

CHAPTER - 5

Boundary Maintenance and Exchange with Other Communities

- Intercommunity Marriages and Other Exchanges
- Syncretism and Boundary Maintenance Reflected in Religious Occasions and Customs of the Barua Buddhists.
- Barua Buddhists: Perception of and Social Exchange with others

CHAPTER - 5

Boundary Maintenance and Exchange with Other Communities

In this final phase we are going to analyze the presence and existence of the Barua group of people, particularly on the basis of their relationship with the other religious and linguistic communities and on their activities and reaction, their intermingling and exchange with the majority community and their mutual interactive communication that lead to the development of such relationship.

We have already observed that Baruas as a minority community is getting constantly acculturated to their social surroundings and are thereby influenced by this in varying degrees and dimensions in different spheres of their existence, but in spite of that they have been able to retain the uniqueness of their identity and many of them maintain their rites and rituals with utmost care and seriousness. Despite the induction of practices from other religion, they are able to uphold and maintain the importance, privacy and originality in their core religious practice and rituals to some extent.

It is significant to note that to discuss the exchanges of the Baruas with the 'other' communities, it becomes highly significant and important to have a distinct concept of that 'other' before any viable discussion commences, and that can only be possible if and only when a community has an immaculate idea of his or its own being and existence. It is generally seen that when a community acquaint itself by using a chain of phonic icons (or leverages conjugate words to describe his identity), it indicates that it associates itself with more than one group even while dissociating itself from those concurrently. That suggests it in spite of being associated with many communities, is not a member of such community exclusively, that is to say, it is attached to and detached from those communities at the same time and wants to create an impression of its own identity on the basis of this simultaneous association and dissociation.

The Barua community of North Bengal is such a community of individuals who identify themselves as Bengali Buddhists and in the light of this acquaintance, they maintain their

unique identity which separates them from the majority of the Hindu Bengalis and also from the non-Bengali Buddhists even as they acknowledge and share partial association with both.

Therefore in this phase we would discuss the mutual exchanges and action/reactions that occur between the Baruas and the Hindu Bengalis as well as between them and the non-Bengali Mahayani Buddhist sect. The instances that we are going to analyze with regard to the issues such as the influence of the Barua community, the attitude towards them, their mutual cooperation, etc. are as follows:

Intercommunity Marriages and Reflection of Exchange through Nomenclature

Syncretism and Boundary Maintenance reflected in Socio-Religious Occasions and Customss of the Barua Buddhist.

- Influence and adoption of Hindu practices in Life-Cycle Rites and Rituals of Barua Community – birth rituals, marital customs and death rites
- Participation in Major Festivals of Other Community – observation

Barua Buddhists: Perception of and Social Exchange with others

- Bengali Buddhists: Insight and Response of Other Religious Sects.
- Participation of the Other Communities in Barua Festival.
- Impact of Social Activities Performed by the Barua Community.

5.1 Intercommunity Marriages and Other Exchanges

This part is divided into two sections. First section deals with the inter-community marriages and many other challenges and exchanges related to that. In a patrilineal society there are situational differences in attitude and acceptance depending on the religious background of the bride or groom. Here, we will try to explore the dimensions of intermarriages between Bengali Hindu - Bengali Barua Buddhist and non-Bengali Barua Buddhist - Bengali Barua Buddhist as well.

Name is the reflection of one's identity, family background and social condition in a given time. In case of a migrated minority it also reveals the extent of interaction and eagerness to be adjusted with the mainstream flow. Our second section will check this point to understand the community in a better way.

5.1.1 Intermarriage: Crisis and Adjustment

According to Atul Sur (Sur 2016), religion has very negligible role in Buddhist marriage. In ancient period the rituals were simple and marriage was nothing more than a social contract. Buddhist marriages took place when the girl was above twenty years of age and in such marriages, there was no need of approval by anyone else other than the boy and the girl. Marriages needed approval of the concerned guardians in the situation where the age of the girl was below twenty years. Polygamy was prevalent in Buddhist society, along with mutual divorce based on the dynamics of the situation. If one partner of the couple was inflicted by serious, debilitating illness, divorce was immediately sanctioned. Mutual distrust between couples too allowed them to be divorced by social sanction.

We have got lots of information regarding the erotic life and practices of that era from the *Therigatha* literature. *Theri* means a Buddhist nun and *gatha* means songs. Thus it was inferred that *Therigatha* literature had been primarily composed by the Buddhist nuns. These nuns joined the *Sangha* (Monasteries) hailing from almost every social tier. These compositions revealed that a woman could get married fortice or even for a third time too.

In the present times some of these specific characteristics have been rendered extinct. Some had been modified and reformed. If we discuss the issue of inter religious marriages in the context of Siliguri or, even in a larger context, the entire North Bengal, then, after studying fifty (50) barua families we would observe that usually there exist **three diverse inclinations**.

- There are a number of Barua families (10%) who feel that the accomplishments of the boy and the girl are enough to be considered as primary eligibility for marriage; there need not be religious parity between them. Basically this attitude towards marriage is prevailing amongst the affluent and highly educated families.

- At present, the majority of the Barua families (70%) are of the opinion, that it is very important and necessary to establish marital relations between boys and girls within the community itself and that should be of primary consideration and importance, but if the couple is in courtship, belonging to different communities or sect from each other, they are usually accepted, provided that there are no other problem to be found, regarding the other issues related to the marriage.

In this context it is significant that a subtle difference may be observed in certain specific cases /occasion. The middle class Barua community is a part of the patriarchal system of society and the ease with which a marriage between a Barua groom with a Hindu bride is recognized, that between a Hindu groom and a barua bride is not accepted whole heartedly. In patriarchy a lady moves to the family of her Barua husband and is treated as a member of the family where she adjusts and adapts accordingly; that is, in this case with the notion of growing Barua community influence, the socio cultural reputation is also getting enhanced. But in the other way round, when a Barua girl gets married with a Hindu boy the effect is not of the same tenor. Apart from that, non-adjustment between different ideologies and different cultural atmosphere is also apprehended.

- A number of Barua families (20%) feel that marriage should take place within the community itself, otherwise leading a happy married life is not possible. They opine that religion is the foundation stone of the social and familial relationships and it is religion itself, which shapes the human character. An individual grows up according to the norms and rituals of a particular religion and even a small aberration from these practices triggers an imbalance and friction becomes inevitable in that not so desired situation. These Barua families feel that disparity of economic status or gap in education can be bridged but individual's primary and basic outlook or perspective towards life should have equanimity and should be given the utmost importance.

These above mentioned various opinions are as integrally related with education, economic status and socialization as much with the time /period of migration, contact and connectivity

with Bangladesh, the first workplaces during the migratory phases etc. It has been noted that generally those families that had migrated from Bangladesh in a very early period and settled in areas with very little or no religious ethos or concern whatsoever regarding Buddhism have comparatively lesser religious conservatism. The feature and specificity of such group are of a *mélange* of cultural varieties.

Primarily **three types of intercommunity marriages** have been observed to have occurred amongst the Baruas. Marriage between a Theravadi Barua Buddhist bride and Bengali Hindu groom, Theravadi Barua Buddhist groom and Bengali Hindu bride and marriage between a Theravadi Barua Buddhist and Mahayani, Sub-Himalayan Buddhist.

On the basis of the above mentioned conventions, marriage between the Baruas and Hindus remains predominant. Apart from these, observation has been made of a few cases of intercommunity marriages between Barua grooms and a few non-Bengali Hindu (Punjabi and Nepali) brides. Only one instance of an inter-community marriage exists at present – that between a Barua and a Mahayani lama marriage.

Here, we would like to mention that we had earlier discussed in detail the influence of the Hindu Society on the Baruas and their cultural & social exchanges; but in this phase we are going to focus more upon the mutual exchanges between the members of the Barua community and others and that how such exchanges have affected both the communities.

It has already been mentioned in the town of Siliguri and in the entire North Bengal several marriages are taking place between the Buddhist Baruas and the Bengali Hindu. In these cases we find and observe, these marriages are occurring between Barua grooms and Hindu brides as well as Hindu grooms and Barua brides.

But it would be repetitive to mention that in these two instances, vast differences have been observed in their marital life regarding their daily exchanges and influence upon one another.

Although a marriage between a **Barua bride and a Hindu groom** is not always welcomed by the family of such groom, yet such examples are prevalent in Siliguri. In such instances it has been observed that the bride hailing from the Barua community, gradually over the period of time

learns and adapts herself to all kinds of rituals and lifestyle skills of the Hindu family where she has got married; on the contrary, the Hindu family too, eventually learns or gets exposed to the Buddhist culture, at least to some extent.

