

Identity and Cultural Diversity of Barua/Mramagyi Buddhists in Bangladesh and Rakhine State of Myanmar

Gyana Ratna

1. Introduction

This presentation is mainly based on field works in Bangladesh and Rakhine state of Myanmar. In 2005, I went to Rakhine state and visited many villages of the Barua/Mramagyi Buddhist people. Although Barua/Mramagyi were from Bangladesh they have lost their national identity and culture during the time of Army government of General Ne Win.⁽¹⁾ Before his Government, Barua Buddhist people in Rakhine state practiced their own culture, such as keeping their names, using their dresses, practicing their religious identity, reading, writing, speaking their own language, and preparing their own style of food. At present they do not have their own Barua names; they don't have their own dresses as well as their own language.⁽²⁾ Although Bangladesh shares the border with Rakhine state the former is completely different from the latter. Yet in Bangladesh Barua Buddhist followers can practice their own custom and culture more freely among other minorities.

I was wondering how Ne Win Government came to destroy the identity and cultural belief of the other minorities of the country. Although it is quite difficult to keep their own identity and culture in such a condition, Barua Buddhists are trying their level best to keep them in their daily life.⁽³⁾

2. Residing Area of Barua/Mramagyi Buddhists

The Barua Buddhist people are residing mostly in Chittagong,

Cox's Bazar, Khagrachori, Bandarban, Ranghamati, Feni, Noakhaki and Comilla districts of Bangladesh,⁽⁴⁾ and Rakhine state of Myanmar. Political and economical conditions have forced them to reside in West Bengal, Meghalaya, Assam and Tripura of India. At present many of the Barua Buddhists are permanently residing in America, Canada, France, Italy, England, Australia and Japan.⁽⁵⁾ Most of them originally came from Chittagong. In the above mentioned locations Barua Buddhist people are residing harmoniously with Hindu, Muslim, Chakma, Marma, Rakhine, and Christian. The Barua Buddhists build up temple based societies. Where there are 20 Barua families, there is a temple. Therefore, we can say that Chittagong area is the original place of the Barua Buddhist people even though some other places are also identical.

As far as we know, about 1000 years before the political and social disturbance of India, some Buddhist people from middle India (Present Bihar state and adjacent area), came to Assam and the greater Chittagong area for the preservation of their own identity and culture. At present, most of the Buddhist people in Assam have lost their religion and own identities but still are using Barua as their family title. They are living in the middle of Hinduism and Buddhism even though by title they are Barua. On the other hand, Barua Buddhists in Bangladesh are raising their head and trying their level best to keep their own identity, through practicing their own culture and religious belief.

3. Concept of Barua/Mramagyi Buddhists

In Bangladesh even now Muslim people call "*boudga*" to Barua people, this means great. At the same time, Muslim people of Rakhine state of Myanmar also call "*boudga*" to Barua people. But the Barua Buddhists in Rakhine state wants to be introduced themselves as Mramagyi, not as Barua. Even though they know they are from Bangladesh, they were recorded in the government office as a minority group of Mramagyi during

the nationalization period of Myanmar government.⁽⁶⁾ The Barua people know that they are a great Aryan noble race of people. They are greater than the other rational people in the India sub-continent. The word “*boudga*” is the decline form of barua. The word itself is Chittagonian. In Dhaka, near the International Airport, there is still a place named “*boudga*”, even though Barua Buddhist people no longer reside there. In Comilla district there is also a place called “*Baruda*.” These kinds of names prove that there was a race of people named “Barua” who lived previously around Bangladesh. In the Moundaw Magazine⁽⁷⁾ we can find out that there were “*bo ruang*” in Chittagong. “*Bo*” means Army ‘Commander’ and “*ruang*” means ‘village’. Therefore, “*Bo ruang*” means “village of Army Commander.” During the war between Rakhine state and Bengal, when the Bengal army lost, Rakhine state army occupied the area and continues to live there. Later, the village was known as “*bo-ruang*” village of Army Commander. According to Rakhine thinking, most of “*bo*” was very much brave and great. Later the village became *bo-ruang* = Barua village. According to them, Barua derived from the word “*bo-ruang*.”

