sacrificing the welfare of existing children by pro-creating more is no way to attaining paradise. According to the tenets of Islam, the onus of raising children with proper nourishment and education squarely lies on the head of the family. Parents who do not cater to the legitimate needs of their children are sinners.

### **Marriage and Islam:**

Marriage is the first step in raising a family and without matrimonial sanctity; a family has no social standing according to Islamic laws. Celibacy has no legitimacy in Islam. Disobeying the laid down injunctions on marriage is highly condemnable. Marriage and raising a family are mandatory, but marriage simply by one’s own desire is not permitted. A person who is physically fit but lacks the wherewithal to run a family is restrained by Allah to enter into marital life. Allah the beneficent and merciful has instructed that those who are not financially capable of sustaining a family



Moriya Girls of Nagaon

should refrain from marriage: *'Let those who find not the means of marriage, keep themselves chaste, until Allah enriches them of his grace'* (Surah An Noor : 24-33). The Prophet, His messenger, has also instructed the same in Hadith Al Bukhari. He has prodded his followers to undertake 'roza' (fasting) to keep the sexual desires under check. A person who cannot shoulder the responsibilities of a family should not marry. Unfortunately, in our society the tendency is to encourage marriage without weighing the pros and cons of such an act. Religious

interpretations are misconstrued to abet marriages of even those who are jobless, terminally ill, unfit, underage, old and infirm, which in turn contributes to a rise in population with all its attendant ills.

### Allah's grand design of Universe

Critics allege that the concept of planned family is not in keeping with the tenets of Islam and it (family planning) has been grafted from Western philosophy, which is why it is unacceptable to Muslims. In reality, it only reflexes their ignorance. History has witnessed to the fact that the concept of planned family is based on Quranic principles which was borrowed by the Western civilization.

Let us take into account, the creation of the universe and the emergence of life-forms in the light of the Holy Quran. Allah, the beneficent and merciful, created the universe with great care and panache. The story of His creations is dealt graphically in the Quran: *'It was not for a sport, that We created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. We created them not except for just ends but most of them do not understand'* (Surah - Ad Dukhan : 44-38, 39). It is clear from this 'ayat' that Allah and His creations are all part of his grand strategy. In another 'ayat' of the Holy Quran, Allah has proclaimed that: *'Surely We have created everything in perfect estimation (proportion and measure)'* (Surah - Al Qamar: 54-49). It is evident from this 'ayat' that Allah has not created the universe by his whims and fancies. It was planned with great accuracy, designed accordingly and then executed.

Allah is most powerful and supreme. He is not beholden to anyone. He has revealed the story of creation of the universe in the passages of the Quran. It is incumbent upon us to understand the message that he has given us through the Quran. The concept, by which Allah has created the universe, calls on the believers to be guided by His message in performing



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our everyday tasks. We must lead our lives in a well-thought-out way in a similar manner like how Allah designed the universe and created various life-forms. A planned and disciplined life is the hallmark of an Islamic way of life. Undisciplined life, unplanned family and unorganized society are against the ideology of Islam. The concept of planned family is not outlandish to Islamic thought.

#### Mother : Breast Feeding and Family planning

The mother, in Islam, has the highest status and she is the foundation, upon which an Islamic family is built upon. She plays vital role in nurturing the child from the moment of gestation in the womb and carries through. Islam lays great emphasis on breastfeeding, which is one of the paramount duties for women from the religious standpoint. More than fourteen hundred years ago, before any medical knowledge on health values and the benefits of breastfeeding were available, the Holy Quran recommended every mother to breastfeed her children up to the age of two whole years. Similarly, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) instructed that every mother should breastfeed her child. Evidence suggests that different prophets and the last prophet Muhammad (peace be upon them), were all breastfed. It is such a noble



act that Islam calls for financial incentives to be bestowed on a mother if she wishes. However, every mother will be paid by Allah as the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) has said *"...every mouthful and for every suck, (the woman) receives the reward of one good deed..!"* Today the message of breastfeeding is being advocated by various organisations worldwide including WHO as we know that there are enough scientific and medical evidences proving the great health and psychological benefits of breastfeeding.

WHO's observations on breastfeeding states, 'Breast milk is the first natural food for babies as it provides all the energy and nutrients that the infant needs during the initial months right after birth and it continues to provide up to half or more of a child's nutritional needs during the second half of the first year and up to one-third during the second year of life. Breast milk promotes sensory and cognitive development and protects the infant against infectious and chronic diseases. Exclusive breastfeeding reduces infant mortality due to



common childhood illnesses such as diarrhoea or pneumonia and helps for a quicker recovery during illness. Breastfeeding contributes to the health and well-being of mothers, it helps to space children, reduces the risk of ovarian cancer and breast cancer, increases family and national resources is a secure way of feeding and is safe for the environment,' as clearly highlights the importance of breastfeeding in Islamic philosophy.

Mother's milk is the birth right of the newborn. This right has been conferred by the Quran. Maternal breastfeeding is not only a natural practice but is also a binding religious obligation. To deprive a newborn child from mother's milk is to deviate from Quranic stipulations. The Quran has clearly laid out instructions on the time period for which the child needs to be breastfed. *'Mothers must breastfeed their newborn child for full 2 years'* (Surah Al Baqara : 2-233). *'Didn't your mother take 30 months to wean you from breastfeeding?'* (Surah Al Ahqaf : 46-15). During this period only the newborn child has the right to be breastfed. And in this period, it is not advisable for the mother to conceive. To this effect, the Prophet has held that to conceive while breastfeeding a newborn is tantamount to doing grave injustice to both



*Brass metal workers polishing brass pitchers*

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the newborn and the foetus. 'Don't kill your children unconsciously, al-ghaylah will have in future the same effect as when a horseman is overtaken (by an opponent) and thrown off his horse. Al-ghaylah means - a women getting pregnant during breastfeeding (Hadith Sunan Abi Dawud)'. It is evident from the precepts of the Quran and the Hadith that the gap between 2 consecutive siblings should be around 2 years 9 months.

These age-old injunctions have now found favour with the contemporary medical fraternity as ideal for child development. A research carried out in the Middle-eastern countries of Egypt and Algeria, on the guidelines of breastfeeding as laid down by the Quran and Hadith, showed that those who followed the Quranic guidelines had 2 children fewer than those who didn't.

Breast milk is optimal source of nutrients for the child. Upto 6 months mother's milk is complete food for infants. Those mothers who breastfeed (solely mother's milk) their infants for 6 months, are not required to adopt birth control means since breastfeeding acts as natural form of contraception. This natural form of contraception is called 'Lactational Amenorrhea Method'. But the infant must be breastfed in every 4 hours during daytime and



Newly welded and polished brass pitchers

in every 6 hours at night. The success rate of such a method is about 98%. Breastfeeding interferes with the release of the hormone needed to trigger ovulation. Hence, the more a mother nurses a newborn, the less likely chances of her ovulating.

Here are a few Hadiths to emphasize the importance of breast-feeding in Islam:

a) Abu Ummah al-Bahili, a companion of the Prophet who was told by Him: "We moved on

until I saw some women with snakes biting at their breasts. I asked, "I (Prophet) asked who those are?" The reply was, "Those are the women who deny their children their milk". The main point about breast feeding is the reward which is surprising.

b) Um Salmeh, wife of the Prophet asked Him: *Men get all the good rewards but what about poor women?*

Upon which, He replied: *The reward of*

*pregnancy is the same as fasting and night worship and fighting in the way of God with one's wealth and life. Delivery has such an extensive divine reward which no one can realize. And for breast-feeding, each suck of the baby has the reward of freeing one of the slaves from the generation of Ishmael. When the mother stops, a noble angel shall hit her on the side and tell her, start over since you are forgiven [Vasa'il, Al-i-Bayt, v.21, p.451]*

c) Prophet said: "For each mouthful of milk that a baby sucks, the mother is given the reward of one good deed." [Kanz-ul-Ammaal]

d) During the reign of the second Caliph Umar ibn Al-Khattab, every Muslim in the community, except for newborn babies and including in the weaning stage, received social security benefits from the government treasury. When Umar noticed that mothers tended to wean their babies too early to get the benefits of social security, he cried, "How many young Muslim souls you have deprived from their food. O' Umar!" He then, ordered that every newborn should get the incentive from the birth.

### **Method of Family Planning used during the Time of Holy Prophet**

During the time of the Prophet, some of his

companions tried to reduce the chances of conception and pregnancy, because they did not want any more children. The Prophet was aware of that. Had the Prophet's companions been engaged in something inimical to the tenets of Islam, Allah would have either revealed a prohibitory injunction in the Qur'an or the Prophet would have given an order in the form of a Hadith. The fact is that the Prophet did not spell out any such order Prophetic traditions have referred family limitation methods as 'azol' or 'coitus interruptus' and such novel practices became widespread in the Prophet's lifetime. Coitus Interruptus is permissible as long as it is performed with mutual consent of both the husband and wife since both of them have equal right to have children. This is based on the Hadith of Jabir ibn Abdullah (RA) who said: "We used to practice ('Azl) coitus interruptus during the days when the Qur'an was being revealed". Jabir added: "We used to practice coitus interruptus during the lifetime of Allah's Messenger while the Qur'an was being revealed." (Sahih Bukhari vol. 7, Hadith no. 136). Even the four Caliphs of Islam had sanctioned such practices under certain conditions.

Eminent scholar, Iman Ghazali, advocated 'azol' for economic empowerment of the

family and preserving of feminine beauty. He felt that fewer children would protect against economic hardships which in turn would be good for piety (qillatul haraz mu'inun 'aladdin). In the heydays of Islamic medical excellence, medical practitioners had conceptualized over 20 forms of family planning methods. And such methods were highly popular in the ancient Islamic society and even afterwards such practices found acceptance in the West as well. Prominent medical scientist, Abu Ali al Hussain bin Abdullah Ibn Sinai (Avicena : 980-1037) had developed various forms of contraception. His medical classic, Al Qanoon Phittib, speaks of 20 different forms of birth control techniques.

