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CULTURAL ASSIMILATION AND INTERNAL CHANGES IN DIASPORIC RAKHAIN PEOPLES OF PATUAKHALI DISTRICT OF BANGLADESH

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Abstract

The Rakhains are an ethnic group of diasporic peoples currently living in different parts of Bangladesh. Following their exodus in 1784, they formed enclaves of settlements in Cox's Bazar, Chittagong Hill-tracts, Noakhali, Patuakhali and Barguna. This paper scrutinizes how cultural assimilation has impacted on the lifestyles of the diasporic Rakhain communities living in Patuakhali, a district in the Southern region of Bangladesh; and it also demonstrates how this assimilation has brought in internal cultural changes among the Rakhain peoples. Methods of analyses of this research include conducting interviews of Rakhain headsmen, conducting library based research and analyzing news articles and relevant audio-visual discourses. Results of data and analyses show that the Rakhain peoples have faced difficulties in retaining cultural integrity despite their deliberate attempts, and they have undergone a degree of cultural changes in the recent decades. This paper finds that unwelcoming neighborhoods, lack of education, financial insolvency and disproportionately low representation in the local government are the principal reasons behind these changes.

Keywords: Rakhain peoples; cultural assimilation; cultural and ethnic study; diaspora study; Bangladeshi tribal community.

1. Introduction

The Rakhains are an ethnic group of people who are originally from the Rakhain state of Myanmar adjacent to the South-eastern border of Bangladesh. Their ethnic and cultural heritages date back to thousands of years. Due to political unrest and hostility of the then king of the region, some Buddhist Rakhains migrated to Bangladesh in the late 18th century and settled in the coastal districts of Cox's Bazar, Noakhali and Patuakhali (Banglapedia).

Despite their dislocation and migration and living in an enclave like 'utopian' geography among Bangla-speaking Bangladeshis, they had been able to retain their cultural, linguistic and ethnic integrity for over two centuries until the recent decades when they have found it increasingly difficult to keep their cultural practices 'intact'. Even though a constant course of cultural assimilation occurs between the Rakhains and the Bangali communities that they are surrounded by, specific cultural traits of the Rakhains have not changed over time. This research has focused on such issues and found out to what extent *cultural assimilation* has impacted on the lifestyle of the 'diasporic' Rakhain communities living in the Southern parts of Bangladesh, namely in Patuakhali and what mechanisms the people from this community have implemented to retain their cultural integrity despite strong external influences. Keefe and Padilla (1987:18) define assimilation as the "social, economic, and political integration of an ethnic minority group into mainstream society." According to social scientist Gordon (1964), the process of cultural assimilation occurs in seven steps/stages: behavioral assimilation; structural assimilation; marital assimilation; identificational assimilation; attitude receptional assimilation; behavior receptional assimilation; and civic assimilation. This research has investigated to understand to what extent the Rakhains have become successful in retaining their 'Rakhain originality' and cultural integrity by using these tools of cultural assimilation.

a) Objective of the study

This research project has investigated to what extent cultural assimilation has impacted on the lifestyle of the diasporic Rakhain communities living in the Southern parts of Bangladesh, specifically in the Kalapara Upzilla of Patuakhali district. Despite living among Bangla-speaking Bangladeshis for over a century, the diasporic Rakhain communities have been able to retain their linguistic and cultural heritages. This research has found out how far-reaching this cultural assimilation has been on the community, and what mechanisms the people from this community have implemented to retain their cultural integrity despite strong external influences.

b) Review of Relevant Literatures

"In 1784, the king of Burma occupied Arakan and annexed it to his kingdom. His forces committed genocide there killing at least 200,000 Rakhains, men women and children" (Banglapedia). As a result, several hundred thousand members of the Rakhain Buddhists fled and made their ways in different parts of the present day Bangladesh. Their ethnic and cultural heritages date back to thousands of years. Although they have been dislocated and migrated, they in large parts have been able to keep their cultural, linguistic and ethnic integrity intact for hundreds of years. Even though a constant course of cultural assimilation occurs between the Rakhains and the Bangali

communities that they are surrounded by, certain cultural traits of the Rakhains have not changed over time.

