

## **Religious Institutions of the Magh Barua Community of Kolkata**

**Debolina Sen**

*(Senior Research Fellow, Phd Candidate, Department of Geography, University of Calcutta, India)*  
*Corresponding Author: Debolina Sen*

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**ABSTRACT:** The research paper deals with the main religious institutions established by the Barua Magh community in Kolkata Metropolitan City. It is a migrant community and has migrated from Chittagong in Bangladesh to India through several waves of migration. Also, they have had connections with Arakan of Myanmar. The Barua Magh community after coming to Kolkata have set up several socio- economic cultural, educational and religious institutions in the city. Out of these institutions, the major religious institutions, their establishment and activities have been the main focus of the research paper to be found out by the researcher.

**Keywords:** Barua, Magh, religious, institution. kolkata

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Institutions can be defined as an establishment on which every organisation is dependent upon. They have certain recognised and established set of rules, traditions and usages. These usages and rules are broadly classified as institutions. These are forms of procedures which are recognised and accepted by society and govern the relations between individuals and groups. According to eminent sociologists Woodward and Maxwell, "An institution is a set of folkways and mores into a unit which serves a number of social functions." Institutions are a system of behavioural and relationship patterns densely interwoven and enduring, and function across the entire society. The main functions of institutions are to regulate the behaviour of individuals in core areas of society. Institutions control the activities of the individuals and depend upon the collective activities of men. They often have definite procedures which are formed on the basis of customs and dogmas. They are stable and more effective than other means of social control. Every institution has some rules which are compulsorily obeyed by all individuals. Institutions can be classified into five main types:-

- Political institution in the form of government
- Educational institution in the form of both formal and informal educational institutions
- Economic institutions provides basic physical sustenance of the society by meeting the needs for food, shelter, clothing and necessary supplies and services. Economic institutions include agriculture, industry, marketing, credit and banking system, co-operatives etc.
- Family is also an institution in itself. It is the basic social institution and forms the framework of the society.
- Religion is an institution in itself as it binds the different linguistic and national groups into one interconnected whole.

### **II. CHARACTERISTICS AND IMPORTANCE OF INSTITUTIONS**

The basic characteristics of institutions are that:-

- Institutions are the means of controlling individuals.
- Institutions depend upon the collective activities of men.
- The institution has some definite procedures which are formed on the basis of customs and dogmas.
- Institution is more stable than other means of social control.
- Every institution has some rules which must be compulsorily obeyed by the individual.

The usage of the term institution has become widespread in the social sciences in recent years, reflecting the growth in institutional economics and the use of the institution concept in several disciplines like sociology, geography, politics, anthropology, business studies and economics to mention a few.( Hodgson,2006). Sometimes the word institution is confused with that of an organisation. Institution is a broad umbrella term which engulfs organisation as well. Institutions have developed out of the needs of the society. Social sciences have defined "institutions" in opposition to "nature". Creations of men and women, institutions order social, political, economic and even cultural intercourse. Institutions are the medium of human interaction. Institutions

also act as a medium of inflicting social control and promise human liberation from both the social bond and the constraints of nature. (Immergut, 2010) Mirva Agabrian ( 2003, p 227) considers that the social institution is a representation of a stable and persistent set of values, statuses, roles, groups and organisations that work together to meet societies basic demands in a particular area of social life. According to Norman Goodman, institutions also have a functionalist viewpoint. They are economy, education, family, politics and religion.

### **III. STUDY AREA**

The study area where the field work has been carried out is Kolkata district. The study has been confined to the 144 municipal wards that are grouped under 15 boroughs. The field survey has been carried out in the areas where clusters of Magh settlements have been found. The different localities that have been surveyed are:-

- Alipore( Ashoka Road)
- Chetla( Chetla Central Road Barua Para)
- Tollygunge ( Moore Avenue)
- Garia ( Milan Park)
- Pottery road, Park Circus( Nikhil Bharat Bidarshan Shiksha Kendra)
- Behala( Sarsuna)
- Burma Colony ( Thakurpukur, Behala)
- Lenin Sarani ( Taltala)

Apart from these clusters a detailed survey has been made of the separate religious institutions spread across the city. In this case special mention may be made of the Maha Bodhi Soceity, Bankim Chatterjee Street, Kolkata and Bengal Buddhist Association, 1 Buddhist Temple Road, Kolkata.

