

# Ethnicity and Ethnic Formations Among the Bengali Refugees: A Micro Study in Central India

Ms. Kritika Mishra<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Nilakantha Panigrahi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>UGC-NET-JRF Doctoral Fellow, Department of Anthropology and Tribal Development, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya (A Central University), Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh

<sup>2</sup>Professor of Anthropology, Department of Anthropology and Tribal Development, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya (A Central University), Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh

## Abstract:

Ethnicity and Ethnic formation is a part of human social evolution. Such social formations over the time are influenced by various processes like cooperation and conflict, mobility, adoption and rejection etc which are guided by primordial features like region, language, religion, culture etc. Secular factors enforced by market during last few centuries have started playing important roles and became very pertinent in human day- to- day life, reflecting the syncretic manifestation of culture, politics and economic transformations in the society. However, the fact remains that the secular approach could not even wipe out the cultural content of ethnic formations and ethnicity all over the world in different human societies. With this premise, the paper while taking certain socio- cultural indicators, aims to explore the ethnic formations and ethnicity of the Bengali refugees at destination of their rehabilitation in India. The study observed that the Bengali refugees who have come from Bangladesh maintain a harmonic relationship with the local people and also project their ethnicity. The paper argues that ethnicity in Indian context has to take the help of certain primordial and secular characters so as to maintain a judicious inter-ethnic boundary for survival and prosperity of the refugee community.

**Keywords:** Ethnicity, Ethnic formation, socio-cultural adjustment, Bengali refugees, local people.

## Introduction

Development is progressive, human and secular by nature. It is manifested in economic growth, equity, access to resources distribution and improvement in the quality of life. It aims to bring peace and harmony among different ethnic groups living in a space beyond time. Ethnic processes manifested in various forms in all the societies and in all the time are universal but contextual. Therefore, the ethnic identities reflected through various processes like ethnic conflict, social mobility, changes in socio-cultural boundaries, have supported and also became barriers to its development. All these processes have created syncretic manifestations of culture, political and economic transformations in the society.

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<sup>1</sup>UGC-NET-JRF Doctoral Fellow, Department of Anthropology and Tribal Development, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya (A Central University), Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, Email- [kritika.j.mishra@gmail.com](mailto:kritika.j.mishra@gmail.com) , 8319077060, 7869483240 (M)

<sup>2</sup> Professor of Anthropology, Department of Anthropology and Tribal Development, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya (A Central University), Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, [Email-nilakantha.panigrahi@gmail.com](mailto:Email-nilakantha.panigrahi@gmail.com), 8249300592.

The fragmented social boundaries observed in many societies are expressed in various forms many times have created havoc in the projection of larger national identities, which have been well reflected in all nations including India. In Indian context due to its multi-lingual, multi-racial and pluri-cultural features, with the changing time and philosophical development through governance, it has become necessary to understand, analyze and interpret the inter-group relations in terms of mutual adjustment, mutual attractions or repulsions, prejudices and superiority or inferiority (Panda & Panigrahi 1998).

The objective ascriptive properties in various forms of ethnic markers like region, language, sub-region determines the enclosing devices with immense contributions in the formation of socio-cultural identities and maintenance of cultural pluralism in India. The processes of Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation (LPG) and market economy approach could not even wipe out the cultural contents of such formations fully, however, the levels of boundaries among culture, region and people have been more or less refined and defined situationally and strategically in commensuration with the changing philosophy of national development approach adopted by the State.

In such a situation various ethnic markers are used as a resource to express unity in day-to-day life on the basis of occupations, caste to make social transactions, region to have socio-economic security and religion to gain moral, political support and geographical statehood as a defensive mechanism (Ibid). Many trading communities in India like the Gujratis, Punjabis, Sindhis, Marwadis, who are economically powerful may represent linguistically minority in the context of spatio-temporal dimensions of host society, but they influence the political economy of the society at destination. The refugees across the world are one such community who are forced to cut beyond the socio-cultural and geo-ecological region equally influence not only their life and living, but also the societies at the destination. Keeping this in mind the present study purposefully has selected the Bengali refugees who came into India from East-Pakistan, (Now known as Bangladesh) from a different socio-cultural context and rehabilitated as the refugee mostly in natural resources rich regions of Central India.