### **Abortion**

There is some disagreement among Islamic scholars as whether Islam permits abortions or not and if so, under what circumstances. The legal connotation regarding abortion is varies from section to section and countries to counties. **Abortion in Bosnia and Herzegovina** is legal on request during the first ten weeks of pregnancy. Between ten and twenty weeks, an abortion must be approved by a legal committee and will be permitted only when the woman's life or health is threatened, when the fetus is severely impaired, when the pregnancy results from a crime (rape, incest),

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and for psychosocial reasons. In all these cases, the first step will be the suggesting counseling to the woman. After 20 weeks, abortion is only permitted to save the woman's life or health. Termination of pregnancy is legal in Azerbaijan up to 12 weeks from the date of conception with the woman's consent. It is available on request and for the following reasons: a) To save the life of the woman b) To preserve the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman c) If the pregnancy is the result of rape or an act of incest d) If the foetus is severely physically or mentally impaired e) Economic or social reasons. Thereafter, induced abortion is permissible within 28 weeks from conception on judicial, genetic, vital, broad medical and social grounds as well as for personal reasons if authorized by a commission of local physicians.

In other Islamic countries, majority theologies have opined that abortion is permissible under medical emergencies such as to safeguard the interests of the mother and existing children, to pre-empt the birth of a child suspected to be born with congenital disorders or in case of rape and incest. This permission is based on the principle of the lesser of the two evils known in Islamic legal terminology as the principle of al-ahamm fal-muhimm (the more important and the less important), or the principle of "irtikab akhaff ad-dararain" (i.e. committing the lesser

evil when faced with no other choice except between two evils). The Prophet (peace be upon him) said "When two forbidden things come (upon a person) together, the lesser will be sacrificed for the greater."

Abortion, as per the dominant view, must be conducted prior to the ensoulment of the foetus - according to Islam, should be conducted within the end of the first four months i.e. 120 days. '(The matter of the creation of A human being is formed in the womb of the mother in forty days, and then he becomes a thick clot of blood for a similar period, and then a piece of flesh for a similar period. Then Allah sends an angel who is ordered to write four things and then the soul is breathed into him' Sahih al-Bukhari, 4:54:430). But there are contestations on the upper limit of legitimate abortions which ranges from 40 to 120 days. There are a few who claim that ensoulment occurs once the foetus starts developing and hence abortion is impermissible. However, even this fringe group is not averse to abortion under medical emergencies. Most of the Indian Muslims are Sunnis and with regard to abortion, they are largely liberal.

### THE ISLAMIC UMMAH AND FAMILY PLANNING

Several Islamic states have achieved success in

curbing population growth. To cite an example, as per the 2009 data in the CIA Factbook, Iran's fertility rate stood at 1.88% and that of Indonesia was 2.2%, while that of India was 2.7%. The main reason behind this was the all-round development of those countries. Moreover, family planning schemes in those states were rigorously executed in a scientific and holistic manner. The clergy had joined forces with their respective governments to successfully implement the programmes. In Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini had issued an edict that those couples who have 2 children, and were not in a position to support more children should refrain from conceiving.

Iran is the only country where couples entering marital life undergo mandatory counseling on family planning and birth control. Similarly, the Indonesian government has also roped in the clergy to legitimize its family planning programme. Lately, the Bangladesh government has also enunciated a population control policy and has made some headway in this direction. With the support of the clergy, Dhaka has introduced population control schemes to the public. Incidentally, the fertility rate of Bangladesh is 2.3 while that of India is 2.4 (2012). Those Indian states which have seen better socio-economic indicators among the Muslims, fertility rates have dropped. This is

highly reflected in states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

It is pertinent to note here that population control measures are not outlandish to Islam. From the dawn of Islam, Muslims have been directed to accept family planning guidelines. Large and untenable families cannot be the essence of a rich Islamic heritage. Only value-based, educated, healthy and prosperous families can empower the Muslim society.

### **POLYGAMY AND ISLAM: THE HOLY QURAN ENDORSES MONOGAMY**

Polygamy has been approved of under specific conditions. But not without controversy. Polygamy was widespread in pre-Islamic days. There was no legal binding on the dominant sex in taking up any number of consorts. Based on one's own whims and fancies, males were involved in multiple relationships. But Islam has objected to such practices as being unfair to the fairer sex and has imposed restrictions on such conduct. To this end, Allah the beneficent and merciful has declared: *'If you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of choice, two, three, or four, but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then (marry) only one'* (Surah Al Nissa :4-3). Polygamy was rampant in those days when this 'ayat' was yet

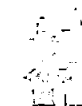
to be introduced into popular parlance. In the interest of war widows and orphaned children, polygamy found religious sanction. Islamic theologians are unanimous in their views that this 'ayat' has clearly spelled out strict marital codes. Only when each wife is given equal treatment then a male can enter into multiple relationships. If an individual attempts to breach well-defined marital codes, then it shall be a heinous crime in the court of Allah. To this end, the Quran declares; *'You are never able to be fair and just as between women, even if it is your ardent desire.'* (Surah Al-Nissa : 4-129). This indicates that no one is able to do just between/among wives. Hence under normal conditions, polygamy is barred in Islam. In various Islamic states, numerous laws have been drafted to deal with polygamy. Polygamy is outlawed in Iran, Syria, Turkey and Algeria. In Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, Morocco, Yemen, Pakistan and Bangladesh, this practice is under the hawk-eyed gaze of the courts and the law. In India, court rulings concerning to polygamy are not appropriate. Fortunately, polygamy within the Muslim population of India has been gradually decreasing.

### **Conclusion:**

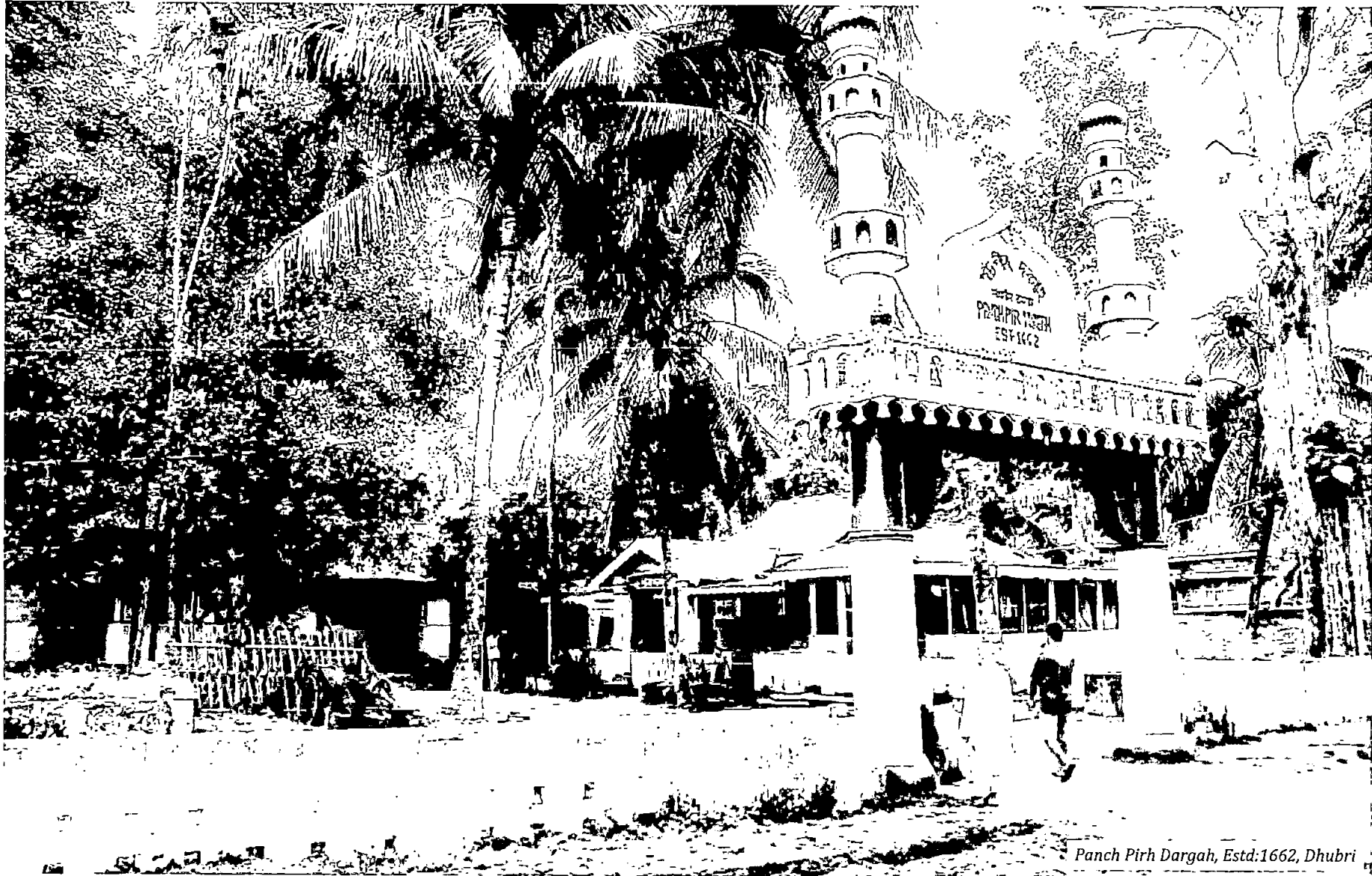
Family planning is not alien to Islamic thoughts and believes. Contrary to the prevalent notion Islam is quite flexible on matters related to reproduction and family planning. Mainly Islam is permissive of family planning and many Muslim countries have active population and family planning program. Islam is, in fact, the forerunner of the concept of family planning. It is important to note that 1,400 years ago, when Islam appeared on the scene, there was no population problem anywhere on the globe. Even so, Islam, directly or indirectly, encouraged family planning (The Population Myth, S Y Quresshi).



*Desi folk dance group*



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## Conquering a Muslim Myth

Prof Ilias Ali

**T**here is a prevailing perception that family planning is a red flag in Islam. That Muslims are firmly against the adoption of family planning measures is a popular misconception. There is a general impression that family planning is deviant from the teachings of the Quran and the Hadith. And that the Muslims are fast multiplying and one day they will outgrow the majority community. Justice Sachar's report on the Muslim community in India demolishes such popular bigotry. In his report he stated that there is substantial demand from the community for fertility regulation and for modern contraceptives and over 20 million couples have already used contraceptive. My own experience while working among the Muslims of Assam for the last 13 years corroborates Justice Sachar's findings that Muslims are not averse to partaking in family planning schemes. It is worth mentioning that between 2001 and 2011, the pace of growth declined more dramatically for Muslims than Hindus over these two decades, as shown by census data (Times of India, 16 Oct, 2021).