Since the marriages are solemnized at the bride's place and also according to the conventions followed by the brides' family, therefore here too, they are solemnized at the bride's place in the presence of the Bhantes with recitation of Mangalsutta. In this phase too there is an intermingling of Hindu and Buddhist ritual. The newlywed couples pay a visit to the Buddhist temple to secure the blessings of Bhantes and contribute alms as per their financial capacity. Mutual adaptation begins right from this point onwards.

This mutual cultural exchange gets firmly established after the birth of a child. Usually children are more inclined to be attached with their mothers and they observe the conducts of their mothers – lifestyle, habits, ideology, rituals everything – and thus they gradually but steadily and instinctively learn to internalize those. This helps to form a religious character in the child which plays an important part in associating and linking the child with his/her mother's family and culture.

It may be mentioned that, since the Barua community of North Bengal is primarily a community hailing from Chittagong of Bangladesh have migrated to Siliguri, they do not only have a different religious culture from that of the majority Hindu population, but also possess a distinct linguistic and culinary features. Even when Baruas use the common local language for everyday parlance, yet the elders of the community use the language of Chittagong amongst themselves besides having quite a number of Arakanese words incorporated in their regular 'spoken language'.

Their dishes, delicacy and cuisine are distinct in the use of excessive spices and usually are rich and 'hot' as far as taste is concerned. Their weakness for dried/salted fish (*Shnutkimachh*) is renowned and a well-known fact. In cases of inter-religious and inter-community marriages, these aspects get acquainted with and are accepted or adopted by the other families with different cultural background.

The two main festivals of Bengali Buddhists are Buddhajayanti and Kathin Chivar Daan. These are celebrated in all the different Buddhist temples across the city and numerous events are organized. It has been observed in the case studies, that women from the Barua community who have opted for inter-community marriage or inter-religious marriage, still celebrate and participate in most of these festivals, along with their children. Sometimes they also involve themselves in *Sangha Daan* (donation to at least 3 to 5 monks) as well.

Consequently, it may be said that when a Barua woman moves to a Hindu family as a bride there seems to be no cultural influence occurring on that occasion on any member of the family, but later it affects a few people indeed and this influence is reflected in their everyday life.

On the other hand, as customary in all other patriarchal social system, in Barua society too, post-marriage the woman comes to stay with her husband in his family. In the event of the bride hailing from a Hindu family, she too adjusts herself to her new marital family and its conducts and customs. Comparatively, marriages where the bride comes from a Hindu family and the groom comes from a Barua family, are lesser in number. These kind of marriages exert influences which are different from the inter-community marriages mentioned earlier.

In cases, where the **lady from the Barua community marries into a Hindu family**, her adaptation to the lifestyle, customs, conventions and rituals of that family increases with the passing time. She gets involved in different festivals, religious awareness, and new words and culinary habits that are totally new to her. But this kind of adaptation is primarily individual based, or may be said to have occurred at the micro level. The bride's family may gain some awareness on the different kind of festivities or on certain customs and conventions but those are not considered with any seriousness. In most of the cases, it may be observed that under such circumstances, images/idols of several gods and goddesses find their place by the side of Lord Buddha in the household. If the elderly members of the family be alive and present, then such images get their first entry in the form of calendars or similar such things and later go for a permanent settlement. Eventually seeking blessings of gods and goddess at the time of child birth, organizing Saraswati Puja, visiting temples for worshipping, participating in Durga Puja

and Kali Puja occur as well. It has been found in my field study that there are quite a few Buddhist families in Siliguri who are greatly influenced by the Hindu religion and culture and they also follow quite a few customs and rituals of Hinduism. It is redundant to point out that in such families, Hindu ladies are more welcome as brides of the families and the level of cooperation is much higher as well.

Another form of intercommunity marriage is when it occurs within the same religious community but between people from different ethnicity and/or different linguistic groups. Like that between a **Bengali Barua person getting married to a member of Nepali Lama Family**. In Siliguri there happens to be a sole example of marriage between this kind of Theravadi and Mahayani families. Both the husband and the wife constitute a working couple and they are blessed with a son as well. It had been informed in a discussion with them that after an initial family resistance, they got married to each other in the year 2007. Ms. Lama had to struggle initially to adjust with the new environment that she was in. Although she had repeatedly mentioned the cooperation and open-mindedness of her in-laws, the members of her husband's family, yet it could be understood that shifting from western dresses to saree from chanting Pali hymns to Bengali culture- everything seemed like an ordeal to her. But her new lifestyle and her new learning – all were confined to herself only – there was little scope for interchanging of cultures and hence, it was kind of unidirectional circumstantial adaptation.

Mr. Barua can speak and understand Nepali language; he also loves the Nepalese cuisine. But he preferred to get dressed in Western outfits on his marriage reception instead of a Nepalese outfit. Their three years old son can speak a little of the Nepali language. Ms. Lama now seldom celebrates Dusshera or Losar but she also participates in Buddha Jayanti and Kathin Chivar Daan festivals.

After having analyzed all the above mentioned issues regarding intercommunity marriages, let us throw some light upon certain factors regarding the same.

- The Barua community is neither extremely sensitive nor conservative about intercommunity marriages. They attach more importance to the happiness and choice of their children.

- It is always considered to be the best option if marriages take place within the community itself, yet such marriages are not possible always. Often eligible couple are not found for a marriage to take place, there is a scarcity of eligible groom particularly. At present, the girls from the Barua community are getting educated, accomplished and progressive and so, without a suitable groom to be found within their own community, they are refusing to contemplate marriage within the community any more.
- In case of inter-community marriages, when a Barua groom brings home a bride from some other community then the prestige of the Barua community rises as a whole, and the new members' adaptation process begins with trifling little things at the micro level; but the relatives and the members of her maiden family are not so much influenced at all. Instead Hindu customs and rituals start trespassing into Buddhist family. The obvious and spontaneous influence of the majoritarian religion in society grows even stronger in these cases.
- On the other hand, when a girl from the Barua community moves to a Hindu family as the bride, although she is compelled to adapt herself to the Hindu customs, rituals and other cultural aspects including the worshipping of multiple idols of gods and goddesses, yet simultaneously and parallelly the members of her family-in-law too accept Buddha as God and start worshipping Him. In most of the cases as she gains control and dominance over the family with the passing time, she is able to install and establish her own cultural practices to be followed in the family. But as said earlier, in such cases, it has been observed that the woman has to have strong ties with her maiden family as a precondition to that situation. In reality, these marriages actually influence the next generation as they play an important role in the formation and development of the children born out of such marriages.

Therefore, in intercommunity marriages, merely the so called patriarchy is not at work fully in its conventional sense; rather, the role of woman in such marriages is very important. Since she devotes a huge portion of her life and time in the creation and development of the unit of

family, therefore her influence over the members of the family is immense and that is often reflected spontaneously.

5.1.2 Reflection of Exchange through Nomenclature

With the help of the genealogical table of a few families and from published material that was studied, (Chaudhuri 1982) it has been observed that till the first half of the 20th century, Arakanese names were popular with Bengali Buddhists, such as *Mamapru*, *Chelapru*, *Khailapru* and *Kalampru* etc. However, these names are not in use in the present time. A few Hindu religious names are popular in the Bengali Buddhist communities. The practice of christening children with non-religious, short and modern names among Bengali Buddhists is on the rise, much like the Hindu community.

As an example, a list of 285 Barua Buddhists living in Siliguri can be presented. It has been observed that only four names from them are associated with Buddhist culture, while 11 names are of Hindu origin while the remaining 270 names are non-religious, popular Bengali names.

The names belonging to the first two groups have been presented here.

| Buddhist Names | Hindu Names |
|----------------|----------------|
| Lumbini | Partha |
| Sujata | Indrajit |
| Sugata | Gopal |
| Gopa | Lakshmi |
| | Rajlakshmi |
| | Krishna |
| | Aparna |
| | NiladriShekhar |
| | Shiladitya |
| | Basumitra |
| | Padma |

Therefore, in this case, the number of names derived from Hinduism is almost three times the names influenced by Buddhism and Buddhist culture. On the other hand, the names like Goutam, Tathagata, Sujata, Amitabha and Buddhadev are also quite common and popular among Hindu Bengali community.

