THE HISTORY OF BUDDHISM IN BANGLADESH: A STUDY OF BUDDHIST SOCIORELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

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Abstract

This study explores the two distinct forms of Buddhism in Bangladesh-Bengali and Jumma Buddhism. Bengali Buddhism, associated with the Barua community and integrated into the dominant Bengali-Muslim identity. On the other hand, Jumma Buddhism is refers to the multicultural and linguistic indigenous Buddhist communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). It investigates how the Bangladeshi state imposes Bengali identity and Islamic culture on diverse these multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic indigenous populations by classifying Jumma peoples as "small or sub-tribal" rather than "indigenous or Jumma." This legal and cultural framing facilitates identity erasure and cultural assimilation. The study employs a documentary research approach and qualitative textual analysis of constitutional documents, scholarly works, and human rights reports to examine how these identities are constructed and marginalized. Findings reveal that although Bengali and Jumma Buddhists appear to coexist, Jumma Buddhists continue to face systematic exclusion, state-led violence, and loss of cultural autonomy. This marginalization contradicts the core Buddhist values of mettā (loving-kindness), karuṇā (compassion), and upekkhā (equanimity). The study calls for formal recognition of Jumma identity and the application of Buddhist ethical frameworks to promote meaningful coexistence, peacebuilding, and the protection of indigenous rights within the national framework of Bangladesh. This study suggests to explore the lived experiences of the Jumma Buddhists and the role of Buddhism in resisting cultural homogenization for further research in this field.

Keywords: *Buddhism, Jumma, Bengali, Identity, Ethnic, Indigenous, Socioreligious, and Cultural Identity*

INTRODUCTION

Chittagong (Chattagram) and Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in Bangladesh are the home to two distinct forms of Buddhism. Therefore, Bengali Barua Buddhists predominantly live in Chattagram division and other plain districts of Bangladesh. The Barua community in the plains and culturally aligned with mainstream Bengali-Muslim society. The Jumma Buddhists usually consisted by numerous distinct indigenous ethnic groups such as the Chakma, Marma, and Tanchangya in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). While Bengali Buddhism is integrated into national identity as an individualized and depoliticized religious form. Jumma Buddhism represents a collective, indigenous identity deeply tied to sociopolitical struggle, cultural preservation, and resistance to state assimilation (Jhala, 2019).

The central problem this research addresses is how the Bangladeshi state's constitutional and cultural frameworks have contributed to the marginalization of Jumma Buddhists. The State classifies them with pejorative terms as " small tribal or sub-tribes" rather than indigenous or Jumma. Therefore, Bangladeshi State is denying them full constitutional recognition and their indigenous rights in the country. This classification has not only undermined their cultural autonomy but has also reinforced the dominance of Bengali identity and Islamic culture across multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic indigenous communities in the CHT (Chakma, 2010). Despite the appearance of religious harmony, Jumma Buddhists continue to face institutional discrimination, forced assimilation, and systemic erasure of their cultural and religious identities (Zubair, 2023).

While existing literature has documented the history, philosophy, and artistic heritage of Buddhism in Bengal (Majumdar, 1943: 91; Qanungo, 1988: 122). There is a significant gap in research analyzing the lived experiences and sociopolitical realities of Jumma Buddhists. Most scholarship focuses on Bengali Buddhism, often overlooking the ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity within Bangladeshi Buddhist communities (B. P. Barua, 2004: 22). Consequently, the voices and concerns of Jumma communities remain largely absent in national and global academic discourse.

The recent scholarship has begun to examine the intersections of state power, ethnicity, and religion in Bangladesh and South Asia more broadly. For example, Dey Jhala (2019) emphasizes the politicized role of religion in the borderlands, but gives little attention to how state power shapes internal Buddhist identities in Bangladesh. Pereira, Huda, and Hossain (2019) critique the limitations of constitutional protections for religious minorities, yet focus mostly on legal reform rather than cultural or religious erasure. Zubair (2023) documents state suppression in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), though his analysis centers more on conflict than on religious identity. Similarly, Partha (2016) assesses the outcomes of the CHT Peace Accord but does not explore Buddhism as a framework for indigenous resistance. Mahathanadull, Siddhi, and Vuddhikaro (2018) propose a metta-based Buddhist model for conflict resolution, though their work is not specific to Bangladesh. This study builds upon and extends these works by uniquely framing Jumma Buddhism as a politicized, marginalized identity, shaped by state-led ethnoreligious categorization, and by exploring how Buddhist ethics can serve as an indigenous response to systemic marginalization.

The objective of this study is to examine how religious and ethnic identities are shaped and controlled by state power, particularly through constitutional language and cultural policies. It also investigates how Buddhist ethical principles such as *mettā* (loving-kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion), and *upekkhā* (equanimity) can offer alternative frameworks for coexistence and justice (Suwatthanapattharaporn et al., 2023: 33). Through a documentary research approach employing qualitative textual analysis mog (Mogalakwe, 2006; Prior, 2003: 17). Therefore, this study seeks to fill a critical gap in the literature by challenging the dominant narratives and reasserting Jumma Buddhism as a legitimate indigenous identity, rather than a marginal religious tradition.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a documentary research approach grounded in qualitative textual analysis. It explores the socioreligious and cultural identities of Bengali and Jumma Buddhist communities in Bangladesh. This method is particularly suited to examine where historical, constitutional, and academic texts are central to understanding identity construction. Documentary research enables the collection, evaluation, and interpretation of written materials. For example, government documents, legal texts, scholarly publications, and organizational reports. To uncover how narratives are formed, legitimized, and contested (Mogalakwe, 2006). The approach follows an interpretivist tradition, treating texts as socially embedded artifacts that reflect broader power structures and cultural ideologies (Scott, 1990: 9).

Data were collected through purposive sampling from a range of sources, including the Constitution of Bangladesh (particularly Articles 6 and 23A), historical accounts, academic works, and rights reports. These documents were selected for their relevance to key themes: identity classification, religious marginalization, and ethnic politics. Analytical methods involved repeated close readings, thematic coding, and categorization. Texts were assessed for both explicit content and implicit assumptions, with special attention to discursive strategies that normalize Bengali Buddhist dominance and suppress indigenous Jumma voices (Prior, 2003: 17). This type of analysis allows the researcher to identify the ideological underpinnings of texts and the social functions they serve in postcolonial Bangladesh (Bryman, 2016: 543).

Ethical considerations were minimal as the research relies solely on publicly available materials. However, the study maintains a strong ethical orientation in treating indigenous issues with care, particularly where human rights and identity politics intersect. The interpretation of sensitive content was guided by a commitment to academic integrity and cultural respect (O'Leary, 2017: 194). Furthermore, the triangulation of sources—legal, historical, and organizational—ensures a balanced perspective and enhances the validity of findings (Bowen, 2009). Overall, the documentary and textual approach provides a robust and reflexive framework for interrogating the two forms of religious identity and state power in the context of Bangladeshi Buddhism.

