

Chapter 2

Locating the Muslims in Assam and the Field

2.1. Fragmented Histories of Muslims in Assam

It is vital to understand the historicity of Muslims in Assam to understand the lived experiences of Muslim women in Assam. However, the production of knowledge about Muslims is insufficient, or there are still silences in the histories of Muslims in Assam (Saikia, 2017). Assam 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 *aryanization* and with the rise and strengthening of Ahomⁱ rule in the Brahmaputra valley. The idea of a composite Assamese or Assamiya jati 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 16th 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 centuryⁱⁱ and continued to the 14th century, which resulted in a sizeable Muslim staying back in Assam. These Muslims got assimilated with the larger section of the people with time. In an article, Udayon Misra, writes about the demography of Assamese society, comprised of "Aryanised Hindus, the Plains tribal and the Assamese Muslims" (Misra, 1999, p.99). Yasmin Saikia, thus, argues that 'recuperating and rethinking the history of Muslims in Assam is of particular importance today because the Muslim experience

provides a window to Assam's blended and fused history – *xanmiholi*' (Saikia, 2017, p.111).

The origin and migration history of the Muslims in Assam can be traced back from the thirteenth century to the seventeenth century, when many new Muslims started to settle down in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. There were mainly four factors in the growth of the Muslims in Assam: (a) Muslim invasions; (b) propagation and conversion; (c) coming of Muslim artisans and learned men and (d) migration (Das, 2014, p.96). Available evidence shows that Assam has been invaded ample times by Muslims. The first Muslims came during 1205 A.D. when Muhammad Bakhtiyar attacked Assam, followed by other Muslim invasions into Assam. Throughout the centuries, many Muslim traders and travellers came into contact with the region. However, the Turkish invasion of Kamrup has had a significant impact on the followers of Islam of the then Brahmaputra valley of Assam. The Turkish attack has also influenced other Muslim invaders, particularly from north India, to capture the then resourceful Brahmaputra valley of Assam (Goswami, 1922, pp. 158-160). 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 included in ancient *Kamrupa*. Again in 1530, the Turbak invaded *Kamrupa* but was defeated by Suhungmung (Gait, 1963; Barpujari, 2007), and later the war prisoners were settled down in the eastern valley of the Brahmaputra with a profession of brass. And it is claimed that they are the first Moria Muslims of Assam (Das, 2014, p.97; Ahmed, 2010, p.89). In the early seventeenth century, during the reign of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan (1636–1707 ce), in 1638–39 ce, Kamrup, including the modern city of Guwahati, became 'the undisputed possession of the Mughals (Saikia, 2017, p. 117). In between, Mughals had established an alliance with the Koch and brought around 10, 000 to 12, 000 soldiers with them. The soldiers later started marrying non-Muslim Assamese women and assimilated with the region's cultural life (Ahmed, 2014, pp.8-9).

The Battle of Itakhuli of 1682 between the Mughals and the Ahom forces has also brought some Muslims to Assam. In the Battle of Itakhuli in September 1682, the Ahom forces chased the defeated Mughals nearly one hundred kilometres back to the Manas river. The Manas then became the Ahom-Mughal boundary until the British occupation (Richards, 1995, p.247). Edward Gait noted that the prisoners who were taken captive were the

earliest Muslim settlers in the eastern valley of Brahmaputra. It must be pointed out in the conflict between the two powers of the Muslims and the Ahoms, the Ahom king Chakradhwaj Singha (1663-1669) appointed Lachit Barphukan against the Mughal army led by Ram Singh. 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 in 1682. From 1198 to 1682, the country had cultivated different political, economic, and cultural ties with the Turks, Pathans and the Mughals. This, however, brought the Ahoms of eastern Assam and the Mughals in close contact and different types of cultural exchanges followed (Saikia, 2017, p.117). Other local historical writings have also documented Muslims' presence in Assam in different periods (Bhuyan, 1947; Saikia, 1997, 2005; Bora, 1936).

