

Islamization of Sylhet-Cachar Region in Pre-colonial period: A Historical Study

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Abstract

Spread of Islam in India has been studied in the context of some conventional theories. East Bengal and West Punjab where large-scale conversion to Islam took place among the indigenous people, was not experienced elsewhere in the sub-continent. Therefore, the conventional theories seems to be inappropriate in examining the spread of Islam in East Bengal. The Eastern Bengal and more particularly, Sylhet and its adjoining Cachar constituted large numbers of Muslim population was ecologically and geographically comprises a distinct region characterized by the presence of large numbers of natural water bodies such as rivers and their tributaries, beels and haors. The area received heavy annual rainfall along with devastating flood resulted in the formation of huge marshland, swamps with forested hinterlands. It was mainly inhabited by the primitive fishing boating communities and a section of people remain dependent on fishing and hunting even after beginning of agriculture. The Turko-Afghan rulers after occupation of the region assisted by forest pioneers ushered a new era of economic transformation leading to the far reaching consequences and rapid expansion of Islam. The Turko-Afghan rulers moved by their search for revenue entrusted the task of expansion of agriculture to the forest pioneers or sufi-saints who mobilized local population to the agricultural activities leading to the emergence of village communities capable of paying revenue and loyal to the state. Therefore, the indigenous population of the region underwent gradual peasantization. Along with this the medieval Muslim state also allotted land for the establishment of religious institutions like mosques, khanqahs, shrines instrumental for disseminating Islam among the agrarian villages communities. The Cachar region bordering Sylhet, which remained under tribal rule was deeply influenced this demographic transformation as a consequences of wanton migration of people and activities of sufi saints. A critical re-examination of spread of Islam in Sylhet-Cacahr region will perhaps provide deep insight into the issue of conversion to Islam in the region.

Key Words : beel, haors, khanqah, proselytization, sukti etc.

I. Introduction

The Sylhet-Cachar region was known as Surma Valley in the pre-colonial period. The region with its hills and bassins constituted a distinctive territory, situated in the north-east of Bangladesh covering an area of 6668 sq.

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miles.¹ The Sylhet region comprises greater Sylhet division at present constituted four district of Bangladesh covering an area of 12, 569 sq. K.M.² The lower valley of the Barak and Surma rivers consists of Sylhet, a vast alluvial plain bounded in the north and south by hills and west toward the delta of Bengal.³ It was flanked by the Indian state Meghalaya in the north, Tripura in the south, Cachar in the east, and Bangladesh district of Netrokona, Kishorganj and Brahmanbaria in the west. The Barak Valley comprises three districts of southern Assam – Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj, (the latter has been a part of Sylhet district during pre-partition period and included to Cachar after partition). The Cachar plain was bounded by the hills of Mizoram, Manipur, Meghalaya and North-Cachar hills in its three sides while western part of the valley was bordered with the Sylhet without any natural barrier. Although Sylhet and Cachar region remained divided politically for ages, ecologically and geographically both the region were characterized by a outstanding resemblance with the presence of large numbers of water bodies including rivers and their tributories, *beels* and *haors*, *auwas*, (horse shoe lakes). The heavy annual rainfall (approximately 150 inches) caused devastating flood resulting in huge sedimentation thereby forming fertile plain suitable for rich crops. It was due to unhealthy climate, ravage caused by wild animals, frequent raid by the neighbouring hilly tribes and epidemics like colera and malarial fever responsible for scanty the human settlement during pre-colonial period.⁴ The Sylhet region was covered by dense forest outgrowth till the Muslim occupation. It was 'outside the pale of human habitation' with no distinction between artificial and natural boundary that venomous reptiles and wild animals moved freely.⁵ The physiography of the Sylhet-Cachar region shaped the historical development of the region with neighbouring hills flowing across the region with continuous sedimentation. The lowland and marshes gradually turning into raised land suitable for cultivation was observed during a single span of lifetime.⁶ Therefore, Sylhet-Cachar region was a distinct territory with uniform geographical and ecological features resulted in the growth of unique socio-cultural life of the people. After the Muslim occupation, the Turko-Afghan rulers ushered a new era of economic expansion based on wet rice cultivation and demographic transformation in the region. The outcome of this transformation was far reaching – the massive expansion of Islam in the region.

