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Multiple Minority Modalities: Dialogical Identities of Bengali-Speaking Buddhists in India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar

Bengali-speaking Buddhists are a small religious minority found in three countries—India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. The Chittagong plains in Bangladesh are the community’s historical home. Since the mid-nineteenth century, some members left the community, travelling from Chittagong toward the northwest (India’s West Bengal and Northeast states) and southeast (Myanmar’s Arakan and Rangoon) for better employment opportunities where they formed their own communities. My case study¹ on this community suggests that its collective identity is dialogical, particularly because it is a minority group. It illustrates and explains how this ethno-religious minority had to negotiate their collective identity with their respective majority counterparts i.e., Bengali Muslims in Bangladesh, Bengali Hindus in India and Arakanese/Burmese Buddhists in Myanmar.

Despite their current dispersed locations across three countries, a shared oral tradition has woven the Bengali-speaking Buddhists together. They collectively believe that they are the descendants of medieval Indian Buddhists. This belief has derived from Bengali-speaking Buddhists’ oral tradition that suggests that their ancestors migrated to Chittagong due to anti-Buddhist forces sometime in the late medieval period (approximately sixteenth century CE) from the primordial Buddhist homeland—the Magadha region now located in the Indian state of Bihar. At the height of communal identity consolidation in the region in the late nineteenth century, colonial official writings first recorded the oral tradition. Subsequently, Buddhists themselves recorded the oral narrative in their Bengali writings. The Bengali vernacular version of the narrative, however, challenges the colonial English version. While the colonial version of the narrative suggests that the ancestors of Bengali-speaking Buddhists arrived in Chittagong from Magadha via Arakan, Bengali Buddhists argue that their ancestors came to Chittagong from Magadha via Assam. These Arakan vs. Assam routes of the ancestral journey to Chittagong have provided the basis for later identity claims by community members, depending on their current locations within the national boundaries of India, Bangladesh or Myanmar.

Bengali-speaking Buddhists in Bangladesh, India and Myanmar demonstrate multiple minority modalities despite their shared historical roots. For example, Bengali-speaking Buddhists in Bangladesh identify as Bengali nationals as well as exclusively Buddhists. Their linguistic nationality and exclusive religiosity reflect Bangladesh’s language-based Bengali nationalism as well as the country’s majority Muslims’ exclusive religious ethos. Although Bengali nationalism persists among the



A Buddhist Temple, Tripura, India.
Author’s photograph.

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Bengali-speaking Buddhists in India's West Bengal and neighbouring provincial states, their religiosity has become more hyphenated as Hindu-Buddhist. Unlike their Buddhist cousins in Bangladesh, Bengali Buddhists in India simultaneously perform Hindu and Buddhist devotional practices i.e., Durgapuja and Buddhapuja, and they religiously engage in Hindu and Buddhist observances and festivities. This hyphenated Hindu-Buddhist religiosity not only bypasses modern exclusive religiosity and reconnects Buddhists with pre-modern non-exclusive religiosity in Bengal, but it also reflects the dominant Hindutva influence on Buddhists, particularly, the Hindutva discourse that suggests that Buddhism is not a distinct religion, rather a branch of Hinduism.

Unlike their cousins in Bangladesh and India, the descendants of Bengali-speaking Buddhists in Myanmar have bypassed their immediate colonial history; instead, they have prioritized the pre-modern history of their ancestors found in their oral tradition, particularly the colonial version that emphasizes the Magadha-Chittagong migration via Myanmar's Arakan region. In other words, the descendants of Bengali-speaking Buddhist immigrants from the colonial period, particularly those living in Myanmar's Arakan state, have claimed to be ethnically Marmagree. Pre-colonial Burmese historical sources refer to Bengali-speaking Buddhists as Marmagree. This term relates to Marma, an ethnic designation of a Buddhist group with strong cultural and historical ties to Myanmar now living in the Chittagong hills. The Marmagree community has deliberately deemphasized their colonial historical roots in the Chittagong plains and emphasized their pre-colonial ancestors who migrated from Magadha to Arakan. The colonial version of their oral tradition discussed above has facilitated the revival and reclamation of their pre-colonial Arakan roots. Although the Marmagrees still speak the Chittagonion colloquial language along with the Arakanese Burmese language, they have abandoned Bengali dress, food, literature and other cultural aspects. This revival and reclamation of the Marmagree ethnic identity, particularly in the 1960s, suggests that the identity itself is a product of majority cultural dominance in postcolonial Myanmar known as the Burmanization process.

Bengali-speaking Buddhists' current multiple identity modalities as Bengali Buddhists in Bangladesh, Hindu-Buddhists in India and Marmagree Buddhists in Myanmar remind us of Charles Taylor's insight on dialogical nature of identity and identity formation. He observes:

We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us . . . [T]he making and sustaining of our identity . . . remains dialogical throughout our lives. Thus my discovering my own identity doesn't mean that I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others (33-34).²

Taylor asserts that our individual identity emerges and is negotiated with our significant others. Therefore, identity and its construction are necessarily dialogical. The multiple identity modalities of Bengali-speaking Buddhists convince us that collective identity, particularly that of minorities, is certainly dialogical. Identities are about the designators as much as the designated. Enduring identities emerge within the self (the identified) and other (identifier) dialogue. Without the negotiation between them, identities lack their currency i.e., recognition and associated rights and privileges. With their negotiated identities, Bengali-speaking Buddhists have maintained a relatively peaceful co-existence with their respective majorities, i.e., Hindus in India, Muslims in Bangladesh and Burmese/ Arakanese Buddhists in Myanmar.

¹ D. Mitra Barua's monograph provisionally entitled as *Adi Buaddha: The Bengali-speaking Buddhists in Bangladesh, India and Myanmar* discusses this case study in detail.

² Taylor, Charles. "The Politics of Recognition" in *Multiculturalism*. Gutman, Amy (ed.) New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994.