## Review of Literature

The paper has attempted to review couple of published research papers on the issues directly related to ethnicity and ethnic formations among the refugees living across the world. **Turton (2005)** highlighted that in case of refugees, they are being forced to leave their homeland often brings ethnic identities into sharper focus. Displacement can lead people to cling more strongly to their cultural roots, or in some cases redefine what those roots mean in a new context. **Nittali (2013)** highlighted that during the partition in 1947, Bengali refugees came into India, especially women from East Bengal experienced extreme hardships such as social shame, exile and assault. **Sen (2014)** examines refugee memories to shed light on their omissions and silences, identifying the mythic framework shared by popular and scholarly refugee narratives and examining its role in creating a particular cultural identity for Bengali migrants. **Maehler (2021)** emphasized that the social environment plays a dual role in ethnic identity formation, while positive intergroup contact facilitates development of healthy identity, experiences of discriminations and various forms of complex challenges. **Mishra & Panigrahi (2021)** highlighted socio-economic difficulties with respect to the rehabilitation of Bengali refugees in Chhattisgarh and observed that because of their cultural and economic differences, Bengali refugee community frequently found it difficult to integrate with the local tribal inhabitants. **Zehmisch (2022)** highlighted the processes of historical, social, and political variables which have formed the complex dynamics of identity, pain and ambitions among Bengali Hindu refugees in the Andaman Islands. **Mukherjee (2023)** documented

women's contributions to the refugee movement, who are the key players in the struggle for acceptance and rights. **Hussain (2024)** draws attention to issues the host community is facing, includes growing school expenses and disruptions in the labour market which are taken as refugee crisis. **Mukherjee (2024)** examines the post-Partition 1947 migration of East Bengali refugees to Calcutta, emphasizing their continued displacement, social isolation, and distinctive self-fashioning in connection to physical environments.

Most of the studies have highlighted various problems faced by the refugee communities at the beginning when they forcefully enter into a new scenario outside their nation. Very few studies have focused on the processes of ethnic formations which took place among the refugee community with respect to their socio- cultural and economic life and living in long term. Very few studies have been carried out among the old refugee communities at their destination settlement areas to understand various ethnic processes/ strategies adopted by them in relation to the local residents who have sacrificed their age old natural and cultural resources to accommodate them with current situations. Keeping these aspects in the mind, the paper based on the authors Ph.D. research work attempts to find out the processes the refugee Bengalis have adopted to consolidate their position at destination both within the community and in relation to the local communities. More specifically the present paper has the following few specific objectives:

1. To find out the basic socio- economic profile of the Refugee Bengalis settled in Chhattisgarh.
2. To find out the processes and levels of socio- cultural adjustments of the Bengali refugees across the generations with respect to linguistic adjustment, friendship networks, marriage network, celebration of festival and festivities.
3. To document the formation and functioning of Bengali ethnic associations, maintenance of ethnic boundaries and assertion of ethnic identities.

### **Research Methodology**

The study has purposively selected Surajpur and Surguja districts of Chhattisgarh, since both the districts are adjacent to each other and carries a sizeable Bengali refugee rehabilitated colonies. Looking at the distribution of rehabilitated colonies which are multi-ethnic by nature, the study has identified two villages Ganeshpur and Silphili in Surguja district and Digma and Chathirma in Surajpur district of Chhattisgarh. Around 51 Bengali refugee households from among the total Bengali households have been identified from each selected village by using Tippet's Table for in depth study. Thus, the study has covered a total of 204 Bengali households representing four rehabilitated colonies of four-gram panchayats of two districts of Surguja administrative division under one major cultural zone of Chhattisgarh.

The study has used multiple tools to explore data from the respondents. More particularly, the study adopted interview schedule and various guidelines for taking case studies and in-depth interviews. In addition to, observation method was also used to strengthen the data base. The quantitative data have been processed with the help of Excel sheets, percentage distribution and making averages, while the qualitative data have been processed in a descriptive form.

### **Bengali Refugee: A brief**

A *refugee* is defined as a person who owing to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside their

country of nationality and is unable or unwilling to return due to that fear (UNHCR, 1951/2010). **Bengali refugees** primarily refer to displaced people from East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) who migrated to India, especially after the 1947 Partition and the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. Large-scale migration of the Bengalis from Bangladesh occurred due to communal violence, political instability, religious persecution, and economic hardships. In states like West Bengal, Assam, and the Dandakaranya region (including parts of Chhattisgarh and Odisha), these refugees sought resettlement, leading to both cultural integration and ethnic tensions (Chatterji, 2007).

