CHAPTER 2

Arrival of Islam in Barak Valley and Locating the Muslim Women in the field

2.1 Introduction

Since its inception Islam is understood to have been a missionary religion. Chowdhury (1928) narrates that Muslims do not practice their faith privately and hence, each time Muslims travel, they take their religion with them as he believes that they are 'zealous preachers of their faith' (1928, p. 147). He further says that the reason Islam made its permanent foothold is that it did not rely on the power of sword but on the peaceful penetration of shop-owners, camel-drivers, beggars, rich and poor (Chowdhury, 1928, p. 147-148). The simple creed of Islam has captured people's heart and through the peaceful voluntary preaching by its supporters it has spread in different parts of the world - from the land of Arab to Bengal. Verily, Eaton (1993) has observed that after the Arabs, Bengali Muslims constitute the second largest ethnic population in the world (Eaton, 1993, p. XXII).

With the passage of time, Islam as a religion, whose birthplace is in desert Arab land, spread to other parts of the globe. As in most parts of the world, in India, Islam made its headway through the state and non-state actors such as invaders and rulers, saints and maritime traders. The advent of Islam in India must not be read in a piecemeal basis through the lens of military and political conquest. The existing socio-economic and ecological factors operating in the vast region, too played its part, for its solid establishment in Indian soil (Eaton, 1993).

Prior to the advent of Muslim rule in India, the social conditions of the inhabitants of the people living in the realm of Indian society, as historians suggest, was characterised by Vedic principle of exclusiveness, segregation and purity and pollution. The Aryan civilization of the north-west followed institutional religion, Hinduism. However, people living in Bengal practised non-ceremonial religion, Buddhism. Nonetheless, Buddhism declined in the region due to internal rift, absence of political/royal patronage as well as ritualistic modification of the Hindu beliefs and practices (Islam & Islam, 2020, p. 114). Thus, the previously dominated Buddhist region of Bengal came under the influence of

caste ridden Hindu Brahmans and other high caste Hindus of the 11th century who continued to impose orthodoxy Brahminical rule of caste rigidities and persecute Buddhist (Rahman, 2019, p.7-8). They continued to rule Bengal till Bakhtiyar Khilji, the Turkish warrior conquered north-western Bengal in the 13th century. The persecuted Buddhist and other low caste found its respite in the egalitarian principles of Islam and their concept of oneness of God (Ahsan, 1994).

The first Muslims that came to India were Arab traders in the southern coast of India. Around the same time, other Muslim Arab traders landed on the western coast of India and the locals warmly received them. In the south Indian coast, early expansion of Islam took place because of economic and political factors (Fanselow, 1989).

Nevertheless, the global commercial interactions of the Muslim traders were not limited to the coastal region, it also had economic connectivity with Bengal[1]. The archaeological discovery of three coins - gold and silver issued by Abbasid Caliph - one in Paharpur in Rajshahi (Bangladesh) and two in Mainamati in Comila (Bangladesh) (Karim, 1959, p. 18) testifies that prior to Mughal conquest of Bengal, early Arab traders or preachers has brought this in the south-eastern Bengal in the 8th or 9th century (Rahim, 1959). During the 8th and 9th century, the Arabs were most formidable in sea-route activities in the entire world. They navigated in all directions by sea and reached in distant countries of the west and east. Their trade and commerce across the Indian Ocean expanded so much that the Bay of Bengal transformed into an Arab lake (Rahim, 1959, p. 37-38). Adding to this, historical writings also suggested that Muslims had trade connectivity with Bengal during

[1] Bengal is the English term given by British rulers. The term 'Bengal' is derived from Persian word Bangalah given by Muslim rulers (Rahman, 2019). There is no doubt that with each ruler expanding their empire, lost empire got included in their territory. In the earliest times of history, the whole of Bengal covers the pre-partition Bengal, which is present day West Bengal (India), its neighbouring areas - Bihar, Barak Valley and Bangladesh. The area of Bengal before the Muslim conquest was divided into petty kingdoms with different names under different rulers (Murshid, 2016, cited in Rahman, 2019, p. 11). The name Gaur was 'occasionally' used to refer to the whole territory of Bengal (Rahim, 1959, p. 2). However, there exists differences of opinion to this, as Murshid (2016) notes Khilji Turkish forces captured Gaur and not Bengal (cited in Rahman, 2019, p. 10). The names of the places of Bengal during ancient period under different rule is determined by its geographical configuration of Bengal. For instance, Muslim rulers in their early days of rule in Bengal referred to the Eastern and Southern Bengal as Bangalah (Rahim, 1959, p. 2-4). The common name Bengal or Bangalah denoting all the territories of Bengal - north, south, west and east came into use in the middle of 14th century under the Mughal King, Sultan Shams-al-Din Ilyas Shah (ibid.). It was under his leadership that the entire region of Bengal - Gaur, Pundrabardan or Barendra, Satgaon, Samatata, Harikhela, Banga was unified under one administrative territory which later paved way to Akbar's creation of Subha Bangalah and British Bengal (Rahman, 2019, p. 11).

the rule of a Hindu monarch. Rahim (1959) quoting the author of *Tabakat-i-Nasiri,* Minhaj-ud-din, narrated that Bhaktiyar Khilji with his eighteen (18) horsemen disguised themselves as horse traders entered the King Lakshmana Sena's fort; the documentary evidence indicates that the route to Bengal hinterland was not unknown to Muslim traders and businessmen. Not only the traders and merchants, but Muslim saints also entered Bengal on many occasions for preaching purpose (Rahim, 1959, p. 47). In the accounts of Arab geographers, commercial sea-port, *Samandar* was frequently mentioned which is later identified by one section of historian as Chittagong port on the coast of Bengal; other section identify as island of Sandwip (Rahman, 2019, p. 5) where the Muslim traders of Arab, Persian and Abyssinian regions not only carried on their business along the coastal regions, but few also permanently settled there (Rahim, 1959, p. 41-43). Other than this, the name Chittagong originated from Arabic word, *Shat-al-Ganga* or bank of Ganga which suggests early contact with Arab merchants (Rahim, 1959, p. 43). All these marked events - discovery of coins, presence of Muslim saints, and settlement of Arab traders took place long before the successful military coup of Mohammad Bin Bakhtiar Khilji of Bengal in 1204.

By the beginning of 18th century, Muslim rule ended in Bengal. The population census of 1872, 1881 and 1891 conducted by the British administrators revealed a startling data of large-scale presence of Muslims in Bengal Province (Rahman, 2019). James Wise, a colonial officer wrote that 1872 census data revealed the immense number of followers of Muhammadan religion in Lower and Eastern Bengal (Eaton, 1993).

