



FROM BANGLADESH TO INDIA: A STUDY ON SYNCRETISM AND DISTINCTIVENESS THROUGH THE PRESENT MARRIAGE SYSTEM OF THERAVADI BUDDHISTS OF NORTH BENGAL.

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ABSTRACT

Theravada Buddhism is practiced by many people particularly of South and South-East Asia. In Bangladesh Theravadi Bengali Buddhists are known as Baruas. After the partition of India in 1947 a good number of these Theravadi Bengali Buddhists started migrating from Chittagong (Bangladesh) to India and settled mostly in West Bengal, Tripura, Assam and the neighboring provinces. The present generation of Bengali Buddhists of North Bengal migrated here during the Bangladesh War of Liberation in 1971 and such migration continued afterwards. Buddhist Baruas are religious minorities and are associated with Mog tribal identity as well. However, due to cultural assimilation and intermarriage it is now difficult to distinguish them from Hindus by their external features. In this context this paper is a modest attempt to unveil the nature of syncretism as well as their pattern of boundary maintenance through their rites, rituals and partner preferences in the marriage practices.

Introduction-

The most widely spread religion in Asia today is Buddhism, but it is a minority religion in India, the country of its origin. However Buddhism continued to be the religion of a sizeable section of people in Bengal and their presence in the ever changing social, economic and political situation is evident even today. As because Buddhism was emerged in India as a protest movement against the rigidity of Hindu caste and other Bramhnic system, many of the so called lower castes converted to Buddhism but the Bengali Buddhist community present in the North Bengal are not such converts. They are mostly *Baruas* who have *Mog/Magh* tribal identity and therefore, more specifically known as *Magh-Barua*¹ (Risley, 1891, P.P 29). This group has migrated people from the Chittagong district of Bangladesh. It is said that some of their ancestors had migrated to Chittagong and settled there from the present Bihar state and other parts of Northern India during the period of Bramhnic resurgence in India. (Chaudhuri, 2010, P.P 432) They are usually believed to be of a mixed origin with blood of different groups and religions². A section of the Baruas however rejects this view and claims to be of *Kshatriya* origin and trace their descent from the ruling race of Bihar (Magadha)³ (Mutsuddi, 1959 P.P 5-10)

After the partition of India in 1947 a good number of these Buddhists migrated to India and settled mostly in West Bengal, Tripura, Assam and the neighboring provinces. But present generation Bengali Buddhists of North Bengal migrated here at the time of Bangladesh War of Liberation 1971 and even after. There are eleven (11) *Theravadi* Buddhist monasteries present in the North Bengal⁴. Though *Baruas* are scattered all over this area but there is a tendency to settle nearby the temple. These Bengali Buddhists of North Bengal are the followers of 'Theravada Buddhism'. However the group under study having adopted many elements of Hinduism in their lives does not maintain the puritan Buddhist traits established through the reform movement. They have a close connection with Bangladesh.

Specifying the problems and objectives -

Cultural plurality and integrity within poly-ethnic cultural environment is the basic feature of India. Under such a situation there is an urgent need for community studies at micro and macro levels to understand the nature and extent of social processes in different eco-cultural areas and regional set-up of this country.

The bank of *Karotoya* is mentioned in different texts and other sources as an important site of early settlement of the Buddhists⁵. But now it is difficult to distinguish the Bengali speaking Buddhist from Hindus by their external features and culturally this group is also assimilated with the majority of the society, even their surname is not a reflection of their religion and interestingly enough they have a multi dimensional history of migration. In Chittagong they were numerically stronger but now they exist here as a marginal group.

Moreover in North Bengal, the Bengali speaking *Theravadi* Buddhist community has to interact also with the non-Bengali *Mahayani* Buddhist community. Overall in North Bengal and particularly in Darjeeling district, non-Bengali *Mahayani* hill peoples are majority among the Buddhists. Their organization and infrastructure are also financially much more strongly supported than the Theravadis.

Research Methods -

Every research project has to start somewhere. Typically, this starting point is an 'idea'. Sometimes this idea originates because of a particular problem or situation one actually experiences or ideas move from information we hear but may not actually experience. In my case, I am not the member of my study group but I became interested about the life and existence of Bengali Buddhists of North Bengal.

Now the second point is that how to relate idea with theories? In my work I used a model that encompasses both the research before theory and theory before research models. I began with an idea, gathered theoretical information, reconsidered and refined my idea, examined possible design, collected data, reexamined theoretical assumptions then analysed and prepared final findings. Thus my model is like-

Idea → theory → design → data collection → theory → analysis → findings

Thirdly, I followed the method of triangulation in my research, though my study is not conducted by the multiple researchers.