II. Historical geography of the Sylhet-Cachar region

The Sylhet-Cachar region having similar ecological and geographical background that experience hot and humid summer with heavy rainfall from June to September and relatively cold winter. Its distinct landforms was characterized by the presence of eroded hills, alluvial hills, alluvial fan and basin plain. There was a vast low lying flood plain with saucer-shaped depression or swams locally known as *haors*.⁷ The discovery of the sea shell and available lime stone deposits in different parts of the region indicates that the entire area was covered by the sea during distant past.⁸ The Sylhet plain was lying in the foot-hills of Meghalaya leaving lasting impacts on its ecology. The hilly rivers during heavy rainfall generated high torrent of water towards the plain region. The major rivers Surma and Kushiara originating from the river Barak along with other hilly watercourse and small hilly streams such as Khowai, Jadhukata, Mogra, Mahadao, Manu forms dense drainage network mainly responsible for developing low flood plain in Sylhet. The flood plain remained deeply flooded for about 7-8 months. During the rainy season,

the *hoars* turn into a vast sea, the villages seemed to be Islands.⁹ The other water bodies accounts lakes or horse shoe lakes or abandoned parts of the rivers locally known as *anuwas*, and parmanent water bodies in the swams called *beels* that cover an area of 6. 000 sq. K.M. There were 35 big and 475 small *hoars* in the greater Sylhet region.¹⁰ The Bengali word *haor* was perhaps originated from the word *sagor* meaning sea.¹¹ Some of the notables *hoars* may be mentioned were Saneer *haor*, Hail *haor*, Hakaluki *haor*, Maker *hoar*, Chayer *hoar*, Tengua *haor*. It was saucer-shaped shallow depression or a bowl of wetland eco system. The other vast areas covered by eroded hills, the large areas occasionally cultivated plain including different wetland eco-system, rivers, their tributories, irrigation canals, A vivid description of the nature of Sylhet was given by W W Hunter that the torrent flowing from the hills violently moves towards the plain during the summer season from about June to October, associated with the heavy local rainfall converts the whole surface into a huge sea. Under such circumstance, the raised villages looked like islands when only means of communication was boat. As usual in case of alluvial plains, the banks of the rivers were raised as a consequence of seasonal sedimentation to a higher level than the neighbouring areas. The low strips behind the banks experience regular inundation covered by reed and grass. The village settlements were built on the raised strips that experience occasional flood and the rest of the raised fertile plain were used for rice cultivation.¹² Robert Lindsay in his autobiography mentions that while coming to Sylhet, he has to sail across a *hoar* which was about one hundred miles and he has to use sea compass and telescope to find the directions.¹³ Colonel Bruce, the inspector general of India in the year 1864 states that Sylhet was flowless flood during the rainy season and the principal means of transport was boat. He further states that the local people were habitually 'aquatic' in nature and nearly everyone was skilled in the management of boat.¹⁴ Lindsay also narrated exclusively about the excellent boat buildings that includes huge boats for transportation of goods.¹⁵ The indigenous fishing and boating castes also used to perform a special ceremony called *Nauka Puja* or boat worship.¹⁶ It was due to this ecological background that water bodies were abundant with palatable fish and hence fishing and boating caste were predominantly settled in the region. They also acquired the technique of converting fish into dry fish. The dry fish called *Sutki* and a processed dry fish called *Shidal* or *Hidal* in the local dialect was much popular food among the local population of Sylhet.