The spread of Islam in Bengal was neither patronized by the ruler in power, nor was intended for the conversion of people to Islam, by force or other means. Richard M. Eaton (1993) who examined the Islamic proselytization in Bengal in the context of his frontier theory described that the process of Islamization in Bengal is more an agrarian evolution. Eaton summarizes this cultural phenomenon by writing in his book, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier (1204-1760)*:

> By the 17th and 18th centuries, the supreme bearer of Islamic civilization in Bengal was the peasant community of the eastern frontier and not the urban ashraf. Bengal's premodern period commenced with the agrarian growth and Islamization which were products of various forces. Certainly, the cultural accomodation achieved between 1342 and 1599 contributed to the ultimate

> Islamization of the delta. This period opened with Bengal's first independent Muslim dynasty of Sultan Shams al-Din Ilyas Shah and closed with the death of Isa Khan, the delta's last successful independent ruler before the rule of Mughal. (Eaton, 1993, p. 306)

Eaton interpreted the spread of Islam in deltaic or Bengal region in terms of its existing 'frontier zones' like political frontier, agrarian frontier, Islamic frontier and Sanskritic frontier (1993, p. XXIII). He analysed the map of Bengal from the period between 1548-1779 C.E. pointing out the direction of the shifting river channels of Bengal. As a consequent of this shift in riverbed, lots of new alluvial fertile land came into being in southern and eastern Bengal, suitable for wet rice cultivation (Eaton, 1993, p. 194-198). The advancement of wet rice cultivation in the deltaic region brought about drastic transformation in the economy and culture of Bengal. On the one hand, this attracted migrants from the north-west of delta. On the other hand, the agrarian process of forest clearing and land reclamation into formerly dense, wild forest hinterland received its boast under the aegis of Mughal patronage. The Mughal rulers entrusted the task of cultivating the yet uncultivated marshy thick jungles to the charismatic figures of Islam *pir* (saint) or *mullah* (holy man); with the main state sponsored objective to raise the land revenue from the arable land and the process was never intended to the spread of Islam. Moreover, in the process of cutting and clearing forests for cultivation purpose, these grassroots charismatic forest figure mobilized the forest dwelling inhabitants - aboriginal communities, lesser castes people, to the fold of impenetrable agriculturally undeveloped region. Additionally, the land grants, *madad-i-maash* issued by the royal patronage are revenue free estates which are utilized in establishing and maintaining the expenses of mosques, shrines and their dependents (Eaton, 1993). Furthermore, he suggested that the community building mechanisms as laid down in the Mughal land grant had profound impact in disseminating the religion of Islam among the local populations of Eastern Bengal. The demographic patterns that evolved subsequently from these social processes suggests that the 'non-Muslim labour force' linked themselves to the Islamic institutions (Eaton, 1993). Additionally, Islam in Bengal is characterised by the assimilation and accommodation of local cultural practices with the Islamic cultural practices (Eaton, 1993, p. 268-303).

Thus, the arrival of Muslim saints and Muslim rulers of different racial and ethnic groups in Bengal at different period of their rule, officially opened the gates of Bengal to numerous foreign-origin Muslim immigrants from the Muslim world who later settled in Bengal (Rahman, 2019, p. XIII). This could be reasonable to suggest that being a former part of Sylhet region of Eastern Bengal - Karimganj witnessed similar experience on the spread of Islam.

The Bengali people who constitute majority of the people of Barak Valley speak a local Bengali dialect called Sylheti. Rahman (2019) notes that the common people of Bengal spoke the language Bengali. It is yet to be ascertained since when the Bengali settlement started to develop in this valley (Bhattacharjee, 1991). Yet in case of literary activities, it was the Muslim rulers who created a conducive environment – provided encouragement and royal patronage to the poets and authors for the flourishing of the Bengali language; prior to Muslim rule in Bengal, the language was looked down upon by the Brahminical class who encouraged Sanskrit as pure language (Rahman 2019, p. 15-18). It is to be noted that, in this connection, the names of the rivers, hills and places resemble with Bengal. Besides, the epigraphic and royal records of the Mughal, Tripura and Dimasa rulers were maintained in Bengali (Bhattacharjee, 1991, p. 15). J.B. Bhattacharjee citing R.B. Pemberton considered that the people in Sylhet and Cachar shares a remarkable affinity in every aspect of life including language, traditions and appearance (Bhattacharjee, 1991, p. 15). Further, citing C. Becker, a German missionary (1923), Bhattacharjee states that Bengali is the principal language in Surma Valley. But Bengali as spoken in Surma Valley differs from that of Bengal province in several ways and hence, it is referred to as Sylheti-Bengali (Bhattacharjee, 1991, p. 17). Surma and Kushiyara the two principal tributaries of the river Barak formed this valley with identical ecological, geographical and ethnic characteristics. It is a native land to a distinct group of people who spoke a common Bengali dialect called Sylheti. In ancient times, Srihatta or Srihattarajya denoted the Sylhet-Cachar region or in other words, the territory now covered in the Sylhet districts of Bangladesh, Karimganj, Hailakandi and Cachar districts of Assam (India) and the adjoining Kailashar-Dharmanagar areas of Tripura (India). Srihatta in ancient times must have been the common nomenclature for the entire Barak-Surma Valley (Bhattacharjee, 1991, p. 19).

Thus, it could be stated that under the influence of environment and geographical features, movements of diverse people extended to this part of the valley, which is a natural geographical extension of Bengal plain. Given this historical glimpse, the history of Muslim settlement in Barak valley is incomplete without referring to the history of larger Bengal. Laskar and Barbhuiya (2019) citing Bengali historian, Nihar Ranjan Roy, who says that

> The Barak-Surma Valley is the northern extension of the Meghna Valley (Dacca-Mymensingh-Commilla). Absence of natural boundary between these valleys resulted in the smooth flow of traditions and cultures of East Bengal to spread into Sylhet-Cachar in the ancient and medieval times. Even now the customs of the Hindus and Muslims of Sylhet-Cachar is tied up with the Eastern districts of Bengal (2019, p. 16).

Barak valley constitutes the plain region of southern Assam comprising of districts of Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj (the later has been a part of Sylhet district in the pre-partition period and formed a part of Cachar after partition) bordering Sylhet district of present-day Bangladesh.

It is in this backdrop; this chapter examines the social and historical trajectories through which Islam spread in Barak valley region, henceforth in Karimganj. Drawing on the historical development of Islam in this valley, the study locates the participants in the context who are well-to-do middle-class Muslims and predominantly belong to the Sunni sect. Participants in the present study constitutes the elderly population and the younger participants who are described as 'new Muslim digital natives' (Khan & Aytes, 2021). Throughout history frantically women have been guarded as well as regarded as the gatekeeper of the family honour. Their price of class position, to a great extent, is understood to determine and shape the dressing habitat and relationship and interactions. Women wearing dress that is considered modest, respectable, and appropriate by their observers legitimates the *Bhodra/Shorif* families they come from and demonstrates to public members the values the community upholds. All in all, their way of dressing is overwhelmingly locked in a meaning making process of certain social and psychological elements - modesty, protection, beautification which signal social distinctions.

2.2 Historical progression of Barak Valley through ages

The physical geography of the Bengal region during the pre-historic period and early historic period played an important role in further shaping the historical and political development of the various cultural sub-regions. In this regard, Eaton noted that, the rivers served as the natural routes of communication and transportation, and they have defined Bengal's physical and earliest sub-cultural regions - Varendra, the Bhagirathi-Hooghly basin, Vanga, Samatata, and Harikela (1993, p. 3).

Of the specified cultural sub regions of Bengal, Samatata included the hilly region, east of the Meghna River in the south-eastern delta and corresponds to modern Comilla, Noakhali and Chittagong and most probably Sylhet-Cachar region and Tripura for a brief period (Eaton, 1993, p. 3; Bhokth, 2018, p. 90). Harikhela referred to the delta's north-eastern hinterland and included modern Mymensingh and Sylhet-Cachar (ibid.). In ancient times, Barak Valley with its three districts was under the state formation process of Southeast Bengal like Samatata, Harikela and Vanga (Bokth, 2018). The boundary of the state and its political status has underwent change, every now and then.