The work has been started in 2012 and on the way to submission as a doctoral thesis.

The sample frame and sampling procedures -

The data for this study were collected through a sample survey. To identify the settlement of the community I have identified religious centers or Buddhist monasteries of North Bengal. Generally each Barua family is the member and donor of one nearby monastery and monastery office keep records of their address and family details with whom they are closely related. This is basically choosing of few pockets where a group of people live within easy reach of each other. For example, in Siliguri, the most important sub-division of North Bengal there are four monasteries and the population of Barua Buddhists is 1500(approximately). The sample size is large enough from the statistical perspective to give the meaningful representation of the population whereby the interpretation of the findings can be expected.

Sources of data collection-

The research task requires both the act of observation and the act of communicating the analysis these observations to others. For the collection of empirical data I have done fieldwork with the help of conventional sociological tools and techniques (viz., observation, use of census schedule, interviews, case studies, group discussions and content analysis) because there was not sufficient information available about the issue to be studied. To get speedy results and to explore unanticipated issues and to encourage interaction among participants a focus group interview method was followed. This study is based on both primary and secondary sources of data. Some published and unpublished materials are consulted for understanding the history and culture of Bengali Buddhist as a background.

A Focus on Barua Marriage in the light of syncretism and distinctiveness-

Among the life cycle rites and rituals marriage is no doubt the most significant one. The first and foremost part of any marriage is to select the bride and groom. It is generally said that as *Siddhartha* himself married *Yosodhara*, his cousin sister, so this type of marriage is allowed in the society subject to the rule that cousins are cross cousins. But the present society tries to avoid marriage between the relatives. Inter religious marriage though not encouraged but is not very rare.

As traditionally it was customary among the *Baruas* that the party of the groom must give *daba* (bride-price) to the bride in the form of ornaments, garments and even cash money and for that reason the actual marriage took place in the house of the bride-groom. But now-a-days by the influence of Hindu neighbours Buddhist bride-grooms too go to the bride's house and marriage is held there.

On the day of the Barua marriage ceremony, a good number of social formalities are to be observed. Before the actual marriage is held the Bhikkhus (*Vantes*) are invited to recite *Mangal-Suttas* in order to bless the couple for their happy and prosperous conjugal life. After that, one non-professional priest (*Mantra-data*)⁶ performs the actual rites for the ceremony. The 'mantra's he utters are generally in Pali. Actually in comparison to Hindu form of marriage the Buddhist marriage system is very simple but it has got many ceremonial parts which occur on different days. And to give a satisfactory feast to the neighbours is the vital part in a Barua marriage.

Different Ceremonial Parts of the Bengali Buddhist Form of Marriage-

There are two systems of marriage of Barua Buddhists. If the bridegroom goes to the father's house of the bride and the nuptial is performed there, it is called *Chalanta Vivah*. Again, if the bride is brought to the bridegroom house and nuptial is performed there, it is called *Namanta Vivah*. In Bangladesh, *Namanta Vivah* is much more common whereas in India *Chalanta Vivah* is a regular practice.

Let us discuss about the various ceremonial parts of the Barua Buddhists form of marriage which are prevalent in the contemporary society. Actually all these ceremonies could be categorized into three groups-

1. Ceremonies before marriage

2. Ceremonies on the day of marriage

3. Ceremonies after marriage

1. Ceremonies before marriage –

Alankar-Charani – When the final selection of bride and groom has been made the first ceremony that is held in the bride's house is known as *alankar-charani* that is to engage the girl finally by giving her new ornaments and garments from the bride-groom's side. From that day the girl concerned practically becomes betrothed. In the house of the bride groom both the parties

finalize the exact date of marriage and also make a formal agreement on the issue as to what they will give in kind to the boy and the girl (in most cases to the girls only) concerned. People are invited as witness to this and they are given a sumptuous feast. The elders formally bless the girl and give their approval for the marriage. This system is prevalent among the *Baruas* even now but the name of the occasion is commonly referred to as *Ashwirbad*⁷ rather than *Alankar Charani*. Another additional part of this occasion in these days is exchange of ring and cutting the cake as an engagement celebration.

Pansalla, Nayari and Haala Song- In traditional Barua society these three customs are very much associated with the marriage ceremony. To conduct all the steps of marriage perfectly neighbours are invited for discussion. Name of this social meeting is *Pansalla* where all important decisions regarding marriage are taken.

After fixing the date of the marriage many friends and relatives used to visit the house of the bride and bride-groom, they are known as *Nayari*, who are very helpful in domestic affairs.

