

Invisible Voices: The Socio-Economic Realities of Indigenous Buddhist Women in Dhaka

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Abstract

Introduction: Bangladesh is a country characterized by its religious and cultural diversity, home to 53 indigenous communities spread across various regions, including the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), Sylhet, Dhaka, Rangpur, and Rajshahi and Barishal divisions. The population is predominantly Muslim, but there are also significant numbers of Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists. Despite this religious diversity, individuals from various religious and ethnic backgrounds often face challenges due to their distinct identities. Dhaka, as the capital, is no exception, with religious and ethnic differences manifesting in various socio-economic issues, particularly for women. This research paper aims to explore the socio-economic challenges faced by indigenous Buddhist women in Dhaka. Based on indigenous and religious identity, the indigenous Buddhist population in Bangladesh is relatively small, comprising only 0.001% of the total population (BBS, 2024), with women making up half of this demographic. These women experience unique struggles throughout their lives, despite numerous development initiatives aimed at improving their conditions. This paper examines the current socio-economic status of these women, exploring their individual and collective perceptions. It also delves into the diverse cultural beliefs and experiences of Buddhist women from varying age groups, social statuses, and educational backgrounds in Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital city. **Methodology:** This study employs both qualitative and quantitative data analysis methods. Qualitative methods include case studies, narrative analysis, oral history, and the analysis of archival materials such as photos, albums, and recordings. Quantitative methods complement these findings by providing statistical data to support the narrative. **Results and Discussion:** The socio-economic conditions of indigenous Buddhist women in Dhaka are multifaceted, with both positive and negative consequences arising from their distinct religious and ethnic identities. These women face unique challenges as a result of their marginalized position within both the broader Muslim-majority society and the indigenous community. The findings are discussed in detail, with relevant case studies

highlighting the lived experiences of these women. The discussion also includes an exploration of the impact of cultural beliefs, social status, and educational background on their socio-economic standing. **Conclusion:** This research offers a comprehensive examination of the socio-economic conditions of indigenous Buddhist women in Dhaka. The qualitative findings highlight the complexities of their experiences, characterized by both adversity and resilience. Based on the findings, recommendations are made for further research and development interventions to improve the socio-economic conditions of Buddhist women in Dhaka.

Keywords: *Indigenous; Indigeneity; Buddhism; Riot; Violence; Women; Theravada*

Introduction

Indigenous peoples are commonly defined as culturally distinct ethnic groups who are the original inhabitants of a particular geographic region, having historical continuity with pre-colonial societies, and who identify themselves as part of a distinct cultural group (Coates, 2004). Indigenous people, like other tribal groups in our country, are also victims of extreme aggression. Their land, language, wealth and even culture are being invaded. Fear of loss of land, insecurity of women, insecurity of resources, cultural progress always keeps them apprehensive. Along with industrialization-urbanization, their own culture, language, music is going to disappear from their lives. Men have been able to adapt to this situation due to socio-cultural reasons, but women's lives have become miserable. Due to backwardness in all fields including education, they are forced to live a dignified life. Socio-culturally they are gradually becoming weaker.

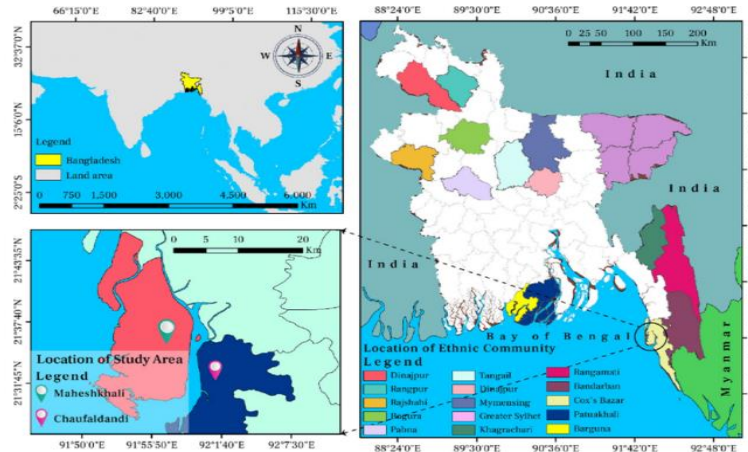


Figure (1): Location of Different Indigenous communities in Bangladesh.

Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Study-area-and-the-location-of-settlement-of-Ethnic-communities-in-different-districts-of_fig1_380766080

Indigenous Buddhist women are placed into the most marginal group in Bangladesh as they are very less in number and in Patriarchal society like Bangladesh as a woman, they have faced a lot of struggles all over their lives including social, cultural, religious, economic and others.

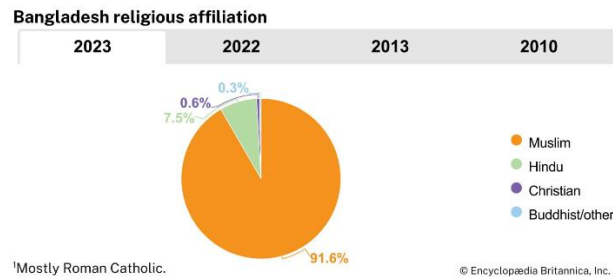


Figure (2): Bangladesh Religious Affiliation. Source: <https://www.britannica.com>

Research Related Literature Review

Although research on the history of Buddhism in Bangladesh is long-standing in the world, there is no specific research on "*Socio-economic Status of Buddhists: Aspect of Dhaka City*". Research on this title is the newest in history. And with this goal in mind, the researcher researches the city of Dhaka and other researches related to the subject. Therefore, the key points of the important books related to the proposed research work are presented below:

History of Buddhism

Sukomal Chowdhury, *Buddhism and Culture in Bangladesh* (Calcutta: 1380 Buddha-Purnima) discusses the history of Buddhism in Bangladesh. For example: the influence of Tantricism in Buddhism, Buddhism in Bengal from ancient times to present, Buddhist monasteries of Bangladesh, Pali language and Buddhist practice of Bengali Buddhists, religious festivals and puja-parban (Religious Rituals) of Bengali Buddhists, social structure and social activities of Bengali Buddhists, lifestyle of Bengali Buddhist monks and householders are discussed in detail. The book discusses the history of Buddhism as a whole in Bangladesh but does not discuss the specific Buddhists of Dhaka city. But even though this book has various limitations, many important points have been highlighted in it which are guiding and significant for the research in question.

Social and Religious Festivals

In Dipank Sreegyan Barua's work like in- *History of Bengali Buddhists, Religion and Culture* (Chittagong: 2007) *Geography of Ancient Bengal*, *History of Buddhism in India during the Buddha's Age* and *History of the Rajyavarga*, *Buddhism in the Outside World*, *Buddhism in Bangladesh*, *Evolution of Buddhism*, *Reasons for the Extinction of Buddhism in India*, *Buddhism in Chittagong* and the Barua Community, *Bangladesh Social and religious festivals of Pali practice and Bengali Buddhists*, finally a list of Buddhist population in Bangladesh is discussed. Although information about the Buddhist society of Dhaka, Particularly indigenous Buddhist people, is not raised in this book, it has been used as a source of important information in the research.

Buddhist Communities in Bangladesh

Jitendra Lal Barua, *Self-Inquiry: Buddhism and Buddhist Communities in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: 1999) *Geographical introduction to Bangladesh*, spread and development of Buddhism in Bangladesh, Harshaska dynasty and Mauryan dynasty, Gupta period, Post-Gupta period, Pala period, Chandra dynasty and Deva dynasty, Burman and Sen dynasty, Sultanate Rule, Mughal and British rule, Pakistan and Bangladesh are primarily about the Buddhist community of Bangladesh discussed in detail. Although the specific information is not mentioned, we completed the research using various information from this book.

Indigenous Buddhist Communities in Bangladesh

Sukomal Barua's work like- Buddhist History-Tradition and Antecedents of Bangladesh (Dhaka: 2017) Buddhist Ethnic Groups: History-Tradition, Buddhism and Development in Bengal, Buddhist Arts and Trades and Professions, Religious-Social and Cultural Activities, Indigenous Buddhist Communities in North Bengal, Buddhist plans and recommendations for socio-economic development, Buddhist historical chronology (1800-2017) etc. has been discussed. In the book, the history and traditions of the Buddhists of Bangladesh have been highlighted. We have tried to complete the research using various important information from this book.