4. Identity and Cultural Diversity of Barua/Mramagyi Buddhists

4.1. Rebirth/ here-after

The Barua Buddhists of Bangladesh are believed rebirth process, but its look like the Vedantic⁽⁸⁾ believers. It seems they do not understand the critical philosophy of rebirth process of Buddhism. According to the Buddhism, though there is no eternal soul but in Veda there is eternal soul; after death which will take place here-after. Therefore, there is no change even after death has taken place, which is called pantheism in vedantic doctrine. Most of the Barua Buddhist people in Bangladesh believe in this theory, even though they also believe that rebirth depends on their own *kamma*: good deed brings good results while bad action leads to bad result. This kind of cultural diversity of Barua Buddhist people is quite different

from other religions in Bangladesh.

4.2. Kamma

Barua Buddhist people have a slight belief in *kamma*. They believe, nobody can overcome the past *kamma* result. Even though they also believe that they have to achieve the present *kamma* result too. It does not mean that they completely believe the *kamma* theory. Although they practice the *kamma* result, they don't practice the *kamma* release theory. It may be said that the only reason Barua Buddhist people's culture is not progressing is due to their misunderstanding of the *kamma* theory. According to the *kamma* release theory, people can be freed from the previous *kamma*, but Barua Buddhist people don't know that. Therefore, without their consciousness, fatalism⁽⁹⁾ is taking place in Barua Buddhist community, which is not the *kamma*, theory. If we wish to achieve only previous *kamma* result, and nothing can be changed by the present *kamma*, then what is the value of present life? In this way Barua Buddhist identity and cultural diversity is different from other religious believers. Hindu, Muslim and Christian believers believe that the creator is controlling everything. We, the believers, have nothing to do and everything is his wish. We are only receivers. But Barua Buddhist people don't believe this at all.

4.3. No Belief in God

Barua Buddhist people don't believe in God.⁽¹⁰⁾ Then how was the greater world created? By whom and how is it running? Such a question is not raised by the people of the society. The Muslim and other religious believers believe in God. Therefore, when Barua Buddhist people talk to them, they show them they are also believes in God and there God is the Buddha as a guider into the *Nibbāna*, the final goal of Buddhism. Even though they have no idea about the secret creation theory of the world or God, they don't believe monotheism either. Barua Buddhist believes that by their own *kamma* result they can take rebirth in various places. Therefore,

kamma is the creator, not God. Even though they practice their own *kamma* as ones creator, a question is left; who is the creator of the material world? It can be said that, in Barua cultural belief there is no curiosity regarding this matter. They admitted Buddha as their saviour to seek freedom from suffering. Therefore, Barua Buddhist spiritual ideology is different from those other religions.

4.4. Nibbāna

Nibbāna is the main achievement of Buddhism. But the Barua Buddhist people of Bangladesh yet have no caution in it. Most of the religious functions performed by the lay people for searching of *devaloka*, and higher stage of the heaven but not to go to *nīraya*. Yet they have no caution to attain *nibbāna* in this life time. But nowadays there are many people and monks interested in practicing meditation. Maybe in the near future the social caution will change into *Nibbānic* way. This kind of cultural diversity made Barua Buddhists different from those who believe other religions.

4.5. Temple-Based Festival

Most of socio-cultural activities of Barua Buddhists have taken place in the temples. Such as welcome to the new year, good bye to old year, *Vesākha purnima*,⁽¹¹⁾ *Asālaha purnima*,⁽¹²⁾ *Bhadra purnima*,⁽¹³⁾ *Pravāraṇā purnima*,⁽¹⁴⁾ *Kathina cīvāra* day,⁽¹⁵⁾ and *Maghī purnima*⁽¹⁶⁾ all kinds of religious festivals take place in the temple grounds. Nowadays, Barua Buddhist people are coming to perform marriage ceremonies in the temples. It's really an identical performance in modern Barua Buddhist society.⁽¹⁷⁾

