Chapter 1
Introduction

The social construction of Muslim women's identity in Assam has to be located in the larger debates on gender and Islam, and the local context of lived Islam. The study tries to explore the everyday lives of Muslim women in Assam, how they conceive their body and self and how they construct their identity and sexuality. How does their agency negotiate with the larger secular, pluralistic ethnic constitution of Assamese society vis-à-vis the normative religious doctrines of Islam? How does the overarching patriarchal structure within these domains practices it differently? This varied exposition to the so-called "models' of patriarchy and gender relations can generate ambivalence in the construction of self and identity.

Understanding this process among the Muslim women through the western logic of feminism has been critiqued by many Islamic feminist scholars like Fatima Mernissi (1991), Amina Wadud (2006), Margot Badran (2009). They argue for decentering feminism to understand the life world of Muslim women in the African and Middle East context. Thus, it requires a careful introspection of feminist methodology that neither traps into the teleology of western models of modernity and the essentialist but 'selective' revisit of historical Islam by the Islamic feminists. The sweeping generalisation of symbolic representation/s ('hijab' or veil) of Muslim women as expressions of repressive structures of patriarchy is problematic. At the same time, according religious sanctity and legitimising oppressive practices in the name of progressive Islamism is also problematic. Therefore, this study explores the construction of self and identity through the lived experiences of being a Muslim woman in Assam.

To understand this lived experiences, it is important to understand the diverse social location of Muslim women in Assam. Muslims in Assam is not a homogenous category; their identity varies in terms of language, region, sects, historical roots, etc. The history of Assam can give hindsight to the diversity of Muslims in the state. It is a multi-ethnic state with different ethnic, linguistic and religious groups that follow different cultural practices. The migration of people to Assam has occurred for centuries. The Assamese or Asomiya community is related to the process of *Aryanization* and with the rise and strengthening of Ahomrule in the Brahmaputra valley. The idea of a composite Assamese or Assamiyajati or nationality started forming during the latter part of the Ahom rule (Mishra, 1999, p.99). This process had begun during the Muslim invasion in the 16[th]century when the people were brought under an Ahom/Assamese banner against the others i.e., the Mughals. The first Muslim invasion started in the early part of the 13th century and continued to the 14th century, which resulted in a sizeable Muslims staying back in Assam. These Muslims got assimilated with the larger section of the people in the course of time.

Further, Assam has been invaded ample number of times by Muslims. In 1498, Hussain Shah, the then ruler of Gaur (West Bengal) defeated Nilamber, son of Chakradhvaj and the last Khen king of *Kamatapur. Kamatapur* was the western part of the Brahmaputra valley which was included in ancient *Kamrupa*. Again in 1530, the Turbak invaded *Kamrupa* but was defeated by Suhungmung (Gait, 1963; Barpujari, 2007). Edward Gait noted that the prisoners who were taken captive were the earliest Muslim settlers in the eastern valley of Brahmaputra. The Mughals were defeated in the historic battle of Saraighat. In 1679 the Nawab Mansur Khan occupied *Kamrupa,* but the Mughal Governor had to leave *Kamrupa* after his defeats in the hands of Gadadhar Singha in1682. From 1198 to 1682, the country had cultivated different political, economic, and cultural ties with the Turks, Pathans and the Mughals.

Another basic factor for the rise of the diverse population in Assam was the growth and development of the tea industry in Assam during the British period. As the number of tea gardens grew, they recruited workers from outside Assam. Besides the tea industry, coal and petroleum industries also promoted the rise in the non-Assamese speaking population in Assam. These industries required labourers, and thus non-Assamese speaking labourers were recruited from other areas of India with a promise of employment and a better future. The population growth was further enhanced by the development of railways (Guha,1977).

The railways employed non-Assamese speaking people in their construction work and management. During the construction work, labours were mainly Afghans, Baluchis and Nepalis. But the management was taken care of by the Bengali speaking people. And the higher places were, however reserved for the white people. The railways employed non-Assamese speaking people in Assam, but the posts of official work in railways were also offered to all non-Assamese speaking people. Only the lower grade workers or labours were primarily people from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (Ibid). Many of those who served as Government servicemen, on retirement, settled down in Assam. It can be said that the occupational and employment facilities generated are directly related to the diverse population growth in Assam. The Muslims' occupations and employment opportunities in Assam were transformed under different administrations. The work of the Muslims during the Ahom rule and the British rule transformed owing to change in administration and necessities of life.

Immigration of Muslims occurred from East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) in the early twentieth century after the partition of Bengal (1905-11) (Kar, 1980). A further wave of Muslim migration into Assam occurred in the 1930s and 1940s facilitated by the Saadulla government. Under the "Grow More Food Programme", immigrants from East Bengal were offered opportunities to settle in Assam by the Saadulla government by opening up wasteland and grazing reserves in Nowgong, Darang and Kamrup districts to Muslim settlers (Misra 2012). They settled in outlying chars and chaporis and began their lives as outliers. The colonial administration called them 'Mymensinghias'. The Assamese variously labelled them as na-Axomiya (new Assamese), pamua (farmers), charua (char residents) or Miya, and disparaged them as geda (filthy) 'illegal Bangladeshis' (Saikia, 2021, 11). They are popularly known as the char–chapori Miyas and are considerd as illegal immigrants(ibid). With these two waves of migration from East Bengal, the proportion of Muslims in Assam's population increased from 16% in 1911 to 25% in 1951. The Muslim share in Assam's population remained steady at one-fourth in the 20 years between 1951 and 1971 but, thereafter, it rose to 28% in 1991, to 31% in 2001(Borooah, 2013, 45) and in 34 % in 2011.

Linguistically these Muslim populations of Assam consist of the Assamese speaking Muslims, the Bengali speaking Muslims, and the Hindi speaking Muslims. The Assamese speaking Muslims consist of the descendants of war prisoners taken captive throughout

the Muslim invasions, the local people who converted and the immigrants i.e., the Muslim artisans and learned men imported by the then Ahom rulers. The Hindi speaking Muslims are the Muslims who moved to Assam during the first part of 20th century and after independence mainly from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. They mostly speak Bhojpuri, Urdu and Hindi. The Bengali speaking Muslims are the immigrants from the East Pakistan /Bangladesh. The Muslims of Assam don't consist of a homogeneous category but are quite diverse in their outlook. As such, the social background of these Muslim communities varies from one another. The status of women within these various categories are further deplorable.

1.1.Statement of the Problem

Assam is a home to diverse Muslim communities, and the women within these categories may have differing experiences. However, they all belong to the larger single identity of Muslim women. Social constructions of such identities are far more complex than it appears to be. Multiple intersectional socio-spatial factors interact with each other in such a process. It is also important to look at the individual subjectivity negotiate with these diverse factors and their implications on her 'self'. The debate on understanding the everyday life of Muslim women across the world is complex. Western feminists argue that the practices within Islam represent the oppressive structure of the religion against women. The Islamic feminist scholars argue for decentering feminism to understand the life world of Muslim women in the non-western context. This debate has gained wider attention in the last four decades since the seminal work of Fatima Mernissiin 1975 in Morocco. Since then, there have been conceptual refinement and conflations of secular or Islamic feminism worldwide. But there are scanty works on the lived experiences of Indian women in Islam, especially in the Assam context. This study aims to fill this gap in the literature and make it compelling to undertake this study.