Partition of India created a new type of migration popularly known as massive displacement which have resulted in utmost physical difficulties and severe mental trauma on individual and collective psyche (Zinkin, 1957). The Mount Batten Plan of 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1947 envisaged the setting up of Boundary Commissions to demarcate the boundaries of the divided territories of Punjab, Bengal and Assam. This affected the amicably settled Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs of these regions, resulting post – communal violence and massive displacement of population who were forced to flee in different directions in search of a safest place. In subsequent period the post-colonial Indian government and its constituent States had to share the burden of the refugees in the form of provisioning relief, rehabilitation and resettlement with respect to their education, employment, medical aids, house sites etc with an aim to minimize the loss of livelihood, mental agonies, human potential, disruption of communal harmony, cultural disintegration and many other human rights.

One such Rehabilitation and Resettlement (R and R) project taken by Government of India for the Bengali refugees who came from East Pakistan (presently known as Bangladesh) is popularly known as Dandakanya Development Authority (thus known as DNK Project) started in 1958 (Government of Chhattisgarh, 2012). These Bengali migrants came into India in three phases: The first phase settled in West Bengal, the second phase settled in Assam and Tripura, while the third phase settled in Central Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh including the region of newly formed State of Chhattisgarh, while a small section of this population was relocated in Andaman Islands. In Orissa they have been rehabilitated in Koraput (undivided), while in Chhattisgarh they are rehabilitated in Bastar region (undivided) (Government of India, 2015).

The Dandakaryana (DNK) Development special project turned a new leap in the life and culture of the tribal people living in Dandakaryana region. The DNK project area is filled with dense forest, countless streams, pleatues and affected by high incidence of malaria. The project provided all infrastructural facilities like roads, schools, health centers, safe water bodies, agricultural land, house sites, etc for the refugees and also for their animals. The resettlement of the Bengalis in Malkangiri Villages (Thus known as MV) was opposed by the local tribe Koya in 1962 with the apprehension that the non- tribals resettled in their villages will exploit their natural resource base. Around 5000 Koyas in their traditional dress with bow and arrow ventilated their grievances in initial days of the project against the rehabilitated refugee Bengali people (Tripathy, 2018). This forced many refugees to flee away from their rehabilitated colonies in initial period of the project. However, many of them were returned back with a lot of assurances of peaceful co-existence with the local tribal people.

During last couple of decades, it is observed that the Bengali settlers due to Government support as well as due to their own sincere hard labor they have developed to a great extent. The development indices are reflected in their educational achievements, adoption of new innovations in agriculture and animal husbandry, employment, material status, economy, bargaining power, political representation, etc. However, such changes are not visible in the entire region among all the Bengali households and the

local tribal people. Quite a sizeable Bengali household in later period are deprived of accessing the benefits of development. This has also created ill feeling among the host communities which have been well studied by Panigrahi (2006).

### **Basic Profile of Study Bengali Refugee**

The paper attempts to give a basic profile of the 204 studied Bengali households who carries 908 total populations, which reflects nearly balanced in terms of gender distribution. Males constitute 49.75 per cent (492 persons), while females are slightly higher at 50.25 per cent (497 persons). The community has a youthful demographic status. About 31.95 per cent of individuals fall in the age group of less than 19 years' category, while the largest group falls in between 20 to 39 years (33.87%). The middle-aged (40–59 years) share around 25.18 per cent, whereas, the elderly (60+ years) account for only 9.00 per cent. The community mostly constitutes predominantly a young population with strong working-age potential. As regard the marital status distribution of the total Bengali population around 40.34 per cent are unmarried, and the majority of 51.97 per cent are married. A small proportion is widows/widowers (6.57%), while cases of desertion (0.40%) and divorce (0.71%) are rare. The average age at marriage is 19 years for males and 17 years for females, reflecting an early marriage trend. The average household size is 4 persons, which aligns with the nuclear family pattern. Education levels of the Bengali people vary significantly. About 73 per cent are illiterate, while the largest share to the extent of 204 (22.47%) people has completed primary level and 199 have completed secondary education. Middle school acquired by 147 and higher secondary by 157 Bengali population. Only 12.33 per cent have graduated and a mere 2.53 per cent have attained post-graduation highlighting a moderate literacy level with limited access to higher education. The economy of the Bengali community is primarily agrarian, as 154 households (75.49%) are engaged in agriculture operations. A small fraction of 15 households (7.35%) works as government employees, while only 31 (15.20%) households are in business. The least share, 1.47 per cent are engaged in tertiary occupations such as tailoring, carpentry, and daily wage labour. All the Bengali Refugee households (100%) possesses both Aadhar cards and Voter ID cards, indicating full coverage of essential identifications to access any formal welfare programs of the State. However, only 99 households possess (48.53%) PDS (Ration) cards, 99 households (37.25%) have MGNREGA job cards, and 68 households (33.33%) have post office accounts. This indicates that almost all the Bengali refugee households have basic identity proofs, while their access to welfare schemes and financial inclusion remains partial.

