

Chapter- II

The Study Area and Historical Background

This chapter attempts to provide an outline of the Goalpara district, i.e. the study area. It begins with the origin of the district by exploring its brief historical background and then proceeds to the providing socio-economic and demographic profile of the district. Further, the chapter also attempts to present the historical background of the different socio-cultural groups of people living in the district, particularly the Muslim ethnic groups.

2.1. Origin of the Name and the District:

The name of the district, i.e. “Goalpara” is associated with the term ‘Gwali’ or ‘Goal’ which means milkmen. It is also widely said that the name of the district ‘Goalpara’ is originally derived from ‘Gwaltippika’ which means ‘Guwali village’ in Assamese and ‘the village of the milk-men’ in English as the term ‘para’ denotes village. There are divergent views and opinions regarding the origin of the name Goalpara. Another view in this regard is that as the district is situated on the bank of Brahmaputra, there was a big char (alluvial land) which became an ideal place for grazing cattle. It is believed that many ‘Goals’ (milkmen) settled there with their cattle and formed a colony of milkmen, popularly known as ‘Goaltuli’ (Barooah, 1979). Thus, it is said that the name Goalpara is derived from the term ‘Goaltuli’.

Goalpara is one of the oldest administrative districts in the state of Assam which was originally created by the British in 1876 (District Census Handbook, 2011). The history of the district goes back to several centuries. British historian Sir Edward Gait had concluded that Goalpara was the capital of the kingdom of Kumar Bhaskar

Varman. It was evidenced from the report of the great Chinese traveller Hiuntsang, who visited Assam during the period of Kumar Bhaskar Varman. The district came under British rule in 1765 and was also a part of greater British Bengal. Before 1765, it was a princely state ruled by Rajbongsi kings and the area was under the control of the Koch dynasty. The district was annexed to Assam in 1874, along with the creation of district headquarters at Dhubri, that is, after the British accessed Assam in 1826 (District Census Handbook, 2011).

2.2. Historical Background of Goalpara District:

The historical background of the Goalpara (undivided) district has to be considered in connection with various kingdoms which formed different parts from time to time. It is originally included in the ancient kingdom of Kamrupa as mentioned in the Mahabharata. Narakasura, as the earliest king of Kamrupa followed by his son Bhagadatta, continued to rule for nineteen generations by his descendants (Gait, 1926). After the Naraka dynasty was displaced, for the next two thousand years, no records have been found about the district.

In the tenth and eleventh century A.D., the powerful Pala Dynasty ruled over the central Assam but similarly, there is no certain record of whether the old Goalpara district was included or not. After Pala Dynasty, it is said that the district formed a part of the Kamata kingdom and came into the dominions of the Khen Dynasty in the 15th century whose capital Kamatapur was overrun by the Muslims in 1498 A.D. (District Census Handbook, 2011). After it, a new caste came to power in the district known as Koch and Biswa Singha was the founder king of Koch rule, who was succeeded by his son in 1534 A.D. The first capital of Koch king was established by the progenitor of Koch kings namely Hariya Mandal in Chikangram, a village of then Goalpara district (Gait, 1926). But it was shifted to Coachbihar by Biswa Singha and in 1593 A.D. it was shifted to North Guwahati. Later on, the Koch kingdom was broke out due to the disputes and it came under Mohammedans who ruled for about 20 years. By taking the

advantage of Shah Jahan's (the Mughal Emperor of Delhi) sickness in 1658 A.D., Ahom possessed Goalpara and ruled for three years. In 1662, Mir Jumlah's invasion of Assam had again brought the old Goalpara district under the Mohammedans rule and continued to be so till 1765 A.D. (Barooah, 1979).

Mughals had strongly occupied the old Goalpara district and introduced their administrative rule and regulations including the Zamindari system, which was continued till its abolition in 1957. According to the historian Sir Edward Gait, 'the district of Goalpara had become a British possession in 1765 when the whole of Mohammedan possessions in Bengal was ceded to the East India Company'. During British rule, the district experienced several changes regarding its inclusion. After the Yandaboo Act of 1826, Goalpara was brought under Assam Valley Division, but it was shifted to Coach Behar Commissionership in 1827. Again in 1874, the district came under the Judicial Commissioner of Assam. It was a part of the province of 'Eastern Bengal and Assam' in 1905 and was transferred back to Assam in 1912 (Datta, 1994).

At the time of India's independence, Goalpara district was bounded by the mountainous country of Bhutan on the north, the undivided district of Kamrup on the east, the Garo Hills districts of Meghalaya on the south and on the west the districts of Coach Behar and Jalpaiguri in West Bengal and Rangpur in Bangladesh (Datta, 1994). In 1957, the undivided Goalpara district was composed of three sub-divisions i.e., Dhubri, Goalpara and Kokrajhar.

But in 1983, two districts were split from Goalpara, i.e. Dhubri and Kokrajhar, and Goalpara district was created with two sub-divisions, Goalpara (Sadar) sub-division & North Salmara (Civil) sub-division. In 1989, Goalpara Sadar Sub-division was upgraded into a district and North Salmara Sub-division was merged with the newly created Bongaigaon district. Presently, the erstwhile Goalpara district is divided into Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Dhubri and Goalpara district, and the present Goalpara district consists of only one sub-division.