There is no controversy among the population experts that poverty, illiteracy, insecurity and inaccessibility to birth control programmes are the root causes for the rampant population growth in the downtrodden sections of the community, irrespective of the cast and religion of our country. Unfortunately, we tend to gloss over this fact and pin the blame on the Muslim clergy for the swelling demography in areas populated by Muslims. We also need to bear in mind that among the Muslims, the bottom-end of the social pyramid; illiteracy, underage marriage, polygamy, poverty and population outburst are not only pervasive but are also inter-related; which only compounds the problem of burgeoning birth rates.

If overall development of the marginalized Muslims remains elusive, then all efforts directed towards curbing population growth will go in vain. Among such Muslims, religious dogmas and social taboos are deeply entrenched. Contrary to my expectations, the enthusiasm, co-operation and appreciation that our family planning camps received in

those pockets of high population densities, was simply phenomenal. Shedding religious inhibitions, people from conservative backgrounds flocked to our camps in droves. During my field trips, most of the clerics that I have exchanged views with, were not averse to the concept of family planning and have certainly not tagged our work as blasphemous. But it is equally true that distorted religious beliefs and traditions are largely prevalent among the non-indigenous Muslims of riverine areas. The thinking and talking heads of this particular group are mistaken in prejudging that family planning is nothing but sterilization. Most of them are even averse to discussing issues of birth control in the light of Islamic teachings. They need to concur with the fact that Islam calls for a knowledge-based society.

Among the Muslims of Assam's riverine areas, there is an unusually high demographic growth. This is hanging like a Damocles' sword in their path to upward mobility. In such a backdrop, the chances for their socio-economic progress are rather slim. Nonetheless, it has dawned on

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many within the community that only a family with fewer children can be helpful in ushering into a life of prosperity and security. For this reason, many have come forward to attend our family planning camps and have responded with fervor to our call for family limitation. During the course of our ongoing campaign, countless couples have expressed that they are not in favor of raising large families as many mouths to feed implies untold hardships and miseries. Those who bear several children were often borne unintentionally. It needs to be stressed that it is not because of the lack of participation by Muslims in family planning programmes that such large families have cropped up in the riverine areas, but due to the dearth of such facilities. During my various trips to the riverine areas in account of the family planning campaign I witnessed the fact that there is a near total lack of logistics for family planning services in almost all the areas I covered. My own finding has also been reflected in the Justice Sacher Committee report.

Teeming multitudes of underfed, half-clad and uneducated souls cannot be the essence of a true Islamic society. Even an otherwise religious person with several children will find it difficult in abiding by the righteous ways of

life as per the strictly laid down instructions of the Holy Quran. Allah the Exalted does not call on his followers to overburden themselves by raising large families simply for material gains, as this could be harmful to their children. The Holy Quran forbids believers from raising large untenable families. Incidentally, at the dawn of Islam, the Prophet himself had not opposed the methods of birth control practiced in those days, known as 'Azol'.

Several nations in the Islamic world have achieved remarkable success in birth control. As against India's fertility rate of 2.6, Iran's rate is 1.88 while that of Indonesia is 2.2 (CIA Fact Book, 2009). The main reason behind this is the broad-based development of these countries. The respective governments have implemented family planning schemes in a scientific manner and it is noteworthy that the clergy has come out in open support of such policies. There are shining examples of religious heads campaigning for the robust execution of such programmes. It bears recalling that Ayatollah Khomeini had once issued a religious edict that if a couple has two children and is struggling against odds in raising them, they are bound by the Shariat to adopt family planning methods. The Vilayat-e-Fiqh (Council of Islamic Jurisprudence) of

Iran was in sync with the Ayatollah and the Ulemawas in the vanguard of the noble mission of spreading the message of population control. Iran was the first nation to launch a programme of permanent sterilization of both genders. Iran is also the only country in the world where it is incumbent upon all seeking to enter into wedlock, to undergo counseling in family planning to be entitled for marriage registration. Such a showcase achievement of birth control has set a precedent in the Muslim world which is increasingly becoming worthy of emulation by the rest. Infant and maternal mortality rates have drastically dropped in Iran while the social status of women has grown manifold.

In Indian state like Kerala, which has witnessed credible all-round development, the fertility rate among the Muslim brethren is lower than that of their Muslim counterparts of other states. Similar trends are noticeable in the neighboring state of Tamil Nadu. This shows that with growth and development, society is better placed in curbing population growth. It is heartening to recall the overwhelming participation of Muslims in our family planning camps and in keeping with the spirit of public participation; it is incumbent upon us to bridge the gap in meeting the growing demand





Eid Prayer, Photo courtesy: Samsul Huda Patgiri

for family planning. In a random study of 2456 participants in male sterilization procedure in Assam, back in the year 2009-10, 1390 (55.37%) were Hindus, while 1066 (43.40%) were Muslims. And it bears reiteration that of Assam's population, Muslims constitute 30.92% (as per census report 2001). Another study of 2383 people who underwent permanent

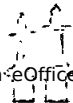
sterilization procedure in Barpeta district of Assam in the year 2011-12 of which 996 were Hindus (41.2%), while 1387 (58.8%) people of the group were Muslims. Being a Muslim family planning activist, I do sincerely believe that conquering of myth, misbelieve and misconception prevalent in the Muslim society against family planning is not an

insurmountable task. Therefore, we need to carry out our activities on a larger scale in order to cover the widest possible area. In this regard, we implore the Government of India to redouble its efforts in widening the scope of family planning initiative among the Muslim masses.

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Jyantipur Soru Masjid, estd:1575, Kaliabar, Nagaon, Photo courtesy: Samsul Huda Patgiri

## UN: Reproductive Health, Family Planning and Sustainable Development-2030



Access to safe, voluntary family planning is a human right. Family planning is central to gender equality and women's empowerment. It is a key factor in reducing poverty. Family planning is the information, means and methods that allow individuals to decide if and when to have children. This includes a wide range of contraceptives - including pills, implants, intrauterine devices, surgical procedures that limit fertility, and barrier methods such as condoms - as well as non-invasive methods such as the calendar method and abstinence (UNFPA).

Family planning also includes information about how to become pregnant when it is desirable, as well as treatment of infertility. Contraceptives prevent unintended pregnancies, reduce the number of abortions, and lowers the incidence of death and disability related to complications of pregnancy and childbirth. If all women in developing regions with an unmet need for contraceptives were able to use modern methods, maternal deaths would be reduced by about a quarter (UNFPA).

Additionally, male and female condoms, when used correctly and consistently, provide dual protection against both unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV. Increasing knowledge and access about **modern contraception** among adolescent girls is a crucial starting point for improving their long-term health. It is also essential for improving maternal and newborn health around

the world. Complications from pregnancy and childbirth are the leading killer of adolescent girls (ages 15-19). Their babies also face a higher risk of dying than the babies of older women. Yet, adolescents face enormous barriers to accessing reproductive health information and services (UNFPA).

The International Conference on Population and Development was convened in Cairo, Egypt, from 5th to 13th September, 1994. It was attended by 179 governmental delegations from UN Member States, 7 observers at governmental level, the European Union and several hundred NGOs. Several thousand media representatives also covered the conference.

The conference adopted the programme of action, which emphasized the fundamental role of women's interests in population matters and introduced the concepts of sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights. Contraceptive use and unmet need for family planning are key to understanding profound changes in fertility and to improving reproductive health worldwide. Family planning is also at the core of the programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development.

The right of all persons to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children, to make informed choices on reproductive matters and to have access to a wide range of safe and effective contraceptive methods was enshrined in the programme of action of the International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo in 1994.

In 2015 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda 2, for Sustainable Development, which reaffirmed the commitments of the landmark International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo in 1994. The programme of action emphasised that universal access to a full range of safe and reliable family planning methods help couples and individuals realise their right to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children.

In the Agenda for Sustainable Development, 2030, this commitment is affirmed under target 3.7, which states that: "By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes."



*Mirza Bagh Mosque, estd:1889, Amolapatty, Dibrugarh, Photo courtesy: Samsul Huda Patgiri*



*Goria community along with other communities attending a meeting on Population Control awareness program, 6 Dec, 2009, at Kenduguri, Darrang*

## Population policy of India and Assam: A Brief Account

### A) Population policy of India

Soon after Independence India had appreciated the problems allied with over growth of population, family planning programme was launched back in the year 1952. India was the first country in the world to embark this novel programme. Since then, successive Governments have been doing some modification and adding up policies, while accordingly implementing them.

In 1976, the Government of India came up with its first National Population policy with an objective to arrest the unabated growth of population by adopting the following principal measures:

1. Increasing the minimum legal age of marriage for girls and boys to 18 and 21 respectively.
2. Providing monetary incentives for birth control.
3. Improving the literacy levels of females both through the formal and non-formal channels.
4. Making population a factor for sharing central resources with that of the states.

During the Emergency period (1975-

77), coercion and pressure were used in implementing the family planning programme which led to nation-wide resentment. In 1977, the new government was formed and the use of force and coercion was put to an end. The family planning programme was renamed as the 'family welfare programme'. Despite some success in lowering the population growth, India failed miserably to achieve the desired goal. This agonizing event compelled the Indian Government to re-examine the 'family welfare policies' and accordingly 'New National Population Policy' was launched in 2000 with the following principal aims:

1. To address the unmet needs for basic reproduction (contraception), child health services, supplies and infrastructure (health personnel).
2. To make school education up to age 14 free and compulsory, reducing dropouts at prim.
3. To reduce infant mortality rate to below 30 per 1,000 live births.
4. To reduce maternal mortality rate to below 100 per 100,000 live births.
5. To achieve universal immunization of

children against all vaccine preventable diseases.

6. To promote delayed marriages for girls, not earlier than age 18 and preferably after 20 years of age.
7. To achieve universal access to information/counseling, and services for fertility regulation and contraception with a wide basket of choices.
8. To achieve 80 per cent institutional deliveries and 100 per cent deliveries by trained persons.
9. To achieve 100 per cent registration of births, deaths, marriages and pregnancies.
10. To prevent and control communicable diseases, especially AIDS and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).
11. To promote the small family norm vigorously.
12. To integrate Indian Systems of Medicine (ISM) in the provision of reproductive and child health services, and in reaching out to households.

The policy was adopted with the chief objective of bringing the total fertility rate (TFR) to replacement level (2.1) by 2010 and to



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achieve a stable population by 2045, at a level consistent with sustainable economic growth, social development, and environmental protection.