Keefe and Padilla (1987:18) define assimilation as the "social, economic, and political integration of an ethnic minority group into mainstream society." Another social scientist Gordon (1964) categorizes the process into seven categories: behavioral assimilation; structural assimilation; marital assimilation; identificational assimilation; attitude receptional assimilation; behavior receptional assimilation; and civic assimilation. This research digs out to what extent the Rakhains have become successful in retaining their cultural integrity. It also researches into the factors that have played significant roles in the preservation of cultural integrity. It finally addresses what factors played significant roles in bringing internal (cultural) changes in the community.

c) Methods of the Study

This research work has been carried out on a number of phases and multiple methods have been incorporated. At the initial stage, relevant literatures and research findings have been consulted to chalk out the cultural traits, i. e.: lifestyle, linguistic heritage, socio-political structure etc., of the Rakhains. The next phase involved the collection of data at the survey sites of Kuakata, Patuakhali, which have been completed through interviews and survey questionnaires. And at the final stage, the collected data have been processed and interpreted from relevant theoretical perspectives on cultural assimilation to find out what internal and external factors have contributed to the cultural transformation of the Rakhains.

d) Sources of Data

With a view to collecting *primary data* on site, we visited three Rakhain villages and arranged five focus group discussions with three ordinary villagers, Rakhain headmen and local government representatives in each group. The discussions enabled us to have insights into the dimensional issues from multiple perspectives. We also interviewed NGO workers who work exclusively on the Rakhains. As for *secondary data*, we used library research method and gathered information from newspaper and research articles that address similar issues.

2. Theoretical Framework

We have incorporated past research works and used different models to measure the impacts of cultural assimilation and level of internal changes the Rakhain community has endured. We then used some established cultural and anthropological

terms and theories to synthesize and analyze the collected data. Following some of the theoretical frameworks we have incorporated in this paper.

a) Diaspora

The word 'diaspora' comes from the Greek word 'diaspeiro', the equivalent meaning would be 'to disperse'. Diaspora means "the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions, is a central historical fact of colonization. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, et al., 1998)

What makes the Rakhain peoples remarkable and unique is that we do not call them '*adivasis*' or 'an indigenous community', rather their root can be traced back to a specific geography and therefore they can be termed as a 'diasporic community'. Two reason why I have termed them as a 'diasporic community' is firstly because, they have been displaced from a place that they call 'home' due to warfare, occupation of their lands and forcible migration into a foreign land; and secondly, this might trigger debate but some of them, if not the economically solvent class, long to go back to the place where they still feel connected to, they still feel at home – the Rakhain state. If I allude to Robert Frost's idea of 'home' as 'a place where when you have to go, they have to take you in', (Frost) then I must say some of the respondents of my survey told me that the government of Burma are not hostile towards them, as in 'if they have to go, they will be taken in.'

Anthropologist Sheffer (1986) says, "Modern Diasporas are ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin – their homelands".

b) Cultural Assimilation and Acculturation

Anthropologist Gordon (1964) defines assimilation as "the gradual process whereby cultural differences tend to disappear". He suggests that 'cultural assimilation—closely related to the term acculturation—involves adopting the cultural patterns of the host society'. It is often hypothesized that if a geography has more than one human groups, each with its own distinctive set of cultural practices, with neighboring groups intermingling, after a specific period of time, there will be only a single homogeneous culture in the entire territory. But this is not the scenario in Rakhain communities. Even after residing for more than two centuries in an area predominantly inhabited by Bangla-speaking Bangladeshi people with distinct cultural practices, the Rakhains have mostly been able to retain their cultural practices.

Axelrod (1997) has created a model to measure assimilation where he has shown that "Two groups that are already culturally similar are more likely to interact

and therefore to become even more culturally similar. On the contrary two neighboring groups with zero cultural similarity are unlikely to interact and therefore will have no tendency to become more culturally similar." Friedkin and Johnsen say that Spontaneous internal changes in cultures should favor cultural assimilation. Domenico Parisi and others (2003) state that in Axelrod's model, there is no further room for cultural assimilation, and therefore the system becomes "frozen" with a (small) number of different cultural regions. However, in our research we have found that this cultural exclusivity remains intact only when the Rakhains are inside the enclaves of Rakhain villages. Assimilation and even acculturation happens outside the territory.