5.2 Syncretism and Boundary Maintenance reflected in Socio-Religious Occasions and Customs.

The Baruas are not really located in a particular zone of Siliguri or other North Bengal region. Earlier they had a predilection to reside in and around the Buddha Mandir, but now that is no longer a priority on some pragmatic consideration. The Baruas are all spread over the town and their neighbours are also of different religion, caste and creed. So naturally staying close and living in amity, Baruas and other communities are involved in social engagements pertaining to attending invitations, exchange of gifts and participation in various festivities or ceremonies, which foster the friendly relationship between the two communities to a great extent. However, the nature and type of the events are not similar, so the involvement of Baruas is also adjusted accordingly depending on the ceremonial attributes with respect to the participation.

In this section we will see the dimensions of their cultural exchange and social boundary maintenance. In the first part, we will try to analyse the amount of adoption and distinctiveness in their life cycle rites and rituals and in the second part, we will check how and to what extent Barua community of Siliguri town is participating in the major festivals of other communities.

5.2.1 Influence and adoption of Hindu practices in Life-Cycle Rites and Rituals of Barua Community

- **Birth** - The new life which begins from the birth of a child, who will grow up in the society needs introduction and formal recognition in the same society. It is in a way imperative to arrange appropriate ceremony by the family members to introduce the new born to social circle. The birth related various stages of rituals and ceremonies are mostly followed by the Hindu practices with only one exception; that in place of *BramhinPurohit* or priest, Baruas engage Bhanter to preside over the ceremony. For

example, *Sadhbhakkhan* or the ritual of wish (*saadh*) fulfillment by preferable dishes is performed like Hindu Bengali community for pregnant women mainly from the parental side. This occasion is attended by the female representatives of various communities staying in the neighbourhood. This phenomenon is mostly observed in the inter marriage between Baruas and non Baruas (mostly Hindu).

In the first rice-eating ritual of the child, the male baby in particular draws more importance and the ceremony is celebrated by inviting the neighbours, relatives and friends depending on the financial capacity of the organizing family.

- **Marital Customs** - The most varied and diverse scene of social life, socialization, action and reaction, values, instruction is viewed in the context of marriage related decision, doctrine, customs, conduct and rituals performed. That is the prime reason why marriage occupies a central fulcrum in the discipline of sociology. The occasion of marriage and attending the same, reflects the capacity, attitude, customs of the family, in particular the matter of approval of the inter community marriage which is of prime importance. Marriage practice of Barua Buddhists of North Bengal in India, shows some leniency to and influence of Hindu practices. At a glance these are:
 - In contravention to traditional practice of the Baruas, now-a-days marriage takes place in the house of the bride.
 - Easy acceptance of marriage between Hindus and Baruas.
 - Practice of dowry.
 - Practice of Hindu marriage customs like -*Mehendi, Gaye Halud, Subha dristi, Maala badal, Sindur daan, Stri achar* etc.
 - Abolition of customs like, *Haala Song* and *Madi Hondani* and cousin marriage.
 - Use of red and white bangles and regular use of vermilion by the married women.

Moreover, the use of *panjika* (Hindu religious calendar) to settle the date of marriage, consulting an astrologer, imagination of clan (*Goutam Gotra*), sometimes practice of *Kali Puja* or *Luxmi Puja* and following the practice of popular Hindu Bengali marriage customs like *subha-dristi, mala-badal, sindurdaan* etc. evince quite a strong influence of Hinduism over

Baruas. Imitating the Hindu custom and processes of marriage, the Barua family also conducts *Aiburobhaat* (bride and groom take their last meal as unmarried persons before the marriage) the day before the marriage. The bride is affectionately invited by her relatives and friends for *Aiburobhaat*.

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 an element of boundary maintenance. They do not perform marriage ceremony in front of fire (*agnisakshi*). In other words, they do avoid *Hom – Yangya* while solemnising 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 interdependence (Barth 1969). Boundaries that a group draws are always in inter-active situations. Boundaries are never drawn in isolation.

There are no strict set of ritualistic guidelines to be followed during a Buddhist wedding by reading from their scriptures, as marriage is generally not seen as a path for salvation by Lord Buddha and therefore Lamas' or Buddhist monks' presence is not mandatory to solemnize the wedding. However, it was observed before, the wedding is governed and steered by *Vantes* in front of *Mangalghat* (lay vessels that hold mango leaves and a coconut on top) by reciting verses from Mangal Sutta. Therefore,

- Presence of Buddhist Monks (*Vante*) is essential. They recite mangal-sutta in Pali. There is no role of Brahmin priest in *Barua* marriage.
- One non-professional priest of their community (*mantradata*) 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 fire hearth (for performing *Agni sakshi*) at the time of marriage.

In these days, the common marriage practice is fixing one day for *Ashwirbad* where both the parties meet one another and offer their gifts and blessings to the bride and the 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 limited only to the well-off families. Historically, for their shifting trajectory of migration perhaps and intermixing with other people the attitude towards marriage here is not very fixed or rigid one, rather remains much flexible. There had been not much resistance reported even of earlier days, arising out of the religious differences in the inter-religious marriage between the Baruas and the Hindus.

In the occasion of Barua bride and Hindu groom, the wedding invitees as spectators were excited, curious and interested to acquire the experience of Buddhist marriage rituals and customs. The giving away of a gift to the newly-wed is an essential part of wedding ceremony. Delving deeper into it, the socio- economic indicators of giving away the gift reveal the relationship, characteristics and attributes between the guests and the host of the wedding. The entire gifting process is determined and governed by the financial capacity, intimacy, the depth of the relationship and socio-economic status of both the parties. Due to the expansive influence of the globalised market, the Buddha statue in various shape or size, is available everywhere and it stands out to be an appropriate object with respect to the process of gifting and it is also readily available in Siliguri market. The invitees who do not belong to the Barua community and not much aware of the choice and need of the bride and groom, they easily adapt to select Buddha Statue as a satisfactory gift, which is pocket- friendly as well. For an example, the marriage which took place in Siliguri between a Barua groom and a Mahayani Lama bride, they received Buddha idol or statue as a wedding gift from both the sides. From the account of an elderly Barua, in earlier days, it was quite a common convention to present utensils to be used as daily usage by the newly married or to gift books which were considered to be noble and perceived as an aristocratic courtesy. In modern days, instead of these books or utensils, the usual way of presenting is various dress material, sari or decoration pieces available all over the market in the Siliguri town.

Here another dimension of this cultural influence deserves mention. Like most of the civilizations Hindu civilization is a veritable example of complex structure of great and little traditions. For instance, Hindu marriage all over India is not performed in the same way. There is a *Shastriya* (Internal values of Hindu religions) 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* (local popular practices) 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 Loukikpart because these are influenced by local culture, environment and availability of the necessary products.

The transmission level of these two parts is also not the same. Loukik rites and rituals transmit more rapidly than Shastriya ones 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 limited to transmission of popular tradition like *mala badal*, *subha dristi*, *sindur daan* and *stri-achar*.

- **Funeral Customs-** Death is inevitable and beyond control of the humans, which brings lifecycle into a termination. So bereavement related rituals or funeral rites is mostly addressed around the activities to pacify the spirit of the recently deceased, through various mourning and memorial events organized amongst close relatives and friends, which does not really need endorsement or acknowledgement from the larger society, apart from being a piece of information.

The living quarters of Buddhist Baruas in Siliguri are different and the practice of living in apartments has increased over the years, which has made the traditional funeral customs of the deceased difficult. This has led to the practice of conducting these rituals in a concise manner. In the Chittagong area, the son of the deceased fetches water in a new urn from the nearby river or pond and mixes raw turmeric, perfumes and soap and cleanses the body with a lot of care. The ritual of bathing the deceased holds an important position in the Barua community.

In Buddhism, it is considered auspicious to see a dead body. All tradition and materialistic things are intransient and all intransient things cause pain. Life is impermanent which is why it is subject to old age, sickness and death. Once this transcendental realization dawns on man, it is possible to achieve salvation. This is why, a dead body is not considered inauspicious or impure in Buddhism.

The Barua community is not much influenced by the Hindu practices of mourning. In the event of a death, practicing the faith or the presence of a monk is significant. Apart from that, their period of mourning is restricted to six days for all. On the last day, the *shraddh* (last rites) ceremony is performed.

Therefore, it is essentially observed that:

- The news of death is first conveyed to the monks in the vicinity. Prior to taking out the funeral procession, it is mandatory for them to recite the *Sutta* (Sutra or Hymns).
- It is a common practice to take the body of the deceased to the nearest Buddhist temple at the time of taking out the funeral procession.
- Before the *shraddh* ritual or the weekly mourning, a monk is expected to visit the household of the deceased every evening for reading out the scriptures.
- In the Buddhist community, the mourning period is completed within a week for all.