The eastern part of the Sylhet constitutes the Cahar plain was natural continuation of Bengal Plain without any natural barrier covering an area of 941.2 sq. K.M. with similar ecological and geographical characteristics intersected by a number of rivers, hilly streams and their tributories. The plain valley was surrounded by the hills in its three sides and dotted with hollows, *beels* and swamps. The principal river Barak intersected the valley into two parts – eastern and western, in association with numerous tributories that forms hilly streams together with heavy rainfall causing devastating seasonal flood resulting in continuous sedimentation. The principal *beels* such as Chatla Fan, Bakri *hoar*, Bowalia *hoar* Shan *beel* and other *anuwas* played a significant role in the regional ecology. The ecology was in a process of constant transformation as a consequence of the continuous deposits of silts and sediments. A vivid description of Chatla Fan was given by WW Hunter in his account, the *beel* or swamps transforming into cultivable land could be noticed by a single life span.¹⁷ The *Shan beel* in Karimganj which covers a vast area was another prominent water body among others played a significant role in the regional ecology. It was presumed that primitive fishing and hunting communities were among early settlers in the region. Due to this

ecological reason that the fishing and boating communities were the dominant population in the Sylhet-Cachar region. These early settlers introduced primitive agriculture, but a section of them remain dependent on fishing and hunting.

III. Spread of Islam in India and Bengal

The spread of Islam in India was studied in terms of some conventional theories. But most of them seems to be inappropriate to explain the spread of Islam in Eastern Bengal including Sylhet which experience en mass conversion to Islam. The majority of indigenous population embraced Islam within a short span of time. This religious proselytization was accomplished in peaceful persuasion without the might of sword. One theory of Islamization was Immigration Theory which states that Indian Muslims constituted the descendents of Muslim immigrants who sail across the Arabian sea or migrated overland from the Iranian plateau. The oldest theory of Islamization was 'Religion of the Sword' theory. (blood and sword theory) According to this theory, diffusion of Islam in India and elsewhere was accomplished by the Muslim invading armies. Therefore, popular belief held that the Muslims came to India with Qur'an in one hand and sword on the other. The theory of 'political patronage and Religious gain' (Patronage Theory) as propounded by some scholars claims that sections Indian non-Muslims embraced Islam with the objective of material gain or state employment including land grant. The theory known as 'Holiman Islam' states that Islam in India was mainly propagated by the Sufi Saints. But the most widely accepted theory was 'Religion of Social Liberation' (Social liberation theory). It stressed that indigenous people, especially low caste embraced Islam in order get rid of oppressive caste system.¹⁸ All these theories have their relevance to the scattered incidence of Islamization in the context of northern India. But they did not match to the geography of Muslim population in India. The sufi activities were an all Indian phenomenon, but nowhere such a largescale conversion took place other than Eastern Bengal and Western Punjab. The Muslim occupation of Bengal took place rather lately and the force of sword in Bengal was relatively weak. The oppressive caste system enforced by the Brahminical authorities was also an all Indian phenomenon, conversion to Islam remained very much limited in the heartland of Aryan civilization where rigorous caste system persisted. Besides, Bengal and more particularly eastern Bengal was not well integrated into the Brahminical social order and Aryan civilization penetrated rather lately. Muslim ruled northern India for about six century, conversion to Islam remained very much limited,¹⁹ that the ratio of Muslim population in medieval India was quite insignificant.²⁰

The Census Report of 1872 indicated that overwhelming majority of the Bengal Muslims constituted indigenous converts from the lower order of the society, the *ashraf* scholars of Bengal raised some serious objections. Abu Ahmed Ghaznavi, an ashraf gentleman from Mymensingh in his report claimed that large scale Muslim migration in Bengal during earlier rulers, greater fertility of Muslims due to the practice of polygamy, widow remarriage besides their greater longevity were principal reasons for the growth of Muslim population in Bengal. Hence, Bengal Muslim exclusively did not constituted the low caste converts rather high caste converts as well.²¹ The thesis was rejected by James Wise who states that no such large scale migration was recorded in any historical narration. He further argued that the climatic condition of Eastern Bengal was not so much favourable to

the Mughal invaders.²² Khandakar Fuzle Rabee, another *ashraf* scholar from Murshidabad, in his book, 'The *Origin of the Muhammadans of Bengal*' (1895) states that the Bengal geographical isolation provided the scope of great asylum for the foreign Muslims. The indigenous Bengali people hardly embraced Islam under force or free will in such a large numbers. He strongly uphold the immigration theory like Abu A Ghaznavi arguing that Bengal Muslims certainly constituted the descendents of those Muslims visited Bengal during the earlier rulers.²³