Syncretism

Syncretism in Bangladeshi Buddhism (2002: Japan) by Dilip Kumar Barua and Mitsuro Ando (2002 : Japan) is a research book on the history of Buddhism in Bangladesh, Buddhist kings, decline of Buddhism, restoration of Theravada Buddhism, social and religious rituals of Buddhists. Buddhism has been discussed about the whole of Bangladesh there.

In addition, various researches, journals, reports and books have highlighted the lifestyle, religious and cultural and socio-economic status of Bangladeshi Buddhists (Bengali Buddhists of the plains, small ethnic groups of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Rakhine's of the plains and Gurdas of North Bengal). Although there is scattered information about the Buddhists of Dhaka, there has not been any institutional research on the Indigenous (ethnic) Buddhists women of Dhaka city. This is our attempt to study indigenous Buddhist's women (history, demographics, festivals, education and socio-economic status) living in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh.

Structure and Methodology

Research methodology or concept of methods used in the study is a must for conducting any kind of social research. There are two types of data analysis 1. Qualitative data analysis 2. Quantitative data analysis. we have used both of these data analysis processes in our research paper.

Study Area: To gather information of indigenous Buddhist women. we chose, the places like– University of Dhaka (Neelkhet, Dhaka), Mohammadpur, Basabo, Mirpur, Kazipara, Siddheshwari, Shahabag, Malibag, Rampura, Azimpur- ten different areas of Dhaka city where comparatively most indigenous Buddhist women live.



Map (1): Dhaka city (where we conducted our fieldwork) Source:
<https://www.virtualbangladesh.com/the-basics/cities/dhaka/dhaka-city-map/>

Study Population: we chose 120 respondents for interviewing, among them 60 women from the indigenous society, their male counterparts were 20, Family members and the Bengalis (from other religion) were 40 in number.

Table 1: Background of selected Participants

Male (18-60+)	15
Female (18-60+)	60
Completed Higher Studies	20
Completed Secondary School	30
Primary Level school	10
Married	40
Single and others	20
Mainstream Bengali and participants from other religion	20
Lower Middle-Class Families	10
Higher Middle-class Families	10

Sources and Collection of Data: In any research, data collection is an important part. we have collected data from two sources that included Primary sources Secondary sources.

Primary Source: we have collected data through direct fieldwork. And my informants were women from Buddhist indigenous community, their families, and the mainstream Bengalis.

Secondary Source: To assess the impacts of socio-economic status data has been collected from reviews of selected documents (books, journals, previous research papers), as well as statistics, mass media products, webs information, historical information on indigenous women, and the Buddhism.

Strategies of Collecting Data: we also adopted some strategies for collecting data. They are: # Sampling # Ethnographic interviews # Focus Group Discussion (FGD) # Case study analysis # Taking Photographs and audio, video recordings # Taking fieldnotes and Diary writing Participant observation is one of the major methods in anthropological fieldwork,

Sampling: It is a selection process (Bernard, 2011). Selecting several people from a group for conducting research. Within a short time, a researcher cannot study the whole nation. For this reason, we select a portion of the population, we have used purposive sampling where our purpose was to identify our key informant and include particularly the Buddhist women from indigenous community. We incorporated this method for collecting data on the socio-economic condition of indigenous Buddhist Women.

Sample Size: So, our sample size was 120.

Interviews: There were two types of interviews: open-ended and semi-structured. Open-ended questions are those that cannot be answered with only “yes” or “no”. the applicants can answer the questions however they choose to respond. This qualitative method is used through in-depth interviews based on open-ended questionnaires. A semi-structured interview is a qualitative method of inquiry that combines a pre-determined set of open questions with the opportunity for the interviewer to explore particular themes or responses further. (Bernard 2011) This study has incorporated this kind of interview to explore more about the current condition of the women. We conduct sixty interviews with our female respondents separately, while visiting their house. The duration of each interview was 30 minutes each, in

ten cases those were more than two hours. We note down the informative data and with their permission recorded their life history in our portable devices like mobile phones and tabs.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

The method in aims to obtain data from a purposely selected group of individuals. There were in total of six groups (6-12 participants in each group) including Buddhist women, and indigenous Buddhist women and their family members. These FGDs were done to gather the collective idea about their socio-economic condition and their lives are influenced. Those FGDs were conducted in six different days in the month of January, 2025. Groups were divided into three categories, first category was only adult women (18-50) from different socio-economic background, second one is the adult male group (18-60) who were the family members of that female group and the third one was a mixed group where we included both adult male and female from different religious and ethnic background. We conduct two FGDs with each group and collected our data. The whole discussion was focused on the current condition of social and economic life of indigenous Buddhist women, how their religious and indigenous identity are affecting their lives and what other people think about that. These FGDs have enhanced the analyzing capacity of this research paper.