As suggested by Ferraro (1994), Culture encompasses: (1) possessions or material objects, (2) ideas, values, and attitudes, and (3) normative or expected patterns of behavior, such as consumption. In measuring assimilation and internal changes, we have focused on the changes in terms of some of the major components of culture.

c) Rakhain Culture

I have used the word 'enclave' to refer to Rakhain villages because unlike the other 26 ethnic groups, Rakhains live in areas surrounded by a significant Bangla-speaking population. This was not the scenario when they settled down back in 1784. (Majid) This place, specifically the site of my research, was uninhibited and it was an extension of the Sundarbans. Due to deforestation, habitation and erosion along the coastal lines, the Sundarbans are nowhere to be seen near the Rakhain habitation. One of the group discussion participants told that they encountered and killed a tiger as lately as in 1993 when it attacked one of their villages near Kuakata, Bangladesh.

However, the villages the Rakhains formed are more concentrated in terms of establishments and population than typical Bangladeshi villages. As I have specified earlier, Rakhain population has collapsed to an unprecedented level. So has the number of villages that were once inhabited by people from the ethnic community. What I found particularly interesting is that the Rakhains have a very conservative outlook towards the retention of their cultural exclusivity. Ever since they have settled down in this geography, they have considered themselves to be parts of the Utopian world where no outsider from other cultures were allowed in up until recently when the concept has rather flipped and the 'enclaves' they live in now have transformed into 'dystopia'.

3. Findings and Analysis

Rakhains are an ethnic group from the Arakan State of the present day Myanmar, previously known as Burma. The Rakhain Kingdom was an independent, sovereign kingdom up until 1784 when King Bodawpaya of the Burmese Konbaung

Dynasty conquered the territory and the Kingdom was seized made a part of the State of Burma. Mustafa Majid in his book *The Rakhains* writes, "There was a genocide of the Rakhains. As a result countless Rakhains fled into the neighboring places controlled by then East India Company." These refugees fled into different parts the present day Bangladesh – some settled down in Cox's Bazar, very few fled into the Chittagong Hill Tracts and some took shelter in the heavy forest areas along the coastal line of the district of Patuakhali and Barguna.

Similar to the Indians who moved to the Caribbean Islands between 1838 and 1917, the Rakhains used very big boats as the medium of transport. (Majid 2005) There are debates concerning what these boats were used for – some historians claim that the

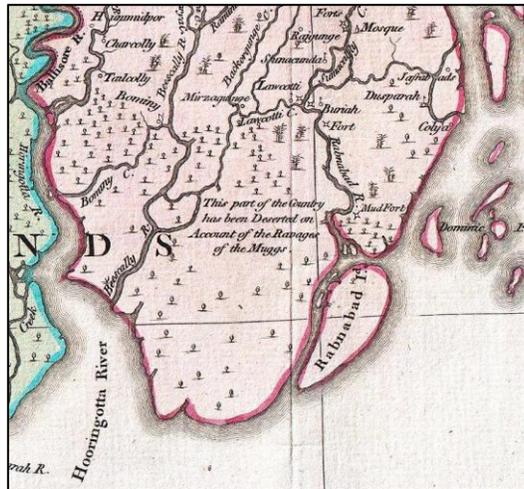


Figure 1: Rennell Dury Wall Map of Bihar and Bengal, India, 1776. The present-day Rakhain enclaves are located in areas the British deemed 'deserted' because of the 'ravages of the Muggs'.

Rakhains, also 'arguably' known as the Muggs used these large pirate boats as vehicles to loot. Michael W. Charney(2005) says,

"Mugh is a referent for the Rakhaing with very early roots. In 1585, Fitch referred to the Kingdom of Recon and Mogen. On the basis of this reference, one must reject SukomalChaudhuri's assertion that the Rakhaing came to be known as Mugh at the start of the seventeenth century."

For the purpose of this research project we chose three Rakhain 'enclaves' located at Kalapara Upzilla of Patuakhali district of Bangladesh. We had group discussions with the leaders of three villages who were accompanied by some adult villagers. We asked them questions that triggered answers relevant to identifying assimilation and internal changes.