2.3. Administration:

The present Goalpara district is situated on the South bank of Brahmaputra. The district headquarters are located in Goalpara town and it is about 125 km. from Guwahati, the capital city of Assam. The total area covered by the Indian state of Assam is 78438 square km. of which 1824 sq. km is covered by Goalpara district with 1759.55 sq. km. rural and 64.45 sq. km. urban areas. The district is bounded by Barpeta district in the North, Meghalaya state in the South, Dhubri in the West and Dispur in the East. The mighty river the Brahmaputra flows from east to west on the Northern boundary of the district and the main tributaries are River Dudhnoi, Krishnai, Jinjiram and Jinary.

According to the 2011 census, Assam has a total population of 31,205,576 of which 1,008,183 are in the Goalpara district. The district has a population density of 553 per square km. which is higher than the state average. It has four Assam Legislative Assembly Constituencies namely Dudhnoi, Goalpara East, Goalpara West and Jaleswar. Only Dudhnoi is in the Guwahati Lok Sabha Constituency, while the other three are in the Dhubri Lok Sabha Constituency.

As per the 2011 census, Goalpara has a population of 10,08,183 of which 5,13,292 are male and 4,94,891 are female. Muslims constitute the majority of the population in Goalpara and the total Muslims in the district are 579,929 which is 57.52% of the total population in the district. The total population of Hindu is 347,878 and Christians are 77,862. There are 1,98,454 houses in the district. The district has 5,63,577 (67.37%) literates, of which male and female are 304,302 (71.46%) and 259,275 (63.13%) respectively. However, some of the important statistical data regarding the district in comparison with the state-level statistics have been shown in the following Table 2.1.

Table - 2.1
Comparison of State and District Level Statistics

		State	District
No. of Villages	Total	26,395	829
	Inhabited	25,372	779
	Uninhabited	1,023	50
No. of Towns	Statuary	88	2
	Census	126	9
	Total	214	11
No. of Households	Normal	6,387,047	198,080
	Institutional	16,131	307
	Houseless	3,293	67
Total Population	Persons	31,205,576	1,008,183
	Males	15,939,443	513,292
	Females	15,266,133	494,891
Rural Population	Persons	26,807,034	870,121
	Males	13,678,989	443,244
	Females	13,128,045	426,877
Urban Population	Persons	4,398,542	138,062
	Males	2,260,454	70,048
	Females	2,138,088	68,014
	Percentage	14.1	13.69
Sex Ratio (No. of females per 1000 males)	Total	958	964
	Rural	960	963
	Urban	946	971
Density of Population	Persons per sq. km.	398	553
Area	In sq. km.	78438	1824
Literates	Persons	19,177,977 (72.19%)	563,577 (67.37%)
	Males	10,568,639 (77.85%)	304,302 (71.46%)
	Females	8,609,338 (66.27%)	259,275 (63.13%)
Decadal Population Growth 2001-2011	Persons	4,550,048 (17.07%)	186,148 (22.64%)
	Males	2,162,406 (15.70%)	93,041 (22.14%)
	Females	2,387,642 (18.54%)	93,107 (23.17%)

Source: District Census Handbook (Goalpara), 2011

The district of Goalpara is composed of only Goalpara (Sadar) sub-division. The district comprising of five Revenue Circles with eight Community Development

Blocks, as per the 2011 census, and consists of 829 villages. Goalpara (Sadar) sub-division is divided into five Revenue Circles which are- (a) Lakhipur, (b) Balijana, (c) Matia, (d) Dudhnoi and (e) Rangjuli. The Balijana Revenue Circle is the most populous having 280,438 persons, and the Dudhnoi is the least populous having 80,847 persons in the district.

Moreover, the eight Community Development Blocks of the district are- Balijana, Jaleswar, Kharmuza, Krisnai, Kuchdhowa, Lakhipur, Matia and Rangjuli. Among all these Community Development Blocks of the district, the Jaleswar Development Block has the highest population of 152,077 and the Kuchdhowa Development Block has the lowest population of 90,909.

Table - 2.2

A Brief Statistical Data of Goalpara Municipal Board

Features	District	Municipal Board
Area in Square Km.	1824	12.76
No. of Households	198,080	11,617
Total Population	1,008,183	53,430
Total No. of Males	513,292	26,970
Total No. of Females	494,891	26,460
Total No. of Literates	563,577	39,627
Male Literates	304,302	20,798
Female Literates	259,275	18,829
Total No. of Illiterates	444,606	13,803
Male Illiterates	208,990	6,172
Female Illiterates	235,616	7,631

Source: District Census Handbook (Goalpara), 2011

The district is covering eleven towns with one Municipal Board, one Town Committee and nine Census towns. But the urban areas of the district are mainly occupied by Goalpara Municipal Board with 19 wards which fall under the Balijana

Revenue Circle with a total population of 53,430. However, a brief statistical data of the Goalpara Municipal Board in comparison with the whole district has been depicted in the above Table 2.2.

2.4. Economic Condition of the District:

The economy of any society mainly denotes that social domain which emphasizes the human practices, discourses and material expressions associated with the production, use and management of resources. The economic domain can't be separated from the social domain because it is a process of human practices and transactions. Therefore, the economic explanation of the Goalpara district covers those production-related human practices by which the economic condition of the district could be reflected.

The economy of Goalpara district is primarily agriculture as about 90% of its population depends on agriculture for their livelihood. Paddy is the major crop of the district including wheat, pulses, areca nuts, sugarcane, oilseeds, cash crops like jute, vegetables, etc. The district is also well known for its production of bananas and a big banana market at Darangiri is situated where businessmen from all over India come. The agricultural sector of the district is characterized by the predominance of seasonal crops, traditional methods of cultivation and over-dependence on rainfall due to its suitable agro-climatic conditions. According to the Statistical Handbook of Assam (2016), the net cultivated area in the district is 80565 hectares of its total geographical area of 182400 hectares.

