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Folk Culture and Urban Adaptation A Case Study of the Paharia in Rajshahi

Abstract

This paper deals with the folk culture of the Paharia, a small ethnic community in Bangladesh. From the prehistoric and protohistoric periods, they lived in the Santal Parganas and Rajmahal hills of the eastern region of India. In the early nineteenth century, a significant number of the Paharia migrated to the northern part of Bangladesh. A proud community that dominated their neighbors, their subsistence strategies were principally associated with plundering and their behavior continually threatened other groups. Later, a number of them migrated to the city of Rajshahi due to increasing unemployment in rural areas and diversified employment opportunities in the city. The present study explores the folk rituals and ceremonies, cultural adaptation, folk worldview, and pattern of acculturation in their new urban setting, as well as strategies they adopted for coping with city life.

Keywords: Paharia—folk culture—acculturation—cultural adaptation

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IN NORTHWESTERN Bangladesh, a small number of Paharia live side by side with other ethnic groups. They were once a very proud group that dominated other peoples in the eastern Indian regions of the Santal Parganas and Rajmahal hills. Although they were mainly concentrated in rural areas, due to a variety of factors, a number of them moved to the city of Rajshahi. This paper explores (i) how the ethnic Paharia adapt to an unfamiliar city setting; (ii) what sort of changes take place in their folk culture, social organizations, and worldview when learning to cope with city life; and finally, (iii) how they acculturate themselves to the new web of urban complexity in the city.

At the beginning of Indian history, the Rajmahal hills were occupied by two distinct ethnic groups—the Paharia, meaning “hillman highlanders” or “hill race,” who inhabited the summit of the hills, and the Santals, who lived in the foothills and valleys. The Paharia, the original inhabitants of this region, frequently attacked the Santals, who were the interlopers. The “hillmen” were considered to be utterly cruel characters throughout the Mogul or Muslim (1200–1757) and British (1757–1947) periods; they were said to be the scourge and “terror” of the Santals and the surrounding region. The Zamindars (superior land lords and revenue collectors appointed by the Mogul empire) and Izaradars (intermediate land tenure holders under the Zamindar) encountered strong resistance from these “hillmen.” They considered it dangerous to collect revenue and try to control the Paharia and sought to avoid them (ROWNEY 1882, 83).

The Paharia were depicted by DALTON (1872, 270–73), a renowned ethnologist, in the following way:

So long as the new colonist (Santals) confine themselves to the lowlands, the Paharia, from their lofty eyries, look down on their rapidly increasing cultivation with indifference; but the slightest attempt on the part of the Santals to encroach on the hills arouses their jealousy and ensures the expulsion of their intruder. Sometimes, indeed, they watch with chuckling complacency, the labors of a Santal, who presuming that all silence means consent, has been beguiled in clearing for a short distance the slopes of

the hills; but the moment he commences to cultivate, he finds very significant threats that he must withdraw, and leave the hillmen to profit by his toil.... In the Mogul period, they were encouraged in predatory habits by the Zamindars at the feet of the hills, who invited the chiefs to plunder neighboring estates giving them a passage through their territory for the purpose, on condition of getting the lion's share of the spoil. Thus tempted and encouraged, they grew to live on plunder and not only were the roads near the hills unsafe, but boats on the Ganges hugged the northern bank of the river to avoid them.

We can also acquire a clear sense about the behavior of Paharia from O'MALLEY (1910, 34), who sketches out these hillmen in the following manner: "This race of aboriginals abhorring regular labor eked out their meager crops by the chase and found a still more congenial occupation as robbers and cattle lifters."

During 1770, a few years after the British took over as the colonial power, a famine struck the alluvial strip of country lying between the Rajmahal hills and the Ganges with peculiar severity and the whole tract was in a state of extreme disorder. The terror caused by the Paharia was so widespread that the region was eventually deserted. Boat owners did not dare moor after dusk on the southern bank of the Ganges: even the government mail runners, who in those days passed along the skirts of the hills by way of Rajmahal and the Teligarhi pass, were frequently robbed and murdered in the foothills. The inhabitants fought against the government and its other subjects. The British encountered great resistance when invading the realm of the Paharia, describing them as the "wildest" and most "backward" Bengali aboriginals. Two British personnel, Captain Cleveland, a British administrator, and Bishop Herber, a priest, wrote about the extremity of the Paharia predatory involvement. Their comments, cited in O'MALLEY (1910, 35), are quoted respectively below:

The hill people are generally employed for plundering by the Zamindars and Izaradars officers. It has been almost a general custom with the low country inhabitants of Sultanabad, Rajshahi and Birbhum to employ the hill people in plundering each other's villages. And every man has been so deeply concerned, that even the sufferers have been afraid to complain lest their iniquitous practices should be brought to light (1783).

