

Approximately 800 people belonging to the Barua ethnic group live in the north-east India state of Tripura. They live intermingled in villages with people from other ethnicities, in the Sadar Subdivision of the West Tripura District (also known as Agartala) and the Udaipur Subdivision of the South Tripura District. K S Singh notes, 'Though their total population is not known, it is said that the number of Barua families in Tripura would not exceed 150'.<sup>1</sup>

The name Barua is derived from two words, *bara* meaning 'renowned', and *ua* meaning 'ruler'.<sup>2</sup> In ancient times, the most highly ranked military ruler of Chittagong under the king of Arakan was a man called Barua.<sup>3</sup>

The Barua are unique among all the peoples of India in that they are Buddhists who speak the Bengali language, which is spoken by more than 200 million people in India and Bangladesh. Although almost all Bengalis are Hindus or Muslims, for historical reasons that are not clear the Barua have survived as a Buddhist enclave in the midst of the two giants of Islam and Hinduism.

After Barua women marry they wear vermilion and conch-shell bangles as marriage symbols and as a sign of their unavailability to men. 'Residence after marriage is patrilocal. Although either spouse can seek divorce, its incidence is rare. . . . Nowadays, the practice of paying bride-price in cash is being replaced by that of dowry.'<sup>4</sup>



Dwayne Graybill

Traditionally the Barua earned their livelihood through farming, fishing and hunting. As waves of migrants have entered Tripura the number of wild animals has diminished, making hunting a fruitless exercise unless the participants are willing to trek deep into the forests. The Barua raise goats and chickens today as their main sources of protein.

In the past 20 years, as education levels among them have improved, a number of Barua men and women have obtained jobs as office workers, teachers and administrators in the towns of Tripura.

Perhaps the most fascinating mystery concerning the Barua people is their belief in Theravada Buddhism. The nearest Buddhist communities to them are probably the Chakma and other Theravada Buddhist peoples in the Chittagong Hill tracts of Bangladesh. Just how the Barua came to believe in Buddhism, and equally how they have managed to preserve their faith under pressure from all sides, is difficult to ascertain because they have no written history. 'The Barua are Buddhist. The families linked with a Buddhist temple are brought under their traditional association, which is headed by a *marubbi*. They worship . . . at the family level and participate in traditional festivals.'<sup>5</sup>

As the Barua have slowly lost their culture and language (which has now been completely lost), their Buddhist beliefs have gradually become mixed with Hinduism. The Barua are now

allowed to marry people from non-Buddhist communities such as the Brahman, Kayastha and Magh, which means that Buddhism may become extinct in the next generation of Barua. There are no known Christians among this interesting and unique unreached people group.



**Population:**

800 (2000)  
930 (2010)  
1,080 (2020)

**Countries:** India

**Buddhism:** probably Theravada

**Christians:** none known

**Overview of the Barua**

**Other Names:** Barua

**Population Sources:**

150 families in India (1996, K S Singh)

**Language:** Indo-European, Indo-Iranian, Indo-Aryan, Eastern Zone, Bengali-Assamese

**Dialects:** 0

**Professing Buddhists:** 80%

**Practising Buddhists:** 35%

**Christians:** 0%

**Scripture:** none

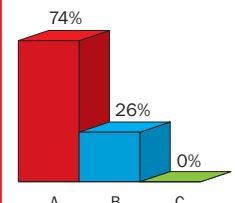
**Jesus film:** none

**Gospel Recordings:** none

**Christian Broadcasting:** none

**ROPAL code:** none

**Status of Evangelization**



**A =** Have never heard the gospel  
**B =** Have heard the gospel but have not become Christians  
**C =** Are adherents to some form of Christianity