Livestock is an essential and important contributor to the NSDP in the agrarian economy of Assam. Dairy and poultry farming can increase the income and purchasing power of the state. As the district of Goalpara is primarily based on agriculture, dairy farming is traditionally taken as the subsidiary occupation of the farmers in the district. But the milk production is low in the district due to the predominance of local cows with poor genetic make-up. Though the district has a

suitable climatic condition for poultry farming, it could not make any significant progress. However, the district has a good concentration of veterinary facilities with one veterinary hospital, 11 dispensaries, 20 Sub-Centre/First Aid Centres, 4 block veterinary dispensaries, one mobile dispensary, 10 artificial immunization centres, one poultry farm and one pig farm (Statistical Handbook, Assam, 2016).

The agro-climatic condition of the district is also conducive for sericulture. It is mainly practiced by the local people of the district including SC/ST families. As the activities of sericulture primarily involve the women in rearing and spinning, it has provided employment opportunities for them. There are about 288 villages of the district involved in sericulture activities with five Eri farms/centres, seven Muga farms and six Mulberry farms both in the government and private sector. The economy of the district is also contributed by fisheries as about 22167 people in the district are dependent on fishing. The district has 57 beel fisheries, 9095 ponds/tanks and 70 derelict water bodies covering an area of about 9118 hectares (Statistical Handbook of Assam, 2016).

The district of Goalpara was one of the backward districts of Assam with poor transport and communication facilities. It was after the opening of rail-cum-road bridge, i.e. the Naranarayan Setu over the river Brahmaputra, the district is gradually begun to prosper. Goalpara as an industrially insignificant district of Assam has now 27 registered factories and about 1500 small scale units. It is an industrially backward district of Assam ranked at the fourth-lowest position among the districts of the state as per the National Industrial Classification (NIC), 2008. The district has consisted of four handloom training centres, four weavers' extension services units and one handloom production centre. However, the following table 2.3 is reflecting the detailed estimates of Gross District Domestic Product (GDDP) of Goalpara district with the state.

Table - 2.3
Estimates of GDDP at Factor Cost by Industry of Origin at Current Prices,
2009-10

Sector (Rupees in Lakh)	Assam	Goalpara
Agriculture	2066747	52914
Forestry & Logging	166935	5119
Fishing	184729	4553
Mining & Quarrying	630796	1701
Primary Sector (Sub-Total)	3049207	63490
Manufacturing (Total)	682365	11747
Registered	444940	7670
Unregistered	237425	4076
Construction	756689	11698
Electricity, Gas & Water Supply	153930	2747
Secondary Sector (Sub-Total)	1592984	26531
Transport, Storage & Communication	672042	14034
Railway	187813	6755
Storage	4494	80
Transport by Other Means	313632	3733
Communication	166104	2802
Trade, Hotel & Restaurant	1384964	42710
Banking & Insurance	266367	4490
Ownership of Real Estate, Ownership of dwelling & Business	248391	9658
Public Administration	706713	13049
Other Service	1352998	46431
Tertiary Sector (Sub-Total)	4631476	131847
Total :: State Domestic Product	9273667	222734
Per Capita DDP (in Rs.)	30874	24027
Population (In'000 Nos)	30037	927

Source: Economic Survey of Assam, 2011-12

2.5. Occupations:

The people of the district are mainly associated with agriculture and most of their rites or ceremonies are agriculturally related. The cultivation of rice is holding a significant place in the life of the people as the main food of the district. The other important crops of the district are pulses, groundnut, sugarcane, wheat, areca nut, betel leaves, jute, banana, mustard, chilly, etc. The economy of the district is simply related to agriculture, and there is no organized kind of industry to employ the people of the district.

In such an economically backward district of Assam, the majority of its people are largely dependent on the agricultural sector and engaged either as cultivators or as poor labourers. The main reason for the poor economic position of farmers is the Zamindari system under which villagers had lost their land and cultivable land were occupied by landlords or its agents. As a result, villagers had worked as labourers and got a little share of profits from cultivable land. Though the Zamindari system was abolished from the district in 1957 along with the whole nation, some of its effects are there which is becoming the main factor behind the absence of rich farmers.

In addition to agriculture, the people of Goalpara are also associated with a number of traditional informal activities like fishing, weaving, pottery making, basket making, mat making, etc. Fishing is one of the hobbies for all the people of the district and they enjoy catching fish for their home consumption. But it is another source of income for the people living in rural areas. Fishing as an occupation provides a good earning source to some sections of people because the fishermen mainly belong to the castes of Jhalo, Dom, Nadiyal, Hira, Majhi, Malla of Hindus and Dathiyas of Muslim.

The industrially insignificant district has four handloom training centres, four weavers' extension service units and one handloom production centre. Besides the agricultural works, people of the district are engaged in handicraft works which provides an additional income. The products are sold at local as well as at outside markets, but the artisans face many problems due to the insufficient raw materials.

The activities like rickshaw and thela pulling, driving of car, bus, truck, auto, etc., are mainly occupied by Bengali speaking Muslims who are known as Bhatiya in the district. People of other communities are also engaged in such activities, but mainly it is absorbed by Muslims. These people are mainly residing in riverside areas of the Brahmaputra and most of them are associated with cultivation. But gradually they are engaging in almost all the economic activities of the district.