Case Study

It is a study of an individual unit, as a person, family, or social group. It has been incorporated in this study to gain a more practical perspective of the lives of indigenous Buddhist women. Here are five different cases of Indigenous Buddhist women and their socio-economic condition, which we selected on the basis of their uniqueness from the traditional cases.

Data Processing and Analysis Procedures

A qualitative method was the main analyzing method with the help of quantitative data. The qualitative data process is a type of social science research that collects and works with non-numerical data that seeks to interpret meaning from these data that help us to understand social life through the study of targeted populations or places [Punch, 2013]. Procedures like analysis of case studies, Narrative Analysis, oral history Analysis, analysis of archival materials like photos, albums or recordings, have been used here.

Ethical Consideration

In our study it was followed strictly, informant privacy was strictly maintained through not providing any information without their consent. no data has been published without informed consent. Their valuable time was not hampered, as their convenient time was chosen as interviews time. They have full access to my study's outcome. In short, every code of ethics like Responsibility towards my discipline, people, nature, the government has been tried to maintain.

Limitation

This article includes several restrictions that may have impacted the data collecting and analysis procedure. the data gathering and analysis were done in a very short period. Due to time constraints, it would not have been possible for us to schedule successful interviews with a large number of specialists. This might have resulted in the omission of important information, theories, and concepts.

Result and Discussion

Result

Economic condition of an indigenous Buddhist women can be determined by the scale of their income, but social status is completely based on the social norms and perception. Socio-economic is the reflection of the quality of life and opportunities available to people in society including- income, educational attainment, occupational prestige and subjective perceptions of social status and social class. According to the data collected from the women from different background, age, class – their experiences are unique in their own way. After the analysis we have found out that most of the women their lives are not disturbed because of their religious identity but their indigenous identity, which also have greater impact on their economic life, their social status is quite low because of their indigeneity.

Discussion

According to Our Research, We Have Found Both Positive and Negative Responses from Our Research Participants, Which Are Both the Part of Our Discussion “We Feel Special and I Enjoy the Special Attention”

“Whenever I go outside, or any study tour my friends and classmates and teacher take care of my food habit, treat me different from others because of the unique cultural background and the different habit from the mainstream society. Whenever in my class, my teachers are teaching about cultural heritage, they pick me as an example and always highlight that how rich we are in terms of history, culture, and unique life-style”- Ania Chakma (pseudonym).

According to the statement of her, in the educational environment, students from indigenous Buddhist community enjoy the attention which increase their social status as a member of indigenous society. Diversity in this case make them unique and exemplary.

“We are invisible at our work place”

Women’s participation in family, society, state leadership, decision-making process, management, problem solving and problem solving is considered unnecessary, so that women cannot be equal partners of men in leadership. Women are not taught to be self-reliant and are not allowed to choose the profession of their choice so that women cannot be self-reliant in any way. Also, it is propagated that it is inappropriate for women to take whatever property they inherit so that they cannot become wealthy. No values are created to establish women’s self- reliance and self-determination. Prevailing values therefore make women financially and emotionally dependent on men. As a result, women get stuck in the vicious cycle of values and become more rights, dignity, wealth and powerless. Moreover, the cultural environment in which we live and the language that is the core of this culture are all dominated by men. Men also have a sexist language to cover up women. Even the cultural work that women engage in, whatever its main purpose, is the result of male satisfaction. Moreover, the majority of people in our country are not yet interested in seeing women in any other role apart from household work. People who are used to the traditional way of thinking are shocked when they see women on the stage of politics. He wants to block his course in various ways. Common people, even women, believe it. Thus, one cannot walk freely in the socio-political arena with respect. women are thought to be less intelligent, less able to speak. There is no disagreement about such comments of men. That is, they also consider themselves unworthy or inferior. Social judgments are carried out unilaterally. There is widespread discrimination against the traditional systems of tribal society, which has created obstacles in the advancement of women and the progress of society.