Actually from the day of *Alankar Charani* or *Ashwirbad* and onwards in both the houses of the girl and the boy, there occurred a regular festival. Among those festivals singing of *Haala* Song was a Major one. Generally the womenfolk sang in a chorus in the days of marriage preparation and on the day of actual marriage. These songs were called *Haala* and contained episodes of some happy historical events, such as *Kaikeyir haala*, *Janakir haala*, *Janak rajar haala*, *Dharmik rajar haala* and the like, though its meaning is very difficult to understand but from the names of these songs we can easily understand the influence of Hinduism over Buddhism. *Kaikeyi*, *Janaki*, *Janak raja* are characters of Hindu epic *Ramayana*.

At North Bengal all these customs are not in practice now rather some new trends are entering within the community, like presently young brides are interested to decorate their hands with *mehendi*⁸ paste before marriage.

Tel Loani- Actually three days before the marriage another ceremony starts which is called *tel loani*. In both the houses of the boy and the girl this ceremony is held. In that period going to the Buddha temple (Bihar) and worshipping the Buddha and taking blessings from the *Bhikkhus* are some common practices. A sacred thread purified by the *Bhikkhus* is fastened to their wrists, in order to protect them from the evil eyes of the spirits and ghosts. Then in a decorated

winnowing-fan (*aanak kula*) paddy, durba grass, oil lamp, green banana, stone pebble, green turmeric, *ghila* (a seed of mimosa scandens) and a painted water jar which is filled with leaves of mango sprouts, bamboo sprouts, *mijri* sprouts (one kind of tree) are placed. All these have a symbolic significance. According to Buddhist beliefs, the green fruits are symbol of good health, green turmeric is the symbol of beauty, stone is the symbol of firmness, earthen light is the symbol of hope, water is symbol of life and quenching thirst, a *ghila* for gravity and leaves within the jar are the symbol of long life. In the boy's house the boy sits in a room surrounded by males and females, especially of young age. One by one they hold that winnowing fan and cause the same to move in front of the boy and touch his forehead. The wives of the boy's elder brothers too participate in it to enhance the pleasure of the company. Widows are not allowed to take part in it, for Buddhists believe like their Hindu neighbour that if any widow takes part in this auspicious ceremony, the couple will also suffer the same fortune. This is done twice in a day – in the morning as well as in the evening. In the girl's house the same thing is done in the same way. But now-a-days in most of the cases this is done on the day before marriage and on the day the actual marriage is held. As another sub-part of this ceremony on the morning of the day of marriage both the boy and the girl are anointed with paste of green turmeric and are bathed in ceremonious way. This ceremony (as *Gaye halud*⁹ in Bengali Hindu marriage) is gaining more popularity today. After bath they are supposed to wear something made up of iron like a ring, bangle or even it can be a small key which hangs around the waist with the help of a thread. These are used for the same purpose i.e. to protect them from the evil eyes. Here again we can notice a role of Hindu occupational caste in Buddhist marriage.

The house deity (*ghardevata* in Bengali) is worshipped with un-boiled rice, banana and some molasses in Bangladesh during marriage days. All the residents of the house pay their homage to this deity and pray for the well being of the couples, who are going to be married. This is not a common practice among the Barua settlers of North Bengal, India.

2. Ceremonies on the Day of Marriage-

According to the original marriage system of Barua Buddhists of Bangladesh before migration, marriage is supposed to be held at the house of the bridegroom (*Namanta Vivah*). So there are two additional steps in the *Namanta Vivah*.

Bridegroom's party goes to bring the bride -

On the day of marriage the bride is to be brought from her parent's house to that of the bridegroom in a ceremonious way. So, on the day of marriage the bridegroom party along with sweets, ornaments, dresses and perfumes goes to bring the bride. They are called *Barjatri*. They will not enter the bride's premises so long as they are not properly received by the bride's party. In the courtyard of the bride's house a temporary structure is built where arrangements of seats for the guests are made. The bridegroom's party sits there front to front with respective persons of the bride society. It is called *kanakani* or *konakoni basa* in the Chittagong language. Good wishes are exchanged between the two parties in there. Then they are served with sugar and betel-leaves arranged nicely on a tray. Everybody takes a bit of sugar and puts in their mouth. After refreshment the bridegroom party handover what they have brought for the bride. All the items, put on a tray is shown to all guests present there and the womenfolk adorn the bride with those items. It takes a pretty long time. In the meantime rich diets are served to the guests. After feeding the guests, time comes to bid farewell to the bride. Some distinguished elderly persons of the bridegroom party are taken inside the house. The father or any near elderly relative of the bride hands over her to them and say, "Please accept our daughter and treat her as your own daughter from this day and take care of her. Hope she will lead a happy life in the house where she is going to live."