The early history of the present day Karimganj territory is hazy and obscure. With the available segmented historical and archaeological scholarships, it is narrated that the territory in the 5th century was part of Kamrupa's king Bhaskar Varman as indicated by Nidhanpur copper inscriptions. In the opinion of two prominent Bengali scholars, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhya and Ramesh Chandra Dutta, Barak valley region formed part of ancient 'Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa' along with neighbouring districts of eastern and northern Bengal (Choudhury, 2020, p. 42). During the 7th century, the region became a part of Eastern Bengal's Samatata kingdom. The inscriptions of the period of the Samanta rulers of Samatata belonging to 7th century AD denotes the identity of this region as 'Srihattamandala'. During the 8th and 9th century, the region was under Harikela state formation (Bokth, 2018). However, in the 10th century, the Chandra rulers of Eastern Bengal incorporated it into his Vanga kingdom. During the 12th century, it became a part of Sylhet also known as Srihattarajya, which was an independent kingdom during those times. The Barak Valley is a natural extension of Bengal plains (ancient Vanga-Samatata region), and the Sylhet-Cachar region is one valley formed by Barak River and its tributaries (Choudhury, 2020, p. 102).

In the medieval period, arrival of famous Sufi saint Shaikh Shah Jalal whose name is commonly associated with the Muslim conquest of Sylhet in 1303 A.D. resulted in the handover of the territory to the Bengal Sultanate. However, Pratapgarh, a portion of the territory remained under the Tripuri rulers which during the reign of Hussain Shah (1483-1519) got finally incorporated with the Bengal Sultanate. The area along with Sylhet came under the rule of Mughal during the reign of Akbar in 1576. In 1765, the East India Company obtained the Diwani of Bengal and as a consequence the district of Sylhet, of which Karimganj was a part, was passed in the hands of the Britishers. However, it was only in 1786, the colonial power could establish their hegemony in the region.

The present-day Barak Valley[2] comprises of three districts of South Assam, namely Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj. Situated between longitudes 92°15' and 93°15' East and latitudes 24°8' and 25°8' North, covering an area of 6,922 sq. km of land, it is bounded on the north, by North Cachar Hills of Assam and Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya; on the South by Mizoram, on the east by Manipur and on the west by Tripura and Sylhet district of Bangladesh (Sen, 2014). The term 'Barak Valley' is created in recent times and is named after the river Barak. It was only after 1947's partition of India that the name was given to.

The present-day Barak valley is an abridged portion of the broader Sylhet and Cachar region of the colonial era. The Karimganj district of Assam (India) and the Maulavi Bazar, Sylhet, Sunamganj and Habiganj districts of today's Bangladesh were then the sub-divisions of the broader Sylhet districts; while Cachar (Silchar), Hailakandi and North Cachar Hill (Halflong) district of Assam (India) were then the sub-divisions of the Cachar district (Choudhury & Ahmed, 2019).

During the British rule in India, Karimganj was a part of broader Sylhet district. Sylhet was always a part of Bengal - politically, culturally, geographically and emotionally. However, in 1874, when British organised Assam as a province, Sylhet and Cachar was

[2] According to *'Kalki Puran'* and *'Joginitantra',* the name Barak is derived from the word Bara-Bakra which denotes 'wide curve of the river' (Laskar & Barbhuiya, 2019, p.15).

carved out of Bengal and both the districts were then placed under a commissionership and came to be known as the Surma Valley[3] Division which continued until 1947 (ibid.).

Following partition and after the 'Sylhet referendum', major part of the Sylhet district which was popularly called Surma Valley, barring some portions of Karimganj district (for 'geographical convenience') was transferred to erstwhile East Pakistan in 1947. When a major part of the Sylhet district (leaving Karimganj to India) was transferred to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) at the time of 1947 partition, the name Surma Valley became obsolete. At the time of partition of India, Karimganj was included in Cachar district of Assam, and the rest of the Sylhet area was attached to East Pakistan, now Bangladesh (Das, 2019).

Hailakandi sub-division, situated in the middle of the Barak valley, was a part of Cachar district for a long time and in 1989 it was made a district with the same territorial jurisdiction. While Karimganj emerged as a district on 1st July 1983. Karimganj town, situated in the southernmost part of the State is the district headquarters and is the second largest town in the Barak Valley. The two valleys altogether constitute the plain area in the state while the rest of the area is hilly (Das, 2019).

2.3 Etymology of the term 'Karimganj'

As Karimganj remained an integral part of Sylhet district - a populous Bengali speaking district for a long time, it is believed that the Bengalis of the district might have given this name, i.e., 'Karimganj' (Das, 2019). There are three plausible explanations on the originality of the term 'Karimganj'. One is that it is named after a local named *Mirasdar* Mohammed Karim Chowdhary. And another is that it is named after Pathan chief Mohammed Karim and Mohammed Zaki (who established Zakiganj on the other side of Kushiyara in Bangladesh). Composed of Karim (Arabic) and Ganj (Persian), the two words got amalgamated and became 'Karimganj'. Another hearsay tale says, Karim, one of 360 Islamic Saints, resided in this area in the olden days with his followers. The word 'Ganj' meaning bazar or hamlet was in course of time suffixed to the name Karim to christen the name Karimganj for the area. His *mazar* (graveyard) lies on 'Deli hillock'

[3] In the pre-Independence period, the Sylhet-Cachar was a part of the erstwhile Surma Valley (the valley was named after the river Surma, a branch of the river Barak which flows northwards demarcating the eastern boundary of Sylhet and western boundary of Cachar).

situated near the railway line in Bonomali areas of Karimganj town (District Census Handbook, Karimganj, 2011; Laskar, 2019; endnote pt.3; p. 533; Anand, 2020).

2.4 Spread of Islam in Sylhet-Cachar region

In ancient period the soil of Srihatta or Sylhet [4] like other parts of India, witnessed the presence of Brahmanical religion, Saivism, Saktism, Vaisnavism and Buddhism. The evidence of socio-political Aryanisation of the Sylhet-Cachar region can be traced from the copperplate inscription, epigraphic records, religious cult spots, temples related folklore and traditions found during the rule of different kingdoms (Sen, 2014). The decline of the Srihatta kingdom in the 12th and 13th Century saw the emergence of petty kingdoms in the valley which led to a political disintegration in the Barak-Surma Valley. The process of kingdom formation came to a halt when the Turks, Afghans, Mughal Sultanate extended their rule to Sylhet as a natural historical process since the Barak Valley or Srihatta in ancient time was a natural geographical extension of Bengal.

The present-day Barak valley comprising of three districts reflects only the political territorial boundaries. During the medieval period, sway of Mughal and Sultan rule was limited to Karimganj district, formerly a part of Sylhet, and it never extended to Hailakandi and Cachar district of Cachar Valley which had successively been under the Tripura, Koch and Dimasa rule. During the medieval period, although Barak Valley was politically divided, the process of cultural development went on with almost in homogeneous model over the entire Valley through ages.

> It is popularly said that Cachar (Cachar and Hailakandi) is the cultural expansion of Sylhet. For this reason, the story of the advent of Islam in the Valley goes with the story of the advent of Islam in Sylhet. As a matter of fact, in the process of development of Islam in the region, Sylhet proper was the hub and modern Karimganj, Cachar and

[4] In ancient times the entire geographical area of Cachar-Surma Valley was known as Srihattamandala or Srihattarajya at various points of time along with the neighbouring districts like Commilla, Chittagong and Noakhali it is commonly designated as South-East Bengal (known in ancient times as Samatata, Harikela etc) (Sen, 2014).

> Hailakandi its peripheries. So, the history of the advent of Islam in Barak Valley cannot be reconstituted without referring to that of Sylhet (Laskar, 2019, p. 526).