A deadly feud existed for the last forty years between them and the cultivators of the neighboring lowlanders, they being untamed thieves and murderers continuously making forays and the Muslim Zamindars killing them like mad dogs or tigers, whenever they got them within gunshot (1824).

THE PAHARIA IN NORTHERN BANGLADESH

Although the British colonial administration tried to control the Paharia, they were unable to achieve this completely. The Paharia governed themselves through their own system. Cleveland recruited young Paharia into a regiment of archers and salaried the chiefs according to their rank. Within two years of their formation this unit became the "Bhagalpur Hill Rangers," which existed until they were disbanded due to the reorganization of the Native Army after the mutiny of 1857 (see DALTON 1872; RISLEY 1891, 161).

Due to unavoidable factors, such as population increase, a shortage of food, and encroachment on their lands, the Paharia were forced to give up their own traditions and become agricultural laborers and sharecroppers. Eventually they migrated to the Bangladesh region. According to HUNTER (1974, 40), the Paharia and other ethnic groups of the Santal Parganas and Rajmahal hills emigrated to work in the plains of Behar and Bengal, principally in the thinly populated forest areas of Gudagari, Rajmahal Ghat, and Maanda in the north of the Rajshahi district (the entire administrative unit including rural areas). A large number of Paharia settled permanently and worked as laborers in indigo factories or plantations, and also as fishermen. Many of them visited district towns annually to work on railways or roads as day laborers, but they usually returned to their homes as soon as they made some money.

The Paharia who are settled in northern Bangladesh claim that they entered the country by various routes. Some in the Nachal area hold that their forefathers went to Nepal for work and from there came down to northwestern Rajshahi. Others claim to have crossed the Ganges at Rajmahal Ghat, north of the now well-known Farakka Barrage. But a great majority claim to have crossed the Lalgola, Bhagavangola, or Ghugumari either by steamer or boat and to have landed in Rajshahi either at Premtoli or Gudagari. Since there was no restriction on settlement in the *khas* (government-owned land), they began to settle down gradually. Some of them became farmers and most of them worked for Hindu and Muslim landlords, although they preferred to work for Hindus because of their relationship to Hinduism. They predominantly inhabited the Anderkota, Gakulnagar, Patharghata areas of the Rajshahi district (see HUNTER 1974; MALONEY 1977, 151).

In 1962, a communal uprising in the Rajshahi district forced a mass exodus of Hindus to India. Consequently, some of them lost their subsistence capabilities in their village and were forced to join the floating population (GOMES 1988). In search of a new livelihood, a small number of them migrated to the city of Rajshahi and settled in the outskirts of the city in the Paba, Boalia, and Shamukhdum Thana metropolitan regions.

STUDY AREA AND METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate the cultural adaptation of Paharia migrants in Rajshahi City, I used participant observation as my principal methodological tool, as this is the most fruitful anthropological approach in the study of small-scale communities both in the city and countryside regions. I employed structured and unstructured questionnaires in order to gain information on socio-economic and demographic characteristic, and used the Focused Group Discussion (FGD) method. I also consulted printed secondary source materials in developing the paper. I selected two clustered settlements, Chalk Para and New Christian Para within the Morshoil *mouza* (smallest revenue unit) under Shamukhdum Metropolitan Thana, for study. I collected data on 61 households from a total population of 275, consisting of both sexes and different age groups.