Rituals for bride reception-

When the bridegroom party comes back home with the bride, the female members of the house cordially receive her in a ceremonial way. Generally the brothers, brother-in-laws follow the bride to the bridegroom's house. The other relatives including her father will join during the actual ceremony. But the bridegroom and the bride cannot see each other before the final ceremony is celebrated. The bride is kept in a particular house and she does not take any food or drinks in the bridegroom's house till she is not a legal wife through Buddhists customs. So at the time of departure from her father's house banana and some other food are sent for the bride. But generally cooked rice and palatable food is supplied from any other neighbouring family for the bride.

In the evening the neighbours are fed with delicious food. When the bride party comes in the bridegroom's house, they are welcomed in a ceremonial way and preparation is taken for the actual marriage ceremony.

Marriage ceremony of Barua Buddhists of North Bengal after migration is held at the house of bride (*Chalanta Vivah*) like her any other friend of Hindu or Muslim communities.

Actual marriage ceremony of Barua Buddhists (both *Namanta* and *Chalanta*) is divided into three parts but the importance and detailing of last part which is emerged as a strong influence of Hindu community is much higher in North Bengal, India.

Religious ritual or Mangalasu-

A particular space is decorated for the ceremony where the distinguished guests of both sides take their seats. The bride and the bride-groom are brought there and seated side by side. It is a custom that neither of the couple will look at each other until the ceremony comes to an end thus on the bride-groom's head there will be a turban above which a coronet (*sehra*) should be placed so that his face remains to some extent covered. But in these days boys mostly use *topor* rather than *sehra*¹⁰. The seating arrangement is made with mattresses, bed covers and pillows of both the girl's and boy's side. The bride is seated on the left side of the groom. Then invited Bhikkhus come and have the couple take refuge in the five precepts along with *Trisarana*. The Bhikkhus go on to recite some *suttas* from holy *Pitaka* and give sermons regarding the activity in their new life, especially from *Sigalovada sutta*, *Mangala-sutta*, *Parabhava sutta* etc. , those contained the duties of householders and used in *Paritta*. They regard the teachings of Buddha mentioned in this sutta as the "code of conduct for householders" or "*Grihi- Vinaya*". This function is called in Chittagong dialect *mangalasu*. It is the main religious aspect of the marriage as considered by the Buddhist custom. Two auspicious water jars (*Mangalghat*) are placed there then the Bhikkhus come and tie the jars as well as make a boundary line of the area with the help of seven layers of thread. They fasten the holy thread on the wrist of the bride and the groom spray the holy water on them at the end.

Rituals performed by lay priests-After the religious rituals performed by the Bhikkhus, a lay priest who is called *Mantradata* is necessary to perform the actual rituals of the marriage ceremony. The lay priest utters all he mantras in Pali and then gives his interpretation in Bengali. The story of the marriage of *Visakha*¹¹ occupies an important position in the marriage ceremony

of Buddhists in Bangladesh and in every marriage ceremony this story is cited. The mantras used in the marriage ceremony are relatively recent collections from different Paritta-suttas. Many scholars published books on this subject and tried to give a systematic form to the system of Buddhist marriage. Among them the noteworthy are Dharma Tilak Sthavir, Dharmapal Mahathera and Dr. Sukomal Chaudhuri. Dr. B. M. Barua described elaborately about the marriage ceremony in his book “*Bauddha Parinay Paddhati*”

Mantradata formally gives permission to a couple to lead a conjugal life henceforth. First of all he seeks protection of himself as well as of the couple by the ‘Act of truth’. This is followed by the *Metta Bhabna* in which he disseminates love for all living beings of the ten directions and thereby he seeks their help to protect the couple. Then he pays his homage to the three jewels (*Buddha, Dhamma* and *Sangha*). After that he invokes all *devas* from all the world-cycles to be present there and protect the couple from the evil eyes. Then he invites the representative of the bride to handover the bride to the bride-groom this will be followed by some formalities like ‘to make the left hand of the groom united with the right hand of the bride’, ‘to make the left foot of the groom united with the right foot of the bride’, ‘to make the bride go round the bride-groom keep her right side towards the bride-groom for seven times’ etc. At the time of uniting the hands of the couple generally the little finger of the left hand of the groom is united with the little finger of the right hand of the bride. At this time the priest will say..

Idam dvihattha- sambandham viya tumhe pi sabbakatam samagga bhaveha vasatha annamannam deva devinam viya sahavaso hotu..

Trns: like this union of the two hands you also live in unity for long. Let your conjugal life be as that of the god and goddess.