The advent of Islam in Sylhet-Cachar region may be traced with the military conquest of Bengal by Ikhtiar Uddin Bakhtiar Khilji in the beginning of 13th century, though the official mark was created by Sikandar Khan Ghazi who attacked Gaur kingdom[5], a petty kingdom of ancient Sylhet but was defeated by the latter. Nonetheless, in 1303 A.D., the eventual conquest of Gaur, by Sultan Firoz Shah's General Sipah Salar Nasir-ud-Din with the help of Hazrat Shah Jalal *Mujarrad*[6] the saint of Yemen and 18th disciple of prophet Muhammed and his 313 or 360 (Bokth, 2018) disciples who is rightly held to be the 'man behind the spread of Islam in the valley' (Sen, 2014). The defeat of king of Gaur and victory of Muslim army made a new aperture in the socio-political life of the people of Sylhet region, including Karimganj (Das, 2019). The whole of Sylhet including Karimganj, except the northern bank of Surma and the Cachar plains, was conquered by the Mughals with the rest of Bengal during the reign of Emperor Akbar in the 16th century. The northern bank of Surma formed part of the Jaintia state and the Cachar plains passed through the successive rule of the Khaspur state and the Dimasa state till the British colonisation. Having thus annexed Bengal in 1576 A.D, the Mughal rule made Sylhet one of the *Sarkars* (district) of *Subha Bangala* (Bengal Province) of the Mughal Empire, till the arrival of the British rule in Bengal after the battle of Plassey (1757) (Choudhury, 2020, p. 108).

Hazrat Shah Jalal sent a number of his companions to modern Karimganj to propagate Islam and the first among these companions was Hazrat Shah Badaruddin. Talukdar (2015) expresses that the large presence of Muslims in Karimganj as well as in Barak Valley suggests the influence of Shah Badaruddin and his fellows. Although much information on his activities is unavailable, yet it is believed that his grave is in the Dak Banglaow of Badarpur town in Karimganj district. But due to the erosion of the river Barak, Shah Badar's grave and the grave of other saints got washed away. B. C. Allen recorded in the District Gazetteer of Cachar that Badarpur is named after Shah Badar (ibid., p. 74). Apart from Shah Badaruddin, Shah Zia-Uddin, Shah Sikandar and Shah Adam Khaki also made their presence felt in the form of establishing mosques and madrassas in the areas between

[5] There is a story which revolves around the advent of Islam in the region. For the story refer to Laskar (2019).

[6] The title means bachelor (Eaton, 1994).

Karimganj and Badarpur. It is notable to mention that Shah Adam Khaki, whose Dargah is situated on the side of national highway connecting Karimganj serves as a living symbol and embodiment of Hindu-Muslim unity (Laskar, 2019). Following the instructions of Shah Jalal, his disciples, who are mostly of foreign origin, settled in various places, married local woman, established families and preached Islam among the people of Sylhet-Barak Valley (Eaton, 1993, p. 74). Those indigenous communities who occupied the lowest rung of the social order; for them, the egalitarian principle of the religion of Islam attracted them in its fold.

Hence, the advent of Islam in modern Karimganj district goes back prior to 15th century as is evident from the different archaeological sources - epigraphs and coins, mosques and *dargahs*[7] available in different parts of the Karimganj district such as, in Asimganj, Kaliganj, Nilambazar, Settlement bazar, Pirnagar or Pinnagar villages of Karimganj district, to name a few (Laskar, 2019; Talukdar, 2018). Further, some authentic sources that can give credence to the accounts of arrival of Shah Jalal are available in the form of travelling account of great Moroccan traveller, Ibn Batuta, another record which is a Persian inscription preserved in Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka that testifies the arrival of Shah Jalal in Sylhet and subsequent establishment of Muslim settlement (Talukdar, 2018).

The archaeological evidence, as a matter of fact, prove beyond doubt, that the advent of Islam and establishment of large scale Muslim settlement in the modern Karimganj district goes back to the lifetime of Shah Jalal[8], in essence, 14th century and very likely, preached by Shah Jalal and his disciples (Ahmed, 1994; cited in Laskar, 2019) whereas Muslim settlement in Cachar (present Cachar and Hailakandi) took place in the 17th century under the patronage of Dimasa King for developing waste land and jungles into arable land and British administrators (Laskar, 2019). The starting of Muslim settlement in Hailakandi and

[7] A physical structure centered round a tomb of holy man. This holy place serves as a site of forging harmonious collectivities across communities.

[8] According to the book, Shrihatta Noor, Shah Jalal dreamt a dream. The dream goes, "It is the wish of Merciful Allah you are to hoist Islamic flag at the Eastern part of Hindustan…". It is said that prior to his visit to Eastern India, his spiritual guide, Ahmed Kabir, giving him a handful of clay said, "You settle there where you will find soil of the same taste, smell and colour". It is said that the soil of Sylhet was exactly of the same taste, smell and colour, so he finally settled there (Talukdar, 2018, p. 19; Laskar & Barbhuiya, 2019, p. 23).

Cachar can be traced back to the migration of Muslim peasants from the adjacent area i.e. from Sylhet or modern Karimganj (ibid.).

Yet it should be mentioned that even before the arrival of Shah Jalal, there are evidence of Muslims residing there in this region. This is supported by historical legend of Burhan Uddin, a resident of the kingdom of Gaur Govinda, connected with the Muslim invasion of Sylhet. As S.K. Chatterjee said, "Sylhet was brought under the power of the Muslim Sultan of Bengal in 1303 A.D. Prior to that there was considerable penetration of Sylhet by Muslim preachers from the west, from Eastern Uttar Pradesh, and its present-day Muslim preponderance seems to go back to the end of the 13th century" (Cited in Laskar, 2019, p. 526).

Moreover, Arabian traders in course of their trading activities used to visit the coasts and seaports of India and Bengal, and hence they also had contact with the hilly regions of Bengal, Kamrup and Assam (Laskar, 2019). Though the early history of Karimganj is shrouded in obscurity, its name as well as its situation on the bank of Kushiyara, a navigable river, indicates that it was a trade centre in medieval times when rivers provided main routes for trade (Das, 2019).

Although it is observed that large number of Muslim settlements in Barak Valley is directly connected with the arrival of Shah Jalal and his disciples, it would be pertinent to point out that it was largely due to socio-economic and political situations prevailing from 14th century onwards in the Bengal more or less also helped in spreading Muslim inhabitants in the valley.

So, some Muslims came to this region accompanying the conquerors and soldiers, some for spreading religious messages, some for shelter and livelihood, some for trade and commerce and some people converted themselves to Islam in a gradual process in the three districts of Barak Valley (Rahman, 2019). The Muslim settlement in modern day Barak valley is a result of Muslim migrants from neighbouring Bengal, Sylhet being the nearest as well as many local Hindus belonging from upper castes and lower castes and tribal folds embraced Islam (Eaton, 1993). Furthermore, according to Laskar (2016), descendants of foreign ethnic Muslims altogether cannot be ignored. Laskar citing Shibtapan Basu writes areas near Bay of Bengal, Chittagong was not unknown to the Arab traders in ancient period, hence it is a natural process of the presence of movement of Muslims of Arab,

Turk, Iran, Afghan ethnic social group in the Barak valley region and their settlement cannot be dismissed (2016, p. 31). In course of time, people from other regions came to the valley and that together constituted the Muslim settlement of Karimganj. Their presence is corroborated by historical facts, legends, traditions, graves, inscriptions and coins found in different places in Karimganj. In this context, it is observed that the marginalized and oppressed class had abandoned their previous faith and those who have come from outside brought and retained some of the older traditions which have coalesced in their social life.