The Assamese Muslim women represent a different representation of religious identity in the public space. They generally do not carry the symbolic representations of pan Islamic identity. It is complicated to identify their religious identity through their physical appearance in public. It is easier to identify other lingustic categories of Muslims with their dress or veil in public. It has been argued that the symbolic representation/s ('hijab' or veil) of Muslim women as expressions of repressive structures of patriarchy is problematic. At

the same time, according religious sanctity and legitimising oppressive practices in the name of progressive Islamism is also problematic.

While the influence of religion varies in the performance of collective identity in public space, does it reflects in their private spaces is an intriguing question. Beyond the dichotomies of public and private, how do these women construct their identity as Muslim women? How do they embody such an identity? Thus, it is pertinent to examine how the Assamese Muslim women experience their religion in their everyday? Do these women in Assam offer different articulations to the whole idea of Muslim women in the South Asian context?

The everyday life of Muslim women is exposed to differing versions of tradition and modernity, both secular and sacred. The sacred religious space is a critical context for the formation of one's self and identity. The religious self may not go well in tandem with the public secular self; one is introduced through the institutions of modernity. The secular space of schools, colleges, health system and the democratic polity offers her an alternate way of articulating her'self'. Thus, ambivalence prevails in her construction of self and identity. Further it needs to be examined how patriarchy is reproduced and restructured through the everyday life. Is the practice the same across the different linguistic groups of Muslims in Assam? Is there any essential difference to other religious communities residing nearby?

The Muslim family structure also invited larger public and academic debates. The women are often represented as 'victims' of religiously sanctified patriarchy through the practices of polygamy and instant divorce or talaq. Similarly, Muslim men can have multiple partners simultaneously, whereas women are not. Do these women have no rights in their marital relation? Do Assamese Muslim women's lived experiences represent the same or offer a different picture? Does it vary across the different groups of Muslims in Assam? What are the contexts of such varied experiences? Therefore, it is vital to understand the Muslim women's lived experiences and how they construct their self and identity both in public and private spaces.

1.2. Research Questions

1. How a Muslim woman's self and identity is constructed in her everyday life?

2. Whether religion and patriarchy interplay in constructing the identity of Muslim women?

3. What role does religion play in controlling her body and defining her space and freedom?

4. How does a Muslim woman negotiate her space in a male-dominated society?

5. Does she have an autonomous agency in negotiating with the structures of oppression?

6. Whether the experiences of women from different linguistic categories or sects within Islam?

1.3. Objectives

The objectives of the present study are listed below

1) To understand the process of the social construction of self and identity through the everyday life of diverse categories of Muslim women in Tezpur, Assam.

2) To look into the interactional space available for women in their domestic and public spaces. How do they negotiate these spaces and perform their self and identity.

3) To understand the significance of the materiality of the body in their construction of self and identity.

4) To understand the process of 'living' Islam in their intimate relational context, primarily through marriage and divorce practices.

1.4. Conceptual Framework

The everyday life is studied from the social constructionist framework, where symbolic interaction theorists and phenomenologists have been used as an entry point. Identity is related to the studied area as a continuous process in Muslim women's lives. It is embedded in social relations and worked out in people's everyday lives. Steph Lawler (2014) discusses that a person's identity isn't built within the individual but produced between different individuals. Social Constructionism is the underlying philosophical view that believes our meanings about the world are co-created by the people, rather than reflections of 'objective' reality. Berger and Luckman proposed that the meanings in and about the world are co-created by people. These concepts mentioned below are discussed

separately however they are intertwined with each other that helped to understand how women navigate their everyday life and how they construct their identity.

1.4.1. Islamic Feminism

This study is located in the larger debates on women and Islam in a global context that argues for decentering western feminism to understand the lived Islam. Fatima Mernisssi, in her polemic work *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society,* introduced feminist interpretation everyday life of Muslim women from Morocco. She outlined a new narrative on the history of gendered subalternity (Rhouni, 2010, p.43) through a secular critique. She presented voices of underprivileged women in rural and urban areas of Morocco and explored how they were subject to both class and gender discrimination. Further, she repositioned her understanding of women from secular feminism to Islamic Feminism in her later works such as *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (1991). Similarly, the acclaimed Islamic feminist Amina Wadud through her *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam,* argued for re-reading historical Islam and challenged the androcentric interpretations of *Sharia* but firmly rooted in the Qur'anic tradition of Islam. They argue that the sweeping generalisation of symbolic representation/s ('hijab' or veil) of Muslim women as expressions of repressive structures of patriarchy is problematic. They have raised debates challenging patriarchal readings of Qu'ran and Hadith (sayings of the Prophet). According to them, it is not the text but its interpretation that allowed patriarchy to persist (Kynsilehto, 2008, p. 9). At the same time according to religious sanctity and legitimising oppressive practices in the name of progressive Islamism is also problematic. Therefore, this study focuses the practice of everyday life of Muslim women in their embodied habitus.

Islamic Feminism in India: Muslim women's rights were most clearly demonstrated during the Shah Bano case during 1980s. These rights triggered the debate of relationship between religion and gender in Indian context. Early women's movement of 19th and early 20th century were engaged with religious discourses in order to promote women's rights unlike the autonomous women's movement which was based of principles of secularism, avoiding questions of religion or at times criticising and challenging religious practices (Kirmani, 2011). Indian women's movement was influenced by the growth of second wave feminism which rejected religion and based on political project of secularism. However,

some sections of the movement have engaged with religious discourses and symbols, focusing on Hindu religious imagery. The use of goddess imagery, like naming of the first feminist publishing house, Kali for Women and celebrations of women's spirituality spearheaded by Madhu Kishwar in the journal, *Manushi* are the attempts to broaden the women's movement call in 'indigenising' feminism (Rajeshwari, 1998; Kirmani, 2011). These developments in women's movement were responsible for the alienation of non-Hindu women from the movement (Agnes, 1995; Rajeshwari, 1998; Kirmani, 2011). The Shah Bano case of 1984 marked the significant transition in the discussion of women's rights. The supreme court judgement in Shah Bano's case, led to the strong protest by the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board, which was established to protect Muslim personal law from state's intervention. In the case of Shah Bano, the movement's general support of a liberal democratic approach to secularism, which also supports for a clear separation between religion and politics, led to the demand of Uniform Civil Code rather than exploring the alternatives for reconciling religious identity and gender concerns (Kumar, 1999; Kirmani, 2011).

In the international context, western feminism argue that the practices of Islam represent the oppressive structure of religion against women. On the contrary, Islamic feminist argues for decentering feminism to understand the life world of the Muslim women. This debate has gained a wider attention after the work of Fatima Mernissi (1975) in Morocco. Since then, there has been conceptual refinement and conflation of secular and Islamic feminism worldwide. Again, the acclaimed Islamic Feminist Amina Wadud through her *Inside the gender Jihad: Women's reform in Islam*, argued for rereading Islam and challenged the androcentric interpretations of Shariah. Islamic feminist scholars like Fatima Mernissi (1991), Amina Wadud (2006), Margot Badran (2009) argued for decentering feminism to understand the life world of Muslim women in the African and Middle East context. Similarly in India, the demand for Uniform Civil Code, brought Muslim Women led groups and networks to find new approaches to engage with and evading the law in ways that recognise and respect multiple identities of women (Kirmani, 2011). Subramaniam (2006) points out the urban upper cast domination of the women's movement in India have opened avenues for newer groups with caste and religion lines, to assert themselves within the wider umbrella of the movement. The self-reflection within the movement and flourishing of different type of NGO's along with diversification of political sphere has led to the emergence of identity-based women's movement by women

of marginalised communities who address multiple axes of power, based on gender, caste, religion, and class (Kirmani, 2011).

The Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan was formed in 2005, and is organisation comprised of Muslim women working across the country. Zakia Jower of BMMA, who is one of the founding members, views women's rights not only limited to purdah and triple talaq but also concerns about poverty, hunger, education also as issues concerning her rights. She argued in an interview that until the overall exclusion of the community is addressed, Muslim women's exclusion cannot be addressed. This reflects the BMMA's general approach, which views Muslim women as members of the wider Muslim minority, which, they contend, is disadvantaged as a whole. Rather than struggling against the community as a source of oppression, which they say alienates women, BMMA members argue that Muslim women must be viewed as members of, and potential leaders within, the community. This approach attempts to reconcile gender-related interests with wider concerns of economic marginalisation and social exclusion. The Bengali Muslim as doubtful citizens and socially excluded section interprets and express their religion based on their poverty. Though the women display their religion physically through their dress (*Hijab, Burqa*), there are some exceptions. They come out of their house to work as laborer and domestic help with their purdah but some of them working as domestic help release their hijab as they are inside the house. Concerning their poverty, they are forced to work outside with other male equivalent not for using their equal right status with men but to earn their livelihood.

If the wider women's movement has struggled with the question of religion, Muslim women's rights activists have especially had to grapple with this issue. Debates about the relationship between Islam and women's rights have been taking place since the Shah Bano case, with advocates such as Asghar Ali Engineer (1992, 1995) and Zeenat Shaukat Ali (1996) taking an 'Islamic feminist' approach and publishing extensively on the patriarchal misinterpretations of Islam and the need for women to familiarise themselves with religious texts in order to reclaim the rights that have been granted to them within Islam. Most of these discussions have grown out of the debates surrounding Muslim personal laws and have therefore focused to a large degree on the issue of women's matrimonial rights.18 Members of the MWRN and the BMMA have also been engaged in debates about the relationship between religion and feminism and how it relates to their

advocacy and to the formulation of their collective identities. However, both networks approach the question of religion differently in the way they formulate their collective identities and strategies (Kirmani, 2011).

1.4.2. Everyday Life

The everyday life is studied from a social constructionist framework, where symbolic interaction theorists and phenomenologists have been used as an entry point. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman, in "The Social Construction of Reality", presents everyday life as a reality, which is interpreted by individuals and is subjectively meaningful to them as a logical world. He argues how ordinary people define reality in their everyday life and how they acquire and use their knowledge to guide their behavior. Similarly, women, who are ordinary members of society, define their reality. This reality originates in their thoughts and actions and is maintained as real. And by these subjective meanings, an inter-subjective commonsense world is constructed. Thus, the individual life world is a combination of the inter-subjective commonsense world and a lot of taken for granted prescriptions of social phenomena.

1.4.3. Self

This construction of lifeworld may be understood from the process of how individuals construct their self and identity. William James has talked about "I'self and '"Me'self. The '"Me'self are of three types –

1) Material self (our body and possessions): our bodies, clothes, family, and home. An individual is more attached to these material things.
2) Social self (friends and relatives): How an individual presents oneself to the other individual.
3) Spiritual self (ideas and belief system): This is the self where one could argue and discriminate of 'one's morality and conscience.

In order to understand the identity construction of a Muslim woman in her everyday life, her "me'self and "I'self should be considered. For G.H. Mead, the process of interaction involves the function of mind, social self, and structure of society where the mind itself is a process and not a thing. According to him, the individual must get outside themselves to

have selves. They cannot experience themselves directly. So, they put themselves in 'other's positions and then view their own self. The position one views oneself may be that of an individual or a particular group. Now when women develop their "selves', they get outside themselves and view their own "selves' from the standpoint of an individual or a group and cultivate it according to the viewpoints of other individuals or groups.

This construction of self and the other need to be understood as how it negotiates with the structure of society. The structure provides the rules and resources to perform structure in each time and space. In doing so, they produce, reproduce, and at times revise the structure (Giddens, 1984). Here the rules and resources of structure needs to be looked from the vantage point of how the women negotiate with it? Is her agency capable enough to alter the androcentric religious norms and values? How does it change across space and time? It is the theory of the relationship between agency and structure with the center of attention to social practices. Agency and structure are the two sides of the same coin. All social action involves structure, and all structure involves social action. The woman i.e., the agent, performs her action towards the structure i.e., religion, norms and values and the structure enable and capable her to perform her action. Agency and structure are tied up with human activity and practice. Activities are not produced by consciousness, by the social construction of reality, nor are they produced by structure. Rather the actors produce consciousness and structure when they engage themselves in practice (Ritzer, 2012, p.523).

1.4.4. Identity

Identity has a broad meaning used in social science researches. Identity is the mark of a person or a community that differentiates that person or community from the rest. The marks are the qualities, beliefs, historical background, socio-economic and socio-cultural background of a community and an individual that is different from others. Identity is socially constructed, which can be established based on collective memory, history, geographical location (Castels: 2010). Psychologists usually use the term 'identity' to mean personal identity, while sociologists often use the term to describe social identity or the collective of group membership in relation to the individual.

The social identity theory was first propounded by Henri Tajfel and John Turner. They explained the intergroup behavior of individuals in society. Following the work of Tajfel,

Weinreich's Identity Structure Analysis is a structural representation of the individual's existential experience, in which the relationships between self and other agents are organized in relatively stable structures over time (Weinreich: 1986). Bauman, on the contrary, argued that identity is not fixed and stable but rather fluid since modern society is constantly changing and transforming. Identity became a new problem and task because it wasn't one before humanity entered modernity (Bauman: 2004).

Wenger described identity as one half of it, providing experiences and material for building identities through an investment of the self in relation to association and differentiation. As the other half, negotiation is the fundamental because it determines the degree to which one has control over the meanings in which one is invested (Wenger: 1998).

Identity is related to the studied area as a continuous process in Muslim women's lives. It is embedded in social relations and worked out in people's everyday lives. Steph Lawler (2014) discusses that a person's identity isn't built within the individual but produced between different individuals. She argues that it is a social and collective process rather than the individual. In the study, identity is how Muslim women identify themselves in a meaning-making process. It is the women as how they see themselves as Muslim women and relate their differences in Indian context and pan Islamic context.

1.4.5. Habitus

Bourdieu's concept of habitus has been widely used in ethnographic studies to explore the construction of identity in various social contexts, including the experiences of Muslim women. The habitus refers to the system of dispositions, behaviours, and values that individuals acquire through socialization and that shape their perceptions, actions, and choices. Bourdieu's understanding of Habitus further refines structure-agency debate. *Habitus is* the mental structures through which people deal with the social world. People are bestowed with internalizing system through which they perceive, understand, appreciate, and evaluate the real world. Bourdieu's *Habitus* is the outcome of the internalization of structures. Now this *habitus* in woman allows her to make sense of the social world. This *habitus* differs along with the positions of a woman in her world. For example, a black woman's *habitus* will be different from that of a white woman. Similarly, a Hindu woman *habitus* will differ from that of a Muslim woman. And with this *habitus,* she tries to construct her identity. In the context of Muslim women's identity, the habitus

plays a crucial role in shaping their beliefs, practices, and understanding of themselves within their religious and cultural framework. Muslim women's habitus is influenced by factors, including family upbringing, religious teachings, societal expectations, and gender relationship and interaction.