Figure 2: Top view of a Rakhain village in Patuakhali. Image: Google Earth

Majid (2005) explains that the Census data of 1901, 1951, 1981 and 1991 regarding the Rakhain peoples living in the three districts of Cox's Bazar, Bandarban and Greater Patuakhali show that:

- In Bandarban the number of Rakhain people in 1901 was 16,608, in 1981 it was 79,518 (which is a significant increase) and in 1991 the number decreased to 59,288 (about 20000 people less than what the number was in 1981).
- In Cox's Bazar, the number decreased from about 3,205 people in 1972 to 1,012 persons in 1982.
- In the Greater Patuakhali region including Barguna, the number was 12,278 in 1951, the number increased to 16,394 in 1961, then decreased four folds to 4,293 in 1974, decreased even more to 3,668 in 1981 and four hundred people less in 1991 at 3,250.

National Census data of 2001 and 2011 did not specify what number of Rakhain peoples now lives in Bangladesh.

Robayet Ferdous, an associate professor of Dhaka University says that "Rakhine people started living in the areas in the beginning of 1800s. There were 144 villages in Barguna and 93 in Patuakhali in 1948, but now the number has come down to 26 and 13 respectively. Most of the Rakhines have gone to Myanmar due to suppression and land grabbing, he added. The land grabbers did not even spare worship places, he said, adding they grabbed most of the land of the century-old Kuakata Buddha Bihar. He said there were 19 Buddhist temples in the areas but now there is only one."

a) Language

The Rakhains have been found to be very conservative in terms of using Bangla. Some of our group discussion participants, particularly ones who are old could hardly speak in Bangla. The language they primarily speak in is the Arakanese language, similar to the Marma language. Our research has found that population from the younger age group tend to be more prone to code mixing (a linguistic process involving using words from one language while speaking in another) than the elder ones.

b) Education

Literacy rate among the Rakhains is significantly low. This directly relates to the lack of language education. The language of instruction during primary and secondary level education is Bangla. The Rakhain children are therefore deprived of having primary education in their first language. Since institutional education is unavailable in Rakhain Arakanese, what the Rakhains do is to appoint *Thakurs* (clergymen) to teach the kids linguistic and religious education. However, one interesting fact is that up until recently, the Rakhain children had to opt for 'Islamic Studies' or 'Hindu Studies' course instead of Buddhist Studies at secondary level. This happened because the area where the small communities of Buddhist Rakhains live did not have religious teachers to teach them the religion study course of their own religion.

c) Religion

Asked if they can follow religion freely, they unanimous responded that they are free to celebrate their religious and cultural programs. There is a practice of inviting neighboring Bangalis to their cultural and religious programs and the vice versa. However, because of extreme decline in their population, according to the respondents, the cultural and religious programs have lost their aura. One respondent hesitantly mentioned that as their villages are treated as tourist spots, they have increasingly been living in a state of *panopticon*.

d) Food

The Rakhains have a distinct food habit. One very common cuisine among the Rakhains is the extensive use of shrimp powder. Bangalis are not known to be fans of this item. Interestingly, when the Rakhains invite Bangalis at their homes on any occasion, they cook separate dishes for them. We do not have any knowledge of the vice versa though.

e) Attire

Both Rakhain men and women wear Lungi. Men wear Fatua accompanied by Lungi. Yet, unlike their Bangalee counterparts, Rakhain men tuck in their fatua inside lungi. This distinct practice is nonexistent among Bangalis. Women wear blouse over lungi accompanied by heavy gold or silver ornaments.



Figure 3: A Rakhain woman weaving using handloom. Image source: Banglapedia

However, according to our respondents, the custom of wearing lungi, fatua and blouse is becoming increasingly less popular among the youths. The elders tend to be more conscious about their customary dresses. The other reason they wear such dresses is to ensure comfort. But according to our research participants, Rakhain youths tend to be more influenced by Bangali cultures. Television and other media also play some roles in swaying their preferences of dresses. As they weave their own dresses using handlooms, a decline in the number of handloom workers is yet another significant reason behind fewer people regularly wearing their traditional dresses. Handloom workers often quit their jobs and find their ways with other professions in hope of better payments.

f) Roles of women

Unlike the Bangali families, the Rakhain women feel more empowered. Men and women enjoy equal distribution of ancestral wealth, and after marriage, bride and groom can decide to choose whether they would live with their parents or in-laws. However, the idea of nuclear family is not very common among Rakhains. This finding is significant because in rural areas of Bangladesh, women are often deprived of their ancestral wealth; and if not wage-earners, women in most cases do not have a say in terms of family decisions. The 'Utopian Rakhain villages' are more gender neutral. However, the rate of education in the Rakhain villages is significantly low among women.

g) Structure of the houses

World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples emphasizes that according to 2011 census data, there are 27 ethnic minority groups in Bangladesh. Of the 27, only 3 or 4 live in flatlands. The rest of them live in hilly areas or hill tracts where the Rakhains are originally from. The houses in hilly areas are made on wooden or bamboo platforms. The vacant space underneath is kept vacant or used for keeping cattle. On the contrary, Bangladeshi houses in rural areas are constructed on the surface with no such platforms underneath.