2.5 Karimganj district - Present day

Karimganj is surrounded by an international border with Bangladesh and Cachar district of Assam in the north, on the west by Bangladesh and Tripura, on the east Hailakandi district and on the south by the state of Tripura and Mizoram. It is situated between the longitudes 91°15' and 93°15' east and the latitudes 24°8' 74 and 25°8' north. According to 2011 census report, the total population of Barak valley stands at 3,624,599. Karimganj district covers an area of 1809 sq. kms. with a population of 1,228,686 as per 2011 Census. Karimganj district is located at the southern fringe of Assam in the valley of Barak. Karimganj is the main town as well as administrative headquarters town of the Karimganj district. Road, and rail modes of communication to this district is available. Karimganj does not have its own flight operation. The nearest airport is Kumbirgham, in Silchar, Cachar district. NH 44 starting from Shillong to Agartala passing through Karimganj is the major road to connect with important places such as Badarpur, Karimganj town, Nilambazar, Patherkandi, Lowairpoa and others in the district. Besides NH 151 connects Karimganj town with Sutarkandi [9] to facilitate cross border trade and movement of passengers from both the countries.

The district has 936 villages, grouped under 7 Community Development Blocks. The district has 5 Revenue Circles: namely, Karimganj, Badarpur, Nilambazar, Patharkandi and Ramkrishna Nagar. There are three census towns.

Religion wise, Muslim community (56.36 percent) dominates the population of the district followed by the Hindu community with (42.48 percent). The district also bears testimony

[9] Sutarkandi is an international border crossing on Bangladesh-India border.

to a small presence of other faiths like - Christianity, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism. The language spoken in Karimganj is Sylheti.

Karimganj is basically dominated by the Bengalis, of which both Hindus and Muslims have formed a significant proportion. The teaching and learning process in present day Karimganj has seen growth of several educational institutions. There are many Bengali medium Government schools along with a Central School (established in 1992), followed by the mushrooming of co-educational English medium private schools. Alongside two recognized government degree colleges - Karimganj College (established in 1946) and Rabindra Sadan Girls' College (established in 1962), there exists one law and teacher training colleges. Further, the district has witnessed many private higher secondary colleges, engineering and Polytechnique institutes in recent decades.

2.6 Classification of Muslims

The Muslims population of Assam do not consist of a homogenous entity. They are diverse in their cultural, religious and linguistic practices. According to Hussain (1987), the Muslim population of Assam can be classified into the following broad categories - Assamese Muslims, Neo-Assamese Muslims, Muslims of Barak valley, North-Indian or Hindi speaking Muslims living in Assam.

The Assamese speaking Muslims locally also known as *Axomiya Musalman, Thalua Musalman* (native or indigenous Muslims) and *Goria* consists of war prisoners. They are descendants of Muslim soldiers of different ethnicity, technicians and artisans imported by the Ahom rulers, preachers of Islam, and local converts to Islam during the Ahom period.

The second category of Muslims, Neo-Assamese Muslims also called *Na-Axomiya Musalman* migrated to Assam mainly between the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. In Assam, they are also known as *Pamua Musalman* (the farming Muslims), *Charua Musalman* (the Muslims of river basin), *Miya Musalman* and *Mymensinghia Musalman*, (Muslims migrated from Rangpur, Sylhet and the Mymensing districts of erstwhile East Bengal or present-day Bangladesh). Monirul Hussain considers this category of Muslim as "immigrant Muslims" since it specifies the group's position in contemporary Assam's socio-political and economic arithmetic. In contrast to the first category, this category is claimed as 'new entrants' in the Assamese milieu who have made

determined efforts to assimilate into the larger Assamese society by adopting the Assamese language.

Muslims of Barak valley live in the present district of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. The valley is geographically separated from Brahmaputra valley or mainland Assam. The people of this region speak Sylheti, specifically regarded as 'undocumented' dialect of Bengali, mainly spoken in Sylhet district of Bangladesh and in certain north-eastern parts of India particularly in the Barak valley.

In fact since the 18th century, the Muslims migrated to thinly populated Barak valley from the thickly populated neighbouring districts of East Bengal. Absence of any natural barrier towards Bengal allowed the large-scale and intensive wave of migration of people from Bengal in general and Sylhet district in particular, who later settled in the valley during the Pre-British and British period. The Bengalese, both Hindus and Muslims comprise vast majority of the population of Barak Valley. The Muslims of Barak Valley consists mainly of three principal categories, i.e. foreign origin, converted from the Hinduism and the migrated Muslims (Laskar, 2024). It is this category of Muslims that the present chapter deals with.

The last category of Muslims - North Indian or Bihari Muslims migrated to Assam mainly from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar states in search of a better livelihood. Their migration happened during the later stages of British colonialism and after independence. They speak either Hindi or Urdu. This group of Muslims has, so far has not assimilated with the indigenous Assamese Muslims nor with the larger Assamese society.

2.7 Classification among Muslims: Locating the participants

Karimganj is predominantly a Muslim populous district with 56.36 percent of the total population of 1,228,686 as per 2011 census. Karimganj Muslim women share many religious beliefs and some forms of ideological and behavioural guidelines such as, following the five pillars of Islam with other Muslim women of the Islamic world; yet they are also distinct from their Arab counterparts because of their specific social and unique historical background in which Islam came. Although by faith they can be a homogenous community but in practice, they remain diversified, fragmented and as caste-ethnic ridden as any other Muslim community of this subcontinent. As in the case of the rest of India,

empirical work confirms the presence of well-structured social class distinctions among Muslims, and Karimganj is no particular to this social exception. As Bokth notes:

> Under the heading Bengali (Muslim), the *People of India* Series mention seven endogamous groups, Sayeed, Chowdhury, Talukdar, Kiran, Maimal and Hajam (Singh, K.S., 2002, p. 95 cited in Bokth, 2018, p. 2).

As noted earlier, Muslim settlement in Karimganj district, which was then a part of Sylhet in pre-colonial times, was a result of conversion under the influence of Muslim saints as well as migration of different ethnic foreign social groups; therefore, the rituals and practices of their indigenous beliefs percolated with the 'Great tradition' of the early Muslim community of this valley. In such case, it is no wonder then that preaching, and practise of Islamic egalitarian principles failed to work in tandem. It is commonly held in the field that there are status differences among Muslims community which is deeply entrenched in the minds of the community. Here, social hierarchy is not only based on feudal landholdings and occupations but also expressed itself, in religious piousness, economic well-off, importance of education within a family and extent of Islamisation in a family or person. Apparently, in the most distinct outward emblem - dress. Concerning dress in connection with class, represents the status of her family, so she must wear the best she owns.

It is to be noted that the contemporary division of class in Karimganj trace its genesis in the pre-colonial and colonial period when the rulers introduced middleman for the collection of land revenue, the later developments of which resulted in stratified class system (Ahmed, 2020). Further, during that time the social world of Bengal Muslims was divided into high born *ashraf* (who claimed their origin from the distant Middle East, Iran and Turkey) and converts from the upper caste Hindus. They look down upon the great majority of indigenous populations, the *atrafs (ajlaf)* who upon their conversion follows syncretic culture (Levy, 1957). In the process this further boosted the stratification process which closely corresponds to the division between the Brahmins and Sudras in Hindu society. Karimganj, historically a part of Sylhet district (present Bangladesh), consequently, the social ranking resembles with that of erstwhile regions.