4.6. Different kinds of Food Offering to the Buddha

In most of the festivals Barua Buddhists offers different kinds of food, fruits, medicine, juice etc. to the Buddha. It is one kind of devotional activities taking place in the Buddhism. Barua Buddhist people frequently offer such a thing to the Buddha. By that way they feel better without

knowledge and practice. Likewise, Hindu people also are devotional. They also offer things to the God for the welfare and protection of their life. Sometimes Barua Buddhists also offers food and others to the Buddha for receiving mercy from him. But like Hindu people Barua Buddhists don't eat the *puja* as *prasat*. By offering to the Buddha, Barua Buddhists are practicing *dāna*. *Dāna* can't be taken back. Therefore, though they are offering many things to the Buddha, they never eat them. By offering things to the Buddha they are practicing a kind of benevolence. Barua Buddhist monks explain it nicely to the people with the example from *Milinda pañha*.⁽¹⁸⁾ Barua Buddhist people not only offer the present Buddha Gotama, but also offer to 27 other Buddhas, too. They believe that there were 28 Buddhas in previous times, including Buddha Gotama.⁽¹⁹⁾

4.7. Buddha Altar at Home

Almost all Barua Buddhist families have a Buddha altar where they are offering food, water, flower and incense at least twice a day. The food is offered to the Buddha before noon and taken back after noon and then offered to the birds, dog etc. This kind of family offering started a long time ago. Maybe because monks don't go for *piṇḍapāta* from door to door everyday, lay people want to remember Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha in their daily life by offering food at a specified time. After 12 they serve it to the other creature, saying "*sabbe satta āhāratitika*,"⁽²⁰⁾ which means all creatures subsist by nutriment. Even now, old people also keep "a handful of rice" beside their dish for other living beings. Before they keep it, they are saying "*sabbe satta āhāratitika*." In their daily life they want to practice Buddhism although sometimes they can't go to the temples for practicing meditation or observing precepts. Such kind of custom and practice found in Barua Buddhist families are really identical. This kind of custom and practice are available in the Barua Buddhist family which is really identical.

4.8. Protected by the Triple Gems

To receive protection from the unseen god and goddess, Barua Buddhist people suddenly utter inarticulate words “*phra tora saṅgha, anicca dukkha anatta,*” which means *Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha, anicca, dukkha, anatta*.⁽²¹⁾ These six characteristics are very difficult to understand by normal studies. But people are thinking and believing that by uttering the names of these six characteristics they can be released from bad things. As well they believe that these six characteristics look like a protection of God in the great measurable time of life. It’s really a unique cultural practice of Barua Buddhists in Bangladesh and Rakhine state.

4.9. Balloon Festival Day

Like other full moon days Barua Buddhist people prepare very good food and offer it to temples in the *Pravāraṇā* full moon day. But this full moon day is a little bit different from the others, because on that day Barua Buddhist people remember the day of renunciation of the worldly life of Prince *Sirdārtha Gotama*, who was later enlighten. Barua Buddhist people believe that during the time of Prince *Sirdhārtha Gotama* renunciation of the worldly life he cut his hair and threw it away. People believe that at that time the Indra god of heaven received his hair and made a pagoda called “*Chulamuni*” in heaven where the hair was being kept. Barua Buddhist people of Bangladesh and Rakhine state pay homage by rising of “*Fhanush bati,*” which means balloon candle, once a year in *Pravāraṇā* full moon day. Also some devoted Buddhists offer one thousand candles on that day. All thousand candles surrounding the temple ground are inflamed together. It’s really an amusable day for the whole of Barua Buddhist’s in Bangladesh. Most of the temples also raise “*akash pradip*” candle, into the sky for one month. This kind of Remembrance Day of “renunciation of worldly life” of *Shirdārtha Gotama* is very rare in other Buddhist countries. The evening of the *Pravāraṇā* full moon day is fascinating to the whole Chittagonian people across all religions.

4.10. New Year Festival

Vesākh is the month of happiness for the whole Theravāda Buddhist people. Because they believe Buddha the Great was born into this world in that month for the welfare of the many. Barua Buddhist people observe it in two parts. One is the farewell to the old year on the 31st day of Chaitra and another is the welcome of the New Year on the 1st day of Vesākh. Nowadays, most of the Bengali people not only the Buddhists are also follow the same way. The welcoming of New Year of Barua Buddhists became a national holiday in the country. It now is a national caution of Bengali people. Maybe there are no other religious festivals that get such national values in the country. Barua Buddhist villages have programs for whole day and night. Most of the temples have Buddha puja, observing five precepts, eight precepts, preaching, and young people are performed sports, cultural festival, sometime Buddhistic drama on the temple ground. It's really identical in all villagers of the Barua Buddhists as well as Chakma, Murma and Rakhine Buddhists.