For example, in her ethnographic study on the experiences of Muslim women in Britain, Sophie Gilliat-Ray (2010) explores how the habitus of Muslim women shapes their religious identity and practices. She argues that the habitus is not a static framework but is constantly negotiated and reconstructed through interactions with various social agents and institutions. Gilliat-Ray shows how Muslim women's habitus is influenced by their family background, education, and the broader social and cultural context in which they live. This habitus, in turn, influences their choices regarding religious observance, dress, and participation in community activities. Furthermore, Gilliat-Ray emphasizes that Muslim women's habitus is not monolithic but varies across individuals and communities. Different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, as well as varying levels of religious orthodoxy or liberalism, shape the habitus of Muslim women differently. This variation in habitus results in diverse expressions of Muslim women's identities, ranging from more traditional and conservative practices to more progressive and innovative interpretations of Islam. In summary, ethnographic studies drawing on Bourdieu's concept of habitus have explained how the habitus of Muslim women plays a vital role in shaping their identity. By examining the interaction between individual character and social structures, researchers have shown that the habitus provides a valuable framework for understanding the complexities of Muslim women's lived experiences, religious practices, and cultural expressions.

1.4.6. Body

Body is the physical form that constitutes the individual where all the social processes are programmed. The body is in a constant process of negotiating and interacting with the social structure with social and biological aspects. The societal norms are internalised through the process of ssocialisation which is termed as embodiment. The point of overlap between the physical, symbolic and sociological is that the body is a dynamic, mutable frontier. The body is the threshold through which the subjects' lived experiences of the world are incorporated and realised and is neither pure object nor pure subject (McNay: 1999).

1.4.7. Lived religion and Lived experiences

The migration of people to Assam has occurred for centuries. The first Muslim invasion in the early part of 13th century and continued to the 14th century which resulted in sizeable Muslim staying back. Again, the immigration of Muslims from East-Bengal to Assam started in the 20th century after the partition of Bengal till today. So, the Muslim population of Assam comprises of three major linguistic categories. Muslim dominated societies, are more traditionalistic and religious than West, characterised as secular, pluralistic and individualistic. In Muslim majority countries, religion is not a choice for them whereas, it is personal decision in the western world (Beck, 1986; Berghammer and Fliegenschnee, 2014). In Austria, the migrants from Turkey and Bosnia Herzegovina, are religious but the Bosnian Muslims were more religiously moderate than Turkey since in Bosnia, hybrid religious have evolved for a long time with Muslims adopting Christian tradition. Gender roles in Muslim majority countries are conservative compared to the west which is more egalitarian. These different environments make it difficult to maintain their identity. Researchers have identified the cognitive strategies to assimilate and integrate both worlds and adapt their religious behaviour as a personal choice. If we see in the pattern of migration to Assam, the Muslim population from the 13th century got assimilated with time whereas the population from east Bengal, now Bangladesh which is a Muslim majority country finds it difficult to adapt to both the worlds. This situation becomes more difficult when these migrants are assigned illegal status. Again, the gender roles assigned are not that strict unlike the Muslim migrants in Austria because of the vulnerable conditions the Bengali speaking Muslim live in, both men and women have to work outside their home to earn their minimum livelihood. The lived Islam experiences of Muslim's whether be migrants from different parts of the world, display their embodied religion in different conducts.

Before lived religion got theorised it was first introduced in "*Lived religion in America: towards a history of practice*" edited by historian David Hall (1997). Hall explains the concept originated as a literal translation of the French term *la Religion vecue* in French sociology of religion. Nancy Ammerman and historian Roberto Orsi, two scholars are strongly associated with the lived religion approach. McGuire (2008) have challenged sociologist of religion, to rethink fundamental conceptualization of what we study and how we study. She argues that religion as practiced by individual is often vastly different from

religion as prescribed by institutions and proposes a re-centering of sociological inquiries of individual (Knibbe and Kupari, 2020). The value of the term lived religion lies in distinguishing the actual experiences of religious person from the prescribed religion of institutional defined believes and practices (McGuire, 2008). In Orsi's interpretation, the lived religion approach concerns religion as embedded in the 'life-world' of existentialist philosophy and phenomenological anthropology (Orsi, 2010, Knibbe and Kupari, 2020).

The religious experiences of a Muslim women in Tezpur are subjected to the practicing of a religion based on the religious ideologies followed by her household, her community which is basically *Sunnis* and the interpretation of religious texts by religious authorities of the respective linguistic community's villages. With all these elements of experiences being embodied, she then practices and expresses her religion, which was also observed by McGuire in her study as one of the important characteristics of lived religion is its embodied nature (Knibbe and Kupari, 2020). McGuire connects the concept of lived religion to Maurice Meleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body - the idea of *lived body* through which people engaged in the world making easier to explain how religious practice and experience are connected to human embodiment. The religious practices and experiences of Muslim women in Tezpur, embodied are more expressed in her private space of home, family and neighbourhood. The public space of different categories of Muslim women are different. The public space of educational institution, workplace of Muslim women are secular in its outlook. The expression of religion in these secular spaces are limited. However, there are categories of women who are not so religious in expressing their "selves".

According to Ammerman (2014) the concept of lived religion refers to religion as inter woven with everyday lives of people. Even the everyday lives of people's experiences who are not religious in their expression are significant and also the social location (secular space) and situations that are not institutionally religious are also important. Thus, Ammerman states that the study of everyday religion against the long-standing tradition within sociology of religion of pre supposing that religion takes place within the sphere of religious institution or the home. Nevertheless, she also warns an entire focus on the professional and non-professional setting, nothing that it maintains the binary between 'official' and 'unofficial' which is damaging to the wider agenda of the approach(Knibbe and Kupari, 2020). Among the different categories of Muslims in their respective villages,

their experiences are different when applied to public and private setting. Muslim women in the institutions which are considered to be secular like that of educational institutions are not always secular but religious. For examples though madrasas are educational institutions, but they are Islamic in all their characteristics so, a not so religious person teaching in Madrassa must follow the prescribed institutional beliefs and practices. McGuire, Orsi and Ammerman makes explicit that their lived religion approach does not depend on a specific, fix theory, rather designates a broad research trend.

In the present study the lived experiences of Muslim women in their domestic and their public life need to be located in terms of intersectional and interactional social locations of class, sectarian ideologies, geography, immigrant status/doubtful citizen, historicity of their community, age, education, employment and exposure (to the world outside the home). Knibbe and Kupari, (2020) argues that lived religion as an approach, it builds from the ground up, emphasises empirical case study, but also uses them to reflect critically on existing concepts and theories, bringing attention to phenomena, people and locations marginalised by conventional perspective. The lived religion approach does not rely on *a priory* (knowledge deducted from the theory rather than practical experiences) definition of religion or proposed phenomenology to establish what is common to all religion. Even it does not delineate a particular segment of religious phenomena (example: unofficial beliefs and practices) and live out others (Hall, 1997; Orsi, 2010). Knibbe and Kupari (2020) also argued that lived religion is not 'out there' for us to study but rather lived religion is an approach that is suitable for inquiries into what people do that they identify as religious, spiritual, or generally going beyond common sense understanding of the world. By focusing on the ways 'religion' is separated from the other domains of life in daily interaction with that scholars have tried to combine lived religion approach with discursive approaches (Schrijvers and Wiering, 2018) or as Helena Kupari does in this special issue with a practice approach (Knibbe and Kupari, 2020). These discursive approaches can provide a fresh perspective on how what is recognised as 'religious,' interacts or intersects with social location of class, sectarian ideology, geography, immigrant status/doubtful citizens, historicity of their community, age, education, employment and exposure.