In Karimganj, the upper strata of the Muslim society constitutes the landed elite class namely, *Choudhuries, Talukdars* and *Tapadars,* and *Sayeds* and they prefer to call

themselves as *'Boro jat or jatila'*. In the field it has been observed that they used these titles with their name. For instance, a participant whose name is Sayed Naj Begum. In this example, Levy notes that the "title *Saiyid* or *Mir* is always given to them, and their women add the title *Begam* (lady) after their names" (1957, p. 72). In the erstwhile Sylhet district (which included Karimganj), these title holders occupied a prominent position in the social structure because of their socio-economic status and were known as Zamindars. Though in the present day, they are absentee landlord and engages in diverse professions - salaried persons or businessman; still they are held as *'agor'*(erstwhile) Zamindar/*mirashdar*[10]. The *Sayeds* claims the highest potent of social distinction because of their descent from the prophet's family and supposed purity of blood. Most of them claim to be religious preachers or experts in theology. They are found mostly within the district of Karimganj (Bokth, 2018). The *Choudhuries* are very small in numbers in Karimganj (Ahmed, 2020). *Choudhuries, Talukdars and Tapadar* enjoyed a superior status because of their money, power and landownership. Within these landed gentry classes, marital alliance exists. Hence, they formed the upper strata or *ashraf* corresponding to the twice-born rank *(dwiza)* of Hindu caste fold. Ahmed (2018) notes that the Ashraf, who are the elite class are said to be descendants of either of the Prophet's family or of invaders or preachers from the Middle East, contain four subgroups, title Sayed, Shaikh, Pathan and Moghul.

In the course of fieldwork, the participants' mothers expressed discontentment in increased use of such titles by 'other' *'horo jat or kom jat'* (lower class) as they attain a higher economic status. Some of them based on their observation derisively told the researcher that those who come from villages and settle in rented houses, often engage in such acts. This suggests that within a closed, known settings, social mobility by low caste can be subject to question as members are known to one another throughout the region. Similar patterns of adoption of Ashraf titles by lower castes individuals has also been found in studies conducted by sociologists (Ahmad, 1966). Nevertheless, they emphasised and assured the researcher that the lower class[11] can only imitate the titles but can neither afford

[10] They are 'peasants' as well as 'proprietors' because they cultivate their own lands as contrast to the large Zamindars or Talukdars who do not do so and only sublet their lands to others. Further they enjoy 'permanent', 'heritable' and 'transferable' rights. (Roy, 2010, p. 20).

[11] The Muslim families that the researcher interviewed disapproved of using the term 'caste' in their daily use as they believe Hindu caste system is extremely rigid unlike the class system of Muslims which is flexible, where one social group can raise their social position by means of wealth.

to historically locate themselves in *bongsho* (wider patrilineage) nor do they can overcome their coarse language.

Quite a lot number of wealthy families reported to the researcher that the people from other lower-class group particularly the *Kiran* (ex-ryots and agricultural labourers) are adopting such titles with the intention of raising their social status in class hierarchy. The elderly participants opined that for the *Kiran* it is an easy upward social mobility since they are mostly engaged in agriculture and hence nothing like social stigma of despised occupation gets attached with them. Thus, owning land and property subsequently follows adoption of titles which enables them to recognize their identity with that of higher strata. However, in case of vast majority of the *Kiran* population's adoption or mimicking title did not happen as not everyone can afford to own land and property. Therefore, majority of them remained at the bottom of social order with their despised status. Moreover, it also did not happen to the bulk of the Muslims who are considered descendants of local converts and comprises various occupational castes like *Maimal* (fishermen), *Patikar* (mat or pati makers), *Hajjam* (barbar). Together these social groups and their occupations formed the lower strata of the society or *Ajlafs*. Marriage alliances are restricted with the higher strata of the society. A few exceptions when *Kiran* owing to their amassed wealth may have been married to a *Talukdar* or vice versa and were sneered upon. These social groups could not attain any social mobility due to their association with (looked down) traditional occupation, unclean and unhygienic dwellings, presence of pre-Islamic practices, and hence occupying demeaning distinguishable status in society. The division between *Ashraf* and *non-Ashraf* strata of Muslims gets clearly reflected in their attitudes towards women with their traditional feminine ideals of chastity and modesty which gets reflected through the medium of dress. Dress thus, also acts to naturalise social divisions (Twigg, 2013, p. 3).

Although there lack universal criteria to ascertain relative status of various groups, yet certain dimensions such as, education, consumption patterns, village origin are considered. Further, the field participants took pride in the observance of delicate symbolic behaviour, a nearly imperceptible phenomenon is the frequent use of 'decent and respectful' social language - *jioy* (yes), *jina* (no), *aafne or tumi* (you) are used by the younger ones when communicating with the elders. These are referred to as *'kothar goyna'* (ornaments of language). Participants' mothers found often emphasising that as clean neat dress and

jewellery adorns and beautifies the physical body, likewise social ornamental communication with the seniors or equals leaves a lasting impression on the communication. Among equals of age and close kin sometimes, *tuin* instead of *tumi* is addressed upon; furthermore, they are conscious and spontaneous of greeting their elders with Islamic greetings. Elements of extreme delicacy of behaviour has also been corroborated by few teachers who told the researcher the manners of Muslim students. Appearance - colour and print of the dress, the ornaments that the wearer wore is another factor that gives a clue as to which class of people who belongs to.

Most of the participants' mothers claim that their grandfather's (both from paternal and maternal side) generation belong to the upper strata of society which is characterized by owning of agricultural lands in the ancestral village, religious persons (*maulana, pir*, Arabic teacher, and some as businessman), hence they are considered as respectable *(Bhodra/Shorif)* and powerful in the community. Belonging from the upper strata, the mother of the participants and their foremothers traditionally observed body covering and symbolic deference as a core feature of modesty, which they grew up hearing as *purdah kora* (doing purdah) and the same thing they tried to pass down to the younger generations - college going participants. For example, several elderly women remember their grandfather being *maulvi* and *pir,* who, with others, used to travel outside Assam for congregations. They used to attend *Istema* and *Tablig* (religious congregation groups where discussion on Islamic religious texts is done)*, waj, khutbah* (sermons) in mosques. Upon returning they used to bring 'religious' manuals for women written by men which outlined, conveyed, explained 'ideal' feminine conduct which for some elderly participants emphasise particular aspects while downplaying others. Hence, the insular printed word became the force of discursive dissemination on the essential values of Islam. To ignore these edicts, their understanding was, would result in punishment in this world and the next.

Women, during those times, were kept away from the looks of male non-kin which was considered a feature of status prosperity and family honour as much as it represented the attainment of a religious principles of segregation of sexes and feminine modesty. Purdah requires not only the seclusion of women in their homes or certain spaces, but it also demands that a woman practice appropriate upper-class modesty in public, including in her dress and behaviour (Papanek, 1973). The idea that their clothes expressed their

identity was certainly endorsed and reinforced in a wholehearted manner which we will see in the next chapter.

On the contrary, the participants' mothers informed the researcher that lower class women are quite lax in following namaz as well as purdah practice, such as, their non-Islamic way of draping sari and interacting with the unknown male non-kin. Lower class Muslim women's non-Islamic way of dressing the reason which lies in practical considerations and economic independence. Yet the elderly women's viewpoint highlights what Daly (2000) notes that in everyday practice, the degree of commitment to Islam is expressed by the amount of the body exposed and the proximity of clothing to the body. As in Islam, modesty in dress is a moral commitment as it is referred to as *haya* which implies covering as well as concealing the body from view. (Daly, 2000, p. 137)

As large number of women who work as daily construction workers, work in the paddy field or as house-help in wealthy households cannot afford the luxury of withdrawing into the confines of the home. Hence, they could easily dispense with the niceties of genteel modesty of the class above them. Yet when improved its financial position, one of the first act of upwardly mobile families is that they attempt to place its women in strict compliance with rules of female confinement to enhance their social standing. Over time, some of them attempt to follow the basic teaching of purdah such as, dressing correctly - taking additional *unna* to cover their body when they wear sari, gentle manner of speaking yet they fail to absorb its ideals.