### **IV. STUDY POPULATION AND THEIR HISTORY**

The population which has been studied are the Bengali Buddhist speaking community hailing from Chittagong, Bangladesh. They are historically the Maghs and use the surname Barua. Together they are called the Magh Barua community. The word

“ Magh” has been derived from the word “ Magadh” , which is a place of historical significance in India. Magh is a tribe that includes Barua, Mutsuddi, Talukdar, Chaudhuris, Sinha and Rajbangshi sub categories. In our thesis we are going to consider only the Magh Barua category above all. The Magh Barua are distinguished from the other members of the Magh tribal community by their surname. All the members of the Magh Barua tribal community have their surname Barua and are followers of Buddhism. There was a close contact between Arakan and Bengal since the earliest time and at different stages of history, several groups of people migrated to south eastern part of Bengal from Arakan. Among the migrants , the Maghs were chiefly found in the districts of Banderban, Cox Bazaar and Greater Patuakhali. This geophysical location has been responsible for the shaping up of the lifestyle and culture of the Maghs. Maghs were specially concentrated in the geographical area called Banderban which is actually the continuation of Sunderban Delta of West Bengal. It is situated between Burma and Lusai Hills on the east, Chittagong district on the west, Rangamati district on the north and Arakan on the south-east. In general the district is a tangle mass of hills , ravines and cliffs densely covered with trees , bush and creeper jungle. Since the land is blessed both by maritime and dense forested area, this geographical location and character of the land has rendered the Magh tribe to carry out their most significant activity of piracy in the seas and dacoits in the land. Centuries ago, the most feared pirates and sailors in the Bay of Bengal terrorized communities along the seacoast and far up the river channels of what is now Bangladesh. They were the Maghs or pirates. They themselves dislike the term Magh and want themselves to be called Marmas. They speak Arakanese a Tibeto- Burman language and regard Burma as the centre of their cultural life. The Maghs having left the seas long ago are now valley farmers. Forced out of the plains and into the hills by more powerful groups , they have adopted the “ slash and burn” method of agriculture. In India there was a time when torture was inflicted upon the Buddhists. In order to save themselves a Kshatriya prince ( member of Brijji clan) abandoned Magadha accompanied by 700 men and entered Comilla, Noakhali and Chittagong. The word “ Barua” is actually derived from “ Bajji” , meaning superior or bigger. This marks the advent of Magh Baruas in India. Before partition of Bengal the Maghs were settled in Sunderban area where it was easy for them to carry out plundering activities. But with the onset of colonial rule, piracy and dacoity could no longer be carried out as a trade and livelihood by the Maghs, owing to strict vigilance. In order to replace this kind of vandalism, these people took to sedentary lifestyle as started pursuing primary activities like sedentary agriculture and fishing. The geographical vicinity to water bodies compelled them to be fishermen. But once Bengal got divided and Bangladesh was a separate country, these Buddhist Maghs became a religious minority in this newly formed Muslim dominated nation since most of them actually resided in that portion of undivided Bengal which took the form of Bangladesh. In order to save themselves from the religious fanaticism the Maghs

came to West Bengal and settled wherever they could accommodate themselves as a result of which they don't have any particular locality or neighbourhood to call their own.

### **V. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

- The significance of this paper is to bring to light the religious institutions of the Magh Baruas in the city of Kolkata.
- Finding out the functions and structure of such institutions.
- Finding out whether they have played a significant role in strengthening the voice of the Magh Baruas.

### **VI. METHODOLOGY**

- The areas where considerable number of Magh Baruas have been available have been identified and field survey has been carried out.
- Various institutes of social, cultural, religious and economic importance to the Maghs have been thoroughly surveyed.
- Buddhist temples, charitable organisations, educational institutes etc within the domain of the study area which have contributed significantly as a probable data source on the subject have been explored.
- In depth interviews, questionnaire surveys, photographs and structured and semi structured interviews, participatory observation, transect walks in and around the institutions have been used as methods.