Richard M Eaton (1994 C.E.) examined spread of Islam in Bengal in terms of his famous 'Frontier Theory'. According to this theory, diffusion of Islam in Eastern Bengal was associated with the expansion of certain pre-existing frontier such as political frontier from Mughal to Non-Mughal territory, economic frontier from cultivable land to the forested territory and religious (cultural) frontier from Islam to non-Islam.²⁴ According to this theory, the process of Islamization in the Eastern Bengal was associated with the peasantization and the extension of agriculture in the uncultivated forested hinterland under the leadership of religious persons entrusted by the medieval Muslim state. In the process, two objectives were served, the development of village community loyal to the state and agrarian community capable of paying state revenue. The medieval Muslim state entrusted the task of clearing the forest and bringing them under rice cultivation to a religious persons or sufis to recruit labour of diverse origin. The state also allotted land for establishment of religious institutions like mosque, shrines and Khanqahs including temples which became instrumental disseminating Islam among the newly emerging peasant community. The significant numbers of forest pioneers were sufis and the village community came under the influence of the religious persons. Therefore, the Islamization in the Bengal periphery was process not of conversion at a particular moment, but constituting a community undertaken initially for an economic activity of clearing dense forest for the wet rice cultivation. The peasants living in the periphery accepted Islam as a religion of plough breaking the bond of caste. This Islamization was accompanied by the process of assimilation and accommodation of indigenous cultural elements and practices with Islam by gradual replacement and displacement of the same.

Eaton provided sufficient data in support of his argument related to the land grants made in favour of religious persons and sufis along with land grants made in favour of various religious institutions during Mughal period from 1658 to 1759 C.E.²⁵

IV. Spread of Islam in Sylhet-Cachar region

Merchants and traders played a significant role in disseminating religion in the old world. The Muslim merchants carried the message of Islam to the different corners of Asia and Africa. However, it cannot be reduced to the Muslim merchantile activities alone nor the presence of Muslim invading armies.²⁶ Bengal's early contact with the Muslims in connection with the maritime trade was started much earlier than the successful conquest of Bengal by the Muslims in the thirteenth century. They visited the Eastern countries including Chittagang and Sylhet for commercial purposes. The Muslim traders were followed by the Sufis and missionaries in different parts of Bengal. The Muslim merchants from Arab, Iraq, Persia and other region of central Asia started to visit Chittagang from the eighth century onwards.²⁷ The Muslim traders in the Bay of Bengal became so much active that it virtually turned

into an Arab Lake.²⁸ The Chittagang port owed its name from Arabic word Shat-al-Ganga.²⁹ Therefore, numerous *Sheikhs*, Sufis and *ulema* came to Bengal to preach Islam much before the successful Muslim conquest of Bengal. It was perhaps not surprising that some wandering Sufis might have visited Sylhet-Cachar region before Shah Jalal's successful conquest of Sylhet 1303 C.E. The Sufi saints played the most significant role in the spread of Islam in India. While the Muslim invading armies were conquering territories in the parts of India, the Sufis were conquering the hearts of the people with their message of love and brotherhood.

No clear evidence ever suggests that the territory known as Sylhet Sarkar during the Mughal period was totally controlled by any state authority before Mughal Occupation in 1663 C.E. Even during the time of Bengal Sultan, occasional military campaigns were undertaken rather than exercising political authority over the entire region.³⁰ During Shah Jalal, the Sylhet Region what we mean was nothing more than boundless geographical spaces, plains and mountains loosely connected to one another and to far-off places. It was inhabited by Khasis, Garos, Hindus, Muslims and others.³¹ The scholars made reference of two Muslim families in Sylhet named Nur Uddin in Taraf and Burhanuddin at Telitkar in Sylhet.³² It was presumed that Islam was introduced by many unknown Sufi saints. The Muslim conquest of Bengal and thereby Sylhet region was by no means an important incident which triggered the process of the spread of Islam. The arrival of famous Sufi saint of Sylhet Sheikh Shah Jalal Muzarrod-e-Yamini (1346 C.E.) expedited the process of mass conversion, especially among the despised section of the society.