Apart from these, a number of other practices have developed in the Barua community as a result of influence of the surroundings. For an example, the carrying of rice and water by the eldest son and the ritual of *mukhagni* (touching the face of the dead with a lit torch) have been adopted although the worshipping of the Fire God or *homa*, circling the fire at the time of the wedding, etc. have not been adopted yet. During the seven day period of mourning or *Satdinna/Hatdinna*, the mourners are not permitted to sit in high places or lie down, to use soap, combs and hair oil or to stitch. They should consume vegetarian food, wear white

clothes and walk on barefoot. Shaving the head by sons and cutting nails before the commencement of shraddh rituals are also common practices like Hindus.

A wife has to renounce her sarees, ornaments and sindur upon the death of her husband. She has to drape a white saree (a thin black border is permitted). These practices are prevalent among the Buddhist Baruas of Siliguri because of the influence wielded by Hindu neighbours on them. Apart from this, they believe that the difference between death and rebirth is seven days at least. Considering this, it is imperative for the family and loved ones of the deceased to follow a few customs.

At present, it has been observed that a *kirtan* (devotional songs) is organized at the household of the deceased on the day of performing the final rituals after a period of seven days. At least five monks are invited to share a meal on this day and for donating different items. Among the items to be donated, it is important to have an umbrella, cloth, thread and needle, soap, candles, paper and pen, food items and cash. The neighbours are invited for this purpose as well. This ceremony marks the end of the mourning period and the practices that were associated with it. Usually non-vegetarian food is served at this ceremony named *Niyam Bhanga* (end of restrictions).

As an invitee attending a festival or a ceremony is a part of socialization, it bolsters recognition in the society when being invited by the other communities. The Baruas receive various invitations from the other communities and neighbours, through their personal and family relationship, flair of communication with other community, mutual cooperation in the time of need etc. which act as prime catalysts as well. However, in the event of demise, both the communities become little conservative and performs final rites with close family members.

It is worth mentioning that any occasion or festival of any nature, being social or religious; life-cycle events, whether large or small, are accompanied by a meal of some sort, had always been an essential part of the festivity or ceremony. In case of family occasion or ceremony the guests are invited to dine, which is 'reception' and for religious occasion the distribution of offerings to deities (Prasad) or any particular preparation remain the prime session of the very occasion. In general, while living in the close proximity of various other castes and religions, it is observed

that most of the rules and regulations with respect to food, with few exceptions, is relaxed. The urban middle class Bengali is very much fond of all kind of foods available in their reach. Mag Baruas prefer dried fish and pork in their favorite food list. However, on occasions or ceremony, they usually avoid by delisting this when they interact with other community in social context. Since Pork is not universally accepted as a food, they try to avoid any discussion about it. And the evening reception menu is carefully crafted so that everyone can participate to dine together.

5.2.2 Participation in Major Festivals of Other Community

The life cycle related ceremonies are performed based on certain religious practices but socialization over the religious activities and social interactions become their cardinal aspect. Also there are certain festivities like New Year, which is celebrated by all the communities, groups, or populace with equal involvement, enthusiasm and spirit. In present days, the *Rakhi Utsab* (*Rakshabandhan*, a popular, traditionally Hindu annual rite) or *Holi* (festival of colour, popular Hindu perennial festival) is not observed only within a religious group, but has spread across all religions and are recognized as universally acknowledged festivals.

However, certain festivals are organized and followed by specific communities as their main event with respect to respective religious stand points namely for Buddhists' Buddha Jayanti, for Christians' Christmas, for Muslims' Eid etc. Due to diverse culture, language and dialects, place of belonging etc., it is very challenging to identify and discuss any particular festival of Bengali Hindu. But in general notion the Durgapuja is the biggest annual Hindu festival for four days. In this segment, we will pick **Durga Puja** as a topic to discuss and analyze the subject of intermixing and exchange. Durga Puja, also called Durgotsava, is an annual Hindu festival in the Indian subcontinent that reveres the goddess Durga. The special pointer that makes Durga Puja the cultural extravaganza is so inviting that no Bengali person ever wants to miss it and every non-Bengali wants to experience at least once to savour the feel of the festivity in the month of *Ashwinas* per Bengali calendar (typically September or October of the Gregorian calendar). The festival brings lot of joy, happiness in people in general by offering them scope to enjoy the annual long leave, hopping decorated *pandals* (temporary ceremonial structure)

adorned with lights, taking food in the array of road side eateries or restaurants, buying and gifting new apparels to near and dear relatives etc. It becomes a melting pot for cultural exchange and economic activities. It would not be prudent to conceive an idea that this festivity is only meant for Hindus in terms of arrangement, participation and enjoyment. Putting aside the religious dimension of the festival this festivity is so important and cardinal in nature to West Bengal state and its population, that this event amalgamates politics, economics and socialization on a single platform and draws participation from all corners and strata of the society.

However, being the largest Bengali festival which is performed as per Bengali practices, the Baruas are not out of the spectrum or inducement. The elderly Baruas keep some distance with respect to participation. The youths are more engrossed in the pleasure of the festivity from evening till midnight by leveraging all means of socialization like meeting friends who live far and near, dining together, strolling around the pandals etc. The middle aged Baruas are divided in adopting two types of outlook and view, one of the group is extremely active and participates in the community club by offering voluntary service in charting out Puja plans and associated budget, subscription collection, arrangement of Puja, food, pandals and other knitty-gritty, but refrain themselves from offering *pushpanjali* (is an offering of flowers to Hindu Gods and Goddesses). Some of them, Barua women in particular, offer their service in Puja activity in every aspect of the preparation with greater fervor. Contextually, it can be inferred and observed that the exchange can only happen when the arranging party allows and does not create blockade of any sort in participation, with amicable gesture. So the involvement in Puja by Baruas also addresses the acceptability of minority community in larger canvass of majority representation. So it is quite obvious that the celebration is not only encompassed within its religious boundary but has traversed outside the fence to assimilate every representative of the caste, creed or the diaspora like Baruas.

The Baruas also arrange and organize *Kali puja*, *Saraswati puja*, and *Manasa puja*, offering to *Lokenath Baba* (Hindu deities and religious guide) in their own home or in respective *temples* with great involvement. However, there is no report of any kind of resistance or opposition

experienced by the minority Barua community while arranging or performing the above mentioned celebrations.

There have also been instances where Buddhist children are initiated with other Hindu ones at Saraswatipuja (worship of Goddess of Wisdom as per Hindu mythology), usually being held in pandals in the locality, organized by any School or local clubs or other organization. However, what is most noticeable in case of these two religious orders is the attempt to maintain harmony. There are several instances where Buddhist monks have initiated the child in writing on *Saraswati puja*.

Although Buddhism flourished as a counter practice to idol worshipping, follower of caste system and ritual centric Hinduism and 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 due to their proximity with larger non Buddhist community like the Hindus. As Martin Orans (Orans, 1965), has described how a tribe that has been looking towards the great tradition of high Hinduism, has been pulled towards emulating the caste pattern. Similarly, Magh Baruas of North Bengal are worshipping at Kali, Durga or other Hindu temples and for the purpose of offering sacrifices with name and *gotra* (clan), they are using *Goutam gotra* (Hindu clan name and name of Buddha prior to his incarnation) as their clan name. These practical life-style strategies help them to avoid unwanted questions at the time of socio-religious interaction with Hindu community members. Above mentioned analysis shows that though they are ethnically associated with 'Buddhist Tribe' identity, but socio-culturally exactly not so.

Observation

Around fifty men and women from Barua community were interviewed to collect the following data with respect to their daily compulsory religious activity, rituals, practice and faith related subjects. Based on how Barua families in the area of North Bengal conduct their daily life and practice rituals at home, how they intermingle with relatives, friends and neighbors from religious perspective, we can categorize them as following:

Those who perform Buddhapuja at home and shun other religious events.

Among these fifty respondents, twelve (24%) of them believe that abiding by the Panchasheel and Astasheel is the only religious conduct. They feel that to follow Buddha's teaching and performing activities to improve the Buddhist society should be the cardinal goal of the religious life of the Theravada Buddhists of Barua community. All these families attend the religious events and conduct the rituals with utmost sincerity. These activities include the worship of Buddha twice a day both at morning and evening, meditation and prayer at home, visiting Buddhamandir on regular frequency etc. Many Baruas are actively involved with Bidarshan Dhyana Ashram where weekly two classes on Buddha teaching is arranged and conducted. Apart from these formal activities, Baruas also indulge themselves in informal ways to nourish their religious activity like reading books on Buddha, discuss and contemplate Buddhism with their children to inculcate the philosophy, offer Fang to Bhanter etc. By regular chanting Mantra or singing Buddha hymn the Baruas remember the words of mantra by heart and memorize those very well. Sibalipuja is also conducted with Buddhapuja by many of them. While respecting the invitation to attend events of friends or neighbors from other religious community, some of the Baruas refrain from participating in those events. In this aspect one teacher revealed that he has stopped attending other religious events when he realized that his non-Barua friends or neighbours do not show the same degree of interest in his own religious events. Some of them feel not so interested because of strict customs and rules observed by Hindu community with high importance on purity with less or zero tolerance on any defilement for the practitioner.