The lived experiences are the experiences received through practising their social reality. The individual gives their own meaning to those experiences, and these experiences are

lived. These lived experiences are then embodied. This process of experiencing social reality constitutes an individual as a social being in the community. These experiences are interpreted by individuals and present everyday life as subjectively meaningful to them as a logical world. The lived experiences of an individual are both personal and collective. An individual's lived experiences provide an approach to the researcher to understand the research subjects and their intersubjective experiences. These lived experiences as a form of narratives in the field helped locate the individual woman in their historical, social, economic and cultural settings.

1.4.8. Embodiment

Embodiment is the physical and mental experience of existence, which is the condition of possibility for those relating to other people and the world. One is able or not, it is through ones physicality that we function as social beings, whether in a face to face communications, through handwritten letters or by keying disembodied electronic symbols into computer to 'stay in touch' with someone half the world away (Kate: 2006). Embodiment is also a lived matter of gender which is important for experiencing gendered identity (Huges and Witz:1997). Embodiment is a process of the sinternalisation of the external world. This external world is the society with its multiple social, cultural, economic, and political forms. This process of embodiment is performed subjectively within a specific cultural context and in a particular point of time.

1.5. Review of literature
1.5.1. History of Assam

Edward Gait (1963) in his "A History of Assam", provides an account of the pre-historic and traditional rulers. This book gives an account of the events that occurred in the 14th century till the growth of the tea industry of Assam. This book provides an understanding of the advent of the first Muslims in Assam. *Kamrupa* or old Assam first contacted the Muslims in 1198 A.D., when a Turkish army led by Muhammad ibn Bakhtiyar Khilji conquered Bengal, defeating Lakshman Sen (1169-1198), the last king of the Sen Dynasty in Bengal. This first contact of Muslims with the old Assam could be seen in the copper plate inscription found in the Madhai town of Pabna district (now in Bangladesh). Again in 1202, Muhammad ibn Bakhtiyar Khilji, invaded *Kamrupa* with a motive to conquer

Tibet. Though he was defeated and most of his soldiers died owing to different climates and unfavourable circumstances, this invasion was the first Muslim invasion of Assam.

Amalendu Guha (1977) in "Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947", provides the background for an understanding of the colonial socio-economic structure. In the last five chapters, he emphasises the politics of anti-imperialism. He also lays stress on political activities involving the legislature in Assam. He discusses wasteland settlement rules: 1838 and 1854 for tea cultivation. The formation of tea committee in 1834, the status of the Government Experimental Tea Gardens in 1836 and first successful manufacture of Assam Tea in 1837 made the colonisation scheme more acceptable. This has led to the change in the social and cultural life of Assam with the emergence of the tea community.

B.B. Kumar (1995) in his "Re-Organization of North-East India" explains how the state of Assam was gradually re-organised into the states of Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh. This book also provides an account of administrative and constitutional documents.

Udayan Mishra (1995) in his article "Identity Transformation and the Assamese community" in the edited book of Kailash S. Aggarwal discussed the formation of Assamese identity and community. This book also explains the demographic changes that have brought significant alteration in the cultural content of the Assamese people. The author mentions that Assam is the melting point of diverse cultural streams, the Aryan and the Austro-Mongoloid being the central ones.

1.5.2. Muslims in India

Amalendu De (1982), in his book, "Islam in Modern India", examine the factors that haveled to the growth of the Muslim population since 1826 to 1947. This book also describes the role of Sufis in the spread of Islam in Assam. Sufism was introduced in Northern India in the 11th century A.D. It entered Bengal and from Bengal it was introduced in Assam. The ideologies of the Sufis greatly influenced the culture of the Muslims in Assam.

Shah (2007) in his article, following the Sachar Committee Report, has brought out the poor economic condition of the Muslims. The report deals with relative deprivation in various dimensions of development. He argues that the main concerns of Muslims in India are identity, security, and equity. He discusses how discrimination and poverty are the two main reasons for deprivation. He also discusses and compares the socio-economic conditions of Muslims with that of SCs, STs and OBCs. Robinson (2007) in her article Indian Muslims: The Varied Dimensions of Marginality, investigates the Sachar Committee Report brings together the data with respect to the development and marginalisation of different socio-religious groups and the Muslims in particular, in the country. This article examines the social, political, and economic profile of Indian Muslims emerging from the SCR; its regional, gendered, and other variations; and its implications.

Moonis (1994) in his paper, Indian Muslims in their homeland argues that the destiny of Indian Muslims is an integral component of the destiny of India and so it is the responsibility of the secular, democratic forces, to raise the specific problems facing the Indian Muslims and put their solutions squarely on the national agenda. V.V. Saiyed (1995) in his article "The Muslim family in transition, orthodoxy and change in a minority group family" in the edited book of A.R. Saiyed, discusses the rights of Muslim Women in her family. He also explains her rights in relation to property and in selection of her husband. This chapter also notes that there is transition taking place in Muslim families. Though a Muslim woman is vested with property rights, the Muslim families are patrilineal and patriarchal. Though males are allowed to marry non- Muslims, but the women are not allowed to do the same.

Ahmed (2014) in his article Muslims in Uttar Pradesh discusses about the relations of the political parties with Muslim communities in Uttar Pradesh and that it should go beyond the phenomenon of "Muslim vote bank". He also argues that political parties should instead understand the existing diversity within Muslims and should address their concerns.

Kumar (2014) in his letters have discussed about the conditions of Muslims of Godhra and shows the marginalisation of Muslims through Sachar Committee Report, 2005-2006. He says that the condition of Gujrati Muslims are even worse than the scheduled caste (SCs)

and scheduled tribes (STs) and also in Bihar, West Bengal, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.

Sarkar (2014) in his paper Muslims in Gujarat and West Bengal, breaks the myth that Gujrati Muslims are much better off than the Bengali Muslims in West Bengal. He argues that the relative prosperity of Muslims in Gujrat is historical and has nothing to do with Narendra 'Modi's tenure ship in Gujrat as chief minister.

1.5.3. Assam and Muslims

Muslims of Assam is not homogenous and consist of different categories of people. It is important to know these categories and their locations. B.J. Dev and D.K. Lahiri (1985) book "Assam Muslims, Politics and Cohesion" helps to understand the social climate of Assam. It provides an understanding of the social and political consciousness and involvement of the Muslims of Assam in the political arena. The writers also describe the discussion in the Assam Legislative Council concerning the Line System held in 1936. The line system through which the Muslims from then Bengal (now Bangladesh), especially from the district of Mymensingh, were allowed to settle in definite areas of the Assam valley district. This book also focused on the social setting and sentiments of the Muslims of Assam.