However, the industrially backward district is gradually witnessing some other kinds of informal activities that increasingly engaging its people, particularly women who were largely engaged in agriculture and at present as building and construction workers, workers in brick kilns and stone quarries, domestic workers, etc. Almost people of all sections are engaged in these informal activities including a large number of Bhatiyas of the district.

2.6. Human Development Index:

The concept of the Human Development Index (HDI) is devised by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1990, which attempts to quantify capability. The index is composed of three dimensions, i.e. long and healthy life, knowledge and a decent standard of living, indicating some basic capabilities. The Human Development Report of Assam is highlighting the main indicators of the Human Development Index.

The following Table 2.4 is depicting the picture of the HDI key dimensional achievements of the district in relation to the state. The district is showing a comparatively higher HDI status of 0.591 than the state average of 0.557, by holding 10th rank among the districts of Assam. In respect to the indicators of HDI measurement i.e., health, education and living standard, the district is ranked at 7th, 22nd and 14th respectively. The Gender Development Index (GDI) of the district is 0.829 which is below the state average of 0.875 (Assam Human Development Report, 2014).

Table - 2.4
Key Dimensional Achievements and Human Development Indices of the State
and the District

	State (Assam)	District (Goalpara)
Life Expectancy at Birth	54	66.69
Mean Years of Schooling	6.17	4.65
Expected Years of Schooling	11.85	11.88
Annual Per Capita Income	24660	22404
Dimensional Index: Health	0.523	0.718
Dimensional Index: Education	0.661	0.612
Dimensional Index: Living Standard	0.501	0.470
HDI	0.557	0.591

Source: Human Development Report (HDR), 2014

The total work participation rate, labour force participation rate and unemployment rate is 31%, 35.8% and 13.4% respectively in Goalpara district (HDR, 2014). However, the classification of the workers at the state and district level along with the Goalpara Municipal Board has been depicted in the following Table 2.5.

Table - 2.5
Classification of Workers

Workers	State			District			Municipal Board		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Total Workers (Main and Marginal)	8,541,560	3,428,130	11,969,690	267,118	95,455	362,573	15,015	3,586	18,601
Main Workers	7,034,642	1,652,481	8,687,123	222,680	43,696	266,376	13,324	2,448	15,772
Marginal Workers	1,506,918	1,775,649	3,282,567	44,438	51,759	96,197	1,691	1,138	2,829
Non-Workers	7,397,883	11,838,003	19,235,886	246,174	399,436	645,610	11,955	22,874	34,829
Cultivators	3,099,763	961,864	4,061,627	103,209	23,340	126,549	278	74	352
Agricultural Labourers	1,129,210	716,136	1,845,346	44,559	31,269	75,828	279	87	366

Workers in Household Industry	205,744	285,577	491,321	6,520	7,826	14,346	231	173	404
Other Workers	4,106,843	1,464,553	5,571	112,830	33,020	145,850	14,227	3,252	17,479

Source: District Census Handbook (Goalpara), 2011

2.7. Literacy Rate:

According to the 2011 census, the literacy rate in the district is 67.37% that is lower than the state average of 72.19%. The literacy rate of the female is lower than the male literacy in both the district and Municipal Board by showing gender differential literacy rate as the state literacy. The following Table 2.6 is revealing the gender disparity in the number of literates which is drawn from census data of 2011.

Table - 2.6
Literacy Rate by Sex

	Assam	Goalpara	Municipal Board
Male	10,568,639	304,302	20,798
Female	8,609,338	259,275	18,829
Total	19,177,977	563,577	39,627

Source: District Census Handbook (Goalpara), 2011

The district as one of the oldest districts of Assam having a population of 1,008,183 and occupying about 1824 square km. has a sharp gender disparity in terms of literacy. However, there is a decadal growth in the literacy rate of the district as in 2001, it was 58.03% with 64.86% male and 50.85% female. The growth is also found in the sex ratio which was 956 in 2001 and the 2011 census is showing 962 females for every 1000 males. The following Table 2.7 has depicted the picture of the decadal growth of literacy of the district.

Table - 2.7
Decadal Growth of Literacy (2001-2011)

Year	Assam		Goalpara	
	2001	2011	2001	2011
Person	63.25	72.19	58.03	67.37
Male	71.28	77.85	64.86	71.46
Female	54.61	66.27	50.85	63.13

Source: District Census Handbook (Goalpara), 2011

2.8. The People of Goalpara:

The district comprises of various socio-cultural, religious, ethnic groups including Hindu, Muslim, Garo, Rabha, Bodo, Kalita, Brahman, etc. The people of the district are widely speaking the 'Goalpariya' language. The other languages spoken in the district include Assamese, Bengali, Rabha, Hindi, Garo, etc. The different groups of people had their own history of evolving as the people of Goalpara district.

As B. C. Allen had observed in 1905, "the homogeneity is the dominant note in the social system of Goalpara and a single caste, Rajbongshi forms over one fourth of the total population. More than one fourth of the total populations are Mohammadans and less than a quarter of the whole is thus left for all castes and tribes outside the Rajbongshi group. The higher castes such as the Brahmans and Kayasthas are by no means strongly represented. Even the Kalitas who stand for middle class respectability in Assam and form so large proportion of the population of the Kamrup are comparatively few in numbers. The same may be said of the Kewats or Kaibartas who rank next after the Kalitas in the estimation of the Assamese" (Allen, 1905).