Kar (1980) noted that the immigration of Muslims from East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) to Assam was started in the early twentieth century after the partition of Bengal (1905-11). It has been documented that Muslim settlers arrived during the British colonial rule and were located in the colonial market towns of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia. They speak Assamese and are called *julaha* by the Axomia Musalman (Muslim Assamese). New groups of Muslims from the east and north India arrived after 1947, but they are not linguistically integrated with the older communities of up-country settlers (Saikia, 2017, p118). And the colonial history suggests that the colonial government has encouraged the immigration of Muslim peasants mostly to increase land revenue and allowed them to settle in the wasteland areas of the Brahmaputra valley. During the colonial regimes, they were mostly settled down in the Goalpara district, in foothills areas of the then Karbi hills of Nagaon district, Barpeta subdivision of the then Kamrupa district, and in the Mongoldoi subdivision of the erstwhile Darrang district (Sharma, 2012, p.296). Weiner noted that Muslim migration in Assam was started from 1914 onwards. Initially, they 'moved into the Brahmaputra Valley from East Bengal...they reclaimed thousands of acres of land, cleared vast tracts of the dense jungle along the south bank of the Brahmaputra, and occupied flooded lowlands all along the river' (Weiner, 1983, p.283).

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 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.

During 1930s and 1940s the then Saadulla government has facilitated Muslim migration into Assam. 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. Monirul Hussain categorised them into four groups: (i) Asamiya Muslims, (ii) Na-Asamiya Muslims, (iii) Muslims of the Barak Valley, and (iv) North Indian Muslims living in Assam (Hussain, 1993). The second category of Muslims in Assam, who are known as Na-Asamiya Musalman, means Neo-Asamiya Muslims. In Assam, they are also known as Pamua Musalman (the farming Muslims), Charua Musalman (the Muslims of river islands or banks seasonally sub-merged into river waters), Miya Musalman and Mymensinghia Musalman (Muslims from Mymensingh district of erstwhile East Bengal) (Ibid, 1993). 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, p.11). With these two waves of migration from East Bengal, the proportion of Muslims in Assam's population increased from 16 percent in 1911 to 25 percent in 1951. The Muslim share in Assam's population remained steady at

one-fourth in the 20 years between 1951 and 1971 but, after that, it rose to 28 percent in 1991, to 31 percent in 2001 (Borooah, 2013, p.45) and in 34 percent 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 moved to Assam during the first part of the 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. And today, in place of history, Muslims have become a political category. The spectral haunting of the alien 'Bangladeshis' who are deemed the representatives of the Muslim problem in Assam is generating fear, distrust and even hatred. Violence has become the tool for finding solutions to the enemy Muslim (Saikia, 2017, p.111).

2.2. Universe: Sonitpur District

During the British rule, the Darrang district with the headquarters in Tezpur was an important district of Assam, and the same administration set up continued even after independence. In 1983, the Darrang district was divided. Tezpur Sadar subdivision was named Sonitpur District, and Mangaldoi subdivision was known as Darrang district. Sonitpur is situated in the north bank of river Brahmaputra (Longitude 92° 57` east - 93° east and Latitude 26 ° 50` north – 27° 1` north). Sonitpur district has Arunachal Pradesh as a neighbour in the north, river Brahmaputra in its south, Biswanath district in its East and Darrang district in its west (Fig. 2.1). Sonitpur covers an area of 5324sq.km., and total forest area of 935.38sq k. Sonitpur has two sub-divisions Tezpur and Dhekiajuli, 5 circles or Tehsils (Tezpur, Dhekiajuli, Thelamara, Chariduar and Naduar), 16 number of Mouzas, 7 community development (C.D.) blocks, 7 Anchalik Panchayats (intermediate Panchayats), 82 Gram Panchayats, 1615 villages.