Participates in the events of other religion, but imposes importance to his own religion i.e. Buddhism.

Twenty persons (40%) out of above mentioned fifty interviewed for research, strongly harbour the idea of having religion in society to maintain peace and harmony conjugated with basic law and order. As a minority community the Baruas have to maintain a cordial relationship with majority Hindus on both religious and social transactions. For an example, it can be referenced that some of them are actively involved and contribute to various Hindu

religious worshipping (Puja) events like Durgapuja, Lakshmi puja, Kalipuja etc. Some Baruas induced by interest and for acquiring knowledge read and study the other religious books or other materials. Also they offer prayer to Hindu gods and goddesses along with Buddha.

It is worth mentioning in this context that with respect to religious conduct the family members can have different opinions and practice. Senior members of the families are believed to be religious custodian in nature and prefer to have more importance on their own religious practice and belief, while younger generation is more open and willing to participate in mainstream activities in the society they belong to, which can be observed in various occasions. Many students have expressed being happy while with their friends during Durgapuja, Saraswati puja, visiting puja pandals in particular. The fast life of modern days has shortened the free time while religious events give an opportunity to congregate with friends. The festival is the melting pot for all caste and creed in the society and to live in society mutual respect and support to each other from religious and social perspective is extremely important. As a representative of young Barua community, a Barua youth revealed that he performs various activities during Durgapuja in terms of collecting subscriptions, helping in worshipping activities. He also takes same interest to bring his non- Barua friends to take part in the Cheevardan or Buddhapuja. And his non-Barua friends also take initiative to support Cheevardan and Buddhapuja by collecting subscriptions, offer helping hand in organizing these events etc.

The list of auspicious days as per the Hindu calendar, also have huge importance for some Barua families. And many of them conducted 'First initiation to learning for kids' (*Hatekhari*), which is a celebratory occasion on the day of Sarawati Puja. They organized the Saraswati Puja for their children and students, conducted the hymn and offered tributes following Hindu rule of prayer (Anjali). Some of them attend other religious festivities and events but they are not interested in idol worship (*Murti puja*). This segment of Baruas remains liberal and open towards the religious belief and conduct. Their belief system hovers around the idea that serving humanity and maintaining family ties is the cardinal duty of life. Generally, they are respectful to all religions and corresponding religious beliefs.

One mother of a Barua family offers respectful salutation (*Pranam*) while passing by Hindu temples but does not perform the worship (Puja) of the idol in formal way. However, she does not interrupt her daughter in worshipping Sarasawati Idol during the festivity which is a core and a holy Hindu event related to education in particular. Similarly, from another family it is known that they have Nepali neighbour and they have similar transactions between them with respect to religious practices and rituals. During the conversation it was revealed that inter religious marriage also played a crucial role in fostering religious endurance within the families and maintained harmony between them. Those who are not accustomed with the rituals of other religion apart from Buddhapuja, have to see the entry of other religion with related gods/goddesses along with formalities or rituals due to the existence of inter- religious marriage in their house. For an example the daughter-in-law practices the reading of Sathya Sai teachings, while before her induction into marriage only Budhhapuja had been conducted.

Maximum adaptation to Hindu Religion and Culture

In case of 18 persons (36%) adaptation to Hindu religion and culture is observed maximum due to the high influence and effect of Hindu religion. There remains minimal difference in daily religious activities in comparison to a Hindu family. The reason for this adoption is primarily due to 'regional effect'. Before settling down in Siliguri, while migrating from Chittagong most families have spent significant time in Assam or other parts of West Bengal. In this respect the neighbours and surrounding environment plays an important and critical role in shaping preferences. As an example the fourteen out of fifty surveyed families are under this category of substantial adoption of Hinduism. Most of them have the collection of The Gita, The Bible, books on Sri Arabindo's teachings and they periodically worship various gods and goddesses of Hindu religion. Manasa puja and related Manasa narration (Pnachali) is organized by the ladies of the community not only for observing the pure religious practice, but to foster amity in the neighborhood, they exhibit the similar features with respect to religious customs that deal with fertility, protection of the children etc.

Those who are living in high- rise apartments as a residential community arrange various events to render religious reverence and homage to various gods and goddesses - like Barer

Pujo (Shani – a male deity from Purana, considered inauspicious and a bringer of bad luck) where almost everyone participates voluntarily with alacrity.

In another example, a Barua family having a transferable job had lived in various places and practiced Hindu religious events since there were no Bhanter available around the locality or region. They worshipped in local Hindu temple, consumed Prasad (a small offering of sweets or other food) with family and children together. At present, they organize Lakshmi, Saraswati and Bipodtarini Puja on a large scale. Monday is considered a very auspicious day for the worship of Lord Shiva and they observe fasting on the day as well. Loknath Baba and Saraswati puja are arranged every year in their house and also they read Hanuman Chalisa, The Gita regularly. The family had settled in Siliguri long back in the process of early phase of migration.

Secondly, due to industrialization and consequent urbanization etc. the basic religious characteristics had been altered and relaxed to some extent. So inter-religious marriage between Hindu and Buddhist family is not a surprising event nowadays and as an effect many religious prejudices have been eradicated. Many Barua families have adopted the other religious customs and practices post inter-religious marriage of their children.

5.3 Bengali Buddhists: Perception and Reaction of Others.

In this part we will observe how much the other communities, mostly Hindu and non-Barua Buddhist, are aware of this Barua community with respect to their existence, customs, culture and lifestyle. Many of time it is realised that two religious institutions despite functioning congruently for a long time, seldom have any communication between them. However, the practice of intermingling with general public, comprising other communities, is prevailing. It is also observed sometimes that when a connection or link is established between the two communities during any festival, the religion stands not the sole or main reason for the daily exchange.

We will be discussing the mutual exchange and relationship in the above context - because a minority community's acknowledgement resides not only on the situation, security, dignity

and constitutional recognition; but mostly on the surrounding social acknowledgment and unified receptivity.

In this section we have spoken to a monk of the oldest Tibetan Buddhist monastery situated at Salugara in Siliguri and a Pujari of an established Kali Mandir adjacent to Buddhabharati Buddha Mandir. The discussion reveals that both the communities are interconnected and mutual exchange is persistent at different levels. We have made an attempt to know from the other laypersons about their understanding of the life-style, history and festivity of Barua community and about non- Barua communities' participation in those festivals.

5.3.1 Bengali Buddhists: Insight and Response of Other Religious Sects.

Interaction and Connection with Tibetan Buddhist –

We are supposed to comprehend the level of exchange and the maturity of the connection between the Local Mahayani Buddhist community and Theravadi Buddhists community or how much the Mahayani Lama Buddhists are cognizant of the existence of Barua Buddhists. International Tashi Gomang Stupa is one of the oldest monasteries in the Salugara locality. It was founded by Tibetan Monks and followers of Dalai Lama. The monastery is believed to have been built by the Tibetan lama Kalu Rimpoche. Presently, six monks stay in the premises on regular basis and often many other guests from other towns, states and countries also visit, while a few stay back for various reasons. A group of children from different places of India, mostly from the hills of West Bengal, Sikkim, Nepal and Bhutan stay here as residents.

We have conversed with Guru Dorji of International Tashi Gomang Stupa - one of the teachers and resident monks of this monastery. It has been expressed that as per their understanding, they believe that Buddhists from mostly Thailand, Cambodia, Srilanka, Myanmar etc. usually hail from Theravadi Buddhist community. Guru Dorji is not much well acquainted with the Theravadi Buddhists of Bangladesh, but he accepts, as being realistic, that the existence of the border between Myanmar and Bangladesh has been the logical reason of the presence of the Theravadi Buddhists in Bangladesh. He explained that there is no great internal differentiation between these two streams of thought apart from the rituals shaped by them independently

over the passage of time. He does not possess much awareness about the general Barua Buddhists. On the contrary, he is more comfortable in keeping close contact and cordial relationship with some of the Hindu pujaris (priests) in the vicinity. Guru Dorji enjoys the fact that the interest and attention expressed by Hindu community in Buddhist festivals and philosophy is gaining ground. And he relishes his own inquisitiveness in Hindu rituals, festival, customs etc. as well.