**B) The Population & Women's Empowerment Policy of Government of Assam, 2017: Its primary Objective:**

The Population & Women's Empowerment Policy of Government of Assam was formulated in 2017. The Government of Assam (GoA) is committed towards the objectives and goals set out in the NPP 2000. Over and above, the GoA also recognises that rapid population growth could severely derail progress in reaching our primary goal, which is to achieve a high quality of life for the entire population of Assam that is sustainable with available resources.

The GoA perceives the next decade as a defining one with respect to the transition of Assam as a progressive and emerging state of the Indian Union. However, the continuous growth of the state's population does not only pose a severe strain on the natural resources and environment of the state but also in constraining the efforts of the Government to improve the quality of life of the people.

The GoA therefore proposes a population policy that incentivises families to optimise family size and allows them the freedom to aspire for higher standard of living. Its goal is to make sure that every family in Assam has access to quality education, healthcare and

employment opportunities. But, the state's envelope of resources is limited and finite. Therefore, this can only be achieved if the size of the state's population remains within the critical limit.

The GoA further believes that empowering women will improve the women's **self-esteem and self-confidence**. It will help in elimination of discrimination and all forms of violence against women and girl child. Empowered women can participate equally with men in building the society and the nation.

Another important objective of the policy was to promote 'two-child norm' without coercion. However, some compulsory provisions were made:

- a) for government job only candidates having two children only would be eligible.
- b) Government servants shall strictly follow norms of two-children family to serve as role models for the Society.
- c) Persons, both male and female, who violate the legal age of marriage will not be eligible for any employment or employment generation schemes of Government Electoral participation. A
- d) Government may legislate legal provision to bar people with more than two children to take part in Panchayat and Municipal Body elections.
- e) Government may consider legislating similar legal provision for election/

nomination to other statutory bodies and committees.

**Two-child policy 2021:** In addition to provisions of the Population Policy, 2017, Government of Assam has proposed to bring in the legislation that will bar people from availing government subsidies and other government benefits if they have more than two children, is known as a two-child policy. Despite resentment from some quarter, the Govt. of Assam is determined to pass the legislation. This policy will be applicable to various schemes of Govt. of Assam. But, this two-child policy will not be applicable for various schemes by central govt. as well as any family belonging to BPL category. In this regard, the Chief Minister of Assam, Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma stated the following:

"We will slowly implement population norms for government schemes. There are some schemes for which we cannot impose the two-child norm, like availing free admission in schools and colleges, or for houses under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana; everyone will get that. But, in the case of some schemes, say if a scheme like a Chief Minister Awas Yojana is launched in the future for the middle-class, then the two-child norm will be enforced. Similarly, population norms will gradually be put in place in the case of some chosen schemes." (As reported by The Indian Express on June 20, 2021).

## Demographic Profile of Assam and Muslims

As per the 2011 census report, population of Assam was 3.12 crores. Thus, the population of Assam forms 2.58 percent of India in 2011. Assam has a total population of 31,205,576 of which male was 15,939,443 while female was 15,266,133. The total area of Assam is 78,438 square km. Thus, the population density of Assam is 398 per square km which is higher than the national average of 382 per square km (2011 census).

In 2001, Assam's population was 2.67 crores which turned out to be 3.12 crores in 2011. This means, in the given decade, the population rose by 45.5 lacs. In 1901, the population of un-divided Assam was a mere 32.9 lacs and in 1951, it was 80.28 lacs. From then onwards, there was a dramatic spike in the population graph. In the 2nd half of the last century, from 1951 to 2001, the population increased to 1.66 crores and this figure was more than double of the population levels in 1st half of the last century and in the entire century, Assam's population rose by a whopping 706%.

And in the corresponding period, the national average rose by 308% only.

As per the Language Census of 2011, a total of 1,53,11,351 people used the Assamese language as their mother tongue and the language is ranked 12th among the 22 scheduled languages spoken in India. According to the 2011 census study, the total literacy rate of Assam is 72.19%. The male literacy rate is 77.85% and the female literacy rate is 66.27% in Assam.

As per the 2011 census, the total population of Assam was 31,169,272. The total population of the state has increased from 26,638,407 to 31,169,272 in the last ten years with a growth rate of 16.93%. The total population of Assam is expected to reach 34.18 million by 2021 and 35.60 million by 2026 (Assam State Portal, Govt. of Assam).

As per census 2011, Hindus account for 61.46% of total population, Muslims 34.22%, Christians 3.73%, Buddhism 0.17%, Jainism 0.08% and Sikhism 0.06%.

### Demographic profile of Muslim:

Islam is the second largest religion in Assam. It has been noticed that there is rapid change in religious demography since the beginning of the twentieth century. From 12.4% Muslim population in 1901, it rose to 24.68% in 1951 and in 2001, Muslim population became 30.92%. As per the census 2011, Assam has 34.22% (total of 10,679,345) Muslim population (by which, Assam is the 2nd state in India which has the highest Muslims population after Kashmir). The rise in the number of Muslim population in Assam is primarily due to migration of a large number of Bengali speaking Muslim for various reasons from undivided Bengal in pre-independent era and later from Bangladesh.

### Indigenous Muslim and Muslim population with immigrant background:

Assam is inhabited by two distinct groups of Muslims, namely Indigenous Muslim and Muslims with immigrant background. The group called Indigenous Muslim has the history of 800 years



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*A Goria Farmer on his way to plough the fields*

or more. Indigenous Muslims use Assamese as their mother tongue and follow the culture, tradition and festivities similar to other ethnic groups of Assam.

On the other hand, the culture, traditions and

language (spoken) by the Muslims with immigrant background are quite different from that of Indigenous Muslim. However, they have accepted Assamese as their mother tongue. Most of their children studies in Assamese medium schools.

The issue of unabated population growth in Assam has already created the fear of psychosis and panic among various communities for losing their resources and cultural identity, which has led to serious strife in the region. Communities have also turned against each other and in recent past, we have bitterly observed the fragmentation of both, the institutions and the society. At the same time, Assam has witnessed with deep agony, rise of militancy and their ugly activities for the last several decades, impeding the socio-economic growth of Assam.

In view of the above facts, a scientific study of population growth of Indigenous Muslims of Assam is required to know the exact situation and accordingly, formulation of a policy and programme to meet the above challenges is urgently warranted, particularly to dispel misunderstanding among the various communities of Assam. This will certainly help to maintain the amity and tranquillity of the society.

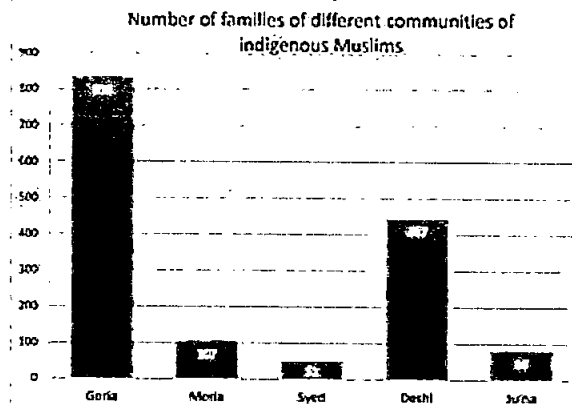




# Random Study of Indigenous Muslim of Assam

## Observations and Results

A Random study was done in the districts of Brahmaputra valley of Assam comprising of 57 villages of 16 districts. A total of 1525 families were studied, belonging to indigenous Muslims of Assam, which were further sub-grouped into Gorias (836), Morias (107), Syeds (51), Deshis (447) and Julhas (84).



This study was carried out with special focus on the following:

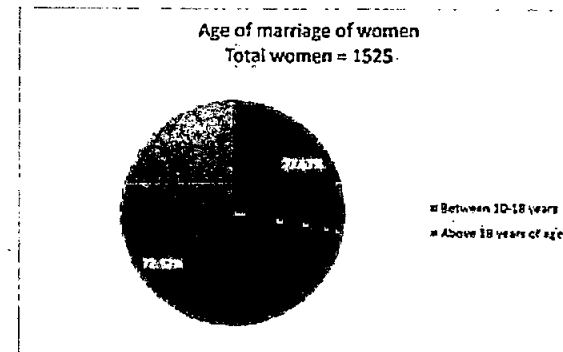
- a) Age of marriage of couples
- b) TFR in respect to the woman's age of marriage

- c) Educational status of women and TFR
- d) Average number of children (TFR) of different communities
- e) Economic status of the individual families and TFR
- f) Birth spacing
- g) Bigamy or polygamy practices
- h) Attitude towards family planning
- i) Distance to nearest health facility.

The study was carried out with the help of volunteers and under the guidance of members of the **Committee for Population Stabilisation of Indigenous Muslim, Government of Assam**. The reliability of the study is based entirely on surveyor reports.

### 1. Age of Marriage of female Partner :

It was observed that out of total 1525 women, 422 (27.67%) got married between 10 to 18 years of age while 1103 (72.32%) women got married when above 18 years of age.



It was observed that in South Samara & Mankachar 68.42% (highest among all districts) women got married at or below 18 years of age and 31.58% (lowest among all districts) women got married when they were above 18 years of age.

Women marrying when they were underage is considerably high (27.67%) among indigenous Muslim women and it is higher than the national average of 23.3% (NFHS 2019-20).

### Age of Marriage of Male Partner :

1193 male partners were studied in respect to their age at marriage, where 179 (15%) got



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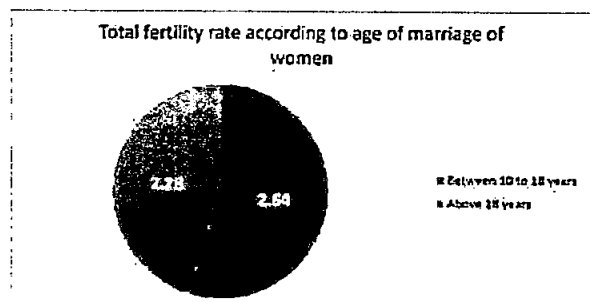
married at the age prior to 21 years (underage marriage) and 1014 (85%) men got married at the age of 21 years or later.

The percentage of men marrying when underage among indigenous Muslims (15%) is slightly lower than the national average of 17.7% (NFHS 2019-20).

**2. Number of Children with Respect age of Marriage of Women and TFR:**

Women who married when they were between 10 to 18 years of age had a total number of 1116 children with an average (TFR) of 2.64 and women who married when they were above 18 years had total number of 2407 children with an average (TFR) of 2.18.