Saikia (2017) in the fifth chapter, 'The Muslims of 'Assam' of the edited book, Northeast India: A Place of Relation, talks about the political history and the advent of Muslims in Assam is always looked through the stories of violence of wars between the armies of Assam against the Mughals. Saikia challenged this type of history by saying that this narrative was first developed by the self-styled historian, albeit colonial administrator, Edward Gait. She describes the Assamese nationalism through the works of Imran Shah – teacher, poet, novelist, and ex- President of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, expressing the memories of *xanmiholi* culture that refuses to be destroyed emerges despite the efforts to silence it.

Ahmed (2007) argued through the Shihabuddin Talish's *Fathiyah-i-ibriyah*, that the Muslims who had been taken prisoners in former times and had chosen to marry in the then Assam, their descendants act exactly in the manner of the Assamese and have nothing

of Islam accept the name; their hearts are inclined far more towards mingling with the Assamese than towards association with Muslim.

Ahmed (2009) in "Smritir Jilinganit Keigarakiman Asomor Musalman", narrates about the lives of some Muslim Personalities of Assam who have contributed to the society and some who were explorers during their times. This book provides the biographies of hundred and twenty-two Muslim personalities of Assam contributing to the Assamese society. This book is an attempt to study the social background of the Muslim of Assam through their lives.

Das (2006) in his article "A note on the economic consequences of immigration of Bangladeshis into Assam" in the edited book of B.B. Kumar discusses the occupation of the Bengali speaking Muslims who were brought as cultivators from East Bengal and got them settled in in Assam for their 'Grow More Food 'Programme'.

Malik (2006) in, "Axomiya Upanayaxot Musolman Jivonor Chitro", critically analysed lives of Muslims in Assamese novels. This book throws light on the social and cultural life of Assamese Muslim Community through Assamese novels. The writer also describes the position of women in Assamese society and how their position determines their occupation.

1.5.4. Everyday life

In ''Gender and Everyday life'' life' (2009), Mary Holmes discusses that Societies are still organised in ways that benefit men more than they benefit women. Within patriarchy, society is largely controlled by men and men usually have a greater share of the rewards available. So, Holmes argues that it is important to examine and explain the existing inequalities and how they influence people in their everyday life. The book also discusses how the everydayness of gender is taken for granted. Further, the book, 'The Body in Everyday 'life' by Nettleton and Watson, (1998) talks about how ordinary men and women perceive their bodies through physical and emotional needs, illness, gender, and ageing.

1.5.5. Embodiment

In the book, 'The sociology of the 'body', Kate (2006) points out that Embodiment, is the physical and mental experience of existence, which is the condition of possibility for our

relating to other people to the world. We are able or not; it is through our physicality, we function as social beings, whether in face-to-face communications, through handwritten letters or by keying disembodied electronic symbols into computer to 'stay in 'touch' with someone half the world away. Embodies social relations exist both as the context (the prior to circumstances), and as an outcome (a consequence) of given social formations, given systems through which we create and gain social meaning.

Alexandra (2005), in the book 'Embodying 'gender', the concept of body is identified through the lens of sociology and feminism. Embodiment and human experience share the common ground where different experiences and practices are related to the body. Diverse lived experiences. Howson examines that experiencing different embodiment is the cause for diverse lived experiences of of an individual's daily life. Thapan (2009) in her "Living the body: Embodiment, Womanhood and Identity in contemporary India", considers the linkage between embodiment, gender, and identity and how this point to the socially, emotionally, and individually constructed human body. She explores that everyone is embodied through their space in socio-cultural and political positions. So, she considers embodiment is experienced in our daily lives as lived and communicative bodies.

'The Lived 'Body' by Bendelow and Williams (1998), explores the dimensions of body in dealing with sociological theory. They discuss how the previous sociologist viewed the body. They discuss the bodily order by 'Douglas's 'symbolic' body, Foucault's 'discursive' body and Elias's 'civilised' body. They differ in terms of the nature of the human body they seek to analyse. In contrast to Douglas and Foucault, Elias offers a more subtle and sophisticated account of the dynamic interplay between biological and sociological factors across the long historical curve of the civilising process. According to Williams and Bendelow, Elias provides a more satisfactory foundation to build Sociology of embodiment. They also argued that the sociology of embodiment could not be defined based on nature/culture, public/private or reason/emotion.

In the edited book of Jonathan Ruthaerford, Identity: community Culture, difference; Homi Bhabha talks about the 'third space', where Bhabha says that the third space becomes the space of contradiction, repetition, ambiguity, and disavowal of colonial authority that does not allow for original signifiers and symbols in oppositional polarities. Shahnaz Khan uses this third space in her paper *Muslim Women: Negotiations in the Third Space* talks about Bhabha's theory of third space in Muslim women's lives. Jana Nakhal

also in his paper 'Women as space and woman in space: Relocating our bodies and Rewriting Gender in Space' says, "the capitalist patriarchal system we live under dictates our roles and relations in the place…" he also argues that women are subjugated within economic and social structures at home, in the street, and in cafes and suggest that both women and men living in developing countries that fulfil their needs.

1.5.6. Islamic Feminism

Margot Badran in her book, 'Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergence' (2009) has unlocked the stereotype which thought Islam and feminism to be contradictions to each other. In her book, she presents the feminism created by Muslim women over the ages and tends to explore the ideologies of Islam and secular feminist approaches that fit into Islamic ideologies.

The book, "Believing women in Islam: Unreading the patriarchal interpretations of the Quran" (2002), by Asma Barlas talks about the Quran that it has never discriminated men and women in terms of superiority and is against patriarchy. She also argued that it is not the Quran, but the interpretation of the Quran is patriarchal and urged the re-reading of the religious texts.

Leila Ahmed's "A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from Middle East to America" (2012), examines how veiling emerged from Egypt to United States. She also explores various factors on why women choose to veil. Ahmed also considered the historical background to be the reason behind the Islamic resurgence and re-veiling process of the 1970's in Egypt.

Suheir Abu Oksa Daoud in her article, Negotiating Space: The construction of a New Spatial Identity for Palestinian Muslim women in Israel (2017), talked about that in College education, especially in mixed cities, has increased Palestinian women's experiences, their national identities and in some cases their feminist awareness. In some cases, these experiences pose challenges when these women go back to their closed spaces and localities, they have to abide by social norms and lose some of the freedoms they enjoyed in the big cities during their college years.

In "Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Dichotomy", Carole Pateman views that the division between public and private in liberal societies is a hierarchical division that understands the private as subordinate and public as a higher form of activities. The economic and political activities outside the household are considered more important than the activities of nurturing and taking care.

Gad Saad, a western Behavioral scientist, in his article *Beauty Myth versus Veil: A Feminist Perspective*, talks about how western feminist like Naomi Wolf, Helen Razer and Germaine Greer hails veil as liberating. It is also being argued that veiling is not a symbol of oppression, but instead, male gazing on women is the sign of assault and oppression.

Marnia Lazreg, in her book *Questioning the veil,* analyses the culture of veiling and why women take up to veil themselves. She examines how veiling is passed from one generation to another, and finally, she concludes that women should not take up to veil, and she supports her argument with historical analysis and inconvenience of veiling. Oihana Marco, another anthropologist, in her article *An Ethnographic Approach to the Hijabization process: Some "mindful bodies" uncovered*, (2010) talks about the re-veiling process among British Muslim women to mark their identity as Muslim women. Many feminist thinkers like Fatima Mernissi (1985), Unni Wikan (1982) and Yasmin Alibhai-Brown (2014) considered veiling as a threat to women's liberalisation while some other feminists regarded veil as a mark of liberating women from western concept of beauty and consumtion ideology of western capitalist patriarchy.