However, Guru Dorji has told us that Buddhism has many offshoots and a legion of gods and goddesses. A visit to Bodhgaya reveals the reason, backed by thousand years of history, behind the origin of these offshoots or various streams. He is certain that the Theravadi Buddhists and its worshippers are also Buddhists similar to him and belong to another stream with no exception, everything at the end merges into Buddha and only Buddha. GuruDorji opines that the main difference between the two streams being – Theravadi Buddhism promotes the personal improvement and salvation while Mahayani Buddhists emphasise on the importance of the prosperity of the community.

Guru Dorji knows about the presence of Bhantes in Siliguri but never had the opportunity to interact with them on any occasion of festivities. He is unsure of the fact of existence of Barua Buddhist population or the Buddha mandir. He does not even recollect the fact that the 2555th Buddha Jayanti celebration was jointly organised by both the streams in Siliguri on May 17, 2011. The absence of the consciousness of that joint observance can be attributed to the lack of popular inclusion and equal participation, highlighted by the lack of mutual awareness due to absence of effective campaigning. The Buddhists of both the streams in the region remained slack in comprehending the importance of the united activities of 2555th Buddha Jayanti celebration.

It can be derived from the above mentioned discussion and analysis that the religion as a component is not always the prime influence between the two Buddhists communities for mutual exchange. Personal intimacy or socio-religious exchange is not noticeable between these two minority communities of Buddhism. At the same time establishing relationship or keeping in touch regularly is not a very common occurrence. However, both the communities

are comparatively more interactive and fluent in mutual exchange with Hindus, while they are confined to their own separate existence despite of their common religious belief. Our next survey ratifies this inference as well.

Interaction and Connection with the Hindu Temple –

Bidyachakra Kalibari (Goddess Kali Temple) was established in 1963. The location of this Kali Temple is just adjacent to Buddha Bharati (Buddhist temple of Mahananda para, Siliguri) and practically they share a common separation wall between themselves. Shri Manik Ghoshal is the priest (pujari as per Hindu terminology) of this Kali Mandir. Interaction with Shri Ghoshal reveals that the land was donated for both the establishments i.e. for the Buddhist and the Hindu Temple by the landlord Bnashi Pal in yester years. Shri Rathindranath Ghoshal who was the grandfather of Manik Ghoshal and the first pujari, travelled to Tarapeeth and got himself initiated in various techniques of worship, adoration, occultism or hyperphysical practice (Tantric rituals and system) for over 12 years or more.

He was greatly renowned by the name 'Lalbaba' in the locality. In present days the compound is having Lord Shiva and Shree Hanuman temple together as well. Along with the priest's family dwelling in the land (where the temple is located) another family also resides, and the rental income is accounted for in the temple's earnings.

Now we can try to understand to what extent the pujari of Bidyachakra Kalibari, staying in close proximity to the Budhhabharati is cognisant of the daily life, festival, functions, faith and worshippers of his next-door neighbour Buddha Bharati. Shri Manik Ghosal told us that he is not much aware of the details or lacks understanding of the daily rituals of the Buddha Mandir. He only knows about the existence of a Trustee Board to oversee its religious activities. As a Hindu priest his understanding of Theravadi Buddhism is limited, but he still manages to connect with Buddhist religion as he is a Tantric worshipper through the esoteric traditions both of Hinduism and Buddhism over a period of thousand years namely Yoga, *Tarachar* (a process of worshipping Goddess Kali), *Cheenachar* (Voiced by Shiva to Parbati - an occult way of worshipping), Shamanic and yogic beliefs and practices, *Dehatatta* (worshipping the Body without the dichotomy of Mind and Body) . He sincerely honours a similarity

between *Tara Maa* (Goddess Kali of Tarapeeth) and *Pragyaparamita* (Perfection of Wisdom in Buddhism).

Shri. Ghoshal is not aware of the hierarchy of the senior monk or Abbot. He does not even know who the secretary of Budhhabharti is, but he had a chance once to get familiar with a young Bhikshu and they developed a cordial friendly relationship between them. He could relate to similar journey of financial crisis, domestic disaster, instability as a young religious wayfarer himself like the young Bhante. However, the relationship could not be fostered long as they drifted away in their separate pursuits of life. He understands that his neighbours have migrated from Bangladesh, hailing from low income group families. He clarifies that the visitors are mainly young boys in their pursuit of becoming Shramans and young Bhanter (who is known as *Chhoto Bhante*) come to stay in Buddhabharati for a short while.

Only during a few days, he becomes aware of Buddha Bharati's daily routine of reciting religious books, reading of Mantras (*Mantrapaath*) etc. Although he knows the importance of Buddha Jayanti as a principal festival of the Buddhists, but fails to comprehend the religious significance of Kathin Chevar Daan of Baruas' apart from knowing that new clothes are given to the monks in the Buddha Bharati at certain time of the year. He appreciates the sincere efforts put in by the organisers and residents of Buddhabharati towards maintaining the rules and regulation as well as their organising capability. He also values and gives importance to the formal process of day to day living and earning mechanism of Buddhist monks or Bhanter in Buddhabharati. At the same time, he is critical about the commercialisation of the Buddhabharati Guest House for organising social functions (including DJ party), social gatherings etc.

Such a long close cohabitation naturally rouses the question in mind whether both the establishments had ever come to a disagreement on any dispute which led into some sort of difference of opinion. We come to know that both the mandir committees were having some issues relating to the wall which was keeping them apart as two different physical entities. A couple of years back due to heavy rain and storm the old wall of the Kali Mandir got dismantled. A portion of the boundary wall of these two mandirs was erected collectively and

the other portion was built by the Kali mandir committee. The dismantled one was part of the wall which was built collectively and remaining was part of the Kali Mandir's own wall. However, post disaster the Budhhabharati committee had offered to reconstruct the entire wall at their expense with two conditions. First, they asked to shift the wall inside which was facing towards the road and secondly, they wanted to do paintings with Buddha and Jataka on the newly constructed wall, obviously to promote Buddhism.

Kali mandir committee expressed their consent over first condition. However, they were not accepting the second condition which led to some sort of disruption in the relationship between the two committees. In later time, they both could get over the dispute and continued in amity. Shri Ghoshal pointed out that such issues did not create distance between him and other occupants of Budhhabharati. He also adds that although the two different religious communities never participated in religious festivals of each other or got together in commonality, but he holds his respect for all religions equally. His grandfather was also an open-hearted and liberal kind of a person. Also those who worship and follow the Tantra way, they are not prohibited by anything. To fulfill his spiritual quest he can go anywhere, participate in any sort of activities even of a different religion, be it of Islam or Buddhism. He values mutuality and mixes around with anybody and everybody.

During conversation with Shree Ghoshal, it is quite revealing that he is in close contact with various Barua families. When we make an entry to this mandir, the first thing that comes to notice is the marble slab, which is donated by Bhaskar Barua in the memory of his deceased parents. We come to know that the donation happened twenty years back by the Barua family. At present, the nearby Bengali Barua and Nepali Buddhist families also regularly visit the Kali Temple and conduct Hindu way of prayer or Puja. Especially when Bidyachakra Kali Mandir organizes religious festivals like *Kalipuja*, *Deepavali*, *ShivaRatri*, there happens to be a huge number of visitors flocking the premises. No one is debarred from offering or praying in front of Goddess Kali. While performing prayer (*Puja*) in Kalibari the Baruas are introduced or identified as *Gautam gotra* (gotra denotes the progeny, as one of seven Rishis) during the process. He shares that he has seen the marriage in his family with Baruas. His Brother-in-law though himself, a Barua Buddhist was a regular visitor of Kali Mandir and conducted his

offerings as per Hindu rituals. Shri Ghoshal shared one marriage incident which happened in the Kali Mandir since both the families were against that particular marriage. The bride and the groom did not have a choice to go to any Barua Buddha Mandir, so they decided to solemnise the marriage in Kali Mandir by following Hindu rituals conducted by a purohit. However, Shri Ghoshal nowadays does not entertain such requests without the presence of both the parents. As normal visitors Nepali Buddhists also visit both Bidyachakra Kali Mandir and Budhhabharati during the auspicious days and festivities. Also, there are certain families despite being Baruas who prefer to visit Kali Mandir and conduct prayer over visiting Budhhabharati. Shri Ghosal also uses a rented house from a Barua family. As a spectator he also enjoys Buddhajayanti, Cheebardan etc. Under the present circumstances, he feels that politics based on religious polarity is bringing only distance between the religions. Practically the people need to understand the religion, faith etc. in their real essence and meaning. He said that we have always observed clashes between different religions during all ages in history. The same divide and rule policy was adopted by the British creating or encouraging divisions among the subjects to prevent alliances that could challenge the sovereign power and as an effect of the same the citizens of India are paying the price till date. On the disputed issue of citizenship, he believes that it should not be mixed with religion as they are both two diverse things to be accepted by the state. The government should take enough measure to create the policy first and then accordingly set the programme to implement the policy. This will eradicate the possibility of distress and apprehension in various sects with respect to citizenship. As per him, there is nothing above humanity in this world.