The following flowchart illustrates the sequence of steps involved in the research process—from document selection to data analysis and interpretation.

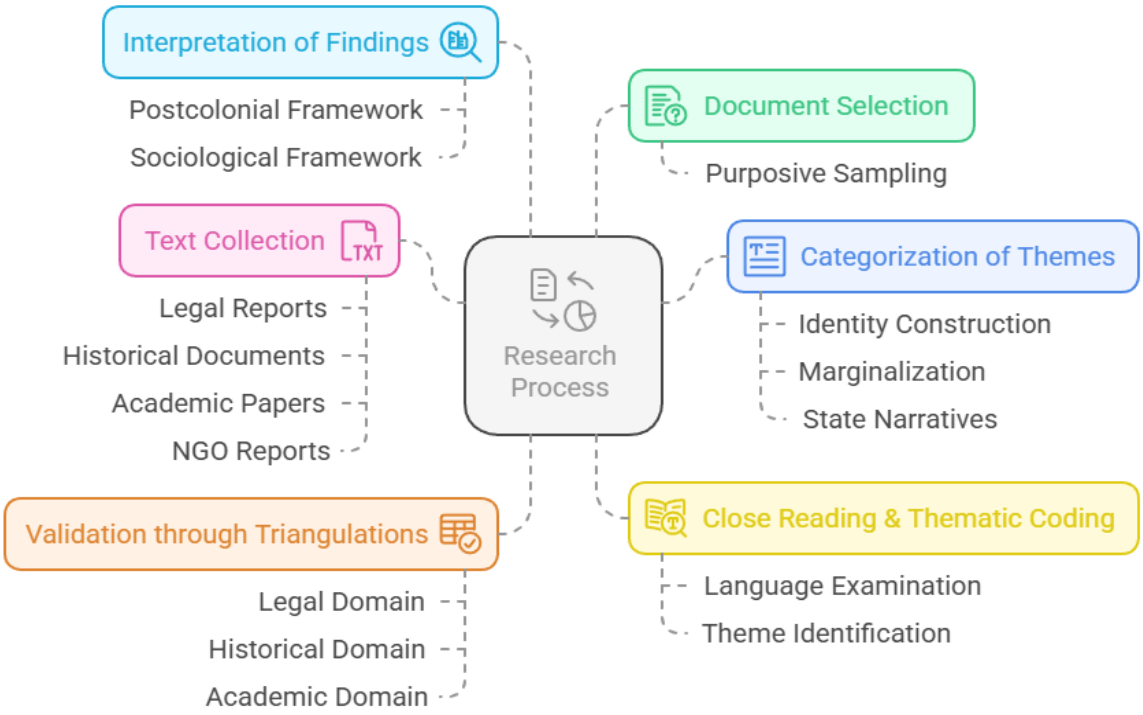

Figure 1: Research Process Flowchart

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

Buddhism in Bangladesh

1. *Early Origins and Historical Foundations of Buddhism in Bengal*

The arrival of Buddhism in Bengal has become a subject of debate. Therefore, the local Buddhist community argues that Buddhism arrived in the region during the time of the Buddha. Local historian like Qanungo (1988) alleges that the Buddha himself introduced Buddhism to the region during his lifetime, and Buddha made several visits to Samatata (present-day Chittagong). During these visits, it is believed that Buddha delivered Dhamma sermons and established Dharmachakras (Wheels of Dhamma) in various places, including *Chakaria, Chakrasala, Hastigrama, Chandranatha, Mahamuni, and Shakyapura,* which have since become sacred Buddhist sites in Bangladesh (Qanungo, 1988: 58). Furthermore, it is widely believed that Buddha used Chittagong's route to Kapilvastu in Arakan during an Indian migrant king Chanda Suriya (8146–198 AD) (Qanungo, 1988: 62). However, there is no reliable evidence to substantiate the claim that the Buddha ever visited Arakan, especially considering the chronology in the Arakanese Chronicle, which dates his visit to the 2nd century AD.

However, this theory unlikely does not support the notion because Buddha never permitted the creation of his images during his lifetime (Phayre, 1883: 45). Qanungo (1988) contrasts that the initiation of Mahāyana Buddhism and Buddha images to Arakan likely originated from India during the 2nd century AD, as Mahāyana Buddhism had already developed in Magadha, and Buddha images were widespread in India at that time. In fact, some scholars argue that Buddhism arrived in Bengal during King Asoka's time. In *Modern Buddhism and Its Followers in Orissa* (1911), Nagendra Nath Vasu and Mahamahopadhyaya Haraprasad Shastri outline the early spread of Buddhism in Bengal (which includes modern Bangladesh) during the reign of the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE (Vasu, 1911: 23). Ashoka's missionary efforts were pivotal in establishing Buddhist monasteries and centers of learning in the region (Vasu, 1911: 25). Therefore, Ashoka's patronage and the subsequent spread of Buddhist teachings among the local population contributed to the influence of early Buddhism in Bengal (Vasu, 1911: 22–30). This era marked the beginning of Buddhist expansion across South Asia, with Bengal becoming a significant area for the religion's growth.

2. *Philosophical and Doctrinal Evolution: Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna*

In addition, the Second Buddhist Council, convened in Jalandhar at the end of the 1st century BCE under King Kanishka's patronage, was a defining moment in Buddhist history. After this second great Buddhist council, it appeared a significant schism in the Buddhist Sangha community resulting in the establishment of two major Buddhist schools, such as Theravāda (often referred to as Hinayana) and Mahāyana. This divide marked a philosophical and doctrinal division between the schools, each taking distinct approaches to the Buddha's teachings and the nature of enlightenment (Robinson & Johnson, 1997: 101–103). The Theravāda school is known for its strict adherence to the original teachings of the Buddha. Its focus is on individual effort and self-salvation, with a strong emphasis on moral discipline and ethical principles. For example, an individual seeking personal enlightenment through the Eightfold Path, serves as the foundation for Theravāda's teachings. This school underscores a personal journey toward liberation, in contrast to more collective or devotional paths (Warder, 1970: 278–280).

In contrast, the Mahāyana tradition developed a broader theological and philosophical framework. Central to Mahāyana thought is the Bodhisattva idea, which strongly puts emphasis on helping others those who indeed. It also emphases on accumulating merits through the performance of various wholesome deeds in order to achieve enlightenment or become Buddha in the future. This philosophical approach is usually referred to the performance of fulfilling the perfection (Pāramī). Therefore, as all previous Buddhas did in the past before becoming Buddhist in this temporary world (Naomi, 2023: 1–3). In addition, Mahāyana Buddhism also integrates the veneration of various gods, and deities. The Mahāyana school, especially in eastern India, further divided into two significant subdivisions such as Vabhasika and Sutra-tika.