### **VII. THE MAHABODHI SOCIETY**

The Maha Bodhi Society derives its name from the tree under which about two thousand five hundred and thirty five years ago, at Buddha Gaya , the Great Being, took the adamant seat ( Vajrasana) and visualised the Truth, The Reality. This was the Asvattha , which was sanctified by Siddhartha Gautama's attaining Supreme Knowledge ( Bodhi) beneath its shade. Thenceforth, it became known as the Bodhi- Tree in India and Bo- Tree in Sri Lanka. Today the word Bodhi has become internationally known term or noun in connection with the Buddhist activities. The Seal of the Maha Bodhi Society, was copied from an alto- redievo tablet in the Indian Museum, Calcutta, and maybe seen against the right hand wall of the large square room, from which one enters the Archaeological Sculpture Gallery. It is included in the Gandhara Collection made by Major General Sir Alexander Cunningham. It is computed to be more than 2000 years old , and General Cunningham and most other archaeologists believe that it was the seal adopted by the Sangharajas of the greatest Viharas of those days. There is a Trident at the centre which represents the three gems- Buddha, Dharma, Shanga. The wheel supporting it is the Dharma Chakra or the Wheel of Law , the Couchant Deer refer to the deer park, Isipatana near Benares, where the Buddha preached his first Great Discourse, entitled the Dhamma Cakkappavattana Sutta, which embodies his doctrines. The two figures typify the celestial hosts in the act of adoration. The Japanese auxiliary of the Maha Bodhi Society has adopted this as their emblem. The main aim of the MahaBodhi society according to Anagarika Dharmapala in the first issue of the Mahabodhi Journal ( May 1891), was

“The Buddha Gaya Maha Bodhi Society has commenced its mission for the resuscitation of Buddhism in the land of its birth. It will have its headquarters at Buddha Gaya, sacred to the Buddhists as the site where Prince Siddhartha, ‘ the light of Asia’ attained the supreme wisdom of ‘ Abhi Sambodhi ‘, and became the all knowing Tathagata, and its hopes in time to establish on that sacred spot a college and a monastery for the residence of Bhikkhus representing the Buddhist countries of China, Japan, Siam, Cambodia, Burma, Ceylon, Chittagong, Nepal, Arakan and Tibet. As one of the chief objects of the society is to disseminate the philosophical and ethical teachings of the Buddha, translations of the Pali and Sanskrit Pitakas into English, Bengalee and Hindi have to be made.” ( pg 21, MahaBodhi Society Centenary Volume , vol 114)

“ Besides having a headquarter at Buddha Gaya, the Society hopes to have a permanent office at Calcutta to carry on its executive work....” ( pg 21, MahaBodhi Society Centenary Volume, vol 114)As evident from the above quotes there was a connection of Calcutta with the Theravada monks of Myanmar, Chittagong from the inception of the Society. This tradition was carried on even to the next few decades where the links with the monks of these countries were strengthened through frequent visits in both ways and exchange of culture as a result of which there was an exchange of news and traditions in the field of Theravada Buddhism. To impart knowledge of the teachings of Buddha, the Society has given priority with keen interest to publish and translate books on Buddhism. It is the Maha Bodhi Society of India that influenced the authorities to open study courses in and on Pali language in Calcutta University and Bombay University as a beginning. Now this exercise has spread throughout the world and now Pali and Sanskrit classes are being held throughout the country on a regular basis. It was the founder of the Society who first established a training unit for Bhikkhus at Shantiniketan with the assistance of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore and later it was shifted to Sarnath. This college is revived with additional new buildings and named the “ Dhammapala Bhikkhu Training Centre” after the founder. Finally , the establishment of the permanent headquarters at Calcutta was realised by Anagarika Dharmapala himself.