Liberal feminist has looked *Hijab* as oppression, but many Muslim women view it as a matter of choice. Scholars like Fatima Mernissi in her work, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (1991) and the acclaimed Islamic feminist Amina Wadud through her *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* argued for re-reading historical Islam and challenged the androcentric interpretations of *Sharia*. They argued that the sweeping generalisation of symbolic representation/s ('hijab' or veil) of Muslim women as expressions of repressive structures of patriarchy is problematic. They have raised debates challenging patriarchal readings of Quran and Hadith (sayings of the Prophet). According to them it is not the religion and religious texts but its interpretation that allowed patriarchy to persist (Kynsilehto, 2008).

Sylvia Vatuk (2008), in her article Islamic Feminism in India: Indian Muslim women Activists and the Reform of Muslim personal Law says, the Islamic Feminist Movement may make some concrete progress toward remedying the consistent failure of the religious authorities to implement those provisions of Islamic law that were originally designed to protect women but are widely ignored in practice today. Seema Kazi in her Muslim Women in India: Minority Rights Group (1999) discusses that the polygamy among the Muslims is a much-debated argument legalised by *Shariah* but *Shariah* is therefore a historically conditioned document', combining both divine revelations and human intervention and was never intended to the blueprint for all future Muslim societies. Hanna Papanek in her article Purdah: Separate Worlds and Symbolic Shelter (2009) discusses that the purdah is a life experience of many south Asians both Muslims and Hindus and is societal norm of certain locations. This social system mainly minimises the interaction between women and men. While for Muslims seclusion begins at puberty, for Hindu's seclusion begins with marriage.

1.6. Methodology

My research journey started when I was asked by my guide as to my preference of study for my research, and I said that the gender issues and particularly on Muslim women. The interest in doing research on Muslim women is not something that suddenly got popped up, but rather it had been a passive interest that got accelerated with continuous engagement in my lifeworld. I am a Muslim woman going through many experiences that need to be explored. During my childhood, an incident occurred whereby an Assamese speaking Muslim woman who happened to be the researcher's, mother's friend was discussing the Bengali speaking Muslim women wearing *burqa*. She was asking my mother, " why these people wear *burqa* since they cannot show themselves to anyone?" This is a simple question that made me think that though the one talking about the burqa happened to be from the same religious background of the woman wearing the *burqa*. She did not know the implications of it being in the same religion. This made me think and was the first negotiation with the field much before the research started. I happened to be a resident in one of the villages which were studied. So, when I was asked about the research interest, I knew what I wanted to do. Due to the practicality of the lives of Muslim women and how they negotiate with themselves and the society the study needs to be carried out.

I carried out my fieldwork from the year 2015 to 2019. I did not find any problems locating myself among the Assamese speaking women community. This thought of being a Muslim will help me carry out my fieldwork smoothly was shattered when I visited the Bengali Muslim village. Interviewing the Bengali speaking Muslims in their village was a challenging work. While interviewing the Bengali speaking women, they always hesitated to open up and always looked at me with suspicion. Initially, I could not understand, so I took a community worker of village Bhujkhuwa Chapori who happened to be my father's friend to interview this section of women. Coming from the fieldwork, the community worker told me that the women thought me to be a government agent visiting villages to identify the migrants from Bangladesh and send them back to Bangladesh. Doing fieldwork among the Bengali Muslim women gave me a tough time since they did not open up and reveal their everyday life. So, I visited these women in their work place where they worked as domestic helps in suburban areas and casually started to interact with them. When they slowly started to recognize me, I accompanied them from their workplace to their home in the village, talking throughout the way. After that, I continuously visited them and had casual talks sipping tea in their backwards. It took almost a year for them and for me to interact freely and then start to note down their narratives.

Interviewing the Hindi speaking women had its own hardships. Firstly, because the housewives hesitated to talk to the strangers, interacting with them through my Hindi-speaking friend helped me a lot. Hindi-speaking Muslims were in both Barika Chuburi and Saikia Chuburi villages; I interacted with them through common friends and got along with them. Once these women became friendly, they did not allow me to leave their home without having meals. So the process of cooking meals again left me with little engagement to their everyday narratives. So I started visiting them hours after lunch when they casually sat resting in their couches. This time was most convenient in interacting with this section of women.

This study is mainly explorative and descriptive. Understanding the lived experiences and construction of self and identity of women requires looking at the subjective meanings given to lifeworlds, which can be explained through women's narratives. Though not in all the cases, as a Muslim woman from one of the villages, it gave an added advantage to interact with them. The primary data was collected through the ethnographic method as explained below.

Ethnography involves, the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions- in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). The first establishment of ethnography can be found in the pioneering work of polish born British anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski in in the Trobriand Island of Melanesia (1915) and the American anthropologist Margaret Mead whose first fieldwork was in Samoa (1925). Ethnography helped me to understand social phenomena from the 'inside', by observing and participating in social activities, by talking to people in their 'natural' settings and in collecting materials (photographs, texts, literature, statistics) which helped to develop an understanding of the social context in which social meanings and activities are embedded. The primary data of my research was collected through the ethnographic method, which involved participant observation, interviews, and discussions which took place in women gatherings like weddings, self-help group meetings and religious gatherings.

Harwati (2019) in her article talks about two main approaches in qualitative research which are ethnography and case study. She in her article discusses the similarities and differences of the two approaches. Ethnographic approach is related to study about relationships between people and several aspects of their life, such as socio-political, culture and history. The main purpose of the ethnographic approach in social sciences is to understand the relationship between people and their social environment (Hallet and Barber, 2014). The characteristic of this approach is close relationship between researcher and the researched. Case study is an approach, which involves studying individual cases in their real-life context for a long period of time. The case studied can be culture, society, community, organization, or phenomenon, such as beliefs, practices, or interactions (Harrison et. al., 2017). The purpose of case study varies, depending on its type.

Philosophical Perspective of Ethnographic approach: In order to understand philosophical perspective of the ethnographic approach, three dominant perspectives in social sciences will be outlined. It is important to note that the philosophical perspective of the ethnographic approach cannot be separated from one of those three dominant perspectives. There are three dominant perspectives in the social sciences, namely the positivist perspective, the interpretive perspective and the critical perspective, which have different perception of reality. Positivists argue that reality is everything can be seen

through the senses. It is 'out there', objective and governed by natural and fixed law (Shakouri, 2014; Harwati, 2019). Interpretive theorists maintain that reality is 'not out there' and can be found in the minds of human beings. Reality is objective, constructed by social interaction and internally experienced by members of society (Sarantakos, 2013; Harwati, 2019). Furthermore, interpretive perspective "is concerned with the emphatic understanding of human action rather than with the forces that deemed to act on it" (Bryman, 2004; Harwati, 2019). Critical theorists believe that reality is created by human beings, not by nature. There are powerful people who manipulate and persuade others to accept things and interpret them based on their own perspective. Among those three dominant perspectives, the ethnographic approach adopts the second one that is interpretive perspective. It is mentioned earlier that the main objective of the ethnographic approach in social sciences is to comprehend the relationship between people and their social environment.