These subdivisions later evolved into the Madhyamika and Yogacara schools of thought, marking new phases of philosophical development in Buddhist history (Williams, 2009: 23–26). The Madhyamika philosophy, which gained prominence during the Third Buddhist Council, was frequently attributed to Nagarjuna. Nagarjuna's contributions to Buddhism aimed to promote egalitarianism within the monastic community and eliminate egocentrism. For instance, Nagarjuna introduced the concept of "Mahāšūnya," or the "great void," closely aligning it with the Mahāyana doctrines of impermanence (sabba anityam), emptiness (sabba sūnyam), and non-self (sabba anatta). These teachings also sought to harmonize Buddhist thought with Hindu scriptures, such as the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, further expanding the Mahāyana philosophical discourse (Kalupahana, 1986: 12–15).

Nagarjuna's Madhyamika philosophy is notable for its emphasis on the concept of emptiness, which later influenced the development of Vajrayana Buddhism. The Vajrayana school, while rooted in Mahāyana thought, incorporates more mystical elements, including practices derived from the Yogacara tradition. Both Madhyamika and Vajrayana schools focus on the transcendence of ego and the realization of ultimate reality through philosophical inquiry and meditative practice (Conze, 1962: 89–92). After Nagarjuna, many regard Vasubandhu as the second principal founder of Mahāyana Buddhism. Vasubandhu's scholarly contributions clarified the doctrine of nihilism within Mahāyana, especially in eastern India, where his writings had a significant impact. His work provided a systematic framework for understanding the concept of emptiness and the nature of reality, positioning him as one of the most influential Buddhist philosophers of his time (Westerhoff, 2009: 45–47).

In the 5th century CE, Mahāyana Buddhism had evolved to include the Tantric tradition, which emerged as a significant force within the broader Mahāyana school. Tantrism, closely linked to the mystical practices of Yogacara, emphasizes the worship of feminine deities and the realization of spiritual power through esoteric practices. This branch of Buddhism became particularly influential in eastern India including modern Bangladesh, where it began to blend with local Hindu traditions, especially in the Bengal region (Samuel, 2008: 53-55).

3. *The Pala Dynasty and the Flourishing of Tantric Buddhism*

The influence of Tantric Buddhism became especially prominent during the 8th century in Bengal under the Pala dynasty. Dharma Pala I, a ruler of the Pala dynasty, supported various forms of Buddhism, including Tantric, Vajrayana, and other mystical traditions. During his reign, the influence of Tantric Buddhism spread widely across the Bengal region, where it began to shape the religious practices and beliefs of the local population. Tantric Buddhism's focus on esoteric rituals and the veneration of feminine divinities played a key role in its appeal and spread (Davidson, 2002: 78–80).

On the other hand, during the reigns of Dharma Pala II, Mahi Pala I, and Naya Pala (1015–1060 AD), Buddhism continued to flourish in Bengal, supported by royal patronage. One of the most prominent Bengali Buddhist scholars of this period was *Atica Dipankara Srījñāna. Atica* served as dean of Vikram Sila Monastic University between 1035 and 1038 CE in Bihar, India. He made significant contributions to the intellectual and spiritual life of the region and was widely recognized for his expertise in Tantric nihilism and deep understanding of Madhyamika philosophy (Dutt, 1962: 132–135). Atica is known for his synthesis of Adi-Buddha (primordial Buddhas) and Adi-Prajnā (primordial wisdom), which he achieved through practices of devotion, renunciation, and the realization of Sūnya (emptiness). His teachings emphasized the transcendence of the ego as well as the pursuit of spiritual liberation through selfless love and deep meditative absorption. Atica's influence extended from Bengal to Tibet, and his religious title, "*Rāma Pandit Hati Siddha Kamalā Kucila Narendra Srījñāna Dana Raksita*," reflected his widespread renown (Tucci, 1980: 65–67). The impact of Atica's teachings was profound, leading to the widespread adoption of Tantric Buddhist practices in Bengal during the Pala dynasty. It is estimated that approximately 40% of the population in the region converted to Tantric Buddhism during this period, marking a significant religious transformation in Bengal. The Pala dynasty's support for Buddhism, particularly its Tantric and Vajrayana forms, helped establish Bengal as a major center of Buddhist learning and practice during this era (Acharya, 2012: 105–107).

According to Taranatha's account of Indian Buddhist history, the Buddhists of the Koki lands (stretching from Assam to Burma, including Chittagong) belonged to the Sravaka school up until the time of Vasubandhu (Qanungo, 1988). Following Vasubandhu's death, several of his students spread the Mahāyana form of Buddhism to this region. These disciples introduced the Tantric and Vajrayana schools of Buddhism to Bengal, Chittagong, Arakan, and Thampadipa also known as Thampanagara (formal name of Bagan) during the 7th century CE. Since then, Mahāyana Buddhism enjoyed royal patronage and flourished in the region, continuing uninterrupted until the fall of the Pala dynasty in Bengal. During this period, the Koki lands emerged as significant centers of Buddhism, with both the Theravāda and Mahāyana schools coexisting without major conflict.

The study further suggests that during this time, the boundaries between Mahāyana and Theravāda (Hinayana) Buddhism were not clearly defined, resulting in a gradual blending of the two traditions. This led to the weakening of the Theravāda school under Mahāyana's influence, though Theravāda never completely disappeared from the region. The Vinaya and Abhidhamma teachings remained well-known, keeping Theravāda practice alive. Following the decline of Nalanda, Chittagong became the new headquarters of Buddhism. In his extensive analysis of archaeological and documentary evidence in *A History of Chittagong: Volume One (From Ancient Times Down to 1761)*, Qanungo highlights the region's Buddhist heritage. [10] However, according to Chinese traveler I-Tsing (671–695 CE), the four majors Nikāyas—M*ahāsamghika, Sthavira, Sammiti,* and *Mulasarvastivada*—belonged to the Theravāda school, indicating its earlier prominence in the region.

Despite the initial strength of Theravāda Buddhism in the region, Qanungo's account emphasizes that Mahāyana Buddhism gained substantial royal support under the Pala dynasty. Therefore, this led to the gradual decline of Theravāda as a dominant tradition, though it continued to survive as a smaller sect. The Pala emperors' royal patronage allowed Mahāyana to spread beyond Bengal to regions like Chittagong, Burma, and even Sumatra Island in Sri Vijaya (Indonesia). According to Sheng Chi's account, the king of Samatata (Chittagong) performed daily devotions by creating one hundred thousand Buddha statues from earth and reciting an equal number of slokas from the Mahāprajnaparamita Sutra. This demonstrates the region's strong Buddhist heritage and the significant role Mahāyana Buddhism played under Pala influence.