### **Bengali Refugee: Socio-Cultural Adjustment:**

It is expected that a refugee community at destination over the time develops various mechanisms to adjust with the local communities by way of developing various mechanisms in their socio-cultural life and livings. Keeping this in mind the present study attempted to document few socio-cultural process the Bengali refugee community has developed with respect to linguistic adjustment, adoption of friendship networks, marriage networks, celebration of Festivals and festivities, formation and functioning of ethnic associations, maintenance of ethnic boundaries and assertion of ethnic identities. The purpose is to understand the socio-cultural processes developed and adopted by a refugee community for their initial survival and later period making control over the available local socio-cultural and livelihood based resources for their sustainable existence.

## Linguistic Adjustment

The Bengali ethnic identity is rooted in shared language, traditions, and cultural expressions that connect people across multiple boundaries of India and Bangladesh (Chakrabarti, 2015). For the past six decades, Bengali refugees have been residing in Chhattisgarh. The long duration of settlement has naturally led to considerable adoption of the Bengalis with the local languages. With this premise, the present study has tried to explore the manner that how Bengali refugees have adjusted linguistically over generations. The findings reveal that while the Bengalis have integrated well into the local linguistic environment, they still carry and maintain their distinct identity. The grandfather generation were conversant in Hindi and the regional dialect, *Surgujia*, though their speech retained phonetic traces to Bengali, resulting in a hybrid pronunciation style. In contrast, the father's and children's generations now speak Hindi and *Surgujia* more fluently, adopting the local accent with ease. At the same time, they retain significant proficiency in Bengali, though local speech patterns have influenced their *Bangla* to some degree. Thus, variations in vocabulary and accent between their use of Hindi and Bengali are evident across generations, reflecting patterns of linguistic adjustment.

The study has also focused on the generational differences in reading, writing, and speaking skills across languages adopted by the Bengalis. Findings show a notable decline in *Bangla* writing ability among the younger generation when compared to the grandfather generation in both study districts. Conversely, proficiency in writing Hindi and English has increased significantly across recent generations, driven by educational, social, and employment needs. In the father's generation, fluency in Hindi became essential for engaging in market activities and interacting with the local host community, who dominate trade and commerce. As a result, the families engaged in business were compelled to acquire Hindi and the *Surgujia* dialect for survival and growth. Despite these shifts, *Bangla* is the primary spoken language within households, used consistently among family members, relatives, and the wider refugee community.

In the grandparent, parent, respondent and children generation, Bengali is the dominant language, with 100 percent of *Bangla* speaking and also possessing understanding ability. In grandparent's generation only 21.08 percent can read and 9.31 percent can write in *Bangla*. Hindi, English and *Surgujia* show minimal functional exposure with no writing, reading, speaking and understanding ability. A shift becomes evident in the parental generation, where 66.18 percent report reading *Bangla* and 48.04 percent reported writing *Bangla*. Reading Hindi emerges modestly with 16.67 percent, while 52.94 percent indicate speaking proficiency, suggesting practical bilingual adoption by the refugees. *Surgujia* exposure increased from 48.53 percent speaking and 80.88 percent understanding. Respondent generation shows substantial linguistic diversification. Bengali retention remains strong at 97.06 percent exhibit both reading and writing skills in *Bangla*. Crucially, English appears prominently for the first time, with capacity of 37.25 percent reporting writing and reading. *Surgujia* based understanding among the respondent's generation reaches 100.00 percent, reflecting consistent local interaction. The children's generation displays the highest multilingual proficiency in Hindi writing and reading to the tune of 61.76 percent, and 66.15 respectively which indicates their linguistic integration with the local. English language maintains a robust presence in children generation to the tune of 60.29 percent in reading, writing, speaking and understanding which clearly reflects the adoption of modern schooling. *Surgujia* remains relevant, with 39.22 percent speaking ability and 58.82 percent demonstrating understanding, suggesting sustained adoption but yet at the level of secondary usage.