It is noticeable that though in one of the *Mantras* for the couple’s benediction, priest says, you have no other refuge, *Buddha* is your only refuge. You have no other refuge; *Sangha* is your only refuge. You have no other refuge; *Dhamma* is your only refuge. The protection, safety and support of the world depend on the power of the *Buddha, Sangha* and *Dhamma*. By this act of truth let victory and prosperity come to you. But at the same time he says, ***Bhavatu sabbamangalam rakkhantu sabba devata*** (May all the gods protect you.) Thus, through the marriage *mantras* priests pray to *Buddha, Dhamma* and *Sangha* along with all Gods and Goddesses not only for knowledge, prosperity and unity but also for protection from the unlucky

omen, inauspicious event and unpleasant scream of evil birds, undesirable dreadful planet and miserable nightmare. (Chaudhuri,1982. P P 135-39)

Then he gives the couple blessings and hold the bunch of sprouts placed on the auspicious pitcher, dips them in the water of the pitchers and sprinkles this water on their heads seven times while uttering mantras seven times. The Priest gives them some advice then for the happiness of their conjugal life along with the ten admonitions given by Dhananjaya Setthi to her daughter Visakha while she was going to her father-in-law's house.

Stri achar (Womanly conventions)-

When the priest finishes his performances the couple is taken to observe some other formalities. In this third part of the marriage they have introduced Hindu marriage customs like 'exchanging the couple's garlands' (*maala badal*), 'to have a first auspicious look at each other' (*subha dristi*), 'putting vermilion' (*sindur daan*) etc. These matters are generally done as 'womanly conventions' (*stri achar*) and no priest is required for that. Finally Bikkhus and other guests are offered food.

3. Ceremonies after marriage

Madi-Hondani, Na-Dinna, Phiranya-Bhat- In case of marriage at the house of bride-groom generally one or two days after the marriage the couple goes to the bride's parents' house being accompanied by others. As because the bride-groom touches the soil of his father- in- law's house first time this function is known as *Madi-Hondani* or touching of the soil.

Then on the 9th day after marriage again the couple visits the bride's parents' house. This function is known as *Na Dinna* (concerning the 9th day). This time the bride generally does not return back with her husband. She lives with her parents for some days. After few days the son-in- law will be invited again to bring his wife back home. This function is known as *Phiranya-Bhat* (literally 'returning meal').the son- in- law stays for a day or two in his father- in- law's house and comes back after that with his wife. After that he can visit his father- in- law's house whenever he likes, no formal invitation is required.

But nowadays, due to economic reason, shortage of time and as influence of greater part of the society (*astamangala* of Hindus / system of going to bride's parental house and return back within eight days) this elaborate system is mostly combined into a single one. Generally, the couple visit the bride's parents' house on the 9th day after marriage and stay there for two, three days and return back together after that.

Few Points of Syncretism at a Glance: Influence of Hindu community/marriage system over the Barua Buddhist marriage system of North Bengal, India.

- Marriage takes place in the house of the bride.
- Tendency to avoid the cousin marriage.
- Number of inter religious marriage is much higher.
- Practice of dowry.

- Practice of Hindu marriage customs like -
 - Mehendi*
 - Gaye Halud*
 - Subha dristi*
 - Maala badal*
 - Sindur daan*
 - Stri achar*
- Abolition of customs like –
 - Haala Song*
 - Madi Hondani*
- Use of red and white bangle and regular use of vermilion by the married women.

Moreover the use of *panjika* (Hindu religious calendar) to settle the date of marriage, consulting astrologer, imagination of clan (*Goutam Gotra*), sometimes practice of *kali puja* or

laxmi puja and the practice of popular Hindu Bengali marriage customs like *subha-dristi*, *mala-badal*, *sindur daan* etc. are no doubt very strong influence of Hinduism over Baruas.

Although Buddhists are living outside the caste structure since the time of its origin but very often they are aspiring for the same status and rights like worshipping Hindu gods and goddesses or following different rites and rituals at the time of life cycle ceremonies. As Martin Orans, in 'Santal: A Tribe in Search of a Great Tradition' (1965), has described how a tribe that has been looking towards the great tradition elements of high Hinduism, has been pulled towards emulating the caste pattern. Similarly Mog Baruas of North Bengal are worshipping at Kali or other Hindu temples and for the purpose of offering sacrifices with name and *gotra* (clan), they are using *Goutam gotra* as their clan name (because they feel that they all are like descendent of Goutam Buddha). This practical life-style strategy proved that though they are ethnically associated with 'Buddhist Tribe' identity but culturally exactly not so.