“Everyone in my workplace is Muslim, one event I Remember that they asked the boss to get a holiday on ‘Eid-e miladunnabi” religious event and got that. I was so happy that I would also ask for a day off during my religious event called “theravada”, but unfortunately as nobody knows about it in my office my boss didn’t agree to grant me one and he made one remark which I clearly remember that “women are always enjoying extra day off, so I can’t grant you another one”. That made me question about my identity as well as my gender. I know I should not, but I could stop myself from crying” Ajana Chakma (pseudonym)

From this statement it is highly visible that as a woman from different religion, different cultural identity, she had to face discrimination and workplaces are discriminative in the case of indigenous Buddhist women which affect their careers and economic lives.

“Nights Should Never Come to Any Women’s Life”

Riots Are to Some Extent Visible in The Chittagong Hill Tracts Areas in Bangladesh Where People Make Violence, Fight with Each Other Due to Different Cultural, Religious Identity

“We were four in Numbers, my mother and me with my two younger sisters, they (the extremists), they accused my father and brother to be the miscreants and threaten them. There was history that they abduct women and molested them. The day police took my father and brother for enquiries, we the women of the house were all alone and spent the night with terror, because we felt that they might attack us or abduct us for their wrath. In my entire life I have never felt so helpless as a woman from a different religious and cultural Identity. One of my Muslim friends help me a lot to hold courage that day” Shuranjana marma (pseudonym)

With her statement the social unsafety for a woman of different background is visible and the consequences they have to face in the time of riots or any political disturbances. Most of them is because of their being a woman of different religion and different Identity.

Our Face Is Our Problem, It’s Not Our Religious Identity

“See the girl with blunt nose?? She might be Chinese descendants, the spreader of covid-19, she eats snakes, monkeys, cockroaches and what not’ Don’t let her touch our food and do not eat the food made by her “. Aloka Chakma (pseudonym)

This statement clearly shows in the society what kind of bullying they have to face because of their facial structure and what people assume just because of their facial structure is not like others. Some people do not even bother asking their religious identity, they just go with their face.

We Just Talk – We Don’t Curse

It is a very common occurrence that while working in the parlour we talk in our language if we found our colleagues are as same as us, like belonging to the same community. Often the client’s complaint our boss that we laughed at them or did mockery, but it just that they do not know our language and misunderstand and misinterpret us. Bidhu Marma (pseudonym)

From this case it is seen that how being the speaker of uncommon language affecting the reputation and economic life of an indigenous Buddhist women.

Conclusion and Future Studies Recommendation

Buddhist women in Bangladesh occupy a complex and multifaceted position within their communities. While facing challenges related to gender inequality, religious marginalization, and limited access to resources, they continue to play an essential role in the preservation of Buddhist religious practices, the transmission of cultural traditions, and the maintenance of ethnic identity. Through ongoing efforts to increase educational access and gender equality, Buddhist women are gradually expanding their social, political, and economic opportunities. As such, their contributions to both their religious communities and to Bangladeshi society at large are indispensable to the continued vitality and resilience of Buddhist life in Bangladesh. This paper focused on their challenges and come to the end that how they are discriminated because of their ethnic identity rather than religious identity which will expand the field of indigenous studies in Bangladesh especially on women. This paper will also help to understand the ongoing perspective on the indigenous Buddhist society and future policy making regarding this gender and identity based social issues. Future research should focus on how ethnic identification exacerbates gender-based discrimination, including examining the intersectional experiences of Buddhist women in Bangladesh. Although the ethnic aspects of their marginalization have been emphasized in this study, more research might examine geographical differences, generational changes, and how sociopolitical processes have shaped these experiences. A more comprehensive understanding of identity-based exclusion in Bangladesh may also be possible through comparative studies between various indigenous and religious minority communities. Furthermore, Buddhist women's voices might be amplified through ethnographic and participatory research methodologies, which would provide rich insights into their resilience tactics and cultural preservation efforts. Lastly, multidisciplinary approaches that combine policy analysis, gender studies, and indigenous studies can help guide more inclusive development policies and support evidence-based policymaking.

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