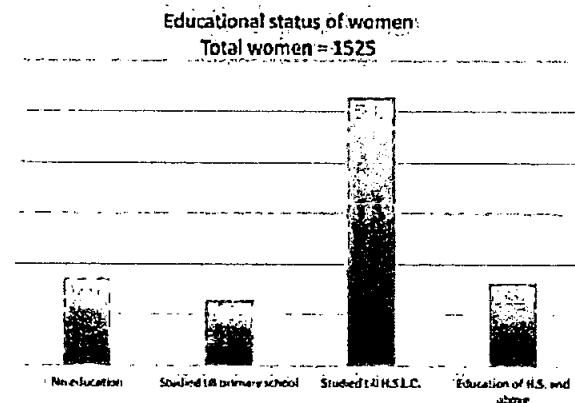
This indicates the women who married underage had 2.64 children per individual while women who married when they were above 18 years of age had 2.18 children per individual.



**3. Educational Status of Women and TFR:**

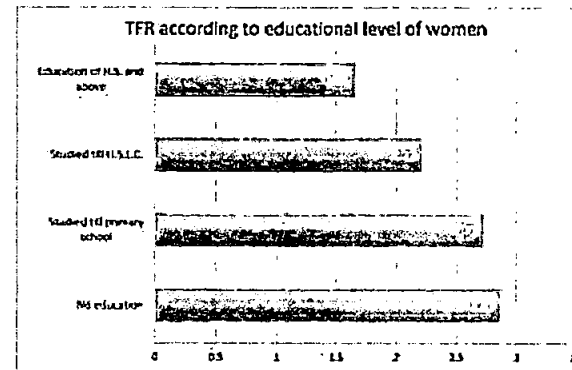
The study revealed the poor scenario of education of married women among indigenous Muslims, and this is primarily associated with high TFR among them.

In the study, out of the total 1525 families, it was observed that 266 (17.44%) women had no education, 200 (13.11%) studied till primary level, 807 (52.91%) studied till H.S.L.C, while only 252 (16.52%) had education up to Higher Secondary level and above.



It was also observed that the women with no education had a TFR of 2.87, women with primary education had a TFR of 2.73, and women with education till H.S.L.C level had a TFR of 2.22. Most importantly the survey revealed that women with education to the level of Higher Secondary and above had a significantly low TFR of only 1.66.

**4. Total Fertility Rate (Average number of children per women)**



The total number of families surveyed were 1525, who had a total of 3523 children, with average number of children (TFR) at 2.3 per woman. The National fertility rate is 2.0 (NFHS -5) and TFR of Assam is 1.9 (NFHS -5). This study revealed that the fertility rate of 2.3 among indigenous Muslims is 0.3 more than the national TFR, and 0.41 more than the Assam's TFR. A comparative table is given below.

DIFFERENT INDEGINOUS MUSLIM COMMUNITES	TFR	NATONAL TFR (NFHS-5, 2019-20)	TFR OF ASSAM (NFHS-5, 2019-20)	ASSAM TFR - TFR OF all MUSLIM (NFHS-5, 2019-20)
Goria	2.10	2.0	1.9	2.4
Moria	2.27			
Syed	1.90			
Julha	2.46			
Deshi	2.71			

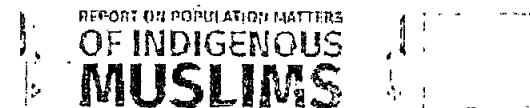
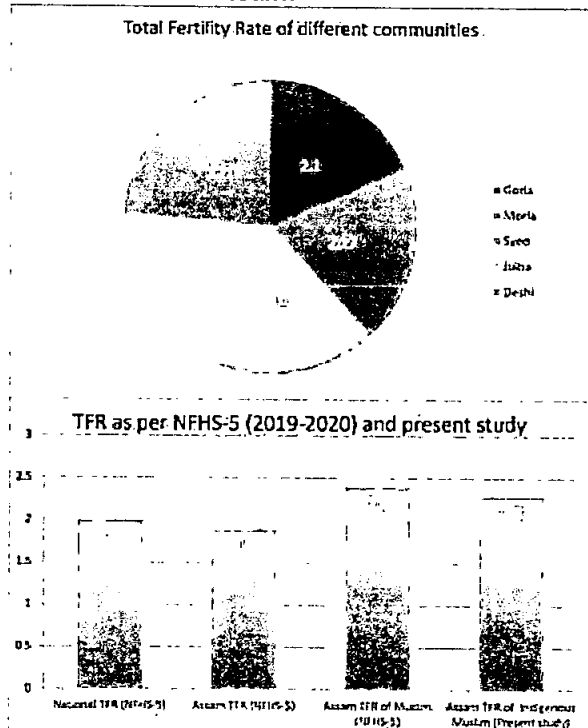


TABLE 1: Table displaying National TFR, TFR of Assam and Muslims of Assam (indigenous and Muslims with immigrant background) as per NFHS -5(2019-20) and TFR of various communities of Assam.



The Goria (including Syed) is the largest community of Assam with a TFR of 2, which is equivalent to the National TFR and slightly higher than Assam’s TFR of 1.9.

The second largest community is the Deshi, and their TFR is significantly high i.e. 2.71,

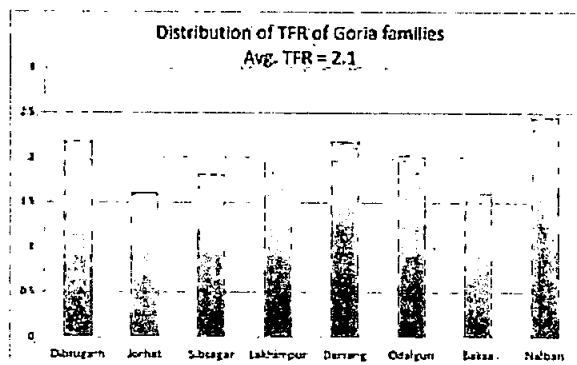
which is 0.71 higher and 0.81 higher than the National and Assam’s TFR respectively.

Moria and Julha are two minor communities with TFRs of 2.27 and 2.46 respectively. Their TFR is considerably high in comparison to National and Assam’s TFR.

The overall TFR (2.3) of indigenous Muslims is slightly high because of high TFR of Deshi, Moria and Julha communities. Excluding the Moria and Julha (considering their small populations), the TFR of the indigenous Muslim population has been considerably increased by the high TFR of the Deshi community.

**Some Significant Findings:**

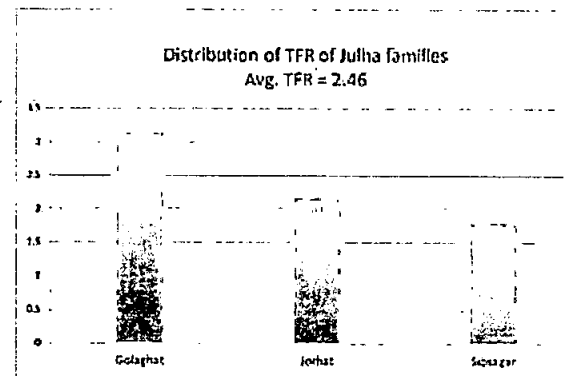
Out of total 836 Goria families studied, 31 were from Dibrugarh, 80 from Jorhat, 65 from Sibsagar, 72 from Lakhimpur, 257 from Darrang, 125 from Odalguri, 30 from Baksa and 176 from



Nalbari with TFRs 2.19, 1.62, 1.83, 1.97, 2.19, 2.04, 1.63 and 2.47 respectively. The total number of children was 1762, with an average TFR of 2.1, which is equivalent to replacement level. TFR of Nalbari is significantly high i.e. 2.47, and this warrants a special family planning drive.

A total of 51 Syed families were studied, where 45 were from Baksa, 4 from Jorhat and 2 from Odalguri with TFRs 1.93, 1.25 and 2.5 respectively. The total number of children was 97 with an average TFR of 1.9, which is equal to the TFR of Assam (NFHS-5, 2019-20).

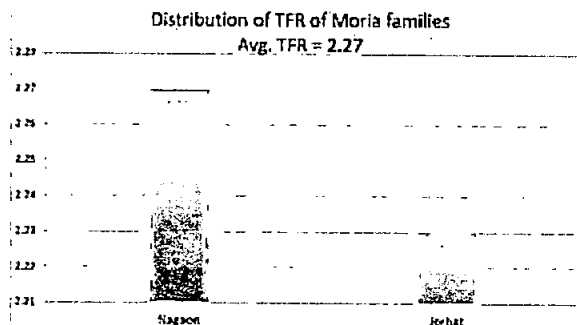
A total of 84 Julha families studied, where 32 were from Jorhat, 30 from Golaghat, 19 from Sibsagar, 1 from Dibrugarh and 3 from Udalguri. The total number of children was 207, with a TFR of 2.46. Interestingly the average number of children per woman in Golaghat was 3.15,



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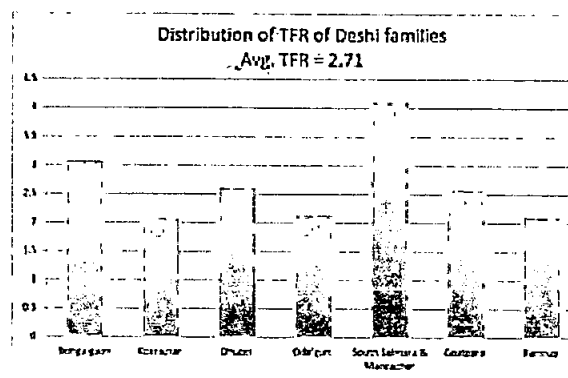
whereas the average number of children per woman in Jorhat is 2.18 and in Sibsagar it is 2.0. The average number of children per woman is considerably high in Golahat in comparison to average number of children per woman of Jorhat and Sibsagar. TFR of Julha of Golahat is disturbingly high and warrants special attention in driving a family planning programme.

A total 107 Moria families studied, 90 were from Nagaon and 17 from Jorhat. The total number children was 243, with a TFR of 2.27 per woman. Interestingly the average number of children of 2.27 per woman per family of Nagaon was quite similar to that of Jorhat i.e. 2.23. Both of them are higher than the National TFR of 2 (NFHS-5) and require time to reach replacement level (2.1).



Out of total 447 Deshi families studied, 60 were from Bongaigaon, 85 from Kokrajhar, 134 from Dhubri, 21 from Odalguri, 57 from Mankachar, 60 from Goalpara and 30 from Kamrup. The total number of children was

1214, with a TFR of 2.71. Average number of children per woman in Kamrup was 2.13, Bongaigaon 3.08, Odalguri 2.14, Goalpara 2.6, Dhubri 2.61, Kokrajhar 2.1, South Salmara & Mankachar 4.12.