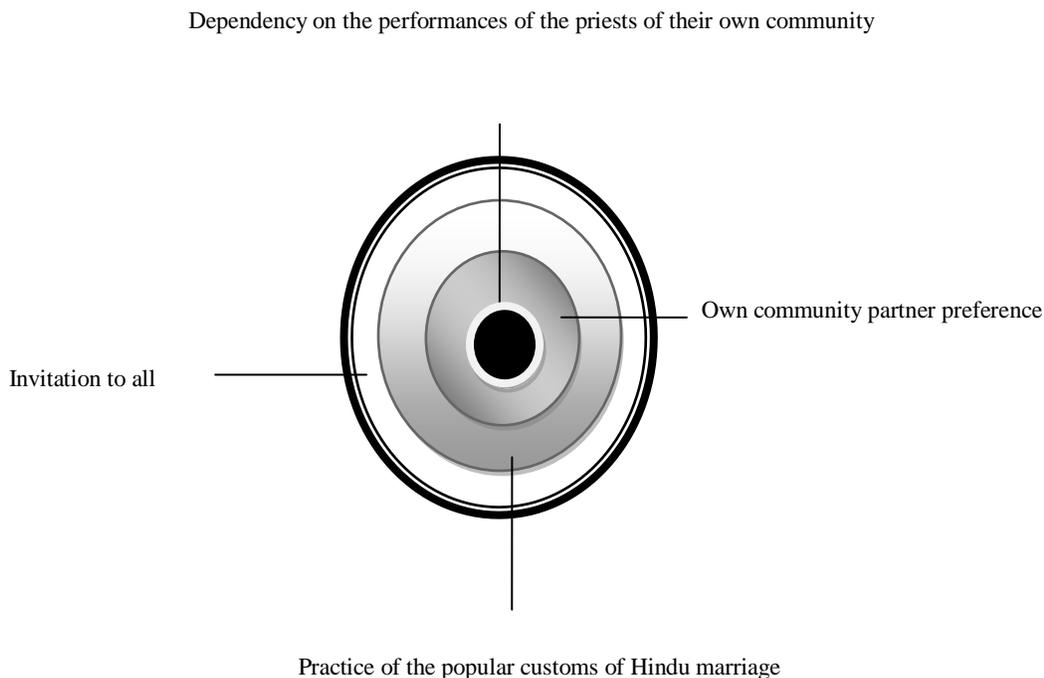
Here another dimension of this cultural influence deserves mention. Like most of the civilizations Hindu civilization is a great example of complex structure of great and little traditions. For example, Hindu marriage all over India is not performed in the same way. There is a *Shastriya* part of the marriage including *Hom – Yangya* (worshipping and taking oath in front of fire), *Kanyadaan* (giving the hand of the bride to the bride- groom), chanting *vaidik* mantras etc. but there is also a *Loukik* part which is according to local culture and varies from community to community. For example, there are many differences between the Hindu marriage of Northern India and Southern India in this *Loukik* part because these are influenced by local culture, environment and availability of the products.

The transmission level of these two types is also not the same. *Loukik* rites and rituals transmit more rapidly than *Shastriya* one because these are external, easy to follow and adjustable with time and demand of the society. Bengali Buddhists of North Bengal are now much influenced by Bengali Hindu marriage but this influence is basically restricted into transmission of little tradition like *mala badal*, *subha dristi*, *sindur daan* and *stri-achar*.

Thus apart from this syncretism there are some points of **distinctiveness** also. If we minutely examine the ethnographic materials of Buddhist Baruas of North Bengal then we will see that the continuum is conceived simultaneously and yet distinctively they are maintaining their own

social structure and culture at least to some extent or in some other words there is a matter of boundary maintenance. They do not perform marriage ceremony in front of fire (*agnisakshi*). In other words they do avoid *Hom – Yangya* in their marriage. As Barth said, it is clear in this situation that boundaries persist despite a flow of personnel across them. Cultural differences can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and inter dependence. (Barth, 1969) Boundaries that a group draws are always in inter-active situations. Boundaries are never drawn in isolation.

BOUNDARY MAINTENANCE OF BENGALI BUDDHISTS OF NORTH BENGAL AT THE TIME OF MARRIAGE



Above diagram shows that the core part of the Barua marriage is based on the performances of the monks and priests of their own community. At the second level they prefer their own community member as marriage partner but this boundary is not unbreakable in these days. Third level is about marriage rites and rituals where they are adopting Hindu popular customs

along with their own rituals and in case of social invitation they are not maintaining any boundary at all. Neighbors and friends from all the communities and religions are welcomed in the reception party.

