

On the way to be Thai Muslims, or keeping their own way?:

“Bangladeshi” Muslim community in Chiang Mai, Thailand

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1 Aim

This paper examines the ‘Bangladeshi’ Muslim community in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Many people know that there are some ‘South-Asian’ Muslims in the city. Some scholars have called them vaguely as ‘Indian’ Muslims or ‘Indo-Pakistani’ Muslims. But, in reality, many of them call themselves as ‘Bangla’ or ‘Bangladeshi’ and formed a distinct community in the southern fringe of the city. Their forefathers seem to come from the eastern part of British India (eastern part of present Bangladesh) for some generations ago and settled in the city, and their self-professed name reflects this historical memory.

2 Methods

To reveal their characteristics, the author conducted field research several times, in Chiang Mai city and its nearby areas, in some border towns such as Mae Sod and Mae Sariang, and also in southern parts of Bangladesh. All the research has conducted by the author in Bangla or in English, with the help of some Thai speaking researchers and of a Burmese speaking scholar. Several methods are used such as, group interview, personal interview, historical reconstruction through the oral history method, etc.

3 Results

Although they call themselves ‘Bangla’ or ‘Bangladeshi’ (Muslims), almost none of them can speak or understand Bangla (Bengali) language at all and, worse, most of them lost any real memory of their forefathers from eastern Bengal (present Bangladesh). Their native language is Thai and most of them can understand Thai only. All they do is just as those of other Thai Muslims. In this sense, they are Thai Muslim. But, their appearance, especially their ‘Indian’ face, and some of their preference of food such as ‘curry’ narrowly keep them to think their self-proclaimed identity as ‘Bangla’. However, there are some new factors have been emerging such as Dawaat of Tablighi Jamaat and having a visit of Imams from southern Bangladesh or from Arakan state, Myanmar. These international Islamic connections urge them to think about their identity and the position of their community in the larger local area again.

4 Conclusion

From these findings, it seems that their community stands just at a crossroad of being a part of larger Thai Muslim or of keeping their own way.