Sylhet or the kingdom of Gour was occupied by the Muslims Sikandar Khan Ghazi, one Afghan general during the reign of Sultan Shams Ud-din Feroz Shah (1301-1322 C.E.). According to the historical narration, Gour Gobinda, the king of Sylhet committed atrocity on one of his Muslim subjects for sacrificing a cow and the latter lodged a complaint about the said incident to the Sultan of Delhi, Ala Uddin Khalji (1295-1315 C.E.). Shah Jalal along with his 360 disciples or *awliyas* joined the army of Sikandar Shah Ghazi and defeated the king of Sylhet and conquered it. Henceforth, Sylhet came to be known as the land of 360 *awliyas*.

After the occupation of Sylhet, Shah Jalal distributed the territories among his disciples and permitted them to marry. His companions set out in different directions of Sylhet-Cachar region and even beyond and settled in different places and engaged in the propagation of Islam among the native people. The above narration is suggestive of a process whereby the warrior disciples from a nomadic base to a sedentary life and becoming gradually integrated with the local society and hence, did not enter the eastern Bengal as holy warriors rather pious mystics operating under the authority of a charismatic leader.³³

Sylhet-Cachar region was characterized by the presence of large numbers of shrines associated with the 360 *awliyas*. They propagated the message of Islam among the native people. The despised sections of the society, mostly the fishermen, hunters, pirates inspired by the message of equality of brotherhood of man in society embraced Islam in large numbers. During the time of Muslim occupation of Cachar and Sylhet-Mymensingh region was covered by uncultivated forested land regularly flooded by seasonal water and inhabited the Non-Aryan fishing and boating communities like Kaiberta, Patini and Namasudra.³⁴ They came under the influence of the Sufi saints who were dedicated to the well-being of the suffering masses. Life of the fishermen and cultivators was miserable due to their

despised social status imposed by the Brahminical authority. Even it was believed that the Sufi saints possessed the supernatural power to cure diseases and to save people from danger. Therefore, the people belonging to the fishing and hunting castes embraced Islam in large numbers. The people known as Mahimal or Muslim Fishermen were reportedly the first Muslim converts from the Hindu fishing castes in the region. The Sufi saints associated with the Shah Jalal established their shrines in different corners of the region and spread the message of Islam. It was due to their propagation that Islam came to be adopted by the majority people in the region. A large numbers of disciples of Shah Jalal settled in and around Sylhet. While many of the settled in different parts of present Sylhet district including Sunamganj, Habiganj, Moulavi Bazar, neighbouring Tripura and Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi districts of Barak Valley. Their shrines became the cult sites venerated by the people of all faiths that proved to be the most instrumental in the diffusion of new faith among the people.

One of the most prominent disciple of Shah Jalal named Shah Paran settled in Dakshin Khas near Sylhet city. His 52 disciples settled in and around the Sylhet city. 45 disciples settled in the different parts of the present Sylhet district. 9 in Sunamganj, 11 in Habiganj, 8 in Moulavi Bazar respectively besides many Sufis associated with the 360 *awliyas* settled in neighbouring Tripura and Barak Valley of Assam. 8 disciples of Hajrat Shah Jalal settled in the present Karimganj district including Shah Badar and Asim Shah who gave the name of places - Badarpur and Asimganj respectively.³⁵The famous Sufi named Meer-ul-Arefeen or saint of high spiritual order was settled in the Hailakandi District. Another famous Sufi settled in a place called Nathanpur in Cachar besides the presence of large numbers of shrines in every nook and corner of Barak valley provides testimony of Sufi activities. Their propagation activities became most instrumental in diffusion of Islam among the masses.