Some Distinctive Features of Barua marriage –

- Presence of Bouddha Bhikkhus (*vante*) is essential. They recite mangal-sutra in Pali. There is no role of Brahmin priest in *Barua* marriage.
- One non-professional priest of their community (*mantra data*) performs actual rites for the ceremony.
- Seating arrangement for the bride and groom is different.
- Though now-a- days inter-religious marriages are taking place but in-group marriage is always preferable.
- They do not make any place of fire (*Agni sakshi*) at the time of marriage.

Conclusion -

I want to conclude here with my observation that we consider identity as a quest, a vision and internalization of an attitude because this attitude provides us images of self and others. It is about distinctions and similarities or the sameness of a person or a group at all times or in all circumstances to prove the fact that the person or group is itself and not something else. And that is why it is difficult for a minor migrated group to maintain their identity because it disturbs the feature of ‘sameness’ and gives birth to the sense of alienation, up rootedness, loneliness, loss of belongingness etc. One of the areas where identification may most easily take place is religion and religious attitudes. For example, a child may ask his parent, ‘daddy what are we? Are we Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists or Jains?’ when told that ‘our religion is such and such’ the child is satisfied and from then on, he will accept his membership and readymade attitudes associated with it. But the problem with Barua community members of North Bengal is that they do not have any such set pattern of attitude which can give them any distinguishable identity in their everyday life. In these days the common marriage practice is fixing one day for *Ashwirbad* where both the parties meet together and offer their gifts and blessings to the bride-groom. After that they exchange rings and cut the engagement cake which is clearly an influence of Western culture and this system is gaining popularity day by

day. But this is till date restricted to the well-off families only. Basically due to shifting from one place to another and intermixing with other people the pattern of attitude towards marriage here is not very fixed or rigid one rather much flexible.

But this deconstruction of identity vis-à-vis leads to the reconstruction of identity where they are putting more stress on their 'Bengali' identity rather than the 'Buddhist' one. Most probably that is why in case of inter religious marriage there is likely no incident of marriage between Theravadi (Bengali) and Mahayani (Non-Bengali) Buddhists. But the same thing is not very rare between Bengali Hindus and Bengali Buddhists.

Note –

1. 2. 3.

According to the Risley Magh or Mag is a name commonly applied to the natives of Arakan, particularly those bordering on Bengal or residing near the sea, the people of Chittagong. Sir Arthur Phayre quoted by Colonel Yule, derives the name from 'Maga', the name of the ruling race for many centuries in Magadha (modern Bihar). The kings of Arakan were no doubt originally of this race. They were Buddhist by religion. History says that before 1666 (Mughal period in India) Chittagong was under the rule of Arakan for a long period with some intervals and in course time Chittagong became the permanent home of the Maghs.

In its actual use the term 'Magh' includes three endogamous groups –

- i) Jumia Magh or Thongha Magh
- ii) Roang Magh or Rakhaing Magh or Marma
- iii) Rajbansi Magh or Bhuiya Magh or Marmagri

Both the Jumia and the Roang Maghs probably belong to the same original stock but the former have so long been settled in the Chittagong that they regard themselves as the aborigines of the Hill Tracts, while the later belong to a more recent stream of immigrants from Arakan.

The Marmagri or Rajbanshi Barua Maghs are of an entirely different type. They are supposed by Colonel, Phayre, and O'Malley to be "the offspring of lower caste Bengali women by Burmese/ Arakanese men when they possessed Chittagong (O'Malley, 1908, P.P 143). Actually due to the peculiar geographical location of Chittagong till 1666 it came under the rule of Arakan, Burma, Tripura and Bengal repeatedly which gave birth of a mixed population at this place. The Baruas are usually believed to be of a mixed origin with bloods of different groups and religions such as Hindu, Muslim, Arakanese, Burmese and Portuguese.

A section of Barua Maghs however claims to be of Kshatriya origin and trace their descent from the ruling race of Bihar. According to them they are known as 'Magh' due to their direct Magadha connection and others are Rakhayancha or Marma of Arakan. As they are also Buddhists by faith, in course of time the non-Buddhist people started using the term 'Magh' to identify all the Buddhists of Chittagong and eventually the term 'Magh' became synonymous to the Buddhists of Chittagong. But as they are not the same so this Rakhayancha or Marma people address them as 'Rajbanshi' or 'Marmagri' which is superior to 'Marma'.(Mutsuddi, 1959, P.P 7-8)

I got this viewpoint from the interaction with the educated section of Barua community which is supported by some published and unpublished printed materials written by some Barua authors. But it is difficult to believe in an existence of any migrant community without the history of intermixing with local people.