The major group of the district is said to be the 'Rajbongshis' as the district was ruled by them and under the control of the Koch dynasty. The literal meaning of the word is 'of the royal kindred' and the title was adopted by those Koches who

followed Koch Raja and converted to Hinduism. The Rajbonshis and Koches were one of the tribes ruled in the district in former days and by converting to Hinduism have occupied different social statuses. Some of them are holding status equal to Kayasthas and Kalitas, while some others are ranked as low castes of Hindus. Those associated with low graded activities are known by their aboriginal name of 'Koch'. However, the Rajbongshis are heavily found in the district of Goalpara and in areas of Jalpaiguri and Coachbehar.

Garos are one of the important tribes residing in the Southern parts of the district. They are mainly agricultural people and are sub-divided into several petty tribes or clans living by tillage. They are the people with muscularly developed and revengeful in nature to a great extent. Though the number of Garos in the district is small as they are largely concentrated in the Garo Hill district, their importance can't be denied.

Kacharis, popularly known as Bodos are another major tribal group scattered in all parts of the district as well as throughout Assam. Bodos are said to be originated from the great Cachari race, but they seem to have no such nation or country from which they can trace their origin. They are residing in nearby hills or forests areas, associating with agricultural activities. The large concentration of Bodos is found in Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Baksa, and in areas of Darrangiri, Dudhnoi, Balbala, Rangjuli, Amjonga of Goalpara district.

Rabhas as one of the dominant tribal groups of the district is also aboriginal people like the Bodos. But unlike Bodos, they are living in plain areas by adopting the religious beliefs of Hindus. They are concentrating mostly in Makri, Bhalukdubi, Rangjuli, Darrangiri, Dhupdhara areas of Goalpara district.

Brahmins are dominantly found in the district, known as the first priestly caste within the Hindu hierarchical system. The majority of Brahmins in the district can trace their ancestors from the early emigrants of Upper India, Coachbehar or Kamrup. But there are also some Brahmin families of Rarhi or Barendra clan, emigrated from

Bengal and the other Brahmins are classified as Vaidik class. They are mainly employed as a priest, spiritual instructor, landowners, officers, etc.

Along with the Brahmins, Kayasthas are also prominent in the Goalpara district as a higher caste of the Hindu social system. They are mainly the emigrants from Upper India or Bengal and engaged in respectable occupations as subordinate government officials, accountants, clerks, etc., and many of them are landholders.

Kalitas are another dominant caste group of the district. They formed as highest caste and enjoyed considerable power and prestige in earlier times, i.e. before the introduction of Brahmanism. Even in present times they have influence over other castes and are employed as priests, traders, soldiers, agriculturalists, etc.

The other caste groups regarded as inferior that present in the district are Napits (barbers), Kamars (blacksmiths), Hiras and Kumars (potters), Malis (gardeners), Goalas or Gop (cattle-keepers), Telis (oil pressers and sellers), Sutradhars (carpenters), Nadiyals and Doms (living by river industry like fishing and boating), Halua and Jaliya Keuts (fishermen), Kaibartas (Fishermen), Dhobas (washermen), Patiyals (mat-makers), etc. (Hunter, 1879).

The people of Muhammadan sects are forming another important group in the district. Many of them came to this land during the time of the Mughals and settled here by adopting Assamese culture, language and way of life. A group of Muslims designated themselves as Uzani, the people of the upper region and some of them are Koch-Rajbongshis converted to Islam. These local Muslims are known as the 'Deshi' people of the district.

Another important group of Muslims are those Bengali speaking peasants who came from East Bengal (present Bangladesh). The migration of these people had started after the Yandaboo Treaty in 1826 and occupied vast tracts of land in Goalpara in the decades before partition and after independence. Initially, they settled in char areas of the district, but gradually they migrated to the town areas of Goalpara by engaging in a number of unorganized activities like rickshaw and thela pullers, auto

and tempo drivers, construction labourers, vegetable vendors, etc. These Bengali speaking Muslim peasants are popularly known as 'Bhatiya' in the district.

The following Table 2.8 is revealing the distribution of population in the district by various religions in which Muslims are found to be the major religious group in the district as per 2011 census data. Further, the Muslims in the district are only not found as a religious community, but as different groups of people with different historical and cultural backgrounds.

Table - 2.8
Religion-wise Population Data in Goalpara

Religions	Total	Percentage (%)
Hindu	347,878	34.51
Muslim	579,929	57.52
Christian	77,862	7.72
Sikh	771	0.08
Buddhist	194	0.02
Jain	477	0.05
Others	103	0.01
Not Stated	969	0.10

Source: Census of India, Assam 2011

2.9. Muslim Community in the District:

Muslims as the single largest religious minority community constituting about 14.2% of the country's population in the 2011 census had come to Assam in the 13th century, before Ahom invasion of the region. This community has been gradually evolved over a long period of time by different major incidences like various Muslim invasions, propagation and conversion, import of Muslim artisans and learned men by the Ahom rulers and, the migration and immigration. In this regard, although there

were some incidences of propagation and conversion found in Goalpara district particularly from the Koch people, the incidences of Muslim invasions and, migration and immigration are playing major roles in the growth of Muslims.