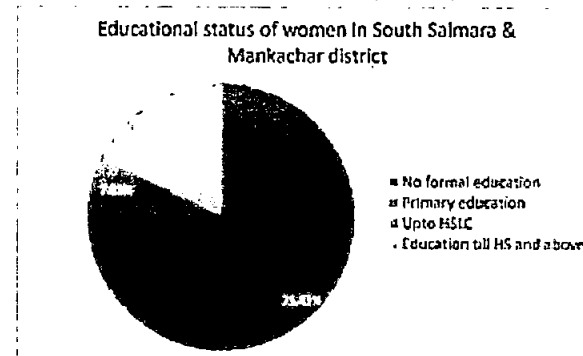


The average number of children per woman in all the above districts with Deshi population are higher than the national average of 2. Among the districts with Deshi population, South Salmara & Mankachar have the highest average number of children followed by Bongaigaon, Dhubri and Goalpara.

In these districts the total number of Deshi women with no formal education is 129 (22.39%), who have a total of 423 children, with an average of 3.27. The number of women with education up to primary level is 82 (14.23%) having 230 children with average 2.80, number of women with education up to HSLC is 268 (46.52%) having 653 children with

average of 2.43, and number of women with education of HS and above is 97 (16.84%) having 171 children with average 1.76. Among those surveyed, women with no formal education or education up to primary level constitute 22.39%, which was alarmingly high.

Interestingly in South Salmara & Mankachar districts, out of 57 women, 43 (75.43%) have no formal education, 4 women have primary education (7.01%), 7 women have education upto HSLC (12.28%) and 3 women have education till HS and above (5.26%).



The alarmingly low level of education among the women of the Deshi community was a major contributing factor for the high average children per women per family.

Among these districts with Deshi population, South Salmara & Mankachar had the lowest level of education of women with the highest average children per woman per family.



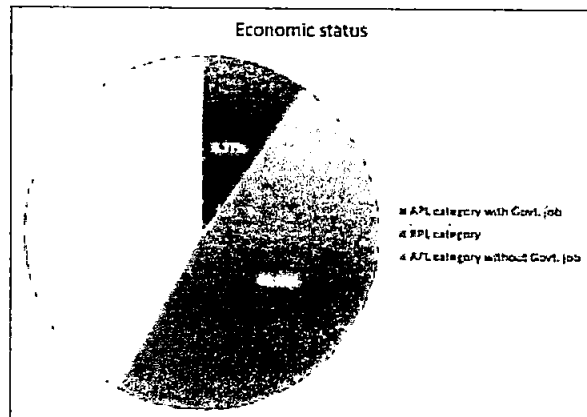


The Deshi community needs special attention with regard to health facilities, education, poverty elevation and intensive family planning drive.

### 5. Economic Status

The study revealed that the economic condition of Indigenous Muslims is appalling and their participation in Government jobs is insignificant.

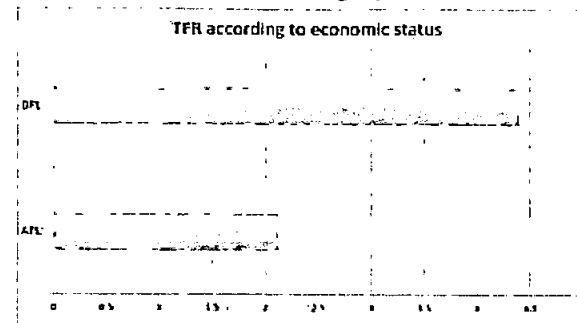
Out of 1525 families, only 149 (9.77%) families have a Government job, 734 (48.13%) families belong to the BPL category, and the rest of the families i.e. 791 (51.87%) belong to APL category without Government jobs.



### 6. TFR and Economic Status:

The study revealed that the TFR of APL families is 2.13 (replacement level is 2.1), while the TFR of BPL families is 2.49. This indicates that poor families belonging to the BPL category

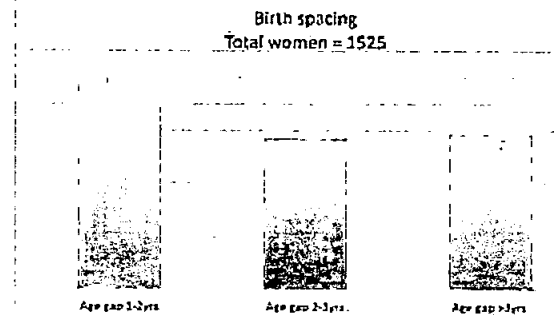
have more children as compared to the families belonging to the APL category.



### 7. Birth Spacing

The study has shown that out of total 1525 women, 637 (41.77%) gave birth to two or more children with a gap period of simply 1-2 years, 437 (28.65%) women gave birth with a gap period of between 2-3 years and only 451 (29.57%) have two or more children with a gap period of 3 or more years.

These findings indicate that the poor family planning and birth spacing is related health education among the indigenous Muslim



population. Birth spacing is one of best natural methods of family planning, but regrettably birth spacing is very poor among Indigenous Muslims which is responsible for high TFR.

### 8. Attitude towards Family Planning:

During the field survey, it has been observed that respective family members were not willing to discuss about family planning, which includes methods of contraception. This indicates that family planning is a taboo for Indigenous Muslims.

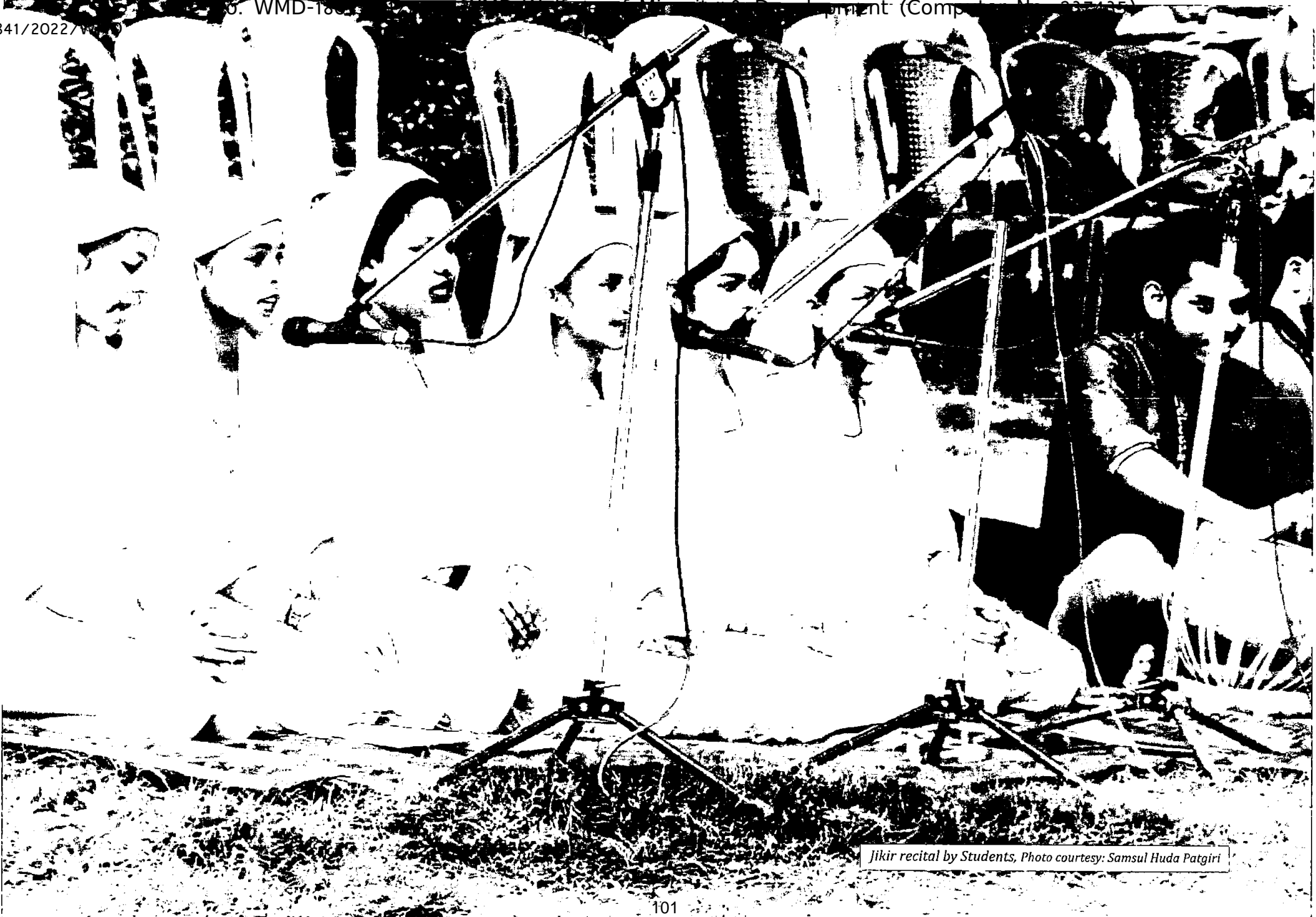
### 9. Practice of Bigamy/Polygamy:

In the study, no case of practice of bigamy/polygamy has been observed.

### 10. Distance to Health Facility

It has been observed that the distance to a nearest health facility varies from 1 to 2 kilometres in 14 districts, while being higher in two districts - namely Dhubri was 4.5km and South Salmara & Mankachar was 4.5 km. It is also observed that the TFR is less where the distance to the health facility is less. On the other hand, TFR increases with the increasing distance to the health facility as observed in Dhubri and South Salmara & Mankachar. However, it is also observed that though the distance to the health facility in the district of Bongaigaon and Goalpara are less, the TFR is considerably high.





*Jikir recital by Students, Photo courtesy: Samsul Huda Patgiri*

## Child marriage/ Underage Marriage and Child marriage prohibition act 2006

Child marriage / underage marriage have been an issue in India for a long time. Every fourth woman in the age group of 20-24 is married off before turning 18, though in percentage terms, underage marriages have declined from 26.8% to 23.3% in the last five years. According to the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21), the problem is much bigger in rural India where the percentage was 27%, whereas in urban areas underage marriage accounted for 14.7% of marriages.