CHART 1: Socio-economic Information of Paharia in Morshoil mouza

Variables	Households N=61	Percentage
Family Structure		
Nuclear	56	91.08
Extended	05	08.02
Family Size		
Small (1-4)	46	75.41
Middle (5-8)	13	21.31
Large (9>)	02	03.28
Average Size (4.51)		
Education		
o (No formal schooling)	33	54.10
I-v	21	34.42
VI-X	06	09.84
XI>	01	01.64
Occupation		
Day laborer	42	68.86
Rickshaw Puller	06	09.84
Sweeper	05	08.10
Service	02	03.78
Small business	04	06.56
Blacksmith	02	03.78
Total	61	100

CULTURAL ADAPTATION TO THE CITY

It is evident that urbanization is taking place at unusually rapid pace in developing countries. After World War II, the emergence of new nation states actually opened a new era of population movements towards the cities from the countryside in search of better life. The cities became the foci for government, commerce, education, arts, crafts, and intellectual life. City centers emerged as nodal points for all kinds of activities and there is a universal expectation that moving from rural to urban areas will lead one to success. In reality, however, success rates vary. Once in the city, the rural peasant or ethnic groups have to adapt to the city environment and various problems associated with adaptation must be faced. On a general level, adaptation refers to changes and modification of cultural manifestations that people undergo in order to fit themselves into a new environmental setting. From a different theoretical consideration, however, we may note that urbanization involves not only moving to the city and the concomitant reorganization from agricultural to other pursuits, but also a shift in patterns of behavior and beliefs. The transitional period can be characterized as a situation in which a person must learn to function in terms of several cultural systems simultaneously. At one extreme level of adaptation to the city, the migrants may assimilate to the host society and totally absorb the way of life of the city people and eventually become a part of the host community. WIRTH (1938, 11–24) hypothesized that the ecological determinants of a city would have certain social consequences, notably anonymity, dependence on impersonal relations and sanctions, sophistication, and tolerance of change. Adjustment to a new socio-cultural context and the acquiring of control over an unfamiliar environment frequently require the abandonment of traditional customs and values (ANDERSON 1964, 1). On the other hand, there are circumstances that may not permit complete assimilation of the migrants into the city. According to Oscar Lewis, the total process of adaptation, and whether traditional or rural culture can continue to function in the city setting without major breakdown, depend upon the prevailing historic, economic, social, and cultural conditions (LEWIS 1952, 31–41). In the case of folk migrants like the Paharia, who have little information and knowledge about city life, this process is beset with numerous obstacles and difficulties. There is always uncertainty associated with moving into the city because the Paharia usually do not have adequate information about employment and settlement opportunities. Generally the Paharia enter the city via their kin, a friend's network, or by the assistance of Christian churches. They concentrate into clusters where the same ethnic groups settled earlier, thus limiting the process of assimilation and acculturation into the host (urban) complex groups. The slow rates of acculturation, in turn, help to account for the survival of indigenous culture patterns. The close proximity with the same

ethnic villagers in a very intimate residential arrangement helps the Paharia migrants to retain certain traditional elements of their culture. While the core social and cultural elements have not been disorganized or destabilized, under the pressure of complex urban influence a minor transformation is apparent. Some changes occurred in the Paharia beliefs, rituals, practices, symbols, and behavior, and some rural and folk forms have been slightly shifted and transformed or lost due to the different environment. Some symbols are retranslated or manipulated by the migrants to cope with the new setting. I will pursue this idea below by examining the migrants's major adaptation spheres.

a) Housing and Physical Setting

Paharia migrants to city areas need to make substantial adjustments with regard to dwellings and physical environment. In villages, the number of self-contained rooms was minimized in order to create enough open space for private courtyards. Construction materials were gathered (free of cost) from the embankment of the rivers and neighboring jungles. Yet in the urban environment, there is much less space and the current settlement is completely inadequate. It is, in fact, like a slum and lacks proper sanitation, water supply, electricity, and other metropolitan facilities. The houses typically contain only one room furnished with a bamboo bedstead and a small space for dining and household utensils. They are rough constructions that use flax plant and corrugated sheets for roofs, and most of them use mud pasted on bamboo branches for walls. They have a narrow veranda which serves both as a storage area and accommodation for guests and outsiders. Houses in villages generally have separate rooms for guests and outsiders. Every house has a small, separate, open, unroofed kitchen yard with a *chula* (oven): in the rainy season the veranda serves as the kitchen. Most households use cow dung cakes, firewood, and dry leaves collected from nearby gardens as fuel. None use kerosene stoves or gas *chulas*. Sanitation facilities are inadequate, with only 11 unhygienic *kancha* (locally-constructed bamboo) latrines for 61 households (1 latrine for about 30.25 people). There are only 7 wells located in different areas, which are used commonly for drinking water and washing.