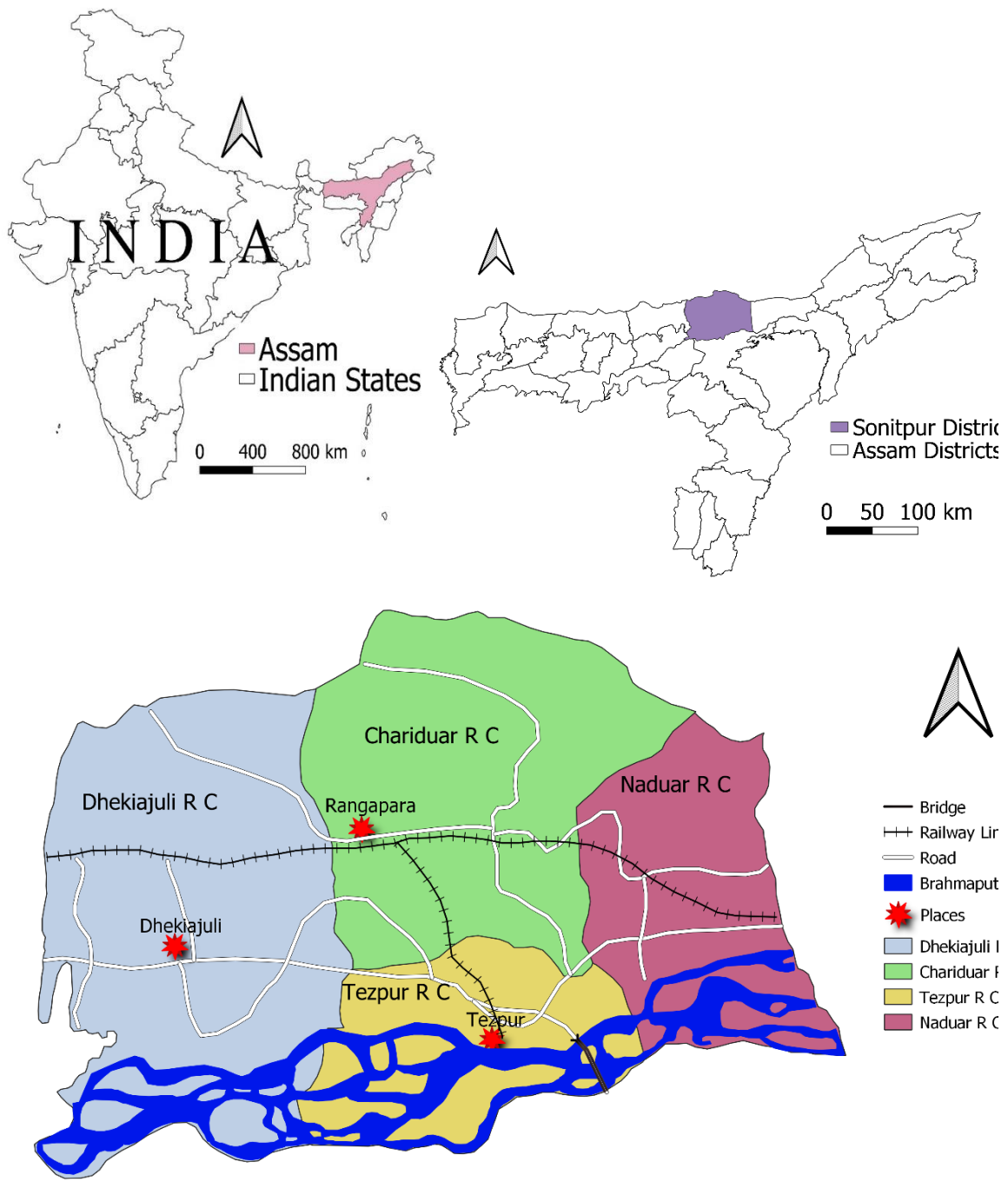


Fig. 2.1: Studied District Map: Sonitpur District

2.3. The villages

Fieldwork was carried out initially in three villages namely, Barika Chuburi village, Saikia Chuburi Muslim village and Bhujkhuwa Chapori. Later one more village of Beseria Muslim village has been added as a field site to incorporate the diverse contexts of Assamese speaking Muslims.

2.3.1. Barika Chuburi Village

Barika Chuburi village is located in the Tezpur block of Sonitpur district (Fig. 2.2). Tezpur is the nearest town of this village. This village has no school and hospital or dispensary inside the village as it is near to the town area it has access to the government schools as well as the private school facilities. It could also access the Government Civil Hospital and other private hospitals. The village has a mosque (Fig. 2.3) and graveyard of their own.