The data show that speaking Bengali at house and in the village with other Bengali maintain their linguistic boundaries and strengthens their belongingness which is otherwise known as Bengali ethnicity, projected before other non-Bengalis. Bengali refugees since father's generation for the survival started adopting local *Surgujia* dialect, Hindi and tribal languages. This helps them to reduce the gaps between Bengalis and tribals and Bengalis and other communities/ societies in the market. Bengalis became successful to adopt Hindi and *Surgujia* as their lingua franca in the market and during interaction with non-Bengalis. By this they strategically minimized the gaps between Bengalis and non-Bengalis and also maintained their linguistic affinity within the Bengali community. This strengthened their ethnic formation not only within the community, but also gradually projected Bengali linguistic community as a force in the region, market and outside, which also became a bargaining tool at the time of different elections of parliament, state assembly and local Panchayat body. This led them to bargain with larger political parties, before the local governance system and with the local communities which became a resource for them to mobilize certain welfare activities and/ or benefits for the Bengalis and for Bengali rehabilitated colonies. The above data reflect that the Bengali refugees in the study villages have successfully used their language in favour of their community interests. The ethnic identifications on the basis of language subconsciously start at the school level in the minds of the Bengali refugee students when they interact to Bengali and maintain their friendship networks which is strongly maintained till the completion of school education. This helps making and maintenance of Bengali ethnicity from the school going Bengali children for a longtime in their childhood.

### Friendship Network

Network of friends among men is natural and very crucial to their existence as it is interlinked with the structure of relationships formed by them for support, companionship and emotional exchange. In addition it offers a safety net and creates a chance for engagement and adoption of change. Of late its importance in the market situation became a major tool for success. In light of this, the study attempted to record the Bengali refugee friendship network to understand the social boundaries maintained by them. It is observed that among the grandparent's generation in the Bengali community, 100 per cent(204 individuals) are having friendships within their own ethnic group, indicating a strong preference for maintaining social ties among people sharing the same linguistic and cultural background. Only 58 Bengalis (28.43%)opined of having additional friends outside the Bengali community, suggesting limited inter-ethnic interaction at the older generation level. This clearly highlights that the elder generation tends to preserve traditional social boundaries and cultural homogeneity, by way of maintaining friendship network for various purposes in their day- to- day life.

The parental generation shows a noticeable increase in maintaining friendship network beyond the ethnic boundaries. While all 204 individual's Bengali refugees maintained friendships within their own community, around 138 respondents (67.65%)agreed of having friendship relations outside their ethnic group, demonstrating greater social exposure and inter-community interactions, possibly influenced by occupational mobility, education and exposure to market environments, which in other words interpreted as survival strategies for the growth and prosperity for very few.

In the respondent's generation, all the households (204 individuals) have intra-ethnic friendships, but 185 (90.69%) also have friends outside the Bengali group. This significant rise suggests that the current generation is far more inclusive for certain purposes like maintaining cultural boundaries, political identities in the region, social inclusiveness and open to inter-ethnic social networks. It reflects increased

social interaction across communities due to modernization and migration processes. This proves when one looks at the empirical findings that such processes taking place from the very childhood of the Bengali community.

Among the children's generation equally all households (204 individuals) have friends within their own ethnic group, and 204 (98.04%) respondents agreed of maintaining friendships outside the ethnic group. This generation shows the highest level of social integration and inclusivity, suggesting that ethnic boundaries in friendship networks are becoming less rigid over time. Exposure to diverse environments such as schools and common playing grounds likely contributes to this trend, which minimises the gaps between the refugee Bengalis and other tribal and non-tribal caste communities at the local level.

The Bengali community shows a progressive pattern of social openness across generations. While the grandparent's generation was largely insular and ethnically bound, the younger generations especially children display a more diverse friendship network. This shift illustrates how social modernization, education, and cultural exchange have gradually bridged ethnic divides, fostering inter-community harmony and integration for the Bengali refugees at destinations.