Sheng Chi documented the presence of over four thousand monks and nuns during his time, indicating that the Chittagong region had already emerged as a significant center for Mahāyana Buddhism during the Pala dynasty, which spanned from the 7th to 9th centuries. Dr. N.N. Law, in his analysis, notes that the Pala rulers of Bengal actively supported scholarly and religious activities in Chittagong during their reign. Additionally, the Chandras of Arakan, who governed Chittagong from 788 to 957 CE, were ardent patrons of the Mahāyana tradition, particularly protecting and venerating the Mahamuni shrine. Archaeological findings further reveal a strong link between Mahāyana Buddhism in Chittagong and neighboring Burma, as seen in the discovery of numerous Mahāyana Buddhist artifacts across Chittagong, Arakan, and Burma. These include images of Mahayanic deities such as Padmapani, Manjushri, Lokesvara (or Avalokitesvara), Maitreya, and various Bodhisattva forms.

Terracotta tablets, found throughout Burma and Bengal, frequently bear the well-known Pali stanza, "*Ye Dhamma hetu prabhavā*," inscribed on the pedestals of these images.

In summary, the most profound Buddhist influence in Bengal occurred during the Pala Dynasty (750–1162 CE), with the region flourishing as a major center for Mahāyana Buddhism. The Pala kings, who were devout Buddhists, heavily patronized Buddhist infrastructures, establishing monumental learning centers such as Vikramashila and Somapura Mahavihara (in present-day Bangladesh). These monasteries attracted scholars and monks from across Asia, promoting an intellectual and cultural exchange that enriched both the region and Buddhist thought in neighboring areas. The vast architectural and scholarly contributions that shaped Buddhist traditions often reflect the Palas' reign as the golden age of Buddhism in Bengal and Bangladesh (Vasu, 1911: 12).

However, with the fall of the Palas and the rise of the Hindu Sena Dynasty in the 12th century, Buddhism in Bengal began to decline. The Muslim conquests that followed further accelerated this decline, leading to a gradual loss of Buddhist influence in the region. Although the direct practice of Buddhism diminished, the religion's legacy endured through its lasting contributions to art and architecture, particularly at sites like Somapura Mahavihara in Paharpur. The enduring cultural and religious exchanges between Bengal and other Buddhist regions, including Southeast Asia, further solidified its place in the broader history of Buddhism in Bangladesh (Vasu, 1911: 120).

This following theme presents the historical evolution and doctrinal transformations of Buddhism in Bangladesh. To improve clarity and emphasize major shifts, key developments are organized into table 1, table 2, and a conceptual diagram. These visuals support the textual discussion by summarizing chronological phases, doctrinal distinctions, and regional impacts.

Table 1: Historical Phases of Buddhism in Bengal

Period	Key Events	Religious/Political **Significance**
3rd century BCE	Ashoka's missionary activities in Bengal	Foundation of early Buddhist institutions
1st–5th century CE	Spread of Mahayana and Second Council	Division into Theravāda and Mahāyāna schools
5th–8th century CE	Development of Tantric Buddhism	Doctrinal expansion and localized worship forms
8th–12th century CE	Pala Dynasty patronage	Golden Age of Mahayana Buddhism in Bengal
Post-12th century	Decline due to Sena Dynasty and Muslim conquests	Suppression and marginalization of Buddhism

Table 2: Key Doctrinal Features of Theravāda vs Mahāyāna

Aspect	**Theravāda Buddhism**	**Mahāyāna Buddhism**
Core Focus	Personal enlightenment (Arhat ideal)	Universal salvation (Bodhisattva ideal)
Key Texts	Pali Canon	Sutras like Lotus, Heart, Prajñāpāramitā
Practices	Monastic discipline, meditation	Devotion, merit-making, esoteric rituals
Metaphysics	Realist view of existence	Emptiness (śūnyatā), interdependence
Geographic Spread	Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia	India, China, Tibet, later SE Asia

The following figure 2 diagram illustrates the flow and influence of different Buddhist traditions in Bengal, from early Theravāda introduction to Mahayana and Tantric developments under the Pala dynasty, leading to the modern marginalization of the faith.

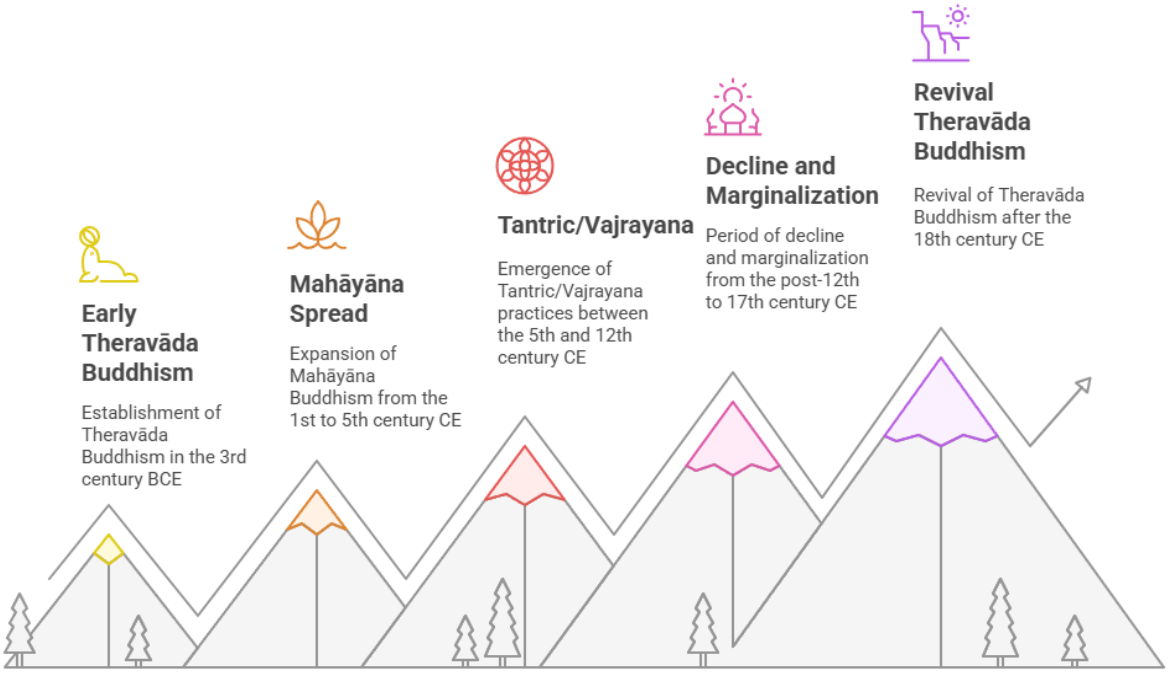

Figure 2: Conceptual Diagram of Buddhist Development in Bengal

As studies show that Theravāda Buddhism was introduced to Bengal in three major phases. According to the mixed types of legends and local myths, the first occurred during Gautama Buddha's lifetime, the second during King Asoka's reign, and the third in the 18th century, when it arrived from Burma (Singh, 2013: 23). Despite these introductions, Theravāda Buddhism could not sustain a long-term presence in Bengal due to various sociocultural and religious factors. The scholars often mark that the rise of Hinduism and the emergence of other Buddhist traditions, such as Tantric, Vajrayana, and Tibetan Buddhism, significantly influenced the decline after the Buddha's Mahāparinibbāna.