This secular minded young priest does not stop criticising the RSS initiative of purohit (priest) training or stricture of Vishwa Hindu Parishad. Shri Ghoshal seems to be inclined towards leftist ideology while trying to understand the importance of Sangha and Budhha himself. He also tries to get hold of those who have drifted away from Buddhism. In this context Shri Manik Ghoshal shared his experience. While conducting Narayan Puja in some Barua families, what he has heard is that low income group Barua families are not very keen to be part of Sangha and their activities. Those Barua families are in the belief that the Sangha is a playground for rich and influential class of the Barua society. Those who can afford to pay

hefty subscription/donation fees or are able to cater to the basic needs of the Bhantes, are more welcome by the Sangha committee. During the festival only the names of those persons are publicly announced who have donated large amounts in Sangha's fund. This Barua group understands that the amount of donations remains the yardstick of sincerity of a devotee which results in their avoidance of Sangha. So, the prevalent tendency to walk along with the mainstream Barua society is juxtaposed with the predominant division of class among the Baruas.

Taking a cue from this internal disparity, inferences can be drawn to mark the cleavage lying in the idea of the Barua community living like a homogeneous clan or as a part of a unified ethnic group. Although Buddhism had originated as an alternative doctrine to Hindu complex culture of rituals and hierarchical caste system, in this particular case it is observed that low income group Barua families are more comfortable in conducting the worship with the available Hindu Mandirs where the restrictions are limited or the process of worship remains comparatively relaxed. The continuous influence of the majoritarian Hindu culture, and added attraction / belief in the miracle of Hindu God is governing the life of this marginalized religious society. On the other hand, the discriminating treatment received from within their own clan or Sangha is culminating in a show of indifference to Theravadi Buddhist religion. This distraction is originating from not showing affinity to Buddhism and the increasing Hindu influence is evidently leading them to embrace majoritarian religion more vigorously in near future.

5.3.2 Bengali Buddhist: Socio-Religious Exchange with Other Community People

We have already seen that the Barua Buddhists are scattered within the Siliguri town with no zonal concentration. So obviously they must have neighbours from other communities. The areas adjacent to Theravadi Buddha Mandirs are occupied by different communities in large number. Owing to this cohabitation in close proximity with each other, mutual exchange amongst them becomes an important factor. It exhibits clearly how far security, recognition and acceptability the Barua community has gained from the other communities.

On the anvil of simplicity, we will now focus on the main themes as a part of our deliberation and assay to portray an overall picture around the idea of mutual exchange, which encompasses the following,

- **Participation of Other Communities in Barua Religious Festivals and Practice**

Kathin Chivar Daan is one of the most memorable and greatest festivals for Bengali Buddhists. Chibar means the dress or robe which monks usually wear. On this occasion the Buddhists at large consider the associated act of donating food and robe to the monks as auspicious and sacred. The chibar is donated to monks who have already observed the Barshabash, which we have discussed in the previous chapter in great detail. Now we will observe the extent of this festivity in Siliguri town. Erstwhile, this festival used to be celebrated with much fanfare in all the four Viharas of Siliguri.

Of late the number of participating Viharas has come down to two only. It is not observed in two Viharas, one of them being closed and the other relatively new. So there are two operational Buddha Mandirs where Chivar Daan tradition is performed regularly and bhantes from all around the region assemble to participate in the festival. However, this is solely limited to Boudhyas and only Baruas take part in the celebration where non - Barua participation is limited so far as participating number is concerned. But as a part of cultural activities of North Bengal, this event is generally well covered by press in newspaper with due seriousness. The air of festivity draws vendors to erect numerous temporary food stalls during this event along with arrangement of public transport to ensure mass participation. The non - Barua residents living in the vicinity of the Buddha Mandirs are aware of the celebration and they know about the monks. For an example, the Muslim neighbours residing near Hyderpara Buddha Mandir are invited in Cheevar Daan festival and they voluntarily attend this religious festival of a different faith and partake meals together as well. However, the intrinsic religious details of the festival are not known to them.

BudhaJayanti is an auspicious day for all the Buddhists. The birth of the Buddha, His Enlightenment and His departure, all these phases of his life took place under the full moon of the Baisakhi month (1st month of Bengali calendar), which is why this date is known to all as

Buddha Purnima. It has also been stated in earlier chapter that apart from Theravadi Bengali Buddhists settled in Siliguri, there are Mahayani Buddhists both from nearby hill regions and from the plains who reside in a couple of Tibetan Monastery in the outskirts of siliguri. These Mahayani Monasteries are organized and governed by Lamas and the followers' representation come mostly from the Nepalese. The Buddhajayanti festival is organized by the Buddhists, but the tone and characteristic of the arrangement is of different nature. The auspicious day of Buddhajayanti has been declared as an official holiday by the Union government and so it has become a universal festival for all religions, castes and creed and we observe their participation on various levels and in different functions. Amongst the visitors, there is participation of non-Buddhist Bengali families comprising youths, teenager as well as teacher and professors of various colleges. From the account of our discussion we have come to know that the prime reason for the influx of non- Buddhist group for paying visit has been various like inquisitiveness about a different religion, attraction to the festival, interest generated as a place of popular visit or because of earlier connect, or for some other unknown reasons. It would be prudent to bring to the notice that only non-Bengali Mahayani Monastery is being visited by the Bengalis. The lush architectural patterns of the Gompas, colorful idols, lavish interior, non-familiar musical instruments and different sort of recitation, presence of lamas and 'Prasad' distribution make this a popular place of attraction for the general public including all communities and religion.

Comparatively, the Bengali Buddha Mandir is flocked primarily by the Barua community and excepting them no Bengali representative takes the trouble to pay visit to this place, apart from the members of some Nepali families who visit all the Buddha Mandirs, be it belonging to the Mahayani or Bengali Theravadi community. However, there has been no presence of Bengali Barua in Mahayani Monastery. They arrange the event of prayer in their households only. It is of much relevance to observe that there happens to be a new Buddha Mandir being overseen by a Bengali Barua Bhante, in Shalugara area of Siliguri town. Also on the main road there stands in majesty a well-known Mahayani Monastery since long. The neighborhood is represented by many Mahayani Nepali Buddhists showing a lot of respect for the Theravadi Bengali Bhante, who has claimed that he had been well supported by these Nepali Buddhists

when he bought the land and erected the Buddha Mandir. The place is often visited by the Nepali women along with members of other linguistic communities.

Being one of the cardinal festivals of the Buddhists, Buddha Jayanti is celebrated by Bengali Theravadi Boudhyas, and the Nepali or Sikkimese Mahayani boudhya in separate threads according to their own regulations and separate operative modes. However, both the Buddha communities got together to form a Festival Committee to celebrate the 2555th Buddha Jayanti in the year 2015. The festivity got initiated with the 'Prabhat Feri' attended by both the Theravadi and the Mahayani groups, followed by flag hoisting for World Peace, reciting Mangalsutta, deliberation on the philosophy of Buddha and conducting religious teachings. The entire event was conducted both in Bengali and Nepali languages, wherein Bengali remained predominant as a medium of communication. Some of the representatives of both Theravadi and Mahayani groups are capable of understanding both languages and moderating between the groups. However, it was also evident that language is the prime barrier to free exchanges between these two groups in the context of culture, philosophy and socialization. Apart from performing various religious rites, cultural events were organized in the afternoon through to the evening. A few community service programmes such as blood donation and distribution of free books were also organized on that day. Enthusiastic participation of various religious communities was observed. The cultural production was catered by the non-Barua Bengali youths or teenagers, conjoined by other communities like Marwari, Bihari etc.

