

Kanaighat: History and Heritage

By Sadequl Amin

Sylhet is well-known as the spiritual capital of Bangladesh. Similarly, Kanaighat Upazila is known as one of the spiritual areas of the Sylhet District.

A distinct characteristic of the people of Kanaighat is that the vast majority of them are deeply religious and practice their religion wholeheartedly. In Kanaighat, there are many renowned and respected religious institutions from where the local people are gaining excellent religious academic education. In this area, people are also engaged in activities concerning their religion and they take great pride in it. Throughout centuries, eminent religious scholars, academics, intellectuals, politicians, professionals and knowledgeable individuals were born in Kanaighat. Many have departed this world and others are continuing to serve the people in Bangladesh and abroad. Hopefully, many of the future generations will serve and contribute towards the betterment of the area, the country and the world.

Kanaighat is a terrain of the early Jaintia Kingdom which was part of an ancient Hill Kingdom of Assam. The Jaintia Kingdom was a matriarchal kingdom which is also mentioned in Epic, Puranic, and Tantric literature. There is a catchphrase that is well-known in Sylhet and beyond; *Pan, Pani abong Nari - Ei tiney Jaintiapuri* – Betel, Water and Women - these three make Jaintiapuri.

On 23rd June 1757, the last independent Nawab of Bengal Mirza Muhammad Siraj ud-Daulah lost his reign at the Battle of Plassey. This was around 263 years ago. The British East India Company, under the leadership of Robert Clive, defeated the Nawab. This win was due to the treachery of Mir Jafar Ali Khan, who was Nawab's commander in chief. It was crucial to the East India Company's success which paved the way to the establishment of British rule in India.

The British East India Company controlled a large area of India for 101 years, from 1757 to 1858. Then the British Crown ruled the subcontinent for 89 years from 1858 to 1947. Altogether, the British ruled this subcontinent for approximately 190 years. On 16 March 1835, 78 years after the Battle of Plassey, the East India Company took control of the Jaintia Kingdom. At that time, the East India Company was under the first Governor General of India, Lord William Bentinck. In 1836, Jaintia Kingdom was incorporated into the Sylhet District Collector. In order to keep peace and discipline in the Jaintia area, the East India Company's local

administration initially set up Thanas (Police Stations) in places such as Jaintiapur and Mulagul Porgona of Kanaighat.

In 1841, a Thana was established in Mulagul Porgonar Lakkipur Mauzar Jarnar Tilai. However, 39 years later in 1880 the Mulagul based Thana was moved to Kanaighat. This Thana is still operating to this day and it is around 140 years old. When Lord Curzon was the Viceroy of India (1899-1905), the 'modern education' or 'English education' system started in Kanaighat. As a result of this system, the first modern education institute, Kanaighat Government ME School, was established in 1905. However, formal religious education started well before the establishment of the ME School in Kanaighat. Many of the masjid based Khankas and Makthabs were providing basic religious education for local people. At the same time, many respected and reputable institutions started providing higher levels of religious education in Kanaighat. Some of these institutions are Jhingabari Alia Madrasa (1874), Umarganj Immdadul Uloom Madrasa (1898), Monsuria Madrasa which is later named as Kanaighat Monsuria Senior Madrasa (1889/1900), Kanaighat Darul Uloom Madrasa and Gasbari Jamiul Uloom Madrasa (1901).

On 15 August 1947, the British colonial rule ceased to exist in the Indian subcontinent. Before the British withdrew from the subcontinent, they created two separate religiously divided independent sovereign states. The states are India, where majority of the people were from the Hindu community and Pakistan, where majority of the people were from the Muslim community. At the same time, independent Pakistan was further divided into two geographically separate parts: East Pakistan and West Pakistan.

During the time of this partition, Sylhet including Kanaighat was a Muslim majority district in the Assam province which was a Hindu-majority area. Due to this, the people of Sylhet needed to decide through a partition referendum whether to remain with Assam or to join East Pakistan. The referendum was held on 7th July 1947 to decide the future of Sylhet as well as of Kanaighat. The majority of the people in Sylhet voted in favour of joining East Pakistan. After nine months of war with West Pakistan, East Pakistan became independent Bangladesh in 1971. Hence, Sylhet became part of Bangladesh.

The Local Government Ordinance 1982 was promulgated by the Government of the time. As

part of this ordinance, previously known 'Thana' the oldest institution was replaced by 'Upazila'. In 1983, after 103 years of its establishment, Kanaighat Thana became an Upazila and named 'Kanaighat Upazila'.

Kanaighat is an upazila of the Sylhet District in the Division of Sylhet, Bangladesh. The upazila has an area of 412.25 km². It is geographically surrounded by Jaintiapur upazila and Golabganj upazila on the West, Maghalaya state of India on the East, Beanibazar upazila and Zakiganj upazila on the South and Jaintiapur upazila and Meghalaya state of India on the North.

In early 1960, the government of the time introduced union parishad. As a result of this introduction Kanaighat was divided into 9 union parishads. The union parishads are: East Lakshmi Prasad, West Lakshmi Prasad, East Dighirpar, Satbak (West Dighirpar), Bara Chatul, Kanaighat, South Banigarm, Jhingrabari and Rajaganj.

In 2005, Kanaighat Sadar was declared a municipality (paurashava). Currently, the upazila is consists of 1 paurashava and 9 union parishads. The paurashava is subdivided into 9 wards and 26 mahallas. Similarly, 9 union parishads are subdivided into 81 wards, 198 mauzas and 262 villages.

According to the Population and Housing Census 2011 of Bangladesh, the population of Kanaighat upazila was 263,969. The male population stood at 48.99% and the female population at 51.01%. The population density of the upazila was 674 per km². Amongst the population, there were 254,940 Muslims, 8,730 Hindus, 248 Christians, 6 Buddhists and 45 others. The average literacy rate was 43.5%. (The Population and Housing Census 2022 results are not yet released.)

The Jatiya Sangsad in Bangladesh has 300 parliamentary constituencies. Kanaighat upazila is part of constituency number 233, Sylhet 5. The Sylhet 5 constituency comprises of Kanaighat upazila and Zakiganj upazila.

This is a humble attempt to highlight the brief history, heritage and present information relating to Kanaighat. Hopefully, this will encourage others to come forward with more in depth writing about Kanaighat. Furthermore, it is highly anticipated that the information in this article will be beneficial to all of us, particularly to young people and for future generations.

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