b) Marriage and Affinity

The Paharia are patrilineal and patrilocal. As they have no clan or lineage segmentation, the marriage system is not regulated by the notion of exogamous or endogamous relationships. Instead, when arranging a marriage contract, they avoid any marital union of kinsmen up to the third generation from both parents. In their place of origin, that is, the Rajmahal hills, polygyny was a common form of marriage. A man was able to marry five or six wives and even five or six

sisters provided the eldest sister was willing. The first wife was the chief and others were subordinate to her (O'MALLEY 1910, 76–77). Gradually, as the Paharia were uprooted from the hills and migrated to the plains areas, they had to adopt different survival strategies in order to deal with economic hardships and environmental disadvantages. As a result, significant changes occurred in the forms of marriage and other social organizations. But the system of co-wives has not completely disappeared and divorce seems quite common in rural areas (GOMES 1988, 45). The co-wives system and divorce is generally seen among the non-Christian Paharia in the urban area as well. For that reason, the Christian (both Baptist and Catholic) Paharia express reluctance in giving their daughters to non-Christian Paharia males. In fact, the Christian Paharia have become completely monogamous. They do not divorce, since this is regarded to be a great sin, and they do not have co-wives. The most preferred and common type of marriage is known as *kirni bou*.¹ Most households occupy separate houses and 91.08% of the families are nuclear, comprising of husband, wife, and unmarried children. Extended families (08.02%) either have two or more sheds or a single home that contains only two or three rooms. Close relationships to rural relatives and kin are maintained. After family, the local neighborhood is the important social institution for urban migrants and these tend to develop through people from the same village. There is no clan or voluntary ethnic organization to help newcomers settle in and so the best option for new arrivals is to initially take up residence with their kin. Those who have no kin in the city often shelter with previous acquaintances from their village.

c) *Economic Activities*

As mentioned above, in their rural setting the Paharia were engaged almost exclusively in agriculture. Both men and women worked hard during the sowing and harvesting periods. They worked for farmer's families as *magna kamla* (receiving only food, not cash, as payment) and in return they were offered subsistence support from the farmers. City migration drew the Paharia into a cash economy which has, in turn, whetted their appetite for consumables from the city markets. The availability of new varieties of foodstuffs, household materials, toys for children, radios, televisions, and so on has added a different dimension to their lives. Furthermore, their work schedule has changed. Most migrants (68.86%) are employed as day laborers in nearby peri-urban agricultural fields as well as urban informal sectors, that is, sectors composed of unenumerated (not formally accounted in national statistics) workers. They are mainly self-employed and operate in unregulated markets through small-scale family-owned enterprises using skills acquired outside schools (HART 1973, ILO 1972). Most day laborers are engaged in road works, construction, and brick-crushing. Many

migrant households have more than a single wage earner, but all the workers are temporary and itinerant. Those who work with different NGOs and municipal corporations are relatively permanent. Women are engaged as sweepers and day laborers in informal sectors. They have to perform household duties as well, including food preparation such as rice and *sak* (fried or boiled green vegetable) and *chapatis* (home baked flat wheat bread), making cow dung cakes, washing utensils, and keeping the house clean. Fetching water is girls' work, whereas both boys and girls collect firewood and dry leaves and assist their mothers in household chores. Boys are also employed as street traders.