Muslim Invasions- The British historian Gait mentioned that Muslims came to the contact of old Assam or Kamrupa for the first time in 1198 A.D. when a Turkish army led by Muhammad ibn Bakhtiyar Khilji conquered Bengal by overthrowing its last Sen king Lakshman Sen (1169-98). Muhammad ibn Bakhtiyar Khilji set out an expedition to the North and invaded Kamrupa in order to conquer Tibet, but he was defeated as most of his soldiers lost their life due to unfavourable conditions (Gait, 1926). Some of his soldiers who survived their lives had decided to stay in Assam before the advent of Ahom and they may be regarded as the first batch of Muslims in Assam. According to Assam buranji, the invasion of the south-western part of the Brahmaputra valley in 1320-21 by Ghiyasuddin Bahadur Shah had brought the southern portion of the erstwhile district of Goalpara and Kamrup under the Gauda Sultan till the Kamata king Mriganko conquered the entire region sometime during 1397-1407 (Ahmed, 2010).

However, the Brahmaputra valley of Assam can be divided into two broad Cultural Zones as Upper or Eastern Assam and Lower or Western Assam covering the western parts of the valley which includes erstwhile districts of Kamrup and Goalpara, and the present Darrang district. The regular influx of Muslims into Assam has commenced since the reign of Chakradhwaja, the king of Kamata, who fought for a longer period of time with the invading army of Gauda Sultan. Even during the war of Hussain Shah with Nilambara, a follower of Chakradhwaja, and after the conquest of the major parts of Kamata and Kamrup by Hussain Shah, the influx of Muslims had become more intensified till the possession of the region by Ahom in the third decade of 16th century. It was mainly after Hussain Shah's creation of the colony of the Afghan warriors in Hajo, a large number of Muslims get the opportunity for the first time to settle permanently in erstwhile districts of Goalpara and Kamrup (Ahmed, 2010).

The major parts of the Western Assam were occupied by Muslims during the 17th century and the influence of the Islamic faith had increased. But the Muslims of Assam were cut off from their co-religionists as the empire of Mughals broke and the Muslim settlers in the region have stayed by mixing up with indigenous people. In addition to these, the second phase of the Muslim influx into the Western Assam started with the alliance of Koch-Mughal (Ahmed, 2010). During the Mughal's rule in the Koch-Hajo region, by the governor of the territory Mukarram Khan, about 10000-12000 soldiers were brought in 1616 under several Muslim nobles to settle in order to ensure their empire over the region (Gait, 1926), which also increased the Muslim population of Assam. In 1658, Goalpara was occupied by Ahom for three years till Mir Jumlah's invasion. In 1662, Mir Jumlah's invasion of Assam had again brought the erstwhile district of Goalpara under the dominions of Muhammadan till it was ceded by the British in 1765 A.D. (Barooah, 1979).

Propagation and Conversion- The Koch and the Mech tribes, the inhabitants of the western part of the old kingdom of Kamrupa, displayed their appreciation of Islam so much that one of their chiefs named Ali Mech adopted the faith from Muhammad ibn Bakhtiyar Khilji as said by Minahajuddin (Ahmed, 2010). It shows that the Islamic faith found its way in Assam through the process of conversion with the first political contact. On the other hand, it can be assumed that the influence of Islam on the people of East Bengal and western Kamrupa was already there, i.e. before the first invasion of Muslims in Assam. It is recognized by many historians that several trade routes were there which connected India with China and South-East Asia through Kamrupa in ancient times. Therefore, it seems that the land of China and Kamrupa, and its route was known to the Muslim world from very ancient times. It should be noted here that after Alberuni who visited India in 1030 A.D., a Brahman named Bhajan converted to Islam in the early part of the 13th century (Ahmed, 2010). Thus, it is proved from these sources that the impact of Islam was noticed much earlier than the first Muslim political contact with Assam.

The accounts of king Ratnadhwaaja pala of the Chutiya kingdom and the Deodhai Assam Buranji indicate that this king of the Chutiya kingdom had established friendly relations with the Gauda Sultan (Ahmed, 2010). It is also mentioned that during the reign of Sukarangka, the successor of Arimatta, Ghiyasuddin Bahadur Shah conquered the kingdom of Kamrupa including the north-western part of the Brahmaputra Valley. It might have supplied a fresh incentive to the saints to preach Islam in this land (Ahmed, 2010).

Many Muslim saints had entered Assam intending to spread Islamic faith, some of which came with the invading army at different times. A Muslim saint named Shah Milan, who is popularly known as Azan Fakir, came to Assam in 1630. A large section of the indigenous people was converted into Islam by the preaching of Azan Fakir and other preachers who followed him. The overall condition of Assam during the Ahom rule was favourable for the spread of Islam and the settlement of Muslims. The Ahom kings also granted tax-free land to such preachers and their institutions, without any interference in their management and functioning. The establishment of these institutions like the Madrassa schools, Mosques, Dargahs, Mazars, etc., again tremendously helped the growth of the Muslim population in Assam.

According to Ahmed, there was no large scale conversion of native people in Assam and converts did not form the major bulk of the Muslim population. But, it is also apparent from the fact that a good number of the Muslims in Assam, especially in Western Assam have designated themselves as Sheikh and many of their ancestors appear to have been early local converts, as manifested through their physical features, manners and customs (Ahmed, 2010). Some convert Muslims were labelled as the Koch caste of the Hindus in the administrative enumeration of 1891 because of their many non-Islamic customs. Hunter (1879) refers to these people as Musalman Koch.