### **Marriage Network Pattern across Generations-**

Marriage is generally defined as a socially recognized and culturally sanctioned union between individuals that establishes rights and obligations not only between the spouses, but also between their families and wider social groups (Ember & Ember, 2011). The Bengali community consists of 204 households, accounting for a total of 989 individuals. Among them, married persons form the largest group with 514 (51.97%) individuals showing that the community considers marriage as very important and acceptable social institution. A considerable portion of the population, 399 individuals (40.34%) is reported unmarried. This segment includes young and adults who have not yet entered marriage or individuals who have chosen to remain single. In terms of marital dissolution, the numbers are relatively low in which only 7(0.71%) individuals were recorded as divorcee and 4 individuals (0.40%) were categorized as deserted, indicating that formal separation or abandonment is not very common. The data also highlights a gendered difference in widowhood. There are 57(5.76%) widows compared to 8(0.81%) widowers, suggesting that women are more likely to outlive their spouses or remain unmarried after the death of a partner. Overall, the Bengali community reflects a marriage-centric social structure, with widowhood being notably higher among women, while divorce and desertion remain minimal. The significant share of unmarried individual's points towards a young or transitioning demographic profile. The study also attempted to find out the marriage networks observed among the Bengalis and tried to find out the patterns being adopted by them. In Grand Parent generation out of 204 households, only 14.22 per cent of marriages took place within the block area, and 18.14 per cent within the district area where the communities have been rehabilitated, while not a single marriage was recorded outside the district. Around 67.65 per cent of daughters were married outside the State, indicating that long-distance or inter-State marriages were the dominant trend during this generation. This clearly suggests that earlier generations preferred or were compelled to send daughters far beyond the local region, possibly due to migration networks maintained by them in initial period during their step migration and cultural norms linking Bengali communities living at a long distance.

In Parental Generation a major shift is observed to the local area marriage network based which have increased significantly, with the occurrences of 39.71 per cent within the block and 38.73 per cent within the district. Only 21.57 per cent of marriages were reported outside the State, marking a sharp decline in

long-distance alliances compared to the previous generation. This indicates a transition toward more regionally rooted marriage practices where the refugee community developed the character of regional affinity in the line of ethnic identifications.

In Respondents Generation the pattern is similar to that of parental generation, with 40.20 per cent marriages took place within the block, 38.73 per cent took place within the district and no marriages beyond district boundary. Around 21.08 per cent of daughters were married outside the State, showing stability in localized marriage preference. Marriage networks in this generation remain largely local, mirroring to that of the parental generation which reflects strong ethnic boundaries at regional level.

Coming to Children Generation 48.53 per cent of marriages are within the block, marking the highest local preferences so far. Around 29.90 per cent are within the district, while long-distance marriages outside the State remain at 21.57 per cent, similar to earlier generations. Again, in this generation no cases of marriages reported within State and/ or outside district. This clearly highlight that future marriages will follow the trend to favour close proximity, with a declining reliance on inter-State alliances by the parents. This is preferred in search of suitable brides to their educated children.

The Bengali community shows a clear generational transformation while covering distance to fixup marriages from long-distance, inter-state marriages in the past to predominantly local and district-level marriages in the present, which reflects greater regional settlement, stronger local social ties, and possibly improved access to suitable matches within nearby areas. The logic behind such close marriage distances covered seems to be satisfactory when they say that location of kith and kins through marital relationships strengthens the bond and are frequently useful during the urgency and the bondage will be maintained very strongly for their special requirements in order to sustain the ethnic boundaries.

### **Celebration of Festivals and festivities**

Adoption of religious practices and the celebration of festivals play an important role in keeping community's cultural identities alive. For the Bengali refugees, these occasions not only strengthen their sense of belongingness within their own groups, but also create a cultural distinction from the local level non-Bengali communities. Over the time, such practices have helped them to preserve their ethnic identities while still interacting with the host communities for various purposes. With this in mind, the study also examined the major festivals celebrated by the refugee Bengali community with respect to their type, frequency and nature of celebration.