While Sufi propagation was an all Indian phenomenon. But nowhere other than Eastern Bengal and Westrn Punjab, such mass conversion took place that overwhelming majority of the indigenous people embraced Islam. The factor contributed for such vibrant and Creative Islam in Bengal was inherent in its ecology and geography – the eastern Bengal including Sylhet-Cachar region was mostly covered by uncultivated forested hinterland inhabited by the non-Aryan fishing and boating communities less exposed to the Brahminic culture. After the Muslim occupation, the Turko-Afghan rulers of Bengal ushered in an era of economic expansion in the Bengal peripheri for their search for state revenue. Hence they entrusted the task of introduction of agriculture in the uncultivated forested land to the forest pioneers or a man of religious orientation or Sufis. Those forest pioneers or men of religion recruited people of diverse origin to introduce agriculture with the objective for emergence of agrarian community capable of paying revenue and village community loyal to the state. Therefore, the large scale peasantization took place. The medieval Muslim state also allotted rent free land for the establishment of institutions of the religious orientation such as shrines, Mosques and Khanqahs and others. The village communities so coming under the influence of their leaders or man of religion or Sufis embraced Islam. This religious transformation was accomplished silently without any force of sword rather than complete peaceful persuasion. The peasant living in the peripheri adopted Islam as a religion of plough.

Richard Eaton has examined the land grants of Sylhet during the Mughal period and stated that in sixty years after 1658 C.E. the Mughals granted 3,000 acres of forest tax-free land to the local supporters of the Sylhet. But in forty years after 1719 the grants exceed ten times than that average. Out of all tax free land , almost all forest

acres 96% of them under the Mughals was granted as tax free found on Mughal sanad dated after 1719 C.E. and majority of them (59%) were dated after 1748 C.E. appeared in Nawabi Sanad.³⁶

Again if we examine the proportion of land grant given to the Muslims in proportion to the grant made under *Madad-i-Mash*, 98 % of forest acres went in favour of Muslims. It is also observed that the Hindu proportion was reduced from 96% in 1719 C.E. to 5% in 1759 C.E.³⁷ However, the Brahmmins and Hindu temples continued to receive grants, but the Muslims enjoyed greater subsidies over land grants. The Hindu landgrants were made in the name of *Devottar*, *Shivattar* and *Brhammattar*. Richard Eaton quoted from Mughal Sanad that one Madhav Bhattacharjee, a Brahmin of Sylhet received 30 acres (10 qulbas) of land confirmed by a sanad dated 1721 C.E.³⁸ He also 70 qulbas (273 acres) of forest land was donated to one Ram Das Sen for maintaining the holy diety in the house of Madhu Das sen of Chakla of Sylhet. Similarly, 4 qulbas (15.6 acres of jungle land including a house) was granted in favour of Givinda Das, a Vaishanava holy man according to a sanad of 1725 C.E.³⁹

Madad-i-Mash land grant was tax free grant made in favour of a person for maintaining religious institutions like mosques, shrines or khanqahs and temples or Hindu deities while land grants made in favour of Hindus included *Brahmmattar*, *Shivattar*, *Vishnuttar* and *Devottar* were granted for maintaining temples. Another land grant namely *Chargar* or *Cheragi* land grant was made for maintaining mosque and Muslim shrines. Ricard M Eaton mentioned that in 1663 C.E. 78.2 acres (20 qulbas) of forest land was *Madad-i-Mash* granted to the devotee the holi shrine of Hajrat Shah Jalal in Sylhet city.⁴⁰ It was said that according to an order of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (1672-73) all the grants under *Madad-i-Mash* granted to the Hindus to be re-allocated with the provision of such grants in future exclusively reserved for Muslims. However, the Hindus continued to receive land grants under *Madad-i-Mash*, but their share in proportion to Muslim declined steadily. During the reign of Emperor Alamgir-II, 38 out of 41 *Madad-i-Mash* grants was made in favour of Muslims that total proportion was nine times higher than the Hindus in an average.⁴¹

