

Chapter 6

Summary and Conclusion

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In the course of this research under the title 'Theravadi Buddhists of Siliguri: A Study of Socio-Cultural Distinctiveness and Exchange', I have discussed on my research method in the **first chapter**. Here apart from specifying the subject-matter of my research, its 5-point objectives have been tabled. I have sought to use the help of some theoretical ideas like 'Ethnographic Perspective', 'Study on Syncretism', 'Boundary Maintenance and Identity Formation with Minority Issues' etc. towards bolstering the theoretical framework of our study.

Two more important parts of this chapter are Review of Literature and Research Design. In the throes of dearth of availability of literature on the Theravadi Buddhist (Barua) community of North Bengal due to very little prior research on them, I have divided the scant salvage into three different parts. Since the Bengali Buddhist community living in Siliguri town had a history of migration from Chittagong of the then undivided Bengal, in the first part I have tried to explore the genealogy and expansion of Buddhism in the contemporary time placing it in the wider perspective of the geographical location and political upheavals of Chittagong against the backdrop of perennial religious ethos, society and culture of Bengal. I have entered into some theoretical readings in the second part. The third part deals specifically with both published and unpublished writings of Barua Buddhist scholars that encompass the history, migration, culture, rites and rituals, religious chores and information on their basic identity.

Different chapters of the thesis have been written based on the information obtained from both the primary and secondary sources. In the face of sheer lack of books and information on this community, I had to depend solely on the conventional sociological tools and techniques i.e. interview, case study, survey, observation etc. Each of the relevant photographs attached here is clicked or collected with due permission.

The discourse on the Theravadi Buddhist or Barua Buddhist community living in Siliguri is spread over four chapters, i.e. second to fifth chapter. The **second chapter** seeks to unravel the mystery about their history, identity and migration and to offer an easy, acceptable account of these pointers. It oversees their settlement pattern in Siliguri as well. Materials available so far on the history of Barua community are few and far between to arrive at a general acceptance.

Even at present time they seem to have differentiated views regarding their own identity or predecessors. The reason behind this could be their past remaining interspersed with an elongated history of migration across political and geographical boundary that denies any unilateral or linear trajectory of their identity. The other important aspects that have already been discussed are their association and dissociation with different places like Magadh, Arakan, Burma, Chittagong or communities like Mag, Rakhain, Bengali etc. The telltale impact of economic crisis has surfaced overwhelmingly in each story of their migration. The influence of political or communal unrest may have dotted their stories of migration only as secondary reasons. The later life patterns of this migrated community have been determined by the historical time and place of their new settlement.

Taking a cue from the above, in the **third chapter** of the thesis we have seen how to assert their separate identity this Barua community could build up their religious institutions in Siliguri town. The efforts have remained directed to know their educational and occupational status as a distinct community and to determine their ideological moorings vis-à-vis politics and policy initiatives. The quest of the study has been to fathom the degree of influence of the Barua social welfare organisations on the other majoritarian communities in terms of their programme, efficiency and acceptance.

The evolution of the Barua community as a permanent settler in Siliguri had begun way back in 1950s. Their primary initiative was directed to establish their religious institutions for two specific reasons. Their community identity as members of the Magh tribes and their religious identity as Theravadi Buddhists remained basic two tools for maintaining their distinctiveness and to achieve recognition. They were pretty much aware of the importance of congregation as a religious minority. But they evidently dithered over their tribal identity, questioning its efficacy either to ensure their social security or in realizing educational and social prestige for their descendants. This indeterminacy factor must have produced changes in the formal assertion of their community identity.

The Barua community has been registered as a tribal group and can enjoy the benefits of reservation due only to their Magh identity. But we have had several such occasions where we

have seen them pragmatically opting for the security of coexistence at the cost of their community identity in consideration of political, economical and occupational status.

The influence of Buddhist culture on Indian traditional education is a well-known fact. Buddhist philosophy had been referred to by Rabindranath Tagore, Arabindo et al and practiced by none other than B.R. Ambedkar. An effective and important exchange of ideas might have been possible amongst the Theravadi Buddhist community and other religious communities through the medium of education. Generally speaking, a religious educational institution may impact immense socio-economic influence based on its degree of excellence. We may cite the examples of Ramkrishna Mission or the educational institutes run by Christian missionaries. But despite having potentials, the educational institutes run by Theravadi or Barua community have failed to achieve heights of excellence or have social exchange. Less number of activists or organizational shortcomings remained as deterrents to carve out a niche of excellence by them.

I have tried to project mainly the cultural aspects of the Barua community in the **fourth chapter** of the thesis. While living together with several other linguistic or religious communities, the distinct identity of a single community may be asserted through food habits, dress culture, language, festivals and religious rituals. Amongst these distinctive pointers, a natural commingling may also be possible through the process of adaptation and assimilation with respect to food culture, dressing and language. Past history, present status and the ideas about future course of a particular community can be ascertained by analyzing the evolution and degree of assimilation of these cultural factors.

It is quite pertinent to mention here that the Buddhist society based on Sangha is stratified into two different streams namely *Bhikshu* (Monk) and *Grihi* (Householder). The language use, dress culture and food habits of these two streams are also different from each other. Lack of manpower, association, financial resource and infrastructural deficiencies of this Barua community in Siliguri town, unlike Kolkata or parts of Bangladesh, have a limiting influence on the functional capacity of the Bouddha Vihars, and influence and controlling power of the Vantes.