The data shows that 6.8% females aged between 15-19 years were already mothers or were pregnant at the time of the survey. The rural-urban difference was prominent, with 3.8% women falling in this category in urban areas and 7.9% in rural areas.

The national Family Health survey (NFHS)-5, 2019-20 shows an alarmingly high percentage of child brides and teenage pregnancies in the state of Assam. It accounts for much

higher percentage of child brides and teenage pregnancies than the national average. It also reveals that the percentage of child marriage and teenage pregnancy in Assam has increased in comparison to NFHS-4, conducted during 2015-16.

The NFHS-5 data show that the percentage of women in the age group of 20-24 years, who were married before the legal marriage age of 18, was 31.8 in Assam. The percentage in the state in this category was 30.8 during NFHS-4. On the other hand, the national average during NFHS-5 declined to 23.3 from 26.8 during NFHS-4.

Assam has also recorded a high prevalence of teenage pregnancy. In the category of "Women aged 15-19 years who were already mothers or pregnant at the time of the survey", the percentage in Assam during NFHS-5 is 11.7 which is twice the National average of 6.8. The percentage of teenage pregnancy was

13.6 in Assam during NFHS-4 when the national average was 7.9.

The NFHS-5 data also shows that Performance of Assam is poor in the category of "Women with 10 or more years of schooling". It is only 29.6 in Assam.

The incidence of child marriage is alarmingly high in Char areas and it may be more than 60%.

It seems to be a losing battle for India even in presence of the the Child Marriage Prevention Act dating back to 1929 and its several amendments in post-independence times. Because of its roots in traditional, cultural and religious practices, it has been a hard battle to fight.

Child marriage is also associated with other problems like dowry and child widowhood. It is also associated with malnutrition, poor health of mothers, unbelievable cruelty to



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girl child, high maternal mortality rate (MMR), infant mortality rate (IMR) and high fertility, and hence over-population. Different studies have proved that the maternal mortality is 2-fold higher in women married between 15 to 19 years and 5-fold higher among those who got married below 15 years of age than the women who get married between 20-24 years of age. Similarly, 60% babies of the mothers of 18 years of age or below die in their infancy.

It has been observed that child marriage is rampant among the riverine Muslim communities. Incidence of forced child marriage, triple talak and physical assault are also alarmingly high. Presence of law enforcing authority is barely existent. Law of the jungle (survival of the strongest, devoid of ethics where brutality and self-interest reign) is the order of the society. Girls and women are the most oppressed, victimized, abused and tortured class in the society.

The Prohibition of Child Marriage (Amendment) Bill, 2021 which seek to raise the legal age of marriage of women from 18 to 21, will apply to all communities in the country and, once enacted, will supersede existing marriage and personal laws, and will help to improve the current appalling scenario of Indian girls and women. However, the primary question still

remains: what would be the outlook of the society towards the changes brought about by this Bill?

### Strategies to curb Child marriage:

1. Extensive awareness programme on child marriage and Child Marriage Prohibition Act 2006 to be held all over Assam by awareness meetings, electronic and print media, hoardings, banners, street plays, distribution of hand bills, introduction in the school curriculum and essay competitions among students.
2. Awareness programmes among law enforcing personnel.
3. Award provision: An award of Rs. 5000 /- to the couple of BPL category who get married after stipulated age.
4. All Gaon Burhar should be entrusted to maintain the resister of marriage.

### Punitive Measure:

- a) Those who get married under the stipulated age mentioned in the Child Marriage Act 2006 will be denied of the following Government of Assam amenities 1) Ration Card, 2) Job in Government of Assam, 3) Job card of MGNREGA, 4) Driving Licence, 5) Vehicle Permits, 6) Scholarships 7) Government subsidised LPG connections.

b) If the child marriage takes place with due consent of parents of child bride and bridegroom, the parents will lose all the Government amenities mentioned above.

c) Imam and Qazi: If any Imam or Qazi performs a child marriage, then he shall not be entitled to get above mentioned Government amenities and also their availing amenities (if any) should be cut off with or without notice. In addition, legal proceedings to be initiated against the Imam and Qazi. Licence of Qazi should be revoked.

1. Imam or Qazi shall maintain a register book of marriage. The marriage will be performed on the basis of valid / authentic ID and age proof of the bride and bridegroom.
2. Imam or Qazi should inform the local police station if any person resorts to pressure / force / intimidation / threat etc. on him to perform a child marriage. In that case the police should take necessary steps immediately.

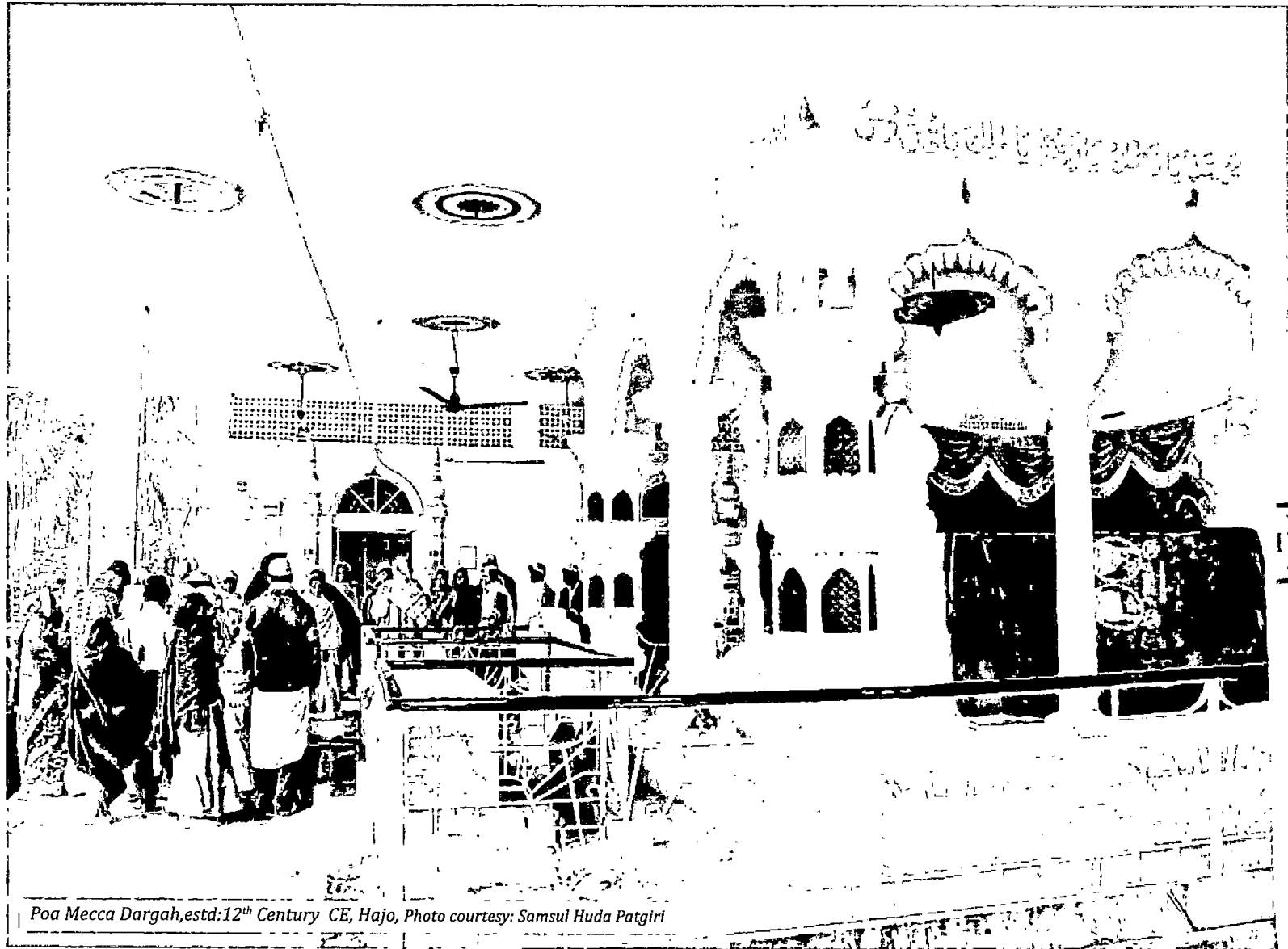
d) If the bride is minor and bridegroom is major and their marriage is already solemnized beyond the willingness of bride and her parents, then the Protection Officer of





the jurisdiction shall initiate suo moto legal proceedings against the bridegroom and his parents.