Secondly, Islamic invention caused one of the major losses of Theravāda Buddhist practices in India and the Bengal region. Therefore, Ikhtiyaruddin Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji, a Muslim invader, destroyed the Nalanda Buddhist University, which further accelerated the spread of Mahāyana Buddhism in Bengal. Because following this destruction, many Mahāyana monks sought refuge in Bengal, transforming it into a major center for Buddhist learning in Asia (Singh, 2013: 30–31). Mahāyana Buddhism flourished in Bengal for over a millennium, with the rulers of the Gupta and Pala dynasties serving as key patrons. The syncretism between Mahāyana Buddhism and Hinduism led to esoteric practices and the formation of various religious cults in the region, contributing to the complete disappearance of the Theravāda tradition in Bengal. Therefore, Bengal became a vital hub for Buddhist learning, which thrived under the patronage of local rulers for many centuries (A. Barua, 2004: 55).

The third phase of Theravāda Buddhism's arrival occurred in the 19th century, but its resurgence faced significant challenges. From the 12th to 17th centuries, Bengal had experienced numerous Muslim conquests, which led to considerable persecution of Buddhists and weakened Theravāda Buddhism to the point that it almost disappeared entirely (Smith, 2014: 48). The colonial era later sparked renewed interest in Buddhism, largely due to Western scholars who studied Buddhist artifacts and translated Pali and Sanskrit texts, providing a foundation for the possible revival of Theravāda Buddhism in India and Bengal (Smith, 2014: 52). Despite the renewed interest during the colonial period, the revival of Theravāda Buddhism in Bengal also faced considerable obstacles. Therefore, many monks and lay followers lacked knowledge of Theravāda's core principles and practices (Smith, 2014: 50). As a result, several Bangladeshi monks traveled to Burma to reconnect with the Theravāda tradition. Historical records indicate that a number of Bengali Buddhist monks visited Burma with the aim of restoring Theravāda Buddhism in Bangladesh (A. Barua, 2004: 60). However, these attempts were unsuccessful, and the monks returned without achieving their mission.

Another significant milestone in the revival of Theravāda Buddhism occurred in 1856 when Ashin Saramedha Mahathera, who is believed to be an Arakanese monk, traveled to Bodhgaya in India (A. Barua, 2004: 62). There he met Ven. Radharan Mahathera, a Bangladeshi Bengali monk who was well-versed in Pali, Sanskrit, and Arakanese languages. According to Theravāda rules, Bangladeshi Theravāda monks were not following the Vinaya, the monastic code of conduct (Smith, 2014: 58). This was revealed in their discussions between two most venerable monks in India. Ashin Saramedha Mahathera, therefore, understood that recognizing the need to purify and restore Theravāda Buddhism in Bengal, Ashin Saramedha expressed his desire to visit the region to help reestablish the proper Vinaya order (Singh, 2013: 35). Hence, Ven. Radharan Mahathera conveyed the message to the Chakma Queen Kalindi Rani (1830–1873), the chief of the Chakma cycle under the British government, after learning of Ashin Saramedha's intention (A. Barua, 2004: 56; Smith, 2014: 49). In response, Queen Kalindi Rani traveled to Myanmar in 1856, where she met Ashin Saramedha and officially invited him to assist in purifying and restoring the Theravāda Bhikkhu Sangha in Bengal (A. Barua, 2004: 65). This marked an important effort in reestablishing the Theravāda tradition, although its full revival faced numerous obstacles.

Ven. Saramitra Mahathera and Ven. Chandramohan Bhikkhu, two key figures, contributed to the reestablishment of Theravāda Buddhism under the Chakma Royal patronage in the region. Chandramohan Bhikkhu, also known as Kripasharan Mahathera, founded the Chittagong Buddhist Association in 1887, one of the earliest institutions dedicated to reviving Buddhist practices in the region (Sarker, 2013: 139). He also traveled to Burma (now Myanmar) and Sri Lanka to receive formal training, and upon his return, established monasteries and schools to educate the local population on Buddhist teachings (Smith, 2008: 97). The partition of India in 1947 and the subsequent formation of East Pakistan (later Bangladesh in 1971) introduced new challenges and opportunities for the Theravāda Buddhist community. During East Pakistan's era, the community faced marginalization; however, monastic leaders worked towards preserving their identity (A. Barua, 2004: 41–42). The Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord of 1997 was a significant milestone, as it led to increased recognition and support for indigenous communities, including Buddhists (Smith, 2014: 185). This accord allowed the community to practice their faith more freely and revitalize their cultural heritage (Sarker, 2013: 146). The revival of Theravāda Buddhism in Bangladesh from the 19th century to the present is a testament to the community's resilience. Through the dedication of key monastic figures, cross-cultural influences, and institutional support, Theravāda Buddhism has reclaimed its place in the cultural and spiritual landscape of the region. While challenges remain, the community's continued engagement with both local and international Buddhist networks suggests a promising future for the tradition in Bangladesh.

Institutions such as the Bangladesh Bouddha Kristi Prachar Sangha and the International Meditation Centre in Dhaka have supported Bengali Theravāda Buddhism's reestablishment in recent decades (A. Barua, 2004: 52). These organizations have played a pivotal role in promoting Buddhist education, meditation practices, and cultural events, thereby strengthening the community's religious identity. The influence of global Buddhist movements, particularly from Thailand, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, has further facilitated cross-border exchange and support, aiding in the spread of Theravāda practices (Smith, 2014: 191–193). Despite progress, Theravāda Buddhism in Bangladesh faces several challenges, including economic underdevelopment in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and occasional religious tensions with the majority Muslim population (Sarker, 2013: 151). However, growing interest in meditation and mindfulness, alongside international Buddhist support networks, has opened new avenues for the community (A. Barua, 2004: 60). The rise of social media has also allowed younger generations of Bangladeshi Buddhists to connect with the global Buddhist community, contributing to a renewed sense of identity and pride in their heritage (Smith, 2008: 199–201).

In summary, the history of Theravāda Buddhism in Bengal is characterized by cycles of introduction, decline, and attempted revival. The region's complex religious landscape, shaped by the influences of Hinduism, Mahāyana Buddhism, and colonial powers, significantly impacted the trajectory of Theravāda Buddhism. Despite numerous setbacks, there were consistent efforts by monks and patrons, such as Queen Kalindi Rani, to restore the Theravāda tradition to its original form in Bengal. Though the region witnessed several efforts to reconnect with the Theravāda lineage, the path to a complete revival has remained fraught with challenges.