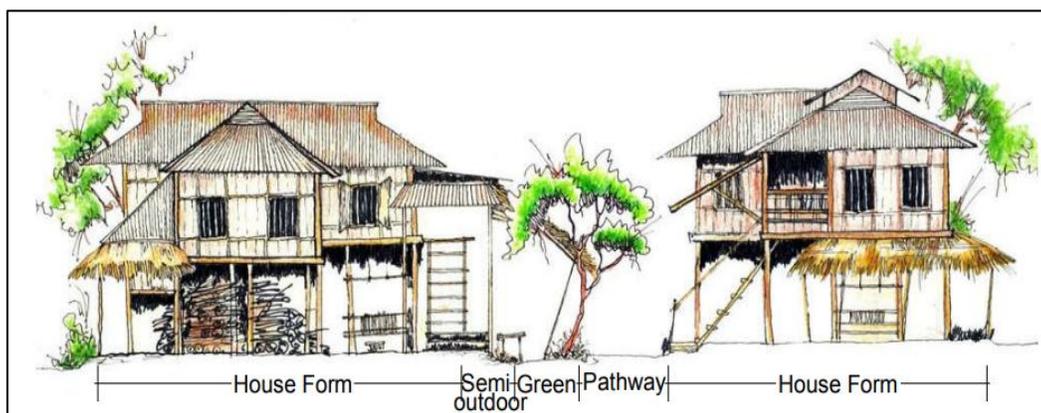


Figure 4: Typical Structure of a Rakhain House. Image: Rahman, Md. Mustafizur, Hasan, Mohammad Tanvir, et al.

What is interesting is that after 230+ years of living in the survey sites, the Rakhains still construct houses that their ancestors did before their exodus in 1784. Asked why they do this, the responses were unanimously – ‘to keep the tradition’ or ‘that’s the way we build our houses’. However, upon observation, it was found that families that are well-off tend to build concrete houses compared to the traditional bamboo/wooden platform ones built by the insolvent. The other reason why they prefer concrete houses is because the coastal areas where they live in are prone to cyclones and flooding. These houses undoubtedly offer better protection during natural calamities, i.e. flooding.

3. Conclusion

Based on what we have found, it can be said that assimilation among the Rakhains has not occurred, but the kind of cultural changes they have adopted have been done deliberately. Therefore, it connects more to the idea of acculturation than assimilation.

When asked what ‘nationality’ they belong to, they felt more comfortable being identified as *Bangladeshi Rakhains* than *Bangladeshis*. So, for over two centuries, the Rakhains have lived in an ‘imagined community’, firstly exclusively as within their own

territory. But, gradually, they became refugees within their lands. Even though they constituted the majority in the territory back in the 1800s, the roles have now been reversed and now they are the 'others'. So, whose imagined community do they live in? The indigenous people living in hill tracts are subject to immunity and protection thanks to the *Hill Tracts Peace Accord of 1997*. But, small ethnic minority groups like the Rakhains that struggle to protect their uniqueness and need to get the attention they deserve. If not so, who knows how long they can survive!

When discussing about other challenges including how they adapt to effects of climate change, some of the respondents informed us that some embankments have been put in place to protect their villages. But, they reinstated that such measures are inadequate. And it did not surprise us to learn that many Rakhain families relocate to cities and some even to their relatives in the Hill-tracts in hope of saving themselves from cyclone and other natural calamities. The sharp decline in Rakhain population supports the idea. The rise of salinity in the soil of cultivable lands is another reason why Rakhains have been constantly leaving their enclaves/villages. An extensive, further study can be conducted to measure the impacts of climate change on the Rakhains, specifically why they relocate and how they adapt to the changing circumstances.

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