d) Religious Practices

The cluster of Chalk Para is inhabited by both traditional Baden (lower caste Hindus) and Protestants or Baptists. Traditional Baden perform religious activities as they did in the rural areas. The Protestant or Baptists perform their religious activities without any church-based assistance as the Baptist church has no elaborate religious or social welfare program for the ethnic Paharia. On the contrary, the Roman Catholic church of Rajshahi city implements various welfare programs not only for the Paharia but also other ethnic people residing in the city. It is also implementing a package of welfare programs for poor migrants and ensuring some support to the Paharia by providing land and housing facilities for newcomers, maintaining medical facilities, promoting child health and education, offering church facilities for praying, arranging weekly prayers, and so on. A young assistant priest from the central church comes at least once a week to teach them Christianity. The Paharia consider the Catholic religion more attractive and adaptive than others because of its status as well as its liturgy rich in signs and symbols. Drinking *taddi* (rice beer) is not a sin. People are very impressed by the dedicated service of Catholic missionaries, especially in the areas of educational expansion among non-literate people, poverty alleviation, and hospital facilities for the poor. People of Chalk Para (Baden and Baptist) as well as from other regions are being encouraged to convert to Catholicism.

e) Rituals and Ceremonies

A series of rituals and ceremonies that strictly regulates folk customs and beliefs is associated with the life cycle of the Paharia—they have to perform these from infancy to death. Although the form of some ceremonial activities has changed after urban migration, they have not been totally forsaken. These rituals and ceremonies serve to restore folk identity and constrain total assimilation with other urban groups. Songs and dances are categorized depending on the nature of the festival being celebrated. Different forms of songs and dances are observed

at weddings, birth rites, *loban* (new harvesting festivals), and funeral rites. The following discussion summarizes some Paharia rituals and ceremonies.

i) Wedding Song and Dance

The Paharia marriage ceremony is one imbued with joy and cheers. They believe that not a dull moment should pass during the ceremony. On the eve before the wedding, children and older boys and girls assemble in the bride/groom's house to prepare for singing and dancing to the band's music. The band, which comprises drums, flute, brass bell, bamboo pipe, and cymbal, performs a traditional symphony. The ceremony begins with the *chumani*, a combination of kissing, cheering, embracing, leaping, and touching the other's cheek by one's nose. A dancing woman shows reverence to the drums by showering paddy and stems of green creeper grass on them. Paddy signifies wealth and green creeper grass represents the youthfulness and freshness of the wedding partners. As the band plays, the children and youths begin to sing and dance in a semi-circular way in front of the band. All participants join in the chorus, which is composed with some word of blessing. In the city they sing secular songs, whether they are relevant to the ceremony or not. Hindi and Bangla songs are common, as band parties are more inclined to perform melodious songs from Hindi and Bangla movies. Although the elderly prefer Paharia compositions and sing them with great emotion, the young people consider them dull. Dancing and music alternate: males and females first sing verses of a chorus together, which is then followed by a lively tune by the band and dancing. This is usually repeated for as long as the participants want. The consumption of *taddi* and *ras* (fermented juice) helps make the occasion lively.

ii) Birth Rites and Name Giving:

Celebration of birth-related ceremonies involves a series of different rituals:

a) On the fifth day after childbirth, a purification ritual called *kaman* (shaving ceremony) begins in the morning. The baby is shaved and its hair rested under the mud of a pond or river. The father is also shaved and takes a bath, as does the mother. Along with other relatives, the baby is taken to the church and is named in the presence of a priest in a ceremony known as *baptisma* (Christianization). This ceremony is the first stage of the child's initiation. At that time, god parents, who must take care of the child in case the biological father dies, are also selected. The participants take part in the prayers, wishing the newborn a happy life. Non-Christian Paharia arrange a quite different form of ceremony, the *narta* (feast) festival. All the villagers participate at the feast and present gifts to the newborn baby. The child's name is decided in the presence of the *sardar/mandal* (headman).

(b) On the seventh or ninth day, the *achi ghar* (labor room) is cleansed and washed. The mother can freely mix with the family members but not with the community. Neighbors are still regarded polluted at that time.

(c) Pollution can be eradicated any time after a second purificatory bath, which generally takes place three or four months after the baby's birth. The purpose of this ritual is to announce that the mother and child are cleansed. The community confirms the final purification of the mother and the acceptance of the child as one of its members. A number of community members are invited and they eat, drink, and participate in festive dancing and music, just as in the wedding ceremony. There is no significant difference found between Christian and non-Christian Paharia in observing this purificatory ritual.

iii) Funeral Rites:

In villages, after conducting a customary ritual at home, the corpse is carried on a stretcher and taken to the *shawshanghat* (graveyard). The participants chant *hori, hori bol* in the same manner as at the Hindu ritual, and shower puffed rice on the corpse, which is usually burned in the traditional Hindu manner.² In the city, however, this occurs after Christian rituals are performed. The corpse is taken to the church, prayers are offered by mourners, and finally, the corpse is buried, not burned, in a nearby graveyard. Non-Christians also bury corpses instead of burning them.