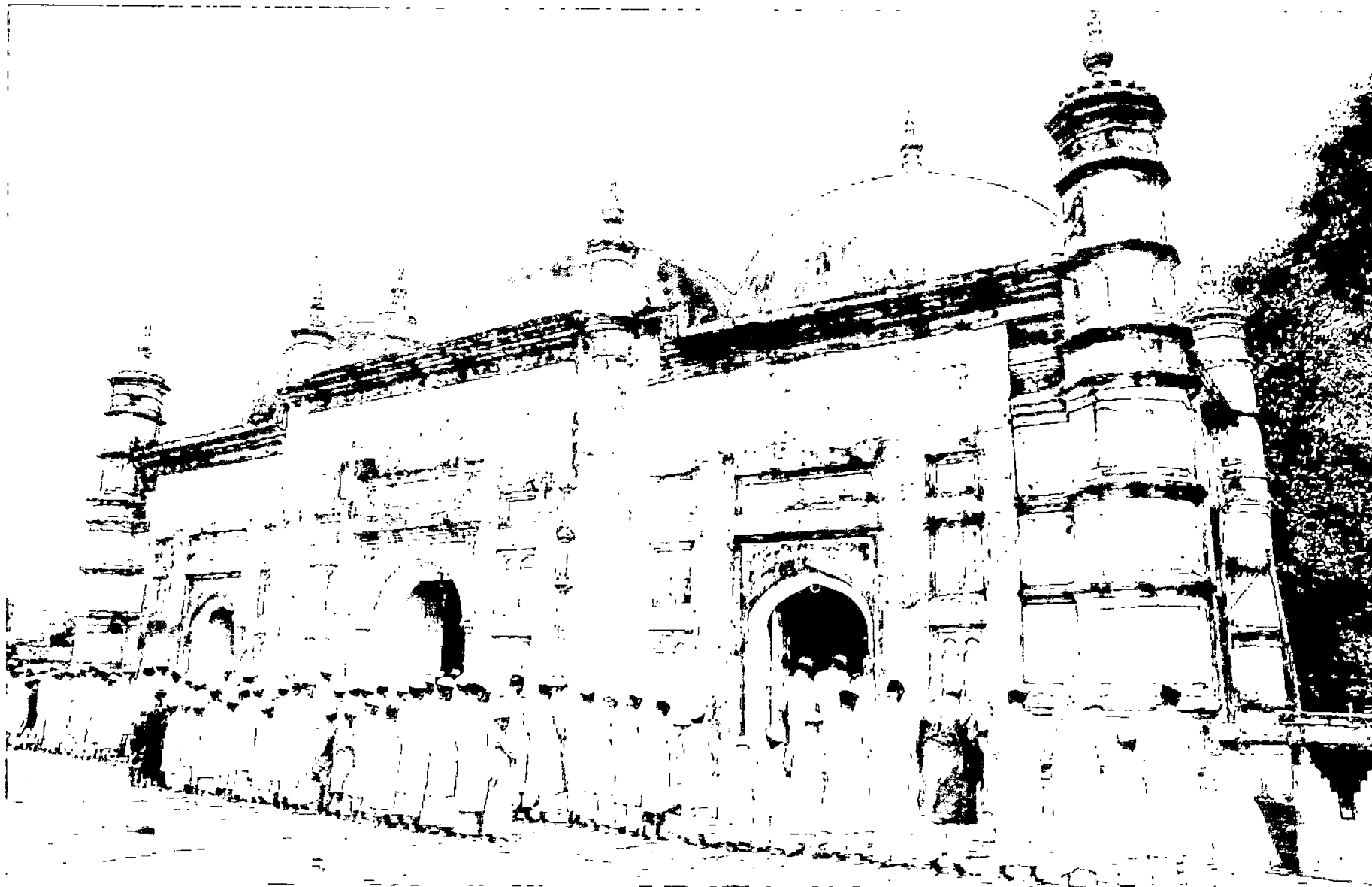
- e) Alternatively, if the bridegroom is minor and the bride is major, and their marriage is already solemnized beyond the willingness of bridegroom and his parents, then the Protection Officer of the jurisdiction shall initiate suo moto proceedings against the bride and her parents.



Poa Mecca Dargah, estd: 12<sup>th</sup> Century CE, Hajo, Photo courtesy: Samsul Huda Patgiri



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## Recommendations/Strategies for Stabilisation of Indigenous Muslim Population:

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**R**ecommendations / strategies for Stabilisation of Indigenous Muslim Population are prepared on the basis of the following results of the analysis of various data of the random study on 1525 Indigenous Muslims families in sixteen districts of Brahmaputra valley of Assam, which was conducted during 2021-2022.

Important Results of Random Population Survey:

- 1. Underage Marriage:** Underage marriage is one of the most important factors for rapid population growth and it has been observed that under age marriage among the indigenous Muslim women is 27.67% and male is 17%. High incidence of underage marriage of both male and female is largely responsible for high population growth among some communities of Indigenous Muslim.
- 2. TFR as per Age of Marriage:** The age of

marriage significantly determines the fertility rate. Present survey indicates that TFR of those who married at eighteen or below eighteen years of age is 2.64, while the TFR of women who married above eighteen years of age is 2.18.

- 3. Education Status:** Poor scenario of education of married women of indigenous Muslim was observed during the present study. It was also revealed that 17.44% women have never attended school, 13.11% have completed primary education, 50.92% have studied up to HSLC and only 16.52% have education up to Higher Secondary level or above.

It was also observed that the women with no education have TFR 3.41, women with primary education have TFR 2.86, and women with education till H.S.L.C level have TFR 2.26. Most importantly, it was observed that women with education to

the level of Higher Secondary and above have significantly low TFR and that is only 1.58.

Shocking to note that in South Salmara & Mankachar district, out of 57 women surveyed, 75.43% have no formal education, women with primary education were 7.01%, women with education up to HSLC were 12.28% and women with education till HS or above were 5.26%. This district has lowest level of education of women with highest average children (TFR) 4.12 per woman.

- 4. TFR of Different Communities:** It was observed that among all the different indigenous Muslim communities, Deshi has the highest TFR of 2.71 followed by Julha 2.46, Moria 2.27, Gorja 2.10 and Syed 1.90. Excluding Moria and Julha (as their total number of population is significantly less) Deshi community has contributed



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*Elderly women on a evening stroll*

the highest burden of TFR among the indigenous Muslim communities of Assam.

5. **Economic Condition:** To a great extent, TFR depends on the economic condition of

a family and poor family usually bears more children. The present study revealed that 48.13% of all families were belonged to BPL category. TFR of APL families is 2.13 while that of BPL families is 2.49. This indicates

that poor families belonging to BPL category have more children as compared to family belonging to APL category.

Undesirably, it was observed that out of 1525 families only 149 (9.77%) families have Government jobs.

6. **Birth Spacing:** Birth spacing is one of the best natural methods of family planning. Unfortunately, birth spacing among indigenous Muslim is not worth mentioning and nearly 70.42% women did not follow the minimum 3 year birth spacing norm while giving birth to 2<sup>nd</sup> child.
7. **Attitude towards Family Planning:** It was observed that Muslim families were not willing to discuss about family planning and methods of contraception. It indicates that family planning is a taboo for Indigenous Muslim.
8. **Bigamy/Polygamy:** In this study, no family is found to be practicing bigamy/polygamy.
9. **Distance to nearest Hospital:** It was also observed that the TFR is less where the distance to the health facility is less. On the other hand, TFR increases with the increasing distance to the health facility as observed in Dhubri and South Salmara





& Mankachar where average distance is 4.5km. In the rest of the 14 districts, distance to nearest hospital varies from 1 to 2 km. However, it was also observed that though the distance to the health facility in the district of Bongaigaon and Goalpara are less, the TFR are considerably high.

**a) Short term Strategies:**

1. Extensive awareness programme on family planning
2. Government should formulate strategies at the earliest to curb the underage marriage
3. Ensuring continuous availability of oral pills and condoms
4. Providing IUCD and sterilisation service in camp basis or fixed day basis in the nearest hospital
5. Temporary Establishment of Sub centre (even in rented houses) or health facility, particularly in South Salmara & Mancacher and Dhubri districts and strengthening of health delivery system.
6. To increase the number of health providers i.e. Doctors, ANM, RSP, MHW,

ASHA workers, particularly in South Salmara & Mancacher and Dhubri districts.

7. Special drives: workshops, meeting with districts stakeholders, community leaders and administrations to augment the population stabilisation activities.
  8. To revamp the existing family planning wings of Government, particularly in South Salmara & Mancacher, Dhubri, Goalpara, Bongaigaon, Nalbari, Golaghat and Nagaon and special family planning drive to be arranged among indigenous Muslim.
  9. Special Committee to be formed with the Community leaders of indigenous Muslim in the districts with high TFR. The committee will guide, provide help and oversee the family planning programme in the respected districts (South Salmara & Mancacher, Dhubri, Goalpara, Bongaigaon, Nalbari, Golaghat and Nagaon).
- B) Proper implementation of the Population & Women's Empowerment Policy of Government of Assam, 2017:** The Committee for Population Stabilisation of Indigenous Muslims highly recommended to

proper implementation of the Population & Women's Empowerment Policy of Government of Assam, 2017.

**C) Proposed Population Bill 2022:** The Committee for Stabilisation of Population of Indigenous Muslim, Govt. Assam supports the proposed population bill 2022.

**d) Long term strategies:**

1. We should *always* remind ourselves *that* education is the best contraceptive. Hence, priority should be given to universal education with special focus on women's education. Apart from formal education, informal education system should be revamped to educate the uneducated girls and women.
2. Establishment of women education institute in priority basis.
3. Special and urgent measures to be undertaken to empower women and girls socially and economically. An empowered girl or woman has earned the capability not only to take part in the family matters, but also gives importance to her reproductive health, takes adequate decision on when to



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marry and how many children she should have.

4. Establishment of health infrastructure, at least in the sub-centres and mini PHCs, particularly in Dhubri and South Salmara & Mancacher districts.
5. Poverty alleviation programme to be initiated vigorously.
6. The Government of Assam should revamp and strengthen the existing Minority Development Commission and special fund should be given to uplift the Indigenous Muslim of Assam.
7. To develop infrastructures like roads, electricity, water supply and telecommunication.
8. To ensure participation of Indigenous Muslims in at least 15% of Government jobs.

Note: Few important clauses of Population Policy and Women Empowerment of Assam-2017 are enclosed:

**Special Measures to promote women's empowerment.**

**Focus on girls' education:** Create an environment that is conducive to gender

equality by incorporating informal and non-formal education and public awareness programmes.

In order to achieve women empowerment, girls' education may be made free up to University level education.

**More educational Institutions, both formal and vocational, for girls may be established:**

A special strategy to lower the drop-out rates of girls will be implemented, whereby families who support higher education for their daughters may be economically sponsored by the Government of Assam. Population & Women Empowerment Policy of Assam, 18 incentivised in certain ways, e.g. in government employment, special scholarships etc.

**Legislation on girls' education:** There shall be strict measures taken by the Government to ensure retention of girl students at school. For this, the government shall provide all necessary facilities like girls' toilets, water, etc. in all schools. The defaulting schools may be penalized and better performing schools should be awarded.

**Review the legal framework for protection of women's rights:** Review, enforce and change (if necessary) the laws and practices that discriminate against women. For

example, stringent application of laws to prevent underage marriage and laws against rape and domestic violence etc. Older widows and women would be protected by the law to ensure that they are not duped of their property rights. Further, strict application of laws will be encouraged to ensure property rights for all women.

**Pensions/schemes for Widows/Divorcees/ Single Women:** There will be provisions for pension for widows (in addition to the existing ones). There will be schemes for divorcees and single women to ensure they can live their lives with dignity and without economic persecution.

**Employment/Pensions for Muslim Divorcee Women:** There will be provisions for skill up gradation of Muslim women divorcees to help in gainful employment. In the interim period, such divorcees will be provided dependency allowance/ pension. In case any women belonging to this category fails to get employment, they may be granted pensions by the Government.

**Government of Assam Population & Political/administrative empowerment of women:** The Government of Assam may bring forth legislation to ensure adequate representation



of women in elected bodies from village level onwards. Government will consider bringing in legislation to increase the reservation of women in eligible jobs up to 50%.



People offering their prayers in Azan Pirh Dargah, Sivasagar, Photo courtesy: Samsul Huda Patgiri