The new land grants brought about the drastic transformation in religious orientation of the region. More and more land grant in favour of Muslims indicate emergence of agrarian village communities coming under the influence of charismatic leaders with considerable organizational ability. Moulavi Mohammad Rabi was one of the most important leader mobilized people in the agricultural activity with community building mechanism along with managing Islamic religious institutions.⁴² Similarly Eaton mentions about notable forest pioneers and a faqir named Rahman Baksh in 1755 C.E. received 21 acres (5.5 qulbas), similar grants of 3.9 acres of land made by Hindu landlords to Nasir Ali Faqir in 1754 C.E. and Sylhet *Sarkar* also granted 13 acres of forest land to Sayed Mehdi, a servant of the Shrine of Shaikh Ahmed Haji in 1734 C.E.⁴³ This was how, along with the agrarian expansion in pre-modern Bengal, Islamic frontier extended with the diffusion of Islam took among the newly emerging agrarian village communities and at the instances of their leader under the influence of Islamic institutions like *khanqahs*, *mosques* and shrines. Thus Eaton states that,

“As such communities acquired an Islamic identity, they conferred on their leader a sanctified identity appropriate to Islamic civilization, and specially to the culture of institutional sufism, as witnessed by the growth of shrines over the graves of holi men throughout the Bengal frontier.”⁴⁴

The demographic transformation that took place in Sylhet had some significant consequences in Cachar plain under the tribal state. Due of absence of any natural boundary, continuous migration of *Bengalees* both Hindus and Muslims took place. The Sylheti migrants ushered a new era in the agrarian expansion in similar pattern as result of abundant uncultivated forested land. A good numbers of Sufis associated with the 360 awlias of Shah Jalal settled in different parts of Cachar and spread the message of Islam. A special kind of land grants called *pir murata* was given for the maintenance of holi shrines indicative of the similar Sufi institution in Cachar.⁴⁴ There were Sufis who preached Islam other than Sufis associated with the 360 awlias. One such prominent saint was sufi warrior named Aga Mohammad Reza popularly known as *Pir Ferotupi* preached Islam in Hailakandi. He invaded Cachar in the year 1799 with 5000 soldiers and ruled Cahar for a small period. However, he was defeated in the year 1801 C.E.⁴⁵ Another *pir* descended from the Bhuban hill of Cachar Chanting '*Ali Ali*' towards eastern Hailakandi and many people embraced Islam at the instances of *Pir Ferotupi* belonging to the *shia* sect.⁴⁶ Shah Jalal and his associates were participant in the Sylhet campaign and other. Indeed, they never waged holy war against the non-Muslims for the sole objective for conversion of non-Muslims to Islam. Islamic proselytization movement in the region was completely peaceful persuasion where the native people embraced Islam as a religion of plough rather than an emancipating ideology.⁴⁷

V. Conclusion

The spread of Islam in Sylhet-Cachar region including Eastern Bengal was neither due to the force of sword nor motivated by the spirit of social liberation by the native people from the caste system and Brahminical oppression rather conditioned by the regional ecology. The presence of vast areas of uncultivated forested land enabled the economic and demographic transformation with the extension of agriculture that supported the growing population in Bengal in its formative period. The Turko-Afghan rulers after their occupation of the region ushered an era of massive agrarian expansion motivated by their search of revenue leading to the growth of agrarian village community capable of paying land revenue and loyal to the state. The forest pioneers entrusted by the Turko-Afghan rulers played the most crucial role of cultural mediator to bring about a drastic transformation oriented towards Islamic ideology together with the growth of religious institutions such as mosques, shrines and *Khanqahs*. The agrarian community coming under the influence of their leaders or forest pioneers or a man of religion or Sufis embraced Islam gradually. This is how Richard M Eaton examined the spread of Islam in Bengal in terms of 'frontier theories' or peasantization. Hence Islam came to be the most vibrant and creative in Bengal frontier. Islamization in Sylhet-Cachar region took place in the similar context.

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