After the burial is completed, everyone bathes. The headman usually consults with the bereaved family members and relatives about the *sradhha* (feast), which is given in honor of the deceased a short time after death. Observing *sradhha* signifies the lifting of pollution and the heavenly placing of the soul, which is obligatory for both Christians and non-Christians alike. According to Paharia beliefs, "the sooner *sradhha* is over, the better the chance the soul has of entering heaven." In this ceremony, invited guests and relatives are offered *khichuree* (hotchpotch) and *taddi*. It is an occasion which brings the community together, and they not only eat and drink but also use the opportunity to settle any outstanding disputes. Elders and respected guests sit together and drink *taddi* while the young people sing and dance to the band's music. The singing, drumming, and dancing may go on throughout the night. Through this ceremony, the community finally sees the soul off with the statement, "Be satisfied; spare us now and have no more claims on the family."

f) Poverty and Changing Worldviews

In dealing with the complex urban environment, migrants encounter not only new physical settings, residential organization, and occupational strategies; their worldviews also require modification. Yet individual worldviews are affected by

social and economic positions. The more rapid the changes in economic and social position, the greater the changes in worldviews. The Paharia still remain poor in the city and their poverty parallels that of the poorest groups in rural areas. Limited opportunities to improve their socio-economic status forces them to continue to survive in a culture of poverty in the city. Their concern is day-to-day survival, not upward mobility. As G. FOSTER's (1965, 293) "image of limited good" holds, they are forced to think that all valuable things in the world are limited. This culture of poverty acts as an obstacle toward integration with the complex urban culture. Consequently, the Paharia generally lack the ambition to be wealthy city dwellers. For many, the idea of reaching beyond their current position means ignoring both the dominant sentiment in the community and their own ethnic boundaries. However, a small number of middle class migrants have an optimistic worldview whereby they try to establish a base upon which their children can build an even better life. Thus, sending children to educational institutes is seen as a way of leading to a better life.

CONCLUSION

The present discussion on urbanite Paharia explores the process of cultural adaptation to a new and unfamiliar environment. Like other poor ethnic migrants, the Paharia frequently find difficulties with the unfamiliar patterns of city life. In negotiating within the multicultural city setting, they encounter numerous modern urban customs and conventions. They acculturate various forms of cultural aspects prevailing in urban society and try to adjust to them. While there is a process of assimilation between two cultures, traditional and modern, the traditional construction of identity and folk views as well as other elements of the rural lifestyle are not completely eradicated. Although the Paharia have become urbanized over a long period of time, a state of "ruralization" and "folk consciousness" within the settlement that resists total assimilation with urban society is maintained. At present, Paharia folk culture is transforming, which is evident in some cultural elements such as the economy, social organizations, rituals, language, and kin networks. Housing and physical conditions are different from the previous rural setting. The patterns of economic activities have shifted and restructured their livelihoods. The systems of family, marriage, and affinity have been restructured but have not lost their rural forms. A loose social network is also emerging in some cases, such as labor unions. The relationships between visiting kin and relatives are almost the same as in rural areas. In order to establish viable coping strategies to deal with the complexities of urbanization, the Paharia have adapted other elements of their culture, such as treating illness and healing, communication methods and language use, and other material and

non-material components. Folk beliefs and rituals have not been abandoned in the urban environment but are undergoing transition.

NOTES

1. Marriage by payment. The groom must pay his future bride's parents either with rice or money in order to marry their daughter. The groom's parents take all the initiative with the marriage arrangements in consultation with close relatives. After performing a series of rituals and ceremony, the bride goes to live with her husband's family.

2. According to Hindu custom the corpse is first placed on a pyre (a stack of wood) in a nearby graveyard. One of the deceased's closest male relatives lights the pyre with a bundle of burning straw and touches the mouth of the deceased with it.

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