The data show that the Bengalis continue to observe a wide range of traditional community festivals. Some of the important ones include *Nababarsha*, *Buddha Purnima*, *Rabindranath Tagore Jayanti*, *Loknath Baba's birthday*, *JamaiSasthi*, *Guru Purnima*, *Nag Panchami*, *Janmashtami*, *Mahalaya*, *Durga Puja*, *Lakshmi Puja*, *Kali Puja*, *Bhai Phota*, *Jagadhatri Puja*, *Krishna Bhajan gatherings by Anukool Thakur's followers*, *Vivekananda Jayanti*, *Makar Sankranti*, *Neel Sasthi*, *SheetalSasthi*, *Ramakrishna Jayanti*, *MaaSharda's birthday*, *Saraswati Puja*, *Shivratri*, *Charak Puja*, *Annapurna Puja*, *Basanti Puja*, along with widely celebrated festivals like *Holi*, *Diwali*, and *Raksha Bandhan*. Irrespective of caste and class, Bengali people buy new clothes and prepare special dishes in these occasions. The celebrations are family- and community-oriented, where women often take the lead in cooking and preparation of special dishes. Festivals serve as a time for socializing, strengthening kinship ties, and creating strong social bonds within the community, which directly contributes not only maintaining the kinship ties, but also strengthens the processes of maintaining their ethnicity consolidating all refugee Bengalis.

At district headquarters, celebrations of Durga Puja reflect a layered history. The main congregations in the urban centre are largely led by earlier settled upper-caste Bengali- Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and others who migrated before independence during the East Pakistan crisis. Refugee Bengalis who settled later in the city's outskirts often faced discriminations from these earlier migrants. In response, the refugee Bengalis began to organize their own *Druga Puja* gatherings and pandals within their neighbourhoods and villages. Though the rituals are performed by Brahmin priests, caste-based exclusion is minimal and caste groups such as the *Nomoshudro* participate equally. By hosting festivals within their own localities, the refugee Bengalis not only gain easier access to worship, but also created opportunities for the expansion of local trade and business, which were less accessible when they had to travel to the centralized urban congregations for enjoying festivals. This reflects that with the expansion of the cultural base of the refugee Bengalis at local level the economic opportunities with seasonal variations are also created for the community which are basically controlled by the earlier steeled Bengalis where the local tribal and other non- Bengali caste groups also participate in terms of purchase and making expenditure. This also strengthens the refugee Bengali ethnic identities in the market and their ethnicity.

### **Formation and functioning of Ethnic associations**

Ethnic associations serve as crucial platforms for Diaspora communities, fostering social networks, cultural reproduction, and political participation in both host and home countries (Fennema & Tillie, 2001). Among the Bengali refugees the Chhattisgarh Bang Samaj Kalyan Samiti established in 2005, works for the protection and promotion of the Bengali community's social and cultural interests in Chhattisgarh. These ethnic associations play a vital role in preserving the unity, identity and rights of the refugee Bengali people residing in the State. One of the key demands of the Samiti is that the refugee Bengali community, who were known as *Namoshudras* in their native region and are recognized as the Scheduled Caste (SC) in India, should be granted the same constitutional and social rights in Chhattisgarh as they enjoy in their places of origin. Through this initiative, the organization seeks to ensure reserved benefits and equal opportunities, representation and social justice for their community. In the refugee settlements, several small community-based organizations such as *Sarvajanik Durga Puja Samiti* and *Navyuvak Sangh* have been established by the Bengali refugees in the year 2012 and 2015 respectively. These local committees actively organize religious and cultural events like *Durga Puja*, *Kali Puja*, and *Saraswati Pujain* their own neighbourhoods. The emergence of these associations can be understood as a collective response to social exclusion faced by members of the *Namoshudra* refugee Bengali community, a Scheduled Caste group in India. Despite their cultural enthusiasm and long-standing presence in the region, they are often not allowed to participate equally in the major town-level *Durga Puja* committees, particularly those in nearby Ambikapur town, the district headquarter. As a result, these Bengali refugee groups have formed their own associations to preserve their traditions, worship together, and celebrate their festivals with unity and dignity. Through such initiatives, they not only maintain their cultural identities but also, foster a sense of belonging and solidarity within the rehabilitated community.