As Twigg notes, "We are who we are by virtue of the lives we have lived" (2013, p. 54). A number of the elderly participants permeated by a sense of memory. As one of the participants' mother recall hearing from her maternal grandmother, the stories of transportation - how they used to travel early in the morning in *falki*[12] (palanquin) and ox cart which remain covered in a cloth thorough out the travel time. Memories of similar nature of curtained rikshaw are also recollected by other participants' mothers. Such as separate living quarters for men as well as woman. In every landlord or Zamindar's house, there is *tongi ghar* where men folk gather, discuss 'important' issues such as, marriage, feast. Young women - married as well as unmarried are denied entry to that 'public' space. Additionally, movement outside the home without any social necessity was frowned upon.

[12] It's like a huge box which requires four men to carry it from one place to the next.

Even the mundane tasks such as, washing utensils in the pond or bathing are accomplished when most of the household men are either in mosques or in field. And too often women from low class extend their help in doing these tasks - bringing water from pond, washing clothes or utensils in pond. These are some patterns of seclusion which constantly got reflected in the participants mother's conversations as they talk about their past while talking about the present moment. This continuous going back and forth of memories indicates that the practice of purdah is influenced by traditional social values and family norms; hence, varies according to both the woman's and the family's socio- economic status and ethnic identity as well. The most important point behind the architectural ambience was that the seclusion of women and privacy of family life was maintained in some manner or other. Since this 'separation', apart from its functional use, was also the insignia of respectability, only the families lower in the social scale could probably ignore its importance.

In Karimganj, the degree of *purdah dresses* (modest body covering) which women adopts in different socio-economic settings varies according to public spaces. The printed design, colour, quality of material used of purdah outfits, cleanliness of the dress is associated with the wearer's status, which also closely signals the wearer's class, wealth, sophistication, region of origin and marital status. That is, the newer, more finely woven fashionable, with different shades of hijab and abaya of more economically sufficient families contrasts with the vibrant and dark colour *burga* or *chaddor* worn by their mothers and grandmothers. Hanna Papanek refers to the physical aspect of purdah (i.e., the forms of attire) as 'instrument'. The women use these instrument as 'portable seclusion' to logically supplement their enclosed living spaces (1973, p. 295). In most of their discussions on dress of Muslim women, the elderly women who are in their early 50's to late 55's referred to *burga* which they wore after their marriage, when moving outside of home. As they advanced in their lifecycle, as their status and position changed, all these bear consequences in the different degrees of flexibility to adherence to purdah rules. Furthermore, as lifestyle improved, economic assets accumulated such as, owning private car which also created a sense of privacy when women travel. There is no doubt that clothes are ideological. They establish values through which individuals are ranked and judged; and they mark out and naturalize hierarchies of different social groups (Twigg, 2013, p. 8).

Participants mother informed the researcher that in the, early 1990's and mid 1995 when they studied in college during those times, they observe purdah with *salwar kameez* and *unna* or with *chaddor* within and outside the boundaries of home, which at the very least a fusion of regional-religious tradition. Throughout fluctuation in seasons and depending on the fibre quality, *chaddor* and *unna* is worn daily by young women which in a way starts as the girls reach menstruating age and continues throughout her life-course in the social context (inside as well as outside home). But they did not wear *burga* and hijab, as was not available back then. The reason as, Khan (2015) plausibly points out that in the 80's and 90's, veil was nowhere to be seen even in Islamic institution. Too often the elderly women have uncritically accepted the cultural rules of purdah practices such as, restriction on their educational participations. It is no wonder that like other principles of Islam, Muslim families considered education of women as unnecessary and cumbersome. As a result, a situation developed where majority of the participants' mothers hardly completed their graduation beyond senior secondary. It is worth noting that in the earlier periods, because of cultural definitions of *bazari porin* (women of the market[13]), emphasis on religion learnings, early marriage, access to nearby schools and colleges, lack of transport and communication facilities, absence of socially defined occupational performance for women in Muslim community, in turn, lack of interest in studying are the main socio-structural and institutional culprit that debarred most of the participants' mother to complete their basic education. One point to note is during those times, any variation in the performance of women, becomes a village issue. The fears and forms of control imprinted in their mind was an indirect way to deter their activity and which was couched in terms of religious sanctions and familial respectability. However, even in this early period one can see, in the response of one woman who, after her marriage, secured a teaching job. Her father-in-law told her to wear sari and *burga* when she travels by public bus. But she politely declined that request citing practical and corporeal reasons; that in the crowded bus and extreme hot weather she is comfortable in wearing salwar kameez and *unna* for her outside work. Burga, to her is an obtrusive dress when her body is in motion. To which her father-in-law agreed and told her to observe purdah according to her convenience and carry her work duty. She recalled that how the entire village use to talk behind her back, calling her family decadent for sending the daughter-in-law to work. Her

[13] Market, here, the participants' mother refers to the outside world, which is tantamount to woman of loose morality, effectively referring to the woman who occupy the lowest rung in social hierarchy.

father-in-law patiently bear all these insults and offensive remarks, yet never stood against her going out. Such is the kind of argument and response, the weight of which women carried with them in the face of opposition of village. Partly this reflected a general sense that the role of dress in the performance of identities relies on the principle of conformity, of fitting in and of being acceptable as opposed to standing out (Twigg, 2013).

Several elderly women noted that compared to today's time, *burga* was not available in huge numbers in stores. Reminiscing the days when burga gifting was done, participants noted that it was when some family members went to perform Hajj or work in Mumbai or in some Gulf countries or some relatives staying in Bangladesh does bring *burga* and *neqaab* for married women and *scarves* for unmarried women along with other gifts. Extreme old women whose physical body is frail are given *shawl* or *chaddor* which covers the head and the torso since due to their corporeal changes in old age they are unable to manage *burga* as they are long and flowy. During their times (elderly women's time period), sometimes the tailor stitches the unstitched pieces of *burga*. Quite clearly, in villages during those times the *burga* was to distinguish the women of a Hajjis family from others. In these cases, the *burga* symbolized the economic capital of the family as not all families can make a trip to Mecca which involves huge finance. Therefore, to be able to send its men to perform Hajj in Mecca and in turn provide *burgas* for their women is crucial in understanding how purdah is used to reinforce status and class differences among other families living in villages.

Less apparent but also significant is with the increasing age, as a matter of habitual action, elderly women of their family secured purdah remained in effect; although in a more relaxed and convenient manner in which the *burga*, shawl, holding the end of sari and bringing it in front, and other forms of purdah modest dress may continue to be worn by anyone who wishes to wear it, since the social practice of head-covering is considered as normal. Moreover, it has remained primarily a symbol of respectable family status and a religious prescription.

The one item of dress quite unique and popular among young Muslim women, especially college going participants is hijab and abaya, an amalgam of head and body covering. Their styles depart from their mother's generation and closely resembles with the kind of images seen in social media. Like *burga, hijab* and *abaya* too speak of social distinctions in terms of the number of pleats in hijab draping, the amount of embroidery done on it. As

already noted in their mothers' voice that they observed purdah in different form, long before the introduction of hijab, yet with advancing progress in social media tools, hijab was introduced in the lives of these young Muslim women. In a highly networked society, the media content, no matter where one lives, is viewed and shared around the world which the elderly [female] people within their families is unfamiliar with it. Perhaps the media content, more particularly hijab and Islamic knowledge is one form of its expression which quickly spread to daughter of other families. The content show case the values concerning this dress which became readily obvious to them. Social media tools like Instagram and YouTube have connected these younger generations to the outside world and being textually literate they are able to draw knowledge from a wide range of media content, the ones that best suit their individual preferences and personalities (Arnett, 1995). Having one's own account in social media platform is now a normal and central part of most people's everyday activities. Typically, in the earlier times, participants' mother's exposure was limited to print media such as, religious texts and manuals, as there was few or no television sets in the households. Adding to this, the total amount of significant elementary information received by them in the name of religion was discriminatory in nature that mostly favoured male power agenda. In general, the knowledge that they received encouraged to adhere to a prescribed and uniform standard of beliefs and practices on how to perform a ladylike behaviour which they try to pass on from one generation to the next.