Theravāda Buddhism, one of the oldest Buddhist traditions, experienced a significant decline in Bengal following the Muslim conquest in the 13th century. The revival of Theravāda Buddhism in

Bangladesh began during the 18th century, prompted by cultural movements and the intervention of local and foreign monks. This reemergence was driven by a mix of social, political, and religious factors. Before the advent of Islam in the Bengal region, Buddhism flourished under the patronage of the Pala dynasty (8th–12th centuries), which played a vital role in spreading Buddhism across Asia. The Muslim conquest, however, led to the decline of Buddhism, with Hinduism and Islam becoming the dominant religious traditions.

The remaining Buddhists in the southeastern part of present-day Bangladesh, primarily in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), sustained their faith through syncretic practices, integrating elements from Hindu and local indigenous beliefs (A. Barua, 2004: 10–12). The socio-religious conditions prevalent in the CHT paved the way for Bangladesh's 19th-century revival of Theravāda Buddhism. The British Colonial administration began to engage with the region, leading to interactions between local Buddhists and external influences. A notable Buddhist monastic and lay figure in this revival was Ven. Saramitra Mahathera, a monk from Myanmar who traveled to Chittagong and helped revive Theravāda practices (Sarker, 2013: 138). His efforts, along with those of other Burmese monks, led to a reintroduction of the Theravāda doctrine, including scriptural study, monastic ordination, and Vipassana meditation (A. Barua, 2004: 25).

Ethnic and Caste Dynamics in Bangladesh

Anthropological and archaeological evidence suggests that the Bengali-speaking population is a confluence of multiple ethnic groups with varied racial origins in early Bengal region. Early inhabitants of Bengal, as recorded in Aryan literature from approximately 2000–1500 BCE, included the Kikatas, Vratyas or Nishada, Sabara, Dom, Chandala, Pulinda, Kola, and Hadi communities (Sengupta, 2001: 28). Additionally, three major racial elements—the Dravidians, Mongoloid tribes, and Aryans—contributed to the formation of the indigenous Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, and other animist populations. The intermarriage between Dravidian groups from the southwest, Mongoloid tribes from the northeastern Himalayas and Chittagong Hill Tracts, and Aryans led to a distinct ethnic composition in Bangladesh. Scholars generally agree that Bengalis are ethnically distinct from Ary ans, emphasizing that while the Bengali population embraced Aryan culture and religion, they remained non-Aryan in origin (Chattopadhyaya, 2004).

Furthermore, scholars like P.C. Mahalanobis identifies seven significant caste groups present in the region: Brahman, Kayastha, Sadgopa, Kaibarta, Rajbanshi, Poda, and Bagdi. The Bengali Brahmans trace their origins to the upper caste groups of northern India, while Kayasthas, Sadgopas, and Kaibartas represent indigenous castes with strong ties to Bihar (Mahalanobis, and Chandra, 1920). Despite these cultural and ethnic distinctions, Bengali society adopted Aryan religious practices, which blended with local traditions over time (Nath, 1999: 112). Several indigenous philosophical and spiritual traditions—such as Buddhism, Jainism, and esoteric Tantric practices like Vajrayana, Sahaja, and Kalachakra—arose outside Aryavarta, the traditional Aryan cultural heartland in the Gangetic plains. These traditions significantly influenced Bengal's religious landscape, even as Aryan social norms and rituals permeated the region (Chakrabarti, 1995: 75–80). Ancient Bengal exhibited notable socio-cultural development before the arrival of the Aryans.

However, early Jain texts, including the *Buddhayana Dharmasutra* and *Acharanga Sutra*, describe the people of the Radha region as uncivilized and hostile toward religious reformers, such as Buddhist monks. These accounts highlight the tensions between indigenous populations and early propagators of religious doctrines. The British colonial administration compiled extensive documentation on the people, history, and cultures of Bengal, in Assam, Mizoram, Tripura, Arakan, and Burma in official gazetteers. Although these records may not always provide entirely accurate depictions, but these remain valuable sources for understanding the socio-cultural dynamics of the region during the colonial period (Allen, 1879: 23-32). These gazetteers offer insights into the customs, rites, rituals, and social structures of the indigenous communities. The early colonial record categorizes the indigenous groups of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, which shows in British gazetteers. For example, the Kuki Group, which includes the Pankhua, Bawm, Lushai, Khyeng, and Kumi, predominantly practices Christianity and animism while the Indo-Aryan Group includes the Chakma, Tanchangya, Tripura, and Chak communities, all of which practice Buddhism. On the other hand, the Magh Group includes the Buddhist communities of Marma, Rakhine, and Mro. The intersection of these diverse

ethnic and religious identities shaped the socio-cultural fabric of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the broader Bengal region (Lewin, 1869: 56–60).

Two Forms of Buddhism in Bangladesh

The 19th century saw the reestablishment of Theravāda Buddhism in modern Bangladesh, which now encompasses two distinct forms of Theravāda Buddhist practice. People usually refer to the Bengali-speaking Buddhists as the contemporary Barua Buddhists, who share common Bengali culture and tradition with Bengali Muslims and Hindus in Bangladesh and India. On the other hand, the tribal Buddhists, also known as Jumma Buddhists, who include the Chakma, Tangchangya, Chak, Marma, Mro, Rakhine, and others, primarily reside in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), located in the southeastern part of Bangladesh. These two forms of Buddhism hold a unique diversity of socioreligious cultural identities and maintain Theravāda Buddhist practice in the region.

However, regarding the origins and significance of the surname “Barua” among the Bengali Buddhists have much significant academic debate. "*Western Education and Modernization in a Buddhist Village of Bangladesh: A Case Study of the Barua Community*," Bijoy P. Barua (2004) describes that the term "Barua" derived from the Arakanese term "Bo," which means "chief of army," while "Roya" signifies "village”. Therefore, “***Bo + Roya***” became Barua (Roya is the Arakanese way of pronunciation and spelling), which means the village of the Army Chief. However, this study contrasts that the Arakanese term "Bo" alone cannot fully convey the meaning of "chief or general of the Army." Instead, the term "Barua" may be likely derived directly from the Arakanese or Burmese terms "**Bojo**" and "**Roya**." Because ***Bojo*** means “***chief or general of the army,***” while “***roya***” means village, both in Arakanese and Burmese languages. For example, the Burmese people refer to their national father (Aung San) as "Bojo Aung San," which means that "General Aung San."