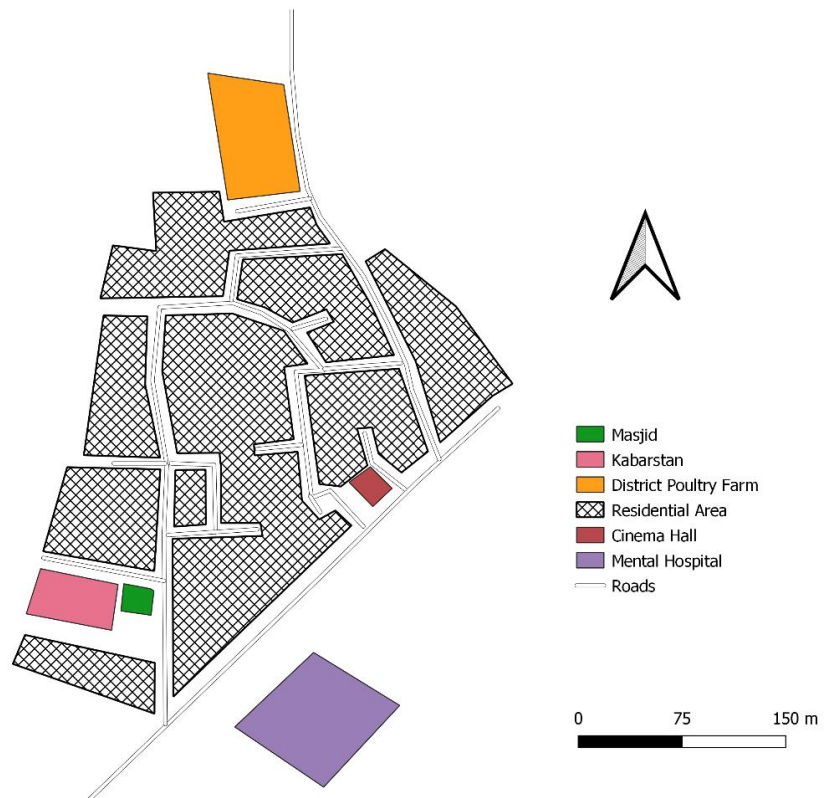


Fig 2.2: Social Map of village Barika Chuburi



(a). Entry to the village Street



(b). Village Mosque

Fig: 2.3: Village Barika Chubri

In Barika Chuburi village majority of people are Assamese Muslims. But after independence, many North Indian Muslims came for business and jobs, and they found a Muslim village started to settle in this place. The total population, according to 2011 census, is 7911 people, of which 4023 are male, and 3888 are female. Most of the residents in the village are government employees. Some of them are in first-grade jobs, many of them are lawyers and shopkeepers engaged in selling of cosmetics, jewellery, clothes and shoes in the town.

Entry to the village:

I was born and brought up in this village, and almost all the respondents have been known since childhood. I do not stay in the village for the last eight years as I shifted my residence to Napaam after my marriage. However, I often visit my parents in the village. So, this helped me get in-depth interviews relating to the respondent's private and public lives. The village starts through a narrow street, entering away from the main road, which opens to a big white Mosque on the left side of the street. The houses are both multi-storey and are of truss roofed. But they are all made of concrete. The street takes a 'U' turn with houses on both sides and opens on another narrow street; the left side ends up to a District Poultry Farm, and the right side of the street reaches the main road. The majority of people are Assamese Muslims.

It was sunny morning in the mid of September 2015 when I started my first interview from this village and went to an Assamese speaking Muslim woman named Zerina Begum. Though I knew most of the women in the village, the sudden visit to her place in the early morning was surprising. At first, she had no idea why I came to her house, but with a little conversation exchange, she became quite comfortable. I told her that I wanted her help in my research, and she agreed right away. We had tea together, and she was the one who accompanied me to other households in the village. The interviews were interesting but were difficult. Since I am from that village, when people see me visiting them, after a bit of talk, they rush to the kitchen to prepare a meal for me and make sure I have food before leaving their house. So, I had to reach out to them in their kitchens all the time.