The MahaBodhi journal was started to serve as a vehicle for the interchange of news among the Buddhist countries and later it served as a common platform of the entire Buddhist world. Renowned scholars, reputed Buddhist writers and authors of Buddhist publications contributed articles to the magazine and it has done yeomen service to spread the light of Buddhism all over the world. It has now been planned to publish this magazine from Singapore, maintaining a high standard and providing articles and information of Buddhist interest, through the generosity of Dr Kwok Shiu Ming, Chairman of the Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhist Institute of Hong Kong. The MahaBodhi Society of India came into existence at a time when both India and Sri Lanka were under the British Rule. The mission and vision of the Society gave much courage to the national struggles in both countries and of other neighbouring countries around, which were under the colonial administration, to gain their independence. The Society rendered its services not only in the field of religious activities but also in social, cultural, health, educational and humanitarian fields. It came forward when the famines broke out in India, specially in West Bengal and Orissa. It took pioneering steps to change the social, religious, cultural and educational pattern in Sri Lanka. Sri Dharmarajika Vihara at Calcutta where the relics of Lord Buddha are enshrined, a free Homoeopathy Dispensary and other social services, MahaBodhi Book Agency which caters to the reading public with publications on Buddhism and Indology and a large Library with a varied collection of books are the other main activities in Calcutta.

### **VIII. BENGAL BUDDHIST ASSOCIATION**

It is a well known fact that Asoka, the great Mauryan emperor had popularized Buddhism on an international level. Buddhism has spread in many parts of the world since then. Credit goes to the British scholars of colonial period when Sir James Princep (1799-1840) in 1837 deciphered the Ashokan edicts on pillars, on walls of the caves and on rocks scattered from Karnataka to north-west region of India. Buddhism was discovered from the historical ruins in many parts of India. In continuation of this spirit the nineteenth century Bengal witnessed a unique cultural renaissance in undivided India. Those days Chittagong town had become the epicentre of Buddhist revival and a tug of cultural war was going among Brahmanism, Buddhism and Islam. Soon the opportunistic forces left the scene, because it had little humanitarian and non-violent spirit to absorb and retain the elements of change in the society. It was a large-hearted Buddhist spirit which extended its tolerant, non-violent and adjusting carpet of religious and spiritual contemplation of meditation and peace to share with Islam. It was an excellent and extraordinary time when around 1865 a youngman of Chittagong Buddhist community, Chandra Mohan later known as Punnachar Dharmadhari Mahasthavir (n 1895-1909) sowed the seeds of Theravada Buddhism in East Bengal (Bangladesh of modern times) and endangered a new generation of Theravada Buddhist society. The sacred legacy of Punnachara was shouldered by a youngman of Chittagong born on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1865 in Unainepura in the Barua family of Ananda Kumar Barua and Aradhana Barua. He was Kripasaran who soon emerged as the pole star of modern Buddhism of Bengal. He was a brilliant man gifted with quality of greatness so much so that his mother dedicated him to the Buddhist Sangha. After his initiation in Theravada Buddhism as a monk he was known as Kripasaran Mahathera in 1885 by a renowned Buddhist monk Sudhanchandra Mahasthavir of Unainepura Lankaram (Vihara).

Karmayogi Kripasaran Mahathera visited the main Buddhist places of eastern India with his preceptor Mahatma Punnachar and visualized the weakness rampant in Buddhist society in forms of tantric and esoteric practices. He made up his mind to reform it through reviving Theravada Buddhism and as such he established the Bauddha Dharmankur Sabha (Bengal Buddhist Association) on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October 1892 at Kolkata which had emerged as the metropolis of Bengal. It is to be mentioned here that Kripasaran had arrived here in Kolkata in 1886 and established the Nabin Vihara at 72/73 Malanga Lane, Bow Bazaar where he stayed for three years and then he shifted his activities at the Mahanagar Vihara of 21/26 Bow Street where he stayed for 13 years before shifting to the present campus. Thus, we can see that the Bauddha Dharmankur Sabha is the premier Buddhist Organisation in the sub-continent although the date of establishment is in the year 1892. In institutionalization of this centre of Buddhism his main objective was to resuscitate Buddhist culture and to propagate the Buddha and the principles of Buddhism by organizing missions, printing and publishing Buddhist text books and pamphlets, arranging lectures and discourses on Buddhism. With this resolve his life and work became a veritable mission full of events and new openings. Soon Karmayogi Kripasaran Mahathera started building memorable structures, discovering Buddhist places followed by eventful functions till he breathed his last on 30<sup>th</sup> April 1926.