Similarly, the Arakanese kings may have officially promoted some of the Bengali Buddhists to the rank of general as Bojo, while serving army in the ancient Arakhan kingdom. Most likely, the village where most Bengali Buddhists resided in Arakan held the title " Bojo” or General of Army, leading the Arakanese people to refer to that Bengali Buddhist village as "Bojo-Roya" in Arakanese languages during those days. Since then, Bengali Buddhists have used this term as their surname, but over time, the Bengali language corrupted it from Bojo-Roya to "Barua." On the other hand, Bijoy P. Barua holds the opinion that Bengali Buddhists probably adopted the surname "Barua" to escape Burmese aggression and social discrimination when Burmese King Bodawpaya Gyi invaded Arakan in 1785 (B. P. Barua, 2004: 43). Dr. Arabindu Barua (1907–1982) also holds a similar opinion, arguing that the adoption of the Bengali Buddhist surname "Barua" occurred much later than previously believed, as the Bengali Buddhists never used their surnames before the 19th century. However, they substituted many other terms, such as Phul Tangya, Pushka Chand, Nayan Chand Talukdar, Kirti Chand Joylaal Munishi Gangan Chndra, and so on. Aparna Chatterjee Sen (2020) argues that the surname of "Barua" among Bengali Buddhists cannot serve as a community identity, as many ethnic tribes such as Tripura, Santhal, Assamese, Munda, and Chakma[1] use their clan names as Barua. In fact, some Bengali-speaking Buddhist researchers have written Bengali Buddhist history based on early literary narratives to deconstruct the complex identity of Barua. For instance, Debolina Sen (2017) asserts in his research work, "*Religious Institutions of the Magh Barua Community of Kolkata*", that Bengali Buddhists are part of the Mogh or Magh group (Sen, 2017: 21-25).

Further, he explained that the term Magh or Mogh derived from ***Magadha***, an ancient kingdom of India in Vihar State. On the other hand, Chatterjee tried to theorize that the term Magh/Mogh derived from the Magadha, an ancient kingdom of India in southern Bihar province. Some Bengali Buddhists claim that they migrated from the Magadha kingdom to modern Arakan and Chittagong when the Muslim successors destroyed it in the 12th century. Bengali people called those migrants from the Magadha kingdom Magh/Mogh at that time. However, there is no such reliable evidence to support the notion that the term ***Mogh/Magha*** derived from Magadha. In fact, while it may be true that Bengali Buddhists migrated from the ancient Magadha kingdom of India, this study contradicts the opinion of

[1] The Chakma ethnic group subdivided into 36 sub-clans “Baruwa” goza is one of them, probably Arpana Chatterjee Sen (2020) refers it as Barua in Chakma community.

many Bengali researchers and writers, who argue that the term "Mogh or Magh" did not merely derive from the term Magadha.

Therefore, this study argues that the term *Mogh/Magh* is not a Bengali term but a Chakma term. "Mogh" which refers to "*poolish men or stupid ones*" in the Chakma language. The Chakma people specifically refer this term to Rakhine, including Marma peoples, as a negative expression due to their bad behavior toward other ethnic groups in ancient times. Cultural traditions and linguistic practices almost completely obscure the Rakhine and Marma ethnic groups. This is due to the Marma people's forced adoption of Arakanese cultures, languages, and traditions, which occurred more than four centuries ago, following their capture by the Arakanese King in Pegu (Bago) in 1599. In addition, the Chakma people also refer to the Rakhine and Marma peoples as *Ro-wangya Mogh or Romochakkra Mogh* (Agree Mogh), *Ubudho Mogh* (Upset Down Mogh), and *Khanpadha Mogh* (Ear Tear Mogh) due to their extreme anger expression in physical actions and mental hot temper. Generally, Rakhine men tend to be hot or short-tempered by nature, and they can easily become agree with someone or something, regardless of the reason.

When they get agree, they immediately act physical action without thinking, like a polished one, so the Chakma people used to refer to them as Mogh, a derogatory term. It is just like when a glass of water is turned upset down without cover where there is no water remained insight the glass at all. Therefore, the term Mogh or Magh originates solely from the Chakma language, not from the ancient Indian kingdom of Magadha, Bengali, or any other language. Arthur Phayre stated that the Bengali people gave the Arakanese the name Magh or Mag. However, the significance of this name remains unclear (N. C. Barua, 1986: 150). In addition, if the term originates from Bengali language, then it is crucial for many Bengali speakers today to comprehend its meaning. Therefore, early western explorers and local Bengali writers were confused about the term "Mogh or Magh," even though they were unaware of its meaning. This confusion stemmed from the fact that the term is not a Bengali or other language term, but rather a Chakma term that has not been thoroughly examined.

On the other hand, academics never investigated the term from different ethnic language family groups and whom it is referred to, so early explorers and writers categorized any group of people who came from Arakan Hill Tracts as a Mogh or Magh group, including Bengali Buddhists, Rakhine, Marma, and so on, while the rest of the ethnic groups fall into the Kuki group. Therefore, in the "*Eastern Bengal and Assam District Gazetteers: Chittagong Hill Tracts*," R. H. Sneyd Hutchison (1909) described the Chakma, Tripura, and others as Kuki groups (Hutchinson, 1909: 8). Hence, it is a gross mistake referring to other distinct ethnic groups as Mogh and Kuki. However, R. H. Sneyd Hutchinson clarified that the terms Magh and Kuki are the general designations of the people who inhabit a particular tract of country. Early literature shows that modern Marma Buddhists were known by various titles, including Maramagrii, Bhuya Magh, Jumiya Magh, and Kyongsa/ta, who came from the Arakan of Myanmar (Hutchinson, 1909: 29). Therefore, the Chakma people specifically referred to Mogh as the modern Rakhine and Marma tribes. In addition, the study examined the literature about Bengali Buddhists, which mentions "Marmagiri and Mogh," primarily consists of narratives from Bengali Buddhist researchers' perspectives. These narratives completely lack objectivity, as a result, it serves as a manifestation of pure Bengali Buddhist nationalism.

The western researchers such as Herbert Risley (1891), Hunter O'Malley (1908), and local writers such as Sukomal Chaudhury (1982), and Ram Chandra Barua (2010) have described Bengali Buddhists as belonging to the Mogh or Magh group, referring to them as Barua Magh, Royang Magh, Jumiya Magh, and so on (Risley, 1891: 79; O'Malley, 1908: 89; Chaudhuri, 1982: 130; Kiron & Singh, 2023), which are lack of proper thermology examination. Thus, this misinterpretation leads to the historical origins as vague and puzzled the modern researchers about ethnic groups. In fact, some Bengali Buddhist scholars assert that the Barua people were once warriors of Kashtriya Arayan, implying that the term "Barua" must have originated from "Bara-Aryan," meaning powerful warriors of Aryan. They also assert that Bengali Buddhists previously used the surnames "Mang or Meng" before adopting the Barua surname, a claim they aim to use as evidence of the Arakanese royal lineage. However, using the surname "Mang or Meng" cannot serve as evidence of an Arakanese or Marma royal family for a community identity, as there are many Arakanese people commonly use Mang, Meng, Maung, or Aung with their names. Some Bengali Buddhist writers depicted the Bengali Buddhist community in the Arakan State of Myanmar as "Maramagiri". However, British colonial records and data unequivocally demonstrate that the modern Marma people specifically referred to Marmagiri

during their early history (Hutchinson, 1909: 28). When the Arakanese king Manrajgiri invaded the lower Mon kingdom of Pegu (Bago) at the Burmese king's request. So, it is believed that the modern Marma people belong to the Mon Royal family of Pegu (now Bago). Thus, in 1599, Arakanese king Manrajgiri captured and transported 33,000 Mon (Talaing) families, including the Mon Royal family, to Arakan. The Arakanese king Manrajagiri married a captured royal princess of Mon Kingdom and later let his brother-in-law administrate Chittagong in 1614. For instance, the modern Marma tribe, belonging to the Mon royal family of Pegu (Bago), received the name Marmagiri in early Arakan to honor their community and royal race.