2.3.2. Saikia Chuburi Muslim Gaon

The Saikia Chuburi Muslim Gaon has a population of 4937 of which 2436 are male and 2501 are females (Fig. 2.4-2.6). The occupation of the people of this village is cultivation. Though most of the villagers are Government employees and do small business of grocery shops, has autos etc, most are also engaged in cultivation along with their jobs and business. Two households are involved in butchering business. This is an Assamese Muslim village, but there are few households of Hindi speaking Muslims. But there are many Bhojpuri people who stay in small huts in rents and earn their livelihood through mattress/quilt making and are barbers.



Fig. 2.4: Social Map of Saikia Chuburi Muslim Gaon



(a). Village entrance route from NH-15A



(b). Village Street

Fig. 2.5: Saikia Chuburi Muslim Gaon (village)



Fig. 2.6: Saikia Chuburi Muslim Gaon Mosque

I did the first interview in this village accompanied by one of my aunts. I visited my aunt during the winters. It was cold, so my aunt and I were sitting beside a fireplace to make ourselves warm when one of her neighbours visited her. She then introduced me to the village woman, and she invited me to her house the next day. After that one household led to the other. Like Barika chuburi, this village too has no dispensary and school since this village is situated near the urban area where we find Baptist Christian Hospital, BJ Hospital, and Times Hospital. We can also find private and government schools in this urban setting. Tezpur Chariali Girl's high school, Tezpur Chariali Girl's higher secondary schools, and Smart School Junior are some of the schools situated in this area. This Saikia Chuburi Muslim village follows the Wahabi ideology of Islam.

2.3.3. Bujkuwa Chapori village

The main language of this village is Bengali. Bhujkuwa Chapori is a village Bengali Muslim Village that has a population of 4232 people, of which 2074 are female, and 2158 are male (Fig. 2.7 and 2.8). The main occupation of the people of this village is vegetable

sellers, grocery shop keepers, auto drivers, selling of second-hand clothes, domestic helpers, wage labourers, butchers and teachers in Madrasas. This village also has people who work as contractors. This field was not like the other two villages mentioned above. Before entering this village, I interviewed a domestic helper in her workplace. At first, she did not disclose her identity and feared that I would be a government agent trying to send her to Bangladesh. It took a while to make her understand that I am a researcher and would like to know more about their everyday life. Leaving aside her initial reluctance, she agreed to help. She was the one who took me to the village where I interviewed other women. With time, she even brought some women to my house to interview them. Most of the households in the village are poor. They are from the Char Chapori areas near Napaam whose lands are washed away by the river Brahmaputra. So, they took shelter in this village. This village has Madrasas and a health centre. This madrasa are funded by the government and also supported by donations by the resident communities.



Fig. 2.7: Social Map of Bujkhuwa Chapori village



(a). Village Market Street



(b). Village Mosque



(c). Azad Memorial High Madrasa

Fig. 2.8: Bhujkuwa Chapori Gaon (Village)

2.3.4. Beseria Muslim Gaon

The Beseria area comprises 14 villages, of which only one village is Muslim. In local parlance, this Muslim village is known as Moria village (Fig. 2.9). It is also called Sopora Chuburi and has a population of 3329 of which 1657 are female and 1672 are male. This entry of this area is through a lane from the side of the national highway. The namghar (prayer house for the Assamese Hindu community) is on the left side of the lane while entering the area (Fig. 2.10). The first part of this area is the village Konaibara Chuburi. Moving forward is the Beseria Muslim gaon of that locale, then comes the Beseria Phukhuria and after that is the Beseria Modarguri and so on. The houses in these villages are situated very close to one another and in a straight line without a proper demarcation where Hindu and Muslim communities share soft boundaries. This Muslim village is a Moria village and has many converts from the Hindu Nath community.