However the demise of Karmayogi Kripasaran, though an irreparable vacuum in the annals of the Bauddha Dharmankur Sabha, was filled up by incessant endeavours of the teams of monks, scholars and admirers who had the fortune to be active under his guidance. The gap of twenty three years from 1926 to 1949, till the advent of a dynamic personality, such as Ven. Dharmapala Mahathera, was filled up by a dedicated monk who made progress and served the cause of the Bauddha Dharmankur Sabha according to previous routine programmes left as a secret legacy by the founder. Convention of All India Buddhist Conference (1928), foundation of Nalanda Vidyabhavana (1935), erection of Arya Vihara (1937) were feats of excellent advancement of the Bauddha Dharmankur Sabha. In 1949, the arrival of Ven. Dharmapala Mahathera marked a

landmark from where multidimensional role of the centre opened new doors and ways to prosperity. Revival of Jagajjyoti ( 1950), the dream of the founder and the torchbearer of the Theravada Buddhism in India, a new lease of the life given to the Gunalankar Library through enriching it with new titles of Buddhist publications, repairing works of the Arya Vihara( 1958), observation of the birth centenary of Karmayogi Kripasaran Mahathera ( 1965), the foundation of the Kripasaran Continental Institution( 1967) for fulfilling the dream of imparting education to the children by the founder, addition of a new plot of land ( 1972) for expanding the premises of the Dharmankur, foundation of Dharmankur Free Homeo Dispensary( 1973), acquisition of land at Rajgir ( 1974) for erecting a monastic establishment of the Bengal Buddhist Association, Convention of Indian Buddhists ( 1979), Millenium Birth Celebration of Atisa Dipankar Srijnan ( 1983) , Dr. B.M. Barua scholarship fund( 1996) were the stupendous achievements of the Bauddha Dharmankur Sabha ( Bengal Buddhist Association) under the guidance of Karmavir Dharmapal Mahathera( 1925- 2009).

### **IX. NIKHIL BHARAT BIDARSHAN SHIKSHA KENDRA**

This monastery cum Buddhist temple is located in Pottery Road in east central Kolkata. This monastery has been constructed in the land donated by the Barua Bakery proprietors. This monastery houses at present five monks and celebrates occasions like the birthday of its founder Ven. Late Prajnajyoti Mahasthavir , holds all events like Prabrajya Daan, Kathin Chibara Daan, Baisakhi Purnima, the twelve different Purnima of the twelve Bengali months etc. The Poila Baishakh is also celebrated in this Bauddha Vihara by offering prayers and meditation.

The other Buddhist temples of the city are located in Alipore Ashoka Road, Chetla Alipur Road, Moore Avenue, Tollygunge, Garia Milan Park , Behala Srima Pally, Teghoria etc. All these Bauddha Viharas have some common temple activities. Daily puja and chanting of suttas are very common in all the temple complexes. Meditation is also common in all these monasteries. Not all monasteries have formal training of monks or any formal education programme, or health services, no publication or formal libraries. Not even a guest house has been found in these monasteries. These monasteries have been mainly constructed to cater to the religious needs of the local Magh Barua population.

### **X. CONCLUSION**

From the above study it can be said that the religious institutions have in some way contributed to the unity of the Magh Barua Buddhist community as a whole. But the strains of the bindings are only through the threads of religion and religious forces. The Monasteries and Buddhist temples serve as a link between the relations among the members of the scattered Barua families in the city and their religion. The monasteries specially the MahaBodhi Society and the Bauddha Dharmankur Sabha are quite active in creating international links with the Buddhist world as a result of which huge donations and collaborations have flowed into these places which have helped sustenance of these religious institutes.

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