### **Maintenance of Ethnic Boundary**

Ethnic boundary refers to the social and symbolic distinctions that separate members of one ethnic group from others. These boundaries are not simply based on cultural traits but are actively maintained through processes of inclusion and exclusion that define who belongs to the group and who does not (Barth,

1969). Ethnic boundaries are relational constructs that shape interaction between groups by emphasizing difference and regulating inclusion and exclusion, often shifting with social, political, and economic contexts (Wimmer, 2008). The refugee Bengali community consciously strives to preserve and maintain their distinct ethnic boundaries through various aspects of cultural life. They continue to uphold their traditional festivals, religious practices, and social customs, ensuring that the essence of their Bengali identity remains intact even in a new socio-cultural environment. This cultural continuity is visible in their dressing patterns, festive celebrations, food habits, and everyday social interactions. Although the refugee Bengalis do interact and establish cordial relations with other local communities, especially local tribal groups like *Pando*, *Gond*, *Oraon* and *Kanwar*, their cultural adoption remains selective. They incorporate only those local customs or practices that are socially and culturally acceptable within their own community framework. This selective adaptation allows them to adjust to the local context while preserving their ethnic and cultural uniqueness. In this way, the refugee Bengali community maintains a close-knit social network and a strong sense of belonging within their own group, reflecting a conscious effort towards ethnic boundary maintenance.

### **Ethnic Identity assertion**

Ethnic identity assertion refers to the conscious efforts of individuals or groups to affirm, express, and safeguard their ethnic identities through cultural practices, language use, traditions, or symbolic markers in response to perceived threats, marginalization, or assimilation pressures (Nagel, 1994). The refugee Bengali community defines and expresses their ethnic identity through a deep attachment to their language, traditions and cultural practices that connect them to their ancestral roots. Despite displacement and resettlement in new regions of another country, they maintain their sense of belonging by preserving the Bengali language in daily communication, celebrating traditional festivals like *Durga Puja*, *Kali Puja* and *Saraswati Puja*, and following distinctive food habits and rituals that reflect their heritage. Their identity is further reinforced through community associations, collective participation in cultural events, and the transmission of customs and values to younger generations. By safeguarding these cultural markers while selectively adapting to their surrounding environment, the refugee Bengali community ensures the continuity at destination and assert their ethnic identity across time and space.

### **Conclusion**

Bengali refugees are living in Chhattisgarh for last 6 decades covering around three generations. With this long duration of stay it is expected that they will be imbibing local languages to a great extent. Keeping this in mind the present study tried to explore the linguistic adjustment of the Bengali's which shows that they have linguistically adjusted with the local lingua-franca while also preserving their distinct identity. In the grandfather's generation migrants were speaking Hindi or the local dialect *Surgujia*. Their phonetics are still rooted in *Bangla*, thus their pronunciations are syncretic. In father and children generation they speak Hindi and *Surgujia* impeccably and have inculcated the local accent. Simultaneously, their command over *Bangla* is also significant. But the local accent, however, has seeped into their *Bangla* to some extent. As a result, the difference in lexicon and accent are observed while they speak Hindi and *Bangla* is apparent across generations.

Religious affiliation and observation of various festivals by the Bengali community helps them in maintaining their ethnic boundaries. Celebrating such occasions not only reinforced their belongingness with the community, but also helped in maintaining social distance with other non-Bengali communities.

In long term this contributed to the Bengali refugee community to maintain their inclusive character. At the end one can say that the Bengali refugees who have come from East Bengal in 1948 finally settled in Surajpur and Surguja districts of Chhattisgarh in 1965. The government settled them with a package of agriculture land, general enmities services and homestead land in special colonies, but during 6 decades of their settlement Bengali's have prospered to a great extent in their life and living. As an industrious and sincere community the Bengali's have proved their success in all fronts of their life. Their inclusive characters are reflected in the forms of festival festivities, language, dress and attire which helped them in strengthening their ethnic boundaries in relation to the host community. Quite a good number of households became successful in markets while competing with the non-Bengali's. Bengali's are not basically traders; however, the fortunate's became entrepreneur in their profession.

Compared to grandfather generation, the father's generations have adopted various local socio- cultural features, while the children generation maintains their identities within English education. Since 1990s Bengali as an organized community are able to bargain with the State apparatus with certain community demands. They are also able to avail all market opportunities which help them to modernize their agriculture, access to banking facilities, possessing all identity proofs etc. To conclude the study finds the prosperity and growth of rehabilitated refugee Bengali community, who maintains a very harmonic relationship with the local non Bengali communities, simultaneously maintaining their ethnicity and able to bargain with the State authorities in favour of their community. Therefore, one can say that ethnicity and ethnic formations in Indian context has to take the help of primordial character and demands a judicious maintenance of inter- ethnic boundaries for their survival and prosperity.

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