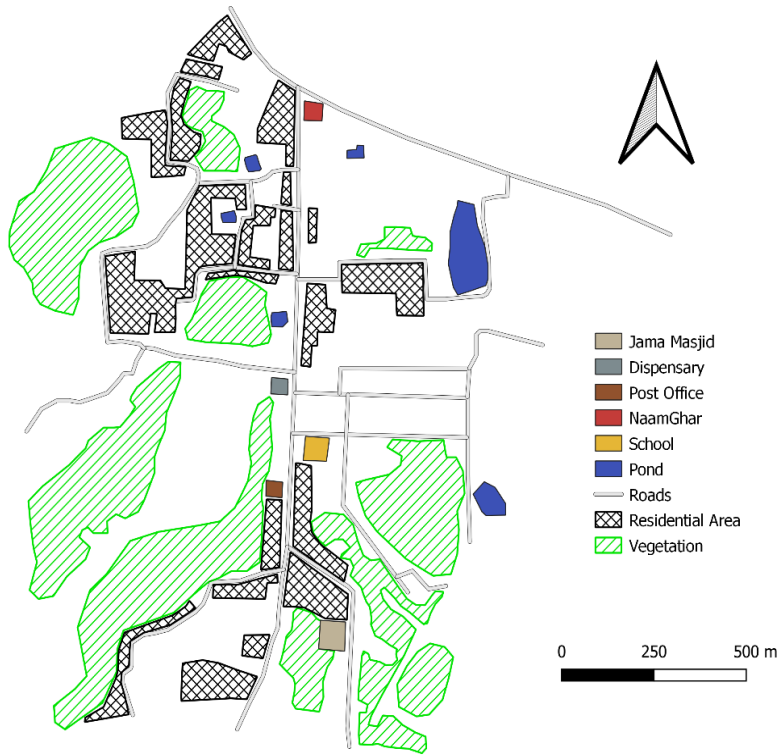


Fig. 2.9: Social Map of Beseria Muslim Gaon



(a). Entrance route to the Beseria Muslim Gaon through NH 15



(b). Naam Ghar in the Entrance of the village



(c). Village Mosque



(d). Village Dispensary

Fig. 2.10: Beseria Muslim Gaon (Village)

My first interview from this village was with a man named Phukan Ali. He is a man from Moria community who happened to be my father's friend and visited my home. He was 72 years of age, and it was through this man that I got to know the village and did the rest of the interviews with his help. He described the time of Babri Masjid demolition. He said that the *Hindu* boys then from Beseria Hindu Gaon protected the village Masjids. The Muslim boys from the Beseria Muslim Gaon guarded the Mandirs of the Beseria Hindu Village. The closeness of both the community was possible only because they share the same historical background of Assamese nationalism. According to the oral history provided by the Phukan Ali, the name *Moriais* was given to this community because they used to worship Devi Manasha, also known as Maroi puja, before converting to Islam were called *maroiya* but later the *maroiya* became *Moria*.

2.4. Ideologies

These villages are guided by their own ideological thought, and its ideology is determined by the thought which the majority of the people in the villages follow. The main ideologies that were seen in these villages are the Barelvi ideology and the Wahhabi ideology. These ideologies are important to know because, men first follow these ideological thoughts in a particular village and through men, these thoughts are brought to the household where

women to a extent tries to follow it and through this process of learning and performing through these thoughts in her everyday life helps her constructing her 'self'. The village Barika Chuburi follows the Barelvi ideology, Saikia Chuburi Muslim village follows the Wahhabi ideology, the Moria Village, Beseria Muslim village follow the Barelvi ideology, and the Bhukhuwa Chapori follow the Wahabbi ideology. It is important to know how these ideologies work to understand the construction of identity among Muslim women. The main three ideologies are followed by major three countries. Saudi Arabia follows the *Wahabi* ideology which is also known as *Ahle-Hadees*, Iran follows the *Shia Islamism* ideology and Taliban which is in power in Afganistan also follows the *Deobandi* Ideology. These three ideologies are the radical ideologies of Islam. Countering these ideologies is the Ahle Sunnat ideology which is followed by the village Barika Chuburi and Beseria Muslim village.