Theravadi Buddhists are known for their special meditation training practice, **Vipasanna Meditation or Bidarshana Dhyana**. The fact is that the other communities are also adopting and participating in this religious training. The center here named 'Panchanadi Vipasanna Kendra' is situated in Dagapur, Siliguri. This centre follows the teachings of S.N. Goyenka and the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin (Burmese leader of the Vipasanna movement). Satya Narayan Goenka was born in Burma in 1924 to Indian parents from the Marwari ethnic group and grew up in a conservative Hindu household. He was a successful businessman, but started experiencing severe and debilitating migraines. Unable to get medical relief, he sought help from the Vipasanna teacher U. Ba Khin and was under his training for 14 years. After his death in 1971, Goenka had moved to India and started his meditation centres at different places of India.

People of different religions and ethnic groups come to these centres. The Panchanadi centre has a mixed group of members from different castes, creeds and religions. Many Baruas also appreciate and follow the technic and method of the Panchanadi Meditation Centre than their very own Bidarshan Dhyana Shibir conducted in Hyderpara Buddha Mandir. People also go to Bodhgaya for the advance level of training.

- **Impact of Social Activities Performed by the Barua Community**

In this part of the study we will discuss about the initiative of the Barua community in social activities, mainly education and public welfare with the participation of the other religious communities and their overall effect. As a minority community, the Baruas are able to keep up their individuality with respect to religious customs and maintain the exchange with the other communities to some extent. However, It is subject to uncertainty whether as a community Baruas are having any social impact or becoming the important partner in the exchange as beneficiaries as of now.

In the earlier chapter we have observed the existence of schools established by Barua Buddhists and the existence of the welfare associations. So, in this chapter we will analyse in a summarised format the overall and generic activities of these aforementioned institutions. We have identified prominent personalities such as Dr Satyapal Bhikkhu, Shri Rastrapal Bhante, Shri Debapriya Barua. This list of renowned persons is quite impressive and of immense credibility in the arena of education of Siliguri town. Buddhabharati Bhuwanmohoni Bidyamandir began as a primary school and as late as in 1970 it was given the status as Buddhabharati High School with merely thirteen students. Over the years it got transformed into a high school receiving government grants. Mr. Sherpa in the year 1992 donated, at a very low fee, twenty-four Kathas of land for the cause of the expansion of the school, so that it could cater to the need of the increasing number of students. It has been observed that from the very beginning Shri Kailasnath Ojha along with Shri Debapriya Barua had shouldered the sole responsibility of the expansion and devoted their time for the improvement of the School in all aspects. So, the establishment of this school had been possible due to the collaborative efforts of these two stalwarts and active participation of various individuals. It can be logically derived and said that

the environment of mutual exchange contributed to the establishment of this school. Initially, apart from Shri Debapriya Barua, few Barua teachers and guardians remained a part of the school committee. However, in the present context the school committee responsible for school operations is comprised of Hindu members owing to non-availability of competent Barua members. Shri Debapriya Barua was the first Headmaster of the Haiderpara Buddhabharati Higher Secondary School which has now grown over the time in terms of number of students which crosses more than thousands comprising non-Buddhist communities in majority. Post retirement Shri Debapriya Barua independently managed to set up a Buddha Statue marking the auspicious day of Rabindra Jayanti as the foundation day of the statue within the school premises. In the foundation day ceremony, many Buddhist monks and Shraman delivered their speeches while non-Buddhist students performed Tagore's famous poem 'Shrimati' in theatrical form, which is based on the Buddhist dogma, associated history and philosophy as depicted by Rabindranath Tagore.

In the heart of Siliguri town, the Haiderpara Buddhabharati High School plays a prominent role in educating the children residents of the nearby locality irrespective of caste, creed, and religion and Barua students are seen to be scattered in various other educational institutions. In the entire North Bengal, the only Dharmadhar Pali college was established in Mahananda Para of Siliguri which used to offer the title 'Pali Sutra Bisharad'. In Gurung Basti the 'International Buddhist Study and Research Centre' used to conduct religious discussions, seminar lectures and workshops, to be held regularly where the professors of Philosophy, History and other faculties of North Bengal University used to take part which yielded greater community influence.

Finally, it can be said that the students of the Haider Para Buddhabharati Higher Secondary and Buddhabharati Bhuwanmohini Primary school hail mostly from lower middle class Hindu families. These institutions are extremely important also for the destitute or poor children. On the other hand, the well-to-do Barua families while keeping pace with the times, have enabled their children to attend the English medium educational institutions or join in nearby renowned Bengali medium schools. Apart from this, the school library makes available the 'Jataka' story as an inevitable resource aids for the introduction of Buddhism or the Buddhist principles to the

students during the very formative years of their lives. There is no confusion or doubt that this genuine exchange of philosophy or the Buddhist principles indisputably disseminate the ideal of communal harmony in the vicinity and beyond.

In a contextual note, 'North Bengal Buddhist Forum' is a general institution of the Buddhists where any Buddhist person from North Bengal can get membership. The institution like Siliguri Bouddhya Jubak Maitri Sangha organizes Voluntary Blood Donation camps, free book distribution for the needy students, and arranges ambulance service for moribund patients. Haiderpara Bidarshan Dhyana Ashram and Mahananda Para Buddhabharati both run a facility to let out banquet halls in a low cost arrangement. As per the Mandir Steering Committee members' statement, they cater to accommodate people irrespective of their caste, creed, religion and also make available halls to persons having limited financial resources.

Apart from these community establishments in this area, there are some prominent persons from Barua community with ample educational background, efficiency and sense of social responsibility who have contributed a lot for the improvement of activities of their locality and in turn they got accepted by the masses with admiration and love. A sense of mutual respect is observed while discussing with the residents who live near the Buddha Mandir.

So, from the above discussion it is quite obvious that being a minority community the Baruas are not very vocal about their festivities, culture and presence. However, a candid humanitarian appeal flows and the participants enjoy it across religious barriers. However, under the current dispensation of feeble religious authority, the internal and inherent bonding among Barua Buddhists has dwindled into crisis. Buddhism is a confederate religion and it is a very difficult job as a whole to bring the scattered Baruas with various economical layers under a homogeneous single framework of union without the Sangha and Sangha Pradhan's firm ability to control and forge an unabated religious influence.

Take away from the discourse on socio-cultural-political location of Barua Buddhists:

After conducting this detailed mapping on the aspects of mutual perceptions that exists among different communities vis-à-vis Barua Buddhists, certain important questions need to be answered to further the degree of comprehension. Why is it so that the Barua Buddhists

remain even a minority among the other dominant Buddhist sects? Why they fail to attract the attention of the majority Hindu festivity buffs to their religious festivals? Despite having close ties with the political power dispensation of the state, realized by a handful of Buddhist monks, why do they still maintain a non-significant presence in the societal matrix?

It might not seem a wide conjecture to arrive at the reasons for their secondary status in society. Historically speaking, this Barua Buddhist had always been on the run to relocate them in a different religious locale before settling in North Bengal in general and Siliguri in particular. This North Bengal phase of their migration remains pretty recent getting them scattered across different parts of North Bengal primarily in search of jobs, the strength in their number decreased. This has produced a deep sense of insecurity followed by some desperation to save their religio-cultural identity. With a limited success in finding a formidable patron for providing material supports from within their own community, in the last 60-70 years of their veritable living they could not come out of the cringe. At times the Barua laity finds their religious identity not very useful in salvaging a prominent social position. Most of non-initiated Baruas are either ignorant or oblivious of their origin and genealogy.

With the missing of this basic bulwark to stave off either the all pervasive influence of Hindu culture or to ensure a living connection with the Mahayani Buddhist community, the Barua Buddhists remain in a comparatively vulnerable social and religious position. On the other hand, born and reared in a robustly individualistic consumer society, the youths belonging to Barua Buddhist sect are drawn heavily to assimilate the dominant signifiers of the majoritarian religion i.e. Hinduism. Perhaps this perennial preoccupation was responsible for adopting Hindu rites and rituals as amalgams to specific Buddhist signatures.

As a corollary to this immensely insignificant social moorings, in a desperate bid perhaps, a handful of Barua bhantes are seen to have sheer inclination to attract government funds for development and progress. It is of some importance to observe that quite often an official appeal comes from some Barua abbots to celebrate major iconic Hindu festivals like Dipavali

or the colour festival, while flaunting their official position as a member of the Minority Development Alliance, Government of West Bengal.

Faced with these double-contenders and fraught with immense identity crisis, the Barua Buddhist community of Siliguri (along with other parts of North Bengal) cuts a very small niche while abiding strictly by their own religious doctrine. Rather, the whirlpool of socio-political upheavals invariably seeks to destabilize the iota of boundary they put up as resistance against possible religio-cultural onslaughts.

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