Migration and Immigration- The census report of 1872 has shown that about one-fourth of the total Muslim population in Assam was the fresh migrants during the hectic days of internal disputes. It was after the British annexed Assam in 1826, the opportunities for employment and trade on a large scale were opened which

commenced the process of migration from the neighbouring districts of East Bengal, i.e. Rangpur, Sylhet, Dacca and Mymensing. These people mainly settled in the undivided districts of Goalpara and Kamrup.

During the later period of the 19th century and early period of the 20th century, a significant number of Muslims from the peasant community had migrated to Assam and settled in char areas of the state. The British government and some of the prominent leaders of Assam had supported such large scale migration intending to increase agricultural production and living standards of the region. However, most of these people settled in Goalpara district had changed the demographic profile of the district. The following Table 2.9 shows the percentage of all immigrants from the outside of Assam to the population of the district.

Table - 2.9
Percentage of Immigrants to the Population of the District

Year	Male	Female
1921	29.89	23.74
1931	27.81	22.72
1951	17.55	13.79
1961	14.32	11.55

Source: Goalpara District Gazetteer, 1979

It reveals a downward trend of immigrants because of the sealing up of the border of India and East Pakistan (Bangladesh). The figures for 1941 are not available because it was not prepared in that year due to the War. According to D. P. Barooah, “The flow of immigrants to Goalpara district from Mymensingh, Pabna, Bogra and Rangpur districts of East Bengal (Bangladesh) began during the decade 1901-11 and settled on char lands of Goalpara. During the decade, the population of the district increased by 30% whereas its increase in earlier decades was 2% in 1891-1901 and 1.4% in 1881-91... By 1921, larger batches of immigrants came and their movement extended far up the Assam valley and colonies of immigrants formed an appreciable

element of the population in all the plain districts of Assam. An idea of the extent of migration can be had from the figures of those born in Bengal but censused in the Goalpara district. Their number stood at 77,000 in 1911, 1,51,000 in 1921, and 1,70,000 in 1931, and a great majority of whom, i.e. 34,000, 78,000 and 80,000 respectively alone came from the Mymensing district” (Barooah, 1979).

A considerable number of Muslims came to Assam and settled particularly in erstwhile districts of Goalpara in 1910-12. It was from the 1921 census, which brought concern that 2,58,000 Muslim peasants were migrated, particularly from the districts of Mymensing and Rangpur to Assam (Ahmed, 2010). But undoubtedly, these Muslims were so hard working that in a few years they had brought a revolutionary change in the traditional Assamese agricultural system.

Table - 2.10

Total Population and Muslim Population of the State and the District

Year	Assam		Goalpara	
	Total Population	Muslim Population	Total Population	Muslim Population
1961	1,08,37,329	2,765,509	15,43,892	668,748
1971	1,46,25,152	3,594,006	22,25,103	940,106
1991	2,24,14,322	6,373,204	6,68,138	335,275
2001	2,66,55,528	8,240,611	8,22,035	441,516
2011	3,12,05,576	10,679,345	10,08,183	579,929

Source: Census of India, Assam (1961-2011),
Goalpara District Gazetteer, 1979 and Ahmed, 2010

The above table is showing the total Muslim population of the state in general and in particular of the Goalpara district from 1961 to 2011 census data. It reveals that the growth of the Muslim population in the district had increased during the decade 1961-71, but it sharply decreased during 1971-91. The main reason behind the

decreasing Muslim population in 1991 census data is that the erstwhile Goalpara district was divided into Dhubri and Kokrajhar in 1983, and Bongaigaon district in 1989. Further, the data on 1981 is not available in the table because the census was not conducted due to the disturbed conditions resulting from the insurgency. So, the present Goalpara district with its one sub-division is showing the growth of the Muslim population, as in the above table, since 1991. The district has the majority of the Muslim population with 50.18% in 1991, 53.71% in 2001 and 57.52% in 2011.

2.10. The Muslim Ethnic Groups:

The Muslims in Assam are not a homogeneous religious community, but they have different groups on the socio-economic, political, historical, geographical and cultural basis. There are several categorizations within the Muslims and each of them has a different level of similarities and diversities with mainstream society. According to Monirul Hussain, the entire Muslim population of Assam can be categorized into four major groups: (a) Asamiya Muslims, (b) Na-Asamiya Muslims, (c) Muslims of Barak Valley and (d) North Indian Muslims living in Assam. The North Indian Muslims are those who migrated to Assam during the later stage of colonialism and more after independence in search of livelihood. The Muslims of Barak valley are those living in the districts of Barak Valley which is isolated from the mainland Assam, i.e. the Brahmaputra Valley. The Asamiya Muslims (Assamese Muslims) are those who came to Assam at the beginning of the 13th century and evolved gradually over a long period of time. They are also known as Thalua Musalman (native or indigenous Muslims) and deeply assimilated with the larger Assamese culture. The Na-Asamiya Muslims (Neo-Assamese Muslims) are those who came to Assam mainly in the first half of the 20th century and settled in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam in a large number. They are also known as Pamua Musalman (the farming Muslims), Charua Musalman (the Muslims of river islands or banks), Mian Musalman and Mymensinghia Musalman (Muslims from Mymensingh district of erstwhile East

Bengal, now Bangladesh) in Assam (Hussain, 1993). In addition to these, they are also called as Bhatiya Musalman, i.e. the Muslims of downstream (Ahmed, 2010).