4.11. Practice of Five Precepts

Most of the Barua Buddhist people in the country received respect from the other religious believers. They are noble and peace-loving people as well as trustworthy. Many of the Barua Buddhist people in the country are honored by being offered manager posts in other religious believers' companies. Most of the Barua Buddhists are trying to observe five precepts in their daily life. From the observation of precepts, they are really praised by the Muslim and other believers. This kind of identity and cultural diversity of Barua Buddhists is really unique in the country.

4.12. Buhu/ Bodhi Cakra Festival

It starts one week before the full moon day of the month Magh and ends in the full moon day. On that full moon day Buddha descended from Tāvatiṃsa heaven after having expounded Abhidhamma to his mother.⁽²²⁾

To signify the day, Barua Buddhist people observe it uniquely. On that occasion they select a plot of land which is enclosed by a bamboo fence. At that entrance there are two ways which we can call route A and B. In the middle of the enclosed area a Buddha statue is kept. One of those two ways is to go directly to the Buddhas place, which Barua Buddhists people call path to heaven route no A, and the other way route no B, one can't reach the Buddhas place. But in the middle one can join route A and B where people can change their destinations. Sometime route A can't reach the Buddhas place or heaven, while route B followers can reach the Buddhas place or heaven. But sometimes neither route A nor B can reach any destination. Young people and older women have so much interest on this festival. However, by this unique way Barua Buddhist people are trying to get test of heaven or to reach the Buddhas land in this worldly life.

4.13. Respect to Other Saints

At present Barua Buddhist people offer puja to Buddha, *Sībalī*, *Arahanta*, and newly included *Upagupta puja*. On the other hand, *Magadaswari*, *Soni*, *Laksmi*, *Swarassati*, *Kathika*, *Bashumati* etc. puja are slowly disappearing. It's noteworthy that, Barua Buddhist people honor any person who develops higher spiritual development in their life, even though he/she doesn't believe the religion they believe. Therefore they are sometimes going to pay respect to Muslim as well as the Hindu saints too.

5. Barua/Mramagyi Monks' Life in Rakhine State of Myanmar

Education and Life of a Temple

Daily routine ⁽²³⁾

4:30 am wake up

5:00 prayer

5:30 meditation

5:45 breakfast

6:30 study (religious)

9:00 alms

10:00 break

11:00 lunch

1:30pm study

4:00 bath

4:30 study

6:00 free time

6:30 prayer

7:00 study

8:30 finish

9:00 sleep

Course	duration	Subject matters
1 st	2 months	Sramaner shikka, Khandaka 14
2 nd	6 months	Maṅgala sutta, Ratana sutta, Metta Sutta, Khandaka-sutta, Moraparitta, Batta, Dhajagga sutta, Āṭṭānāṭiya sutta, Bhojjaṅga paritta, Aṅgulimāla paritta, Supavanna sutta
1 st year	1 year	Pali Grammar, Abhidhammaṭṭhasaṅgaha, Vinaya (Pāṭimokkha), Māthikā (Abhidhamma), Pali into Burmese translation
2 nd year	1 year	1 st year + Yamaka 5 vol. and Abhidhamma
3 rd year	1 year	1 st year + 2 nd year + Paṭṭhāna, Abhidhamma, Leṅkha
4 th year	3 years	Dhammacariya (B.A. degree) in the University

In Bangladesh Buddhist monks and novices have no religious study in temples. Most of them study in general schools, colleges and universities. But for religious study they do it by themselves. Unlike Rakhine state of Myanmar, we have no religious educational institute in Bangladesh.

Let's see the Barua Buddhist population in Bangladesh and Rakhine state of Myanmar.