2.4.1. Wahabi

Wahhabism is a Sunni Islamic set of guidelines and a movement that originated in Saudi Arabia in the 18th century by Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahab (1703-1792). The thoughts of this ideology is an ultraconservative and fundamentalist form that is meant to restore the pure monotheistic (tawheed) worship of Allah. This ideology is strict to the extent of not standing (*kiam*) even in respect of the Prophet while organising any *mawlid*s, a term used to organise Prophet's birthday celebration. Still, this term *mawlid* is also used for any public gathering organised for praying together. Standing for the Prophet is considered *shrik*, (associating partners with Allah). During such public gatherings, the people following this ideology do not stand for the Prophet because they view standing for the Prophet as controversial in the path of achieving the end of *tawheed*. This ideology in India is taught in the Darul Uloom Islamic School in Deoband, which is in the Saharanpur District of Uttar Pradesh in India. The Tablighi Jamaat also propagates the ideology of Wahhabism. The village Barika Chuburi do not allow Tablighi Jamaat people to enter the village since its radical views will jeopardise the already following ideology and their way of life. Tablighi Jamaat roots lie in the Deobandi version of jurisprudence.

2.4.2. Ahle Sunnat Ideology

Jamaat Ahle Sunnat is an organisation in Pakistan that proliferate the ideology of Barelvi in India. Though it is a sunni organisation, it also spreads the doctrine of Sufism. This is

also a sunni ideology which thrive to walk in the path of the Caliphs, the Sahaba (companions of the Prophet), the Ahl e Bait (family members of the Holy Prophet), the Tabieen (those who have seen and learned from the Sahabas) and Tab ut Tabeen (those who have seen and learned from the Tabieen) Mohadiseen (the narrators of the teaching of the Prophet), the Aimm e Mujtahideen (the four great scholars of Islamic law and jurisprudence) and the Auliya e Kamileen (the teaching of the Muslim Sufi Saints), by holding any one of the four schools of thought of Hanafee, Hannabali, Safee and Maliki. The ideology of Ahle Sunnat do not mind in celebrating birthdays (*Mawlid*s) of Prophets and the birthdays of Auliyas and so they do not mind in celebrating Christmas with their friends as it is the birthday of Prophet Jesus. On the other hand, the followers of *wahabbism* consider it as shirk.

The villages following these different ideologies find it challenging to intermingle within them. They may be from the same religion and Sunni background, but they do not prefer marriages with people following different ideologies. These ideologies take an important part in their lives in constructing their self and identity.

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ⁱPrior to the advent of the Ahoms, the western part of early Assam (referred to as lower Assam by the British) consisted of several tribal kingdoms and territories. There is a little account on the internal conditions of Brahmaputra valley in 13th century. For sixty years after the copper plate inscription of Vaidya Deb, there were no available records regarding the condition of Kamrupa. The Ahoms, entered the eastern corner of Brahmaputra valley in the 13th century and their appearance changed the entire course of Assam history (Gait 1963: 38). Gait (1963) in his book "A History of Assam" explained that the buranjis of Ahoms holds that a line of Chutia Kings ruled the country east of the Subansiri and the Disang, excluding a part of the south and south-east, where several small Bodo tribes enjoyed independence. In the west there was a Kachari kingdom on the south bank of Brahmaputra which extended to the half of Nagong district. There were a number of petty chiefs called Bhuiyas in the west of the Kacharis in the south bank, and of the Chutias in the north. Each was independent of the others but whenever there was any kind of threat, they joined their forces against that enemy. The Bhuiyas were ruling north of the Brahmaputra and east of the Chutiya kingdom at the time when Ahom entered Assam.

ⁱⁱAs there is little account of Assam during 13th century, so a clear picture of the internal situation during the first Muslim invasion could not be brought but it is assumed that the then Governor of Bihar, Muhammad Bin Bakhtier passed through ancient Kamrupa in 1202 A.D. to invade Tibet but it has been considered that he might be defeated in Assam either by Vallabha Deb or by his successor as there is no available knowledge since sixty years after the copper plate inscription of Vaidya Deb (Gait, 1963; Barpujari, 2007).