Further, the growth of Muslims in the Indian state of Assam at different periods, from different regions, with different regional, linguistic, ancestral, social or cultural backgrounds have brought a kind of strata or division within Muslims. Though the concept of caste is opposed to Islamic ideology, Assamese Muslims may be divided into four broad caste-like groups, i.e. Syed, Goriya, Sheikh and Moriya. The census of 1891 mentioned that like Hindus, Muslim castes were also hierarchically arranged by placing Syeds at the highest position and the Mughals, the Pathans and the Sheikhs in descending order of social status.

W. W. Hunter stated about the existence of Sheikh, Syed, Mughal and Pathan families in the Goalpara district during the later period of 19th century (Hunter, 1879), but at present no Mughal families are available, except a few numbers of the Sheikh, Syed and Pathan families in the district. Moreover, the number of Pathan families is so small that they have assimilated with the Assamese Muslim group of Sheikhs by holding equal social status with them.

Syed- The term Syed means Lord. Syeds are considered as the priestly class occupying a dominant position in the Muslim social life of Assam. Syeds claim that they are the direct descendent of Prophet Hazarat Muhammad through his daughter Fatima and came to India with Muslim armies (Ahmed, 2010). Syeds are particularly found in Goalpara, Kamrup and Mongaldoi areas of Assam, but Goalpara has a very small number of Syeds. In Assam, they claim their descent from a prominent Muslim saint, who came to this land from Arabian countries in order to spread the influence of Islam.

Sheikh- The term Sheikh means venerable leader that should include only the pure Arab descent. But the term has now generally been assumed by Hindu converts to Islam and the majority of Sheikhs are said to be the descendants of local people

including some animists who had embraced Islam (Ahmed, 2010). Sheikhs are widely found in the entire region including the present Goalpara district.

Besides these broad sections of Muslims of Assam, some other sections of Muslims are increasingly found in the district. The categorization is based on the socio-geographical and linguistic as well as cultural traits of the groups. In this connection, five sub-divisions have been made as Uzani, Bhatiya, Charua, Dathiya and Baramasi or Sandar, which are mostly found in erstwhile districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nagaon (Ahmed, 2010). Among these ethnic groups, it is the Uzani and Bhatiya Muslims which are mainly found in the present Goalpara district of Assam.

Uzani- The local Muslims of the erstwhile Goalpara district is designated as Uzani or Muslims of the upper region. These Muslims call themselves as Desi (native). Besides this, some of the Uzani Muslims also called as Bairbandi as their forefathers had hailed from the Bahirband district of East Bengal (present Bangladesh) during the later period of the 19th century (Ahmed, 2010). It is said that a significant number of Uzani or Desi Muslims are the descendants of the Koch-Rajbangsi people who adopted the Islamic faith by conversion. They are considered as lower than the Assamese Sheikh community.

Bhatiya- This section of Muslims is settled mainly in western Assam simultaneously with the Uzanis. They used the term Bhatiya to indicate the 'downstream Musalman' who were originally belonging to the Mymensing and Rangpur districts of East Bengal. During the later medieval period East Bengal was known as Bhatidesh (the downward country) and the Muslims, who migrated to Assam from this land in the late 19th century, were designated as Bhatiya Muslims (Ahmed, 2010). In other words, it can be said that this group of Muslims are those who have changed the demographic picture of the district. These people are mainly cultivators by occupation, but in present times, a large number of these people are increasingly engaging in various unorganized activities.

However, a number of Charua, Dathiya and Baramasi or Sandar groups of Muslim people are also found in the district. Charuas are those who came as farmers or agricultural labourers in the district during the first few decades of the 20th century and have settled in Char areas. Dathiyas are mainly associated with fishing and are recognized as Other Backward Class (OBC) in society. Baramasi or Sandars are that group of people who traditionally engaged in petty trades of cosmetics and other fancy items like bangles, mirrors, combs, different types of powder, cream, lipstick, etc. W. W. Hunter observed that Baramasiyas came to the district on the occasion of certain local fairs and festivals.

Thus, different groups of Muslims throughout the Assam can be ranked in the hierarchical order as shown in the following Table 2.11. The entire Muslim population of Assam can roughly be divided into two main strata as the upper and the lower based on their socio-economic living standards. The upper stratum is composed of Syed, Goriya or Sheikhs including Uzanis and Bhatiyas, while the lower stratum is composed of Moriyas, Dathiyas, Charuas and Baramasi or Sandar.

Table - 2.11
Social Hierarchy of Muslim Caste-like Groups

Strata	Rank
Upper	Syed
	Goriya or Assamese Sheikh
	Uzani
	Bhatiya
Lower	Moriya
	Dathiya
	Charua
	Baramasi or Sandar

Source: Ahmed, 2010

The caste-like groups within each stratum are again ranked in hierarchical order as shown in the above Table. The Syeds are holding a higher status in the hierarchy which is often compared to the Brahmins of Hindu society. The Goriyas and

Assamese Sheikh Muslims are at the next position to the Syeds. The Goriyas claim that they are superior to the Uzanis and Bhatiyas, but the Uzanis sometimes claim that they are either higher or equal with that of Goriyas. In the same way, the Bhatiyas also claim that they are superior to the Uzanis which is strongly opposed by the Uzanis and regarded themselves as more advance than the Bhatiyas (Ahmed, 2010). Further, the groups of the lower stratum are also ranked, where the Moriyas are at the lower position than those four caste-like groups of upper strata. The Dathiyas are placed below the Moriyas of the lower stratum, while the Charuas are considered as inferior to Dathiyas. The Baramasis or Sandars are at the lowest rank of the social hierarchy of all the ethnic or caste-like Muslim groups in Assam.

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