Methodological Perspective of Ethnographic approach: Participant observation is considered as a central method of the ethnographic approach. This research conducted involved participant observation from the very beginning. It is often combined with other methods especially informal or unstructured interview. Participant observation means that ethnographer becomes part of the situation being studied in order to be able to feel the way people do in that situation. It is essential therefore, for the ethnographer to be actively involved in the respondents' daily lives. This method enables the ethnographer to depict what goes on, where and when a particular social phenomenon occurs, what and who are involved, how and why it happens (Gobo, 2011). In other words, participant observation can help the ethnographer to reveal reality behind the phenomenon happened in a social environment. Study of documents, for instance a life history is different. According to Rahamah et. al. (2008), the life history is the autobiography of a person that can be gained via interview and guided conversation. This technique, therefore, enables the ethnographer to obtain insights into the respondents' world-view and social relations (Harwati, 2019). The research conducted in the four villages involved participant observation companied by informal, unstructured interview. The active involvement helped me to understand the everyday lives of the respondents and how they construct their self and identity.

The ethnographic method involves the participant observation, interviews, and discussions which took place in women gatherings like weddings, self-help group meetings and also

religious gatherings. Secondary sources include elections, census reports, newspapers, books, journals, and magazines.

The universe of study is Sonitpur district in Assam, India. The data was collected from four villages. There were three Assamese speaking Muslim village, namely SaikiaChuburi Muslim village, BarikaChuburi, Beseria Muslim village and one Bengali Muslim village namely Bhujkhuwa Chapori. Beseria Muslim village is a Moria village (they speak Assamese). These Assamese-speaking Muslims also have Hindi-speaking Muslim populations except in the Beseria Muslim village. The initial requirement of a research is to identify the sampling method. All the types of probability and non-probability sampling have their own advantages and disadvantages. Since my research is qualitative, I used the purposive sampling method. Moreover, though my sample size is more than hundred, I still used this method since it helped me to gather in depth data on topics relating to my research questions and objectives. The data through in-depth interview was collected following the purposive sampling method and from 30 women respondents from each Assamese speaking Muslim women, Bengali speaking Muslim women, and Hindi speaking Muslim women. Another 30 Moria women respondents were interviewed from Beseria Muslim village. The ages of respondents were ranged from 16 to 75 years. Apart from these women, men were also interviewed like the village heads, community leaders, and the Imams and Maulabis of the villages. There are 120 in depth interviews and 10 discussions which are random interactions during self-help group meetings. There were no planned focused group discussions. The variables used selecting the samples are gender which is a woman's biological appearance along with her roles and norms followed by her. Age is another criteria since the life experiences of different age group are different to construct one's identity. Socio cultural background is another variable i.e, one's religion, beliefs, and practices. Other variables are exposure to public places, education, earning one's livelihood and relationship status. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and analysed in Chapters Three, Four and Five.

1.7. The Outline of the Chapters

The whole thesis is divided into six chapters. The first chapter is the introductory chapter which outlines the context and the research problem. This chapter focuses on the objectives, conceptual framework of the study and methods applied in conducting the research. This chapter includes the research questions to be sought through abductive

research strategy and a summarizing review of the major literature which forms the base of the study.

The second chapter provides with the field setting where the research is conducted. This chapter talks about the historical and socio-cultural setting where the research work was done. This chapter has a detailed description on the entry to the village, its demographic settings, and the oral history of the villages from the older community members and also through the literature. The chapter gives an ethnographic account of the four villages of Barika Chuburi village, Saikia Chuburi Muslim village, Beseria muslim village and Bhujkhuwa Chapori and their geographical location through maps. Collected data from these fields has been analysed and discussed in the three Chapters. Collected data on the construction and performance of Muslim women's self and identity through their everyday lives has been analysed.

The third chapter focuses on the interactional space available for the Muslim women in their domestic and public spaces. Public spaces are considered to be the areas occupied by large numbers of people where the socio-cultural, economic or political interaction takes place. The domestic spaces are considered to be private spaces, which involves intimacy, privacy, comfort, etc. Public spaces such as workplace are viewed as masculine spaces whereas private spaces like home are viewed as the female domain/domestic space. However, the private – public dichotomy has challenged long ago by feminist critiques.

In the studied villages among different categories of women, the lived experiences of domestic and public spaces interact with each other and are often overlaps. Beyond the linguistic and religious registries of these women the experiences need to be located in terms of intersectional and interactional social locations of Class (of the family at one level and autonomy/control of economic resources at another level), Sectarian ideologies, Geography (the physical space of the community and it's culture-urban/rural/suburban/ghettoised spaces), Age (youth/ middle aged/ elderly), Education, Employment & Exposure (to the world outside the home) Immigrant status/doubtful citizen and the Historicity of their community.

Chapter four is the second analysis chapter from the field. This chapter looks into the material body space of the Muslim women through dress, veil and makeup. Dress is vital to the understanding of body in context to the representation and the ways of viewing the

body. Without the body, a dress is identified as a piece of cloth which has no meaning. It is the body, on which the dress is adorned and provides meaning to the human agency. In such situation, the dress becomes the embodiment of culture and identity for the community. The dominant interpretation of Islamic shariat suggests that women have to cover their entire body and not invite men's attraction except for her husband. For them, the women's sexuality is a threat to the social order and therefore controlling sexuality become important for the social order. A burqa is a dress that covers the whole body of the individual, and it emerged as a pan Islamic dress code for women worldwide. But in the studied villages Burqa as a compulsory dressing style in the public spaces prevails only among the upper-class Hindi speaking women. There are many fluidities and hybrid forms of dressing patterns available among the Assamese speaking Muslim women. The older women often clad in a *mekhela chador* whenever they go out in public and claim their Assamese identity loudly. However, looking at the nuances of draping the *mekhela chador,* also enable her to claim her Islamic identity in their own way by partly covering their head. The younger generation are open to wear any kind of 'fashionable' dress available in the market. The choice and style also loudly talk about their multiple social locations of class, age, neighborhood, workplace, etc. Beyond the religious prescription of complete covering of the body through *burqa* or similar dresses, the field offered multiple contexts of hybrid performances of dress.

Chapter five is the third analysis chapter from the field. This chapter looks into the relational space of Muslim women through marriage and divorce. This chapter also discusses how Islam is being practiced among women through their marriage and divorce. These women are exposed to different and multiple value systems. Muslims, while performing their religion, turn to the agencies of religion like the Maulabis and Muftis. They interpret the religious texts so that they can solve their problems and perform their religion. There is a dominant argument that the position of women in a society is always determined by the religious manuscripts and setting up of religious and cultural norms through institutions. Islamic *fiqh* and *shariah* are solely under the domain of religious clerics. The common Muslim men and women who generally thrive on being good believers and always want to follow the Quran and Sunna depend on the clerics who may provide them with proper guidance for a happy and blessed life on the earth and hereafter.

Marriage and divorce are the sole authority of the men given by the Shariyat, but there are conditions. Islam allows divorce if circumstances warrant or necessitate it, indeed reluctantly neither liking nor recommending it. There are different households in all three categories of Muslims. Bengali speaking Muslims have different household following different patriarchal values. Polygamy is one such practice that gives us a glimpse of the patriarchal values followed by this community. These practices imply self and identity of women in this community. In all three categories of women, interviews showed polygamous relationships only among the Bengali Speaking Muslims. The polygamous structure is being embodied in the lives of this category of women and that it is a common trend which occurs in their lives.

Chapter six is the concluding chapter where a brief summary of each of the chapters are presented and major findings of the research are analysed and discussed.

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