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## **The Muslim Community of Cooch Behar and the Cultural Contribution of Abbasuddin Ahmed**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The princely state of Cooch Behar occupies an important place in the historical and cultural development of northern Bengal. Founded in 1515 by Biswa Singha, the kingdom evolved into a significant regional power that maintained political and cultural autonomy for several centuries before its integration into the Indian Union in the mid-twentieth century. Within the diverse social structure of Cooch Behar, the Muslim community emerged as an important cultural and social group despite remaining a demographic minority. This article examines the historical emergence and socio-cultural characteristics of Muslims in Cooch Behar, focusing on the processes through which Islam spread in the region. It highlights the roles of political expansion, Sufi missionary activities, and local conversion in shaping the Muslim population of the district. The study also explores the cultural contributions of the renowned folk singer Abbasuddin Ahmed (1901–1959), whose musical work played a crucial role in preserving and popularizing Bengali folk traditions such as Bhawaiya, Islamic devotional songs, and other rural musical genres. Through his recordings and performances, Abbasuddin helped bridge the gap between rural folk culture and urban audiences. The article argues that the Muslim community of Cooch Behar represents a unique synthesis of Islamic religious identity and regional cultural traditions, reflecting broader processes of cultural interaction and social

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## Introduction

The historical region of Cooch Behar, located in the northern part of present-day West Bengal, represents a significant cultural and political landscape in eastern India. Established as a kingdom in 1515 by Biswa Singha, the state remained an influential regional power for several centuries. The Koch dynasty consolidated political authority in the region and established administrative and social institutions that shaped the cultural life of northern Bengal. For much of its history, Cooch Behar existed as a princely state under indirect colonial administration during the British period. Following Indian independence in 1947, the princely state was formally merged with the Indian Union in 1949 and later became a district of West Bengal in January 1950. Throughout these historical transformations, the region maintained a diverse population composed of multiple ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities. Among these communities, Muslims have constituted a significant social group within the broader demographic landscape of Cooch Behar. Although numerically smaller than the Hindu population, Muslims have played an important role in shaping the socio-cultural and economic life of the district. The presence of Muslims in Cooch Behar is linked to broader historical developments in Bengal, including the spread of Islam, migration, and the interaction of different cultural traditions.

This article explores the historical formation and socio-cultural characteristics of the Muslim community in Cooch Behar. It also examines the contributions of the renowned folk singer Abbasuddin Ahmed, whose musical legacy significantly influenced Bengali folk culture. By analyzing both historical developments and cultural expressions, the study highlights the important role of Muslims in the cultural history of northern Bengal.

## Historical Background of Islam in Cooch Behar

The introduction of Islam into the region of Bengal is generally associated with the political expansion of Muslim rule in the Indian subcontinent beginning in the early thirteenth century. Historians note that the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate created new political and cultural networks that facilitated the spread of Islamic influence across eastern India (Eaton 1993). Although direct historical documentation concerning the earliest arrival of Muslims in Cooch Behar is limited, it is widely accepted that Islamic influence gradually reached the region through the broader expansion of Muslim authority in Bengal. During the medieval period, Bengal became an important frontier region where political authority, economic expansion, and religious transformation interacted in complex ways. Military campaigns by



Pathan and later Mughal rulers helped integrate northern Bengal into larger imperial administrative systems. These campaigns were accompanied by the movement of soldiers, administrators, traders, and religious scholars who introduced Islamic institutions and practices into local society.

However, historians emphasize that the spread of Islam in rural Bengal was not solely the result of political power or military expansion. Sufi saints and religious missionaries played a crucial role in introducing Islamic ideas and practices to local populations (Roy 1983). These spiritual leaders often settled in rural areas, where they established religious centers that attracted followers from different social backgrounds. The teachings of Sufi saints emphasized spiritual devotion, humility, and equality among believers. Such principles appealed particularly to marginalized groups who faced social discrimination within the rigid hierarchical structure of the Hindu caste system. Over time, these interactions facilitated gradual conversions to Islam among various segments of rural society.

As a result, Islam in Bengal developed a distinctive character shaped by local cultural traditions as well as broader Islamic religious practices. This process of cultural synthesis was especially evident in regions such as Cooch Behar, where indigenous populations incorporated Islamic beliefs while maintaining many aspects of their regional identity.

### **Formation of the Muslim Community in Cooch Behar**

The Muslim community of Cooch Behar largely developed through processes of local conversion rather than through large-scale migration from foreign regions. Historical records indicate that many Muslims in the district were originally members of local Hindu communities who adopted Islam over several centuries. In particular, individuals belonging to lower social strata found in Islam a religious framework that offered greater social equality and spiritual inclusion. As a result, conversion to Islam gradually increased among marginalized communities in northern Bengal. Demographic studies indicate that the Muslim population of Cooch Behar historically consisted of several social groups, the most prominent being Sheikh, Nasya (or Nashya), and Pathan. Among these groups, the Sheikh and Nasya communities are generally regarded as indigenous Muslims of the region.