6. Bangladesh

Dhaka Barua Buddhist Population in the Year of 2005⁽²⁴⁾

Name of Upazila	Families	Population	Temples	Bhikkhus	Sramaneras
Dhaka city and others	2500	15000	3	20	15

Chittagong District

Chittagong & Chandagao	8335	50000	9	30	25
Raozan	6665	40000	100	150	180
Ranginia	4945	25965	51	135	71
Fhatikchadi	2065	12395	20	27	25
Hathazari	1275	7630	13	30	35
Pathia	3475	20845	40	72	60
Boalkhali	1780	10715	25	35	30
Anoara	835	5000	10	15	20
Chandanaish	2025	12127	32	35	30
Satkania	1780	10676	11	12	10
Lohagara	2225	13340	16	17	20
Baskhali	2095	14675	15	15	20
Shitakunda	355	2116	4	4	4
Mireswarai	1765	12330	10	15	20

Cox's Bazar District

Chokoria	835	5810	11	10	5
Maheshkhali	700	4215	3	4	7
Ramu	2320	16205	18	30	35
Cox's Bazar	340	2045	3	2	2
Ukhia	2610	20881	25	30	40

Rangamati District

Rangamati	200	1500	2	2	5
Betbunia	155	1200	1	1	2
Kaptai	145	1000	1	2	5
Ruma	150	1050	1	1	1

Bandarban District

Bandarban	750	5290	4	4	4
Lama	165	1200	3	3	3

Khagrachadi District

Name of the Upazila	Families	Population	Temples	Bhikkhus	Sramaneras
Khagrachadi	50	320			
Mahalchadi	40	280			
Dighinala	150	1040	1	1	1

Ramgar District**Noakhali District**

Begamganj	50	700	2	1	1
Senbag	30	230	1	1	1

Comilla District

Comilla	35	200	1	3	3
Choudagram	60	400	1		2
Laksham	940	7485	15	10	15
Baruda	80	700	3	2	3

7. Barua/Mramagyi Population in Rakhine and Other State of Myanmar**Sittwe & Other City Area of Arakan State⁽²⁵⁾****Sittwe & Other City Area of Arakan State**

Sittwe	430	4000	4	5	16
Mrauk U	190	1600	1	1	5
Min Bya	500	4500	5	5	12
Kyung Phru	140	1185	3	3	10
Muangdaw	75	650			

Others Area of Myanmar

Ramgar	25	180			
Yangon	128	541	1	10	7
May Myo	13	68	1	1	3
Kyaukmei	9	44			
Kalaw	15	55	1	1	2
Sin Taung	8	55			
Aung Pan	5	21			
Taungyi	3	11			

Namtu	2	4			
Kumai	1				
Bagan	2	6			
Yenangyaung	9	37			
Mandalay	12	44	1		
Madaya	1	5			
Laputta	1	7			
Myitkyina	6	28			
Pyinmanar	2	6			
Shew Bo	6	22			

8. Monasteries/Monks/Novices/Nuns in Sittwe Area within Last 5 Years (Sittwe Townships Censures)⁽²⁶⁾

Years	Nikayas	Temples	Bhikkhus	Sramaneras	Totals
2001	Sudhamma	164	783	1807	2590
	Shewe Kyin	21	45	69	114
	Mahadwara	20	59	51	110
	Muladwara	15	38	56	94
2002	Sudhamma	185	934	3198	4132
	Shewe Kyin	21	48	60	108
	Mahadwara	21	53	57	110
	Muladwara	20	59	85	144
2003	Sudhamma	181	998	2016	3014
	Shewe Kyin	22	49	71	120
	Mahadwara	22	54	55	109
	Muladwara	18	49	79	128
2004	Sudhamma	182	1177	2242	3419
	Shewe Kyin	20	55	91	146
	Mahadwara	16	60	88	148
	Muladwara	16	48	71	119
2005	Sudhamma	187	1265	2603	3868
	Shewe Kyin	25	61	131	192
	Mahadwara	20	52	73	125
	Muladwara	18	68	92	160

By comparing the above data with each other it can be said that Barua/Mramagyi Buddhist followers of Bangladesh and Rakhine state are getting more conscious about their own identity and cultural diversity. Therefore, they are trying to keep their national identity through their

own way: practicing of Buddhism according to different circumstances of the different countries. Nowadays they are trying to follow the 7 kinds of *aparihāṇiya dhamma*,⁽²⁷⁾ *sīṅgalovāda sutta*⁽²⁸⁾ as well as 38 kinds of welfare of the *Maṅgal suttas*⁽²⁹⁾ teaching in their daily life.