With the emergence of internet, religion has found a solid online manifestation in social media. Presumably, the phenomenon now applies to the dissemination of the Qur'an-Arabic and its translations through the social media platforms making it accessible to the young Muslim women. One may say that as smartphones are becoming less expensive combined with an ever-expanding internet package, participants are given their individual smartphones when they enrolled in colleges. It is also a time when they are independent from the surveillance gaze of parents and compared to childhood, the influence of the parents diminishes. As Arnett has pointed out "… familial sources of childhood socialization have diminished and sources of adult socialization are not yet present, may make adolescents more inclined to make use of media materials in their socialization than they would be at younger or older ages" (1995, p. 520). Given their generational differences and the greater mobility that they have achieved due to access to educational opportunities they are engaging in a new virtual world, which is potentially transforming the face of Muslims. Changed technological landscape concomitant with self-

consciousness Islamic presence effected a cultural transformation of using Arabic vocabulary in their daily life and a new dress code, which in the yesteryears had little connection with their mothers who wished to disassociate with it when interacting with and attending educational institutes.

Transcending geographical borders, they are exploring and educating themselves about Islam, mastering Islamic practices and learning about Islamic/Muslim dress and fashion. These online spaces convey information on Islamic practices not only in new ways but also provide creative solutions to worldly problems by balancing religious needs and making them new ways to be religious. What needs to be emphasised is that parents mixing of culture with religion is a consequence from lack of avenues to gain authentic religious knowledge. Albeit participants' families implant the seeds of religious and cultural teachings, but the knowledge differed widely from what the auditory experience of social media. This raises discrepant universe, in turn, an authenticity crisis, leading the younger generations to seek out more information on what is or is not Islamic. In effect, the narratives in the subsequent chapters highlights that participants apply aspects of the knowledge presented online in order to enhance their religious lives rather than completely living their lives 'Islamically' as shown online (Bunt, 2004, p. 126). In the process, they shape and negotiate their lives and identities oscillating between two worldviews universe which the following chapters in turn unpack. The 'Islamic modest dress, however, did also show considerable continuity worn by middle-aged women, supporting the idea of broader cultural integration with these age groups. However, it should also be noted that their dress did intersect with the fashionable style that forms the bulk of Karimganj dress across a range of ages.

Younger generations need to find a 'negotiated order' (Maines & Charlton, 1985, cited in Williams & Vashi, 2007) during predicament times of social change which apparently shows up in matters of gendered context-oriented dress. The 'recognition' and 'concern' of 'being a Muslim woman' constitutes the overall modesty code of the dress. To put it differently, as Williams and Vashi has noted, "religion is just the substantive content with which statements of personal identity and distinctions are being made" (2007, p. 285). Moreover, it functions as an impetus for self-definition within a framework that allows women to be both Muslim and independent (Droogsma, 2007). Clearly, true to these statements, in the wearing of this dresses is the manner it communicates not only the relative economic status and class of the young women appearing in the roads and market,

but it also communicates them to be 'better' Muslims', with this attaches far greater individual and collective responsibility for one's public comportment. A point of interest is that the actual observance of hijab seemed to be a complex practice with many subtle shades of behaviour and often highlight contradictory patterns which represents change and demands elaboration. For example, the visual aspect of hijab and its associated Islamic modest dress promotes excessive displays of money and extravagance. This is a departure from the simplicity nature of hijab as first and foremost a dress not intended for fame, pride and vanity (Bullock, 2003). It is clear that the younger generations' practice of hijab observance is in the gradual process of change. It is not so much that its associated values have become irrelevant in the course of social change, but they take on different emphasis as the findings are discussed within the context of thesis chapters.

2.8 Conclusion

According to Islamic tradition, Allah revealed the verses of Quran to Muhammed via Angel *Jibril* (Gabriel) between the years 610 and 632 C.E. Though in the seventh century, Islam originated in the Arabic peninsula, most of the world's Muslims are not of Arab ethnic background and this is reflected in Muslim diaspora that exists geographically widespread all over the world. Although there is an explicit underlying doctrinal belief in the Quran and Prophet's message of an egalitarian Islam, yet people make references to what Islam 'says' versus precisely what this Islam 'is'. To take note of what Bouhdiba (2008) says on Islam as essentially 'socially pluralized' and 'plastic' in the sense that there are different Islams - Arabian, Iranian, Palestinian, Afghan, Indian, Turkish, Sudanese, Yemini and so on. Indeed, this illustrates the form in which Islam enters a new geographical location, many of the customary practices of that region gets expressed in 'Islamic practices'. Given Islam's spread worldwide, Muslims should not be perceived as a static social group.

Drawing on the process of historical development of Islam in Bengal, Sylhet-Cachar being in close proximity - geographically and ecologically with Bengal witnessed similar result of religious transformativity, and thus the chapter contextualizes the study in Karimganj by developing an understanding of the district and culture of the people as an extension and replica of ancient Bengal. The process of Muslim settlement in the district is a long process of tradition of overseas contact which became intensified with the arrival of Shah Jalal, the famous saint who reported to have accompanied in the annexation of Sylhet.

Local conversion, migration from neighbouring districts of Bengal as well as from distant land during medieval period have transformed the demographic landscape of the valley, with people of different ethnic communities and their occupational division residing together. Taking this into consideration, the chapter lays down the indigenous class hierarchy by employing dress and comportment as analytical framework in making hierarchical statements on the family status of the middle class Bengali Muslim women in Karimganj district of Assam.

Like elsewhere in India, in this part of the region too, dress performance pertains to a larger discussion of who and what is coded in which social scale. This conversation is part of the larger project to create the class hierarchy and its associated feminine ideals of 'protected women' through visual markers. This marked functions to delineate the boundaries between one body and another and between groups. This is true where all the elderly generation women observed what can be called as 'full purdah' – the use of *burga* and *chaddor* in their public life. However, more the use of *burga* and *chaddor* in areas where men in general makes a crowd, and less its use in geographical areas where the presence of men is minimal.

In recent times, other aspects of social change must be considered. The issue of modest clothing of middle class Bengali young college going participants becomes important because now they are also participating in the public life outside their homes - such as, attending colleges and performing other responsibilities. Hence change and reform in their dress took the limelight. The expansion of social media applications in smartphones has enabled the younger generations to make adjustments with these feminine ideals of protection, honour, chastity, shame by adopting an alternative dress code - hijab, and abaya. The indispensability of its use has been marked by all the younger participants in the study, and it is beyond their imagination to leave house without wearing one. This often resulted in their uneasy compromises and strategic navigations with their families, peers, and teachers as we will see in the subsequent chapters.

Furthermore, the chapter clearly brings out the heterogeneity and differentiation of experience amongst the younger and older generations in the study area, by throwing light on the subjective reality of change as it is lived and expressed by them, thus, linking it with their historical, political and social standing in class hierarchy. It is significant to note that, while class and the maintenance of moral standards can be conceptualised in broader

framework of dress and modesty, the actual experience of 'otherness' in society at large and in education set-up marks the experiences among the younger participants, which are skilfully utilised by them in structuring their experience with hijab. In the broad sense, the two worlds inhabit by two generations are highly segregate in terms of age experience, yet they share a high degree of mutual dependency amid multiple competing discourses. However, despite changing times, all is not lost. All this together constitutes the experiences of Karimganj's young hijabis, which is (re)contextualized and (re)defined through the various discussion of hijab discourse as has been examined in the subsequent chapters.

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