According to the historian H. N. Choudhury, the majority of Muslims in Cooch Behar belonged to the Sheikh community, which was widely recognized as consisting largely of converts from local Hindu populations (Choudhury 1903). The Nasya community also represents a locally rooted Muslim group with strong cultural connections to the indigenous Rajbanshi population. Physical and cultural characteristics support this interpretation. The Muslims of Cooch Behar share many linguistic and



cultural traits with the Rajbanshi community, including similarities in dialect, dress, and social customs. These shared characteristics suggest that the Muslim community developed through a gradual process of cultural assimilation rather than through the settlement of foreign populations.

The Partition of India in 1947 brought significant demographic changes to the region. Many Bengali Hindus migrated from East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) to West Bengal, including the district of Cooch Behar. Despite these changes, the Muslim population of the district continued to maintain strong ties to local cultural traditions while preserving their Islamic religious identity.

### **Socio-Cultural Life of Muslims in Cooch Behar**

The Muslim community of Cooch Behar exhibits considerable diversity in terms of language, occupation, and cultural practices. Most Muslims in the district follow Sunni Islam, although small numbers belong to Shia and other sectarian traditions. Historically, the majority of Muslims in the region were engaged in agriculture. Rural life and agrarian occupations formed the foundation of their economic existence. Many families worked as farmers, sharecroppers, artisans, or small traders. Over time, the community gradually expanded into new professions, including teaching, government service, and business.

In terms of education, Muslims in Cooch Behar historically lagged behind the Hindu population due to socio-economic disadvantages and limited access to modern educational institutions. However, educational conditions began to improve gradually during the twentieth century as new schools and colleges were established. Cultural life within the Muslim community has traditionally reflected a blend of Islamic religious practices and regional folk traditions. Religious festivals such as Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha are celebrated with great enthusiasm, while local cultural practices also remain an important part of everyday life. One of the most notable features of Cooch Behar's social environment has been the tradition of communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims. Throughout the history of the Cooch Behar kingdom and the modern district, relations between the two communities have generally remained peaceful and cooperative. Shared participation in cultural events and local traditions has contributed to the development of a relatively harmonious social environment.

### **Cultural Contributions of Abbasuddin Ahmed**

Among the many notable figures associated with the cultural history of Cooch Behar, the legendary folk singer Abbasuddin Ahmed occupies a particularly important place. Born on 27 October 1901 in the village of Balarampur in the Tufanganj subdivision, Abbasuddin emerged as one of the most influential



figures in the development of Bengali folk music. His father, Zafar Ali Ahmed, was a lawyer practicing in the Tufanganj court. Abbasuddin received his early education in local schools before continuing his studies at Cooch Behar College, where he completed the Intermediate examination in 1921. Although he did not receive extensive formal training in classical music, Abbasuddin developed remarkable vocal skills through personal dedication and exposure to regional folk traditions. His natural musical talent enabled him to become one of the most celebrated folk singers of Bengal.

Abbasuddin first gained widespread recognition through his performances of Bhawaiya songs. Bhawaiya is a distinctive folk music tradition associated with the rural communities of northern Bengal and Assam. Characterized by melancholic melodies and expressive lyrics, Bhawaiya songs often reflect the emotional experiences of rural life, including themes of love, separation, and longing. Abbasuddin's rich and emotive voice brought new life to this musical tradition. Through gramophone recordings and radio broadcasts, he introduced Bhawaiya songs to audiences far beyond their original rural context. In addition to Bhawaiya, Abbasuddin performed many other forms of folk and devotional music, including jari, sari, bhatiali, murshidi, marfati, and dehatattva songs. His ability to perform across different musical traditions contributed to his widespread popularity.

Abbasuddin also made significant contributions to Islamic devotional music. He recorded numerous Islamic songs written by prominent Bengali poets such as Kazi Nazrul Islam and Jasimuddin. Through his performances, these songs gained popularity among Bengali-speaking Muslim audiences. Among his most celebrated songs are "O Mon Ramzaner Oi Rozar Sheshe Elo Khushir Eid," "Oki Gariyal Bhai," "Nodir Naam Soi Anjana," and "Amar Gohin Gang-er Naiya." These songs remain iconic examples of Bengali folk music and continue to be performed by artists today. Abbasuddin's greatest achievement lies in his ability to connect rural musical traditions with urban cultural audiences. At a time when folk music was often marginalized within elite cultural circles, his recordings helped elevate these traditions to national prominence.

## Conclusion

The historical development of the Muslim community in Cooch Behar reflects the broader patterns of cultural interaction and religious transformation that shaped the history of Bengal. Through processes of migration, conversion, and social integration, the community developed a distinctive identity that combined Islamic religious traditions with regional cultural practices. The contributions of Abbasuddin Ahmed illustrate the important role of cultural figures in preserving and promoting the heritage of Bengal. By popularizing folk music traditions and introducing them to wider audiences, he helped ensure



the survival of an important aspect of Bengali cultural identity. The Muslim community of Cooch Behar therefore represents an important component of the region's social and cultural history. Its heritage continues to enrich the cultural landscape of northern Bengal and contributes to the broader narrative of Bengali civilization.

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