It is likely that the Arakanese Bengali Buddhists (Barua) adopted the term "Marmagiri" as an ethnic identity when the modern Marma ethnic group abandoned it and embraced the "Marma" identity. Thus, the Bengali Buddhists came to be known as Marmagiri in Arakan, while they are known as Barua in Bangladesh and India since the late 19th century. On the other hand, the Bengali Muslims in Arakan most likely adopted the Chakma term "Ro-wangya," which specifically referred to the Marma and Arakanese people as "Rowangya Mogh" in early times. Later on, the Bengali Muslims of Arakan, in response to Arakanese aggression, adopted and corrupted this term "Ro-wangya" to "Rohingya" in Bengali way. Therefore, by adopting this distinct identity, it secured their citizenship rights and other related human rights, positioning themselves as a distinct ethnic group within Myanmar. To sum up, this study argues that modern Bengali Buddhists do not belong to the Magh group but rather to the Vajji, or Varjji, who might be the royal descendants of a Magadha prince.

This study also agrees with this viewpoint that a royal race of Vajji princes fled to Chittagong with his seven hundred retinues to escape Islamic persecution against the Varjji people of Magadha when Muslim invader Mahammad Ikhtiyauddin Bakhtiyar Khilji conquered and destroyed the Magadha kingdom of ancient India in the 12th century (Sen, 2020: 28–29). Therefore, R. H. Sneyd Hutchinson referred to Bengali Buddhists as "Raj-Bungjee" in his documentary work "*Eastern Bengal and Assam District Gazetteers: Chittagong Hill Tracts*." He mentioned that many Buddhist Raj-Bungjee worked under Chakma and Bohmong cycles in Badarban and Chittagong districts in 1790. In this regard, this study posits that the prolonged history of Bengali Buddhist migration in the context of Herbert Risley (1891), Hunter, Sukomol Chaudhuri (1982), and Natun Chandra Barua's (1986) studies in support of the idea that modern Bengali Buddhists are descendants of Varjji princes from the ancient Indian Magadha kingdom.

Discussion

This study reveals that the distinction between Bengali Buddhism and Jumma Buddhism is not merely a cultural or regional variation, but a deeply political and ideological construct shaped by the state and reinforced through institutional discourse. The new knowledge produced here is the identification of Buddhism in Bangladesh as bifurcated not only by ethnicity but also by political function: while Bengali Buddhism serves as a domesticated, apolitical religious identity. On the other hand, Jumma Buddhism represents multicultural indigeneity as an indigenous marker of resistance, identity, and self-determination. This finding builds upon and extends Chakma's (2010) assertion that postcolonial states often engage in "ethnocide" by denying the distinctiveness of minority communities. However, this study further argues that such denial is not limited to legal erasure, but includes religious assimilation through selective representation of Buddhism itself.

The study also introduces new conceptual clarity by defining Jumma Buddhism as an indigenous politico-religious identity, rather than simply a tribal religious tradition. This challenges previous literature that has either generalized Bangladeshi Buddhism as a single entity (e.g., Barua, 2004) or subsumed indigenous practices under the broader framework of Theravāda orthodoxy. While Jhala (2019) acknowledges the political significance of religion among borderland communities, this study demonstrates that in the case of Bangladesh, state-sponsored Bengali nationalism uses constitutional and cultural tools to overwrite this significance—in essence, reducing Buddhism to a private, ethnic-neutral practice (Jhala, 2019). This contributes to the growing body of postcolonial and indigenous scholarship that critiques the nationalization of religion as a method of control and marginalization.

Another critical insight emerging from this research is the invisibility of Jumma Buddhism in both national and international academic discourse. While Bengali Barua Buddhism is well documented in scholarly publications and national media, the absence of Jumma Buddhist voices in academic

literature constitutes a form of epistemic violence. This aligns with Spivak's (1988) theory of "subaltern silence" and further supports Zubair's (2023) argument that the state systematically excludes indigenous narratives from mainstream historiography (Zubair, 2023). The documentation and analysis of Jumma Buddhist representation in this study thus fill a critical research gap by illuminating how religion, ethnicity, and resistance intersect in Bangladesh's southeastern periphery.

Furthermore, the study's reliance on Buddhist ethical frameworks—particularly mettā, karuṇā, and upekkhā—to interpret political and communal violence adds a normative dimension to the analysis. While previous peace studies, such as Mahathanadull et al. (2018), focus on Buddhist strategies for interpersonal conflict resolution, this study innovatively applies those principles to state-indigenous dynamics, offering an indigenous Buddhist critique of national oppression. In doing so, it contributes to the emerging field of Buddhist political thought.

In sum, this research offers a new interpretive lens through which to view Buddhism in Bangladesh—not as a singular religious tradition, but as a plural and contested space of identity, resistance, and exclusion. It aligns with but also goes beyond existing literature by integrating legal analysis, indigenous studies, and Buddhist ethics to build a multidimensional understanding of religious and cultural marginalization.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the two forms of Buddhism in Bangladesh—Bengali Buddhism and Jumma Buddhism—to reveal how religious identity intersects with state policies, ethnic classification, and cultural hegemony. The findings show that while Bengali Buddhism, practiced mainly by the Barua community, coexists relatively peacefully with the Muslim majority due to its integration into mainstream Bengali identity, Jumma Buddhism adopted "Jumma Identity" as a sociopolitical expression of indigenous resistance in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The state's constitutional framing and categorization of Jumma peoples as "small tribal" or even sub-tribe rather than indigenous have facilitated cultural assimilation and the denial of political recognition.

This research highlights that the apparent coexistence between these Buddhist forms masks deeper patterns of marginalization, human rights violations, and forced cultural erasure faced by Jumma Buddhists. These realities contradict the core Buddhist principles of *mettā* (loving-kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion), and *upekkhā* (equanimity), which emphasize dignity, respect, and peaceful coexistence. The study highlights the urgent need for policy reforms, public awareness, and academic engagement that center the voices and rights of indigenous Buddhist communities in Bangladesh.

Future research should expand on the lived experiences of Jumma Buddhists, explore interreligious dynamics with other minority faiths, and assess how Buddhist ethical frameworks can inform conflict resolution and inclusive nation-building. Without such efforts, the future of Jumma Buddhism—and the cultural pluralism it represents—remains at critical risk.

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