The main crisis faced by this community is lack of popular recognition in the society at large. Very few commoners have any idea about their very existence. By Buddhists or Buddhism a common Hindu person means the Mahayani or Tibetan Lamas. Some of them may also visit Tibetan monasteries on the occasion of Buddha Jayanti. On the other hand, to the other sects of Buddhism (Mahayani and Tantrik Vajrajan Buddhists) the Buddhists living in Srilanka, Myanmar or Thailand are known as Theravadi Buddhists. The separate existence of the Bengali Barua Buddhists, living in Siliguri is often ignored for their pronounced affinity to the majoritarian Hindu culture in terms of their everyday chores and rituals. In offering obeisance and financial contribution to Hindu temples, through the mention of Gotra (Caste), following Hindu almanac, idolatry, believing in ghosts, gods and afterlife – this community loses its distinctiveness and the Vantes are no exceptions. Most of the other residents are not really aware even of the location of the Buddha mandirs in the town. It appears at times that the Baruas are not very keen on making their separate identity known to fellow residents.

Important Theravadi festivals, as observed in Siliguri, remain lackluster due to lack of manpower and absence of proper participation of Buddhist monks. Yet, the two Buddha mandirs here diligently observe both festivals and perform worship while maintaining their regular efforts in educational, health and social welfare activities. The very presence and participation of the Vantes in any festival or domestic rites has a special importance in Barua society. We have cited the life history of one of the oldest and most experienced Vantes of Siliguri in this chapter.

In order to arrive at an iota of comprehension regarding the degree of exchange amongst the Baruas and the other communities like the Mahayana or the Hindus, we have dealt with the issues of mutual awareness, social relations, participation in religious festivals and other subtler exchanges in the **fifth or the ultimate chapter**. We have made an assay to gauge the depth of distinctiveness maintained by this minority migrant community while living amidst the Hindus – how far they have adopted Hindu rites in their daily household chores, worship or life practices. How much they feel comfortable in their daily discourse with the other communities? Durga Puja, being the largest Hindu festival, has been cited as an example in this regard. I have also tried to find out how much knowledge about the fellow Barua citizens rests with the Hindu or

Mahayani Buddhists of Siliguri in terms of their existence, culture and history. This last chapter contains specific information about the degree of participation of these other communities in Theravadi festivals or family occasions.

Exchange between two different communities is mostly ascertained by the number of inter-religious marriages and in the corresponding narratives of experiences. Now-a-days, inter-religious marriages between the Hindus and the Baruas even in Siliguri are not very rare though, some aspects of them need special mention. Inter-community marriages do not really face many obstacles in the Barua society. Perhaps, the reason for this lies in the perception of having increased their population and achievement of a kind of recognition by the dominant community. For this, if a Barua groom marries a Hindu bride, this marriage marks an endowment of social prestige too. The reverse is also accepted if the Hindu groom's educational and professional standing has some reckoning in the society. While marrying off their educated and economically independent daughters, the Barua parents often choose a suitable husband from among the other communities. There remains a single Barua-Lama couple in Siliguri town.

Approaching the end of the thesis, the study may claim to have found some truthful revelations that have also ignited the zeal to probe farther into the reality about the Barua community. In the throes of non-availability of information-on-record, there happens to be a lot of contradictory ideas doing rounds regarding the history or genealogy of this community. It has been distinctly observed while the affluent and established Barua families love to identify themselves with the rulers of Magadh, the less fortunate section of the Barua population acts frantically to insist on their Arakan Magh tribal ancestry to access the facilities of reservation. So, this meagerly minor community is seen to be divided over the issues of their own origin and identity.

Historians and the researchers ascribe the Barua community as an example of hybrid community. Our field survey also ratifies their mingled mosaic characteristics, achieved through perennial migration and intermingling with other communities. As such they remain ever confused towards preserving their anthropological and cultural heritage. They generally are

found to be eager to accept their individual social position, living as a commoner in the larger society.

In spite of the overwhelming predominance of a synthetic synthesis between religion and politics in the contemporary time, the Barua community remains conspicuous by an absence of charting out particular demands or assertive movements. On an individual count, we may see one or two people from this community or even Vantes becoming a member of the minority cell or a Tribal Development Board constituted by the state government, but they remain as exceptions and at times they receive tacit criticism from within their own community.

Generally speaking, the Barua community remains at the lower rung of the economic ladder. A few among them prove to be exceptions by achieving government jobs or getting established in business, but the lives of the majority population of the Baruas remain riddled with economic crisis. The Vantes or Bhikshus are not exceptions. Mostly the young members of the impoverished families opt for monastic life and become Shramans. As a consequence they are generally found to have braved difficulties in getting academic access.

To conclude, we may say that in their daily life course the Barua Buddhists do not have much distinctive differences with their Hindu neighbours. Despite being a religious minority community, they are not considered a threat like the Muslims. On the other hand, they fail to attract the attention of the majority Hindus unlike either the Christian missionaries or the Mahayan Buddhists. Even the Bouddha Vihars could not achieve the stellar status of having a binding influence on the variegated members of the Barua community because of several shortcomings. The Theravada Buddhists or the Magh- Barua community of Siliguri seem to have prioritized their social security over maintaining their distinctiveness – be it in the professional fields or in terms of their political preferences. And this sense of insecurity warrants an urge to be part of the mainstream cultural and social ethos. The consequent neglect in the distinctive communitarian moorings raises serious doubts on the future survival of this minority community amidst majoritarian whirlpool.