The meaning of the term 'Barua' is 'honorable'. They were in a good position in the Arakanese army but the use of this term as a surname is comparatively new matter. In earlier days their name and surname were much influenced by the Arakanese tradition but from when the Chittagong became a steady part of Bengal, Baruas also started showing greater interest to be Bengali Buddhists along with the Barua surname.

4. Theravadi monasteries of North Bengal –

i) BuddhaJayanti Vihar, (1956), Nagrakata.

ii) BuddhaBharati, (1963), Siliguri.

iii) Jetban Vihar, (1968), Nagrakata.

- iv) Dooars BouddhaMaitri Vihar, (1971), Binnaguri.
- v) BouddhaShanti Vihar, (1978), Maynaguri.
- vi) Bidarshana Dhyan Ashram, Hyderpara (1981), Siliguri.
- vii) Damdim ShantiNiketan, BodhiSabha, (1983), Damdim.
- viii) Antarjatic Bouddha Siksha ebong GabeshanaKendra (International Buddhist Education and Research Centre) and BouddhaSamaj Vihar, (1983), Siliguri
- ix) Bouddha Tapoban Vihar, (1986), AlipoorDuar Junction,
- x) Atish Dipankar Bouddha Vihar, (1992), JaayGnao
- xi) Siliguri Salugara Humanistic Bouddha Mission (2005), Jalpaiguri.

5. Karotoya was once a mighty river before its parent stream- the Teesta or Trisrota (meaning combined flow of three rivers- the Karotoya, the Pundrabhava and the Atrai) flowing down from the Jalpaiguri suddenly shifted its old channel and rushed into the Brahmaputra in the devastating flood of 1787 AD. The Karotoya is mentioned in the great epic *Mahabharata*. Ancient Pundrabardhana (North Bengal and the part of Bangladesh), the bank of Karotoya is mentioned as early Buddhist settlement during Mauriyan rule. There is another very strong evidence of its Buddhist past that comes from the accounts of the Chinese pilgrim, HiuenTsang. He visited Pundranagar between the years 638 AD and 645 AD. Here Ashoka is said to have erected a large stupa on the body relic of the enlightened one. Epigraphic records suggest that from the 4th century onwards Bengal came to be subjugated by the Guptas. Buddhism flourished during Gupta and Pala period in Bengal.

6. Mantradata is a competent man (Buddhist but not the Monk) selected from the community to perform the actual ceremony. There is no hard and fast rule for the selection of such a man. The individual is usually an adult male who can recite Pali scripture well and it is noteworthy here that the lay priest must be invited by brides side. There is no trace of when or how this custom emerged.

7. A ceremony called *Aashirwad* in which the groom's parents and close relatives go over to the bride's house and bestow her with their blessings. Usually the girl is given some gold ornaments on this occasion by the boy's parents. The same is done by the bride's family, they go to the boy's house and give him their blessings, may be along with a token gift. Notably, the groom or bride does not accompany the family on these occasions. *Aashirwad* is as good as an engagement.

8. Hindu weddings in India are considered to be a long ritualistic and elaborate affair with lots of pre-wedding, wedding, post wedding rituals. It is a fun-filled ritual which is celebrated mainly by the bride's family. On this occasion a professional henna designer or some relative applies mehendi paste to the bride's hands and feet. It is believed that the darker and deeper the henna stains, the more the husband and in-laws will love her bride. Mehendi function is usually organized with the sangeet function. Though it is not within the traditional Bengali culture and tradition but as an influence of cinema and other North Indian community this celebration is gaining popularity day by day.

9. Gaye halud is a ceremony observed mostly in the region of Bengal. It originates from the Hindu wedding religious ceremony where Lord Shiva and his bride Sati were applied with Haldi (yellow turmeric) to cool the couple and make them look even more beautiful. Later this one is adopted as a wedding ritual and celebration by different communities.

10. A Sehra is a headdress worn by the groom of some community during wedding in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. It has garlands hanging, that covers the face of the groom whereas a topor is a type of conical headgear traditionally worn by grooms as part of the Bengali Hindu wedding ceremony. It is typically fragile and white in colour. The topor is traditionally given to the groom by the bride's family. The groom dons the topor before the main ceremony begins. It is believed to bring good luck.

11. The ten admonitions given by Dhananjaya Setti to her daughter Vishaka while she was going to her father-in-law's house are: a) Do not carry indoor fire outside. b) Do not carry outdoor fire inside c) Give only to him who returns d) Give not him who does not returns e) Give to him who returns and also to him who does not returns f) Sit happily g) Eat happily h) Sleep happily i) Respect the fire j) Honour the household divinities.

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