9. Conclusion

In the conclusion it can be said that Barua Buddhist people in Bangladesh and Rakhine state are enjoying a happy and peaceful life through practicing meditation, observing precepts, and celebrating other socio-religious festivals according to Buddha's teachings. Though they are minorities in both countries, they are trying their best to keep own identities through performing their own custom and culture which are mainly influenced by the Buddha's doctrine as well as existing cultures of countries. Even though they have to face a lot of problems as a minority, those with their nobility, peaceful mind and trust, they are continuing to reside harmoniously with other religious faiths.

Foot Notes and References

- (1) General Ne Win in the year of 1962.
- (2) I saw it in Rakhine state during my visit in 2005 Oct. Nov. as well as 2006 Feb.
- (3) Though Barua Buddhist people are residing with majority of Muslim in Bangladesh, Hindus in India and Rakhine people in the state of Rakhine, they are trying to keep their own identity and culture through practicing them in their daily life.
- (4) Mostly South-East part of Bangladesh.
- (5) Barua Buddhist People in Abroad, surveyed by Gyana Ratna during the year of 2003–2005 through searching internet, making phone calls, and personally visiting to neighboring countries.
- (6) During the Gen. Ne Win Army Government 1962–1988.
- (7) Moundaw Magazine, Sept. 2005, p. 94.
- (8) *katha upanishad*: Atul Chandra Sen. Calcutta 1980, pp. 96–7; John Bowker (ed.): *World Religion*. pp. 775, 803.

- (9) kamma and fatalism is not similar. See DN. Vol. III. 202ff. & 207ff.
- (10) “God is almighty” Barua Buddhist people don’t believe this theory they rather believe *kamma* theory is the best. But they believe in “god” and “goddess.”
- (11) Take place in the month of middle of May.
- (12) Take place in the month of July.
- (13) Take place in the months of August and September.
- (14) Take place in the month of October.
- (15) Take place in the month of November.
- (16) Take place in the month of December.
- (17) 「現代バングラデシュの社会における仏教寺院の役割」 ギャナ・ラタナ Journal of Pali and Buddhist Studies, Vol. 18, 2005, pp. 97–8.
- (18) Milinda Pañha. pp. 106ff.
- (19) Saddharma Neeti Monjoree: Jinabodhi Bhikkhu. Dhaka 2004, pp. 61–2. 28 Buddha as follows:
 1. Tañhaṅkara, 2. Medhaṅkara, 3. Saraṅkara, 4. Dīpaṅkara, 5. Kondañña, 6. Maṅgala, 7. Sumana, 8. Rebata, 9. Sobhita, 10. Anomadassī, 11. Paduma, 12. Nārada, 13. Padumuttara, 14. Sumedha, 15. Sujāta, 16. Piyadassī, 17. Atthadassī, 18. Dhammadassī, 19. Siddhattha, 20. Tissa, 21. Phussa, 22. Vipassī, 23. Sikhī, 24. Bessabhū, 25. Kakusaṇḍha, 26. koṇāgamana, 27. kassapa, and 28. Gotama
- (20) Khuddakapāṭha p. 2; Minor Readings, p. 2.
- (21) Nowadays, young generations are going to forget it. But most of the old people are still uttering these words when they have a problem.
- (22) Buddhist Legends: Eugene Watson Burlingame. India 1921, Vol. III. pp. 52–6.
- (23) I got it from the abbot of the temple U Jotika Thero, Sittwe Mramagyi old Temple during my visit in the year of 2005.
- (24) Censure report on Bangladesh Buddhist by Prof. Dīpankar Srigyana Barua, Sammayk quarterly Buddhist Social and Cultural Magazine, 2005, pp. 12–8.
- (25) I collected this data from the secretary of Chittagong Buddhist Association, Yangon on 14th November, 2005, during my field works in Myanmar.
- (26) Sittwe President of Sangha Council censure office, during my field works in Oct. 2005.
- (27) DN. Vol. II, pp. 73ff.; AN. Vol. VII, 20–5.
- (28) DN. Vol. III, pp. 180–193ff.
- (29) Khuddakapāṭha pp. 89ff.; Suttanipāta pp. 46ff.