



### Short Communication

## Socio-Economic and Cultural Identity of Kurmi-A Tea and Ex Tea Garden Labour Community of Barak Valley in Assam, India

Pradip Kurmi

Department of Economics, Assam University, Silchar, Assam, India  
pradip.kurmi.pbh@gmail.com

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### Abstract

*During the British rule in India, especially at the time of tea plantation in Assam, huge number of labourers were imported in Assam from different parts of India. Kurmi are one of the castes who were migrated in region of Assam. This paper tries to focus on the socio economic and cultural as well as growth of Kurmi in Barak valley of Assam. Barak valley is located, at the southern part of Assam. Researcher has analysed different factors in this paper that influence the socio economic condition of Kurmi People.*

**Keywords:** Kshatriya, Marwa, Jeutia, Holoowai, Sub caste, Samvat.

### Introduction

Kurmis are one of the predominant castes among the Bhojpuri community living in Barak valley of Assam. The Kurmi are a Hindu agricultural caste<sup>1</sup> in India and Assam as well. The term “Kurmi” is derived from the Sanskrit word Krishi meaning ‘cultivation’. However some authors tries to trace the divine origin of the Kurmi from the tortoise (kurm) – believed to be an incarnation of Vishnu. These authors further relate the Kurmi to the gods Rama and Indra, the established symbols of the Kshatriya (second level in caste hierarchy) and thereby attempt to claim a higher caste origin. They are believed to be the direct descendants of the earliest Aryan tribes.

With the establishment of tea gardens in Assam, a large number of labour force from various linguistic and ethnic groups were brought to Assam from different parts of India in the hope of good earnings and amazing life. During the said period, different caste of people like Goala (Ahir), Kairi, Kamkar, Nunia, Kanu (Haloowai) Kumar, Kohar, Sonar, Lohar, and other caste like Bania, Barhi, Teli, Sahu, Kalwar, Baroi (Chowrasia) Ghatwar were brought in Assam for working in tea gardens<sup>2</sup>. Kurmis are also one of them who were brought in Assam from different parts of India mainly hails from Bengal, Bihar, Orrisa (now Oddisa), and U.P., Central Province (C.P), present Chhatishgarh etc. These kurmis are later settled here both Brahmaputra Valley and Barak valley of Assam. In course of time these labourers along with others caste who were migrated here as labour, began to reside side by side in plantation area and beyond -developed common composite culture known as ‘Tea tribe’ and Ex –Tea tribe. These Kurmis provides a significant contribution in shaping the socio economic condition of the state. Office of the Tea Garden and Ex tea Garden tribes, Government of Assam enlisted Kurmi as

‘Other Backward Class ‘vide No-TAD/BC/268/75/37 dated 27<sup>th</sup> Nov.1975.

**Objective of the Study:** The paper aims to analyze the following objectives: i. To highlights the growth of Kurmis in Barak Valley, ii. To study the socio economic condition of Kurmis in Barak Valley. iii. To study the cultural pattern among the Kurmis in Barak valley.

**Study Area:** The Barak valley of Assam Consists of three districts viz Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi is situated between 24°08’’ and 25°15’’ N latitude and 92°20’’ and 93°15’’E longitude covering a geographical area of 6962 sq. Km. The sample size mainly collected from the areas where Kurmis are found in greater section in Barak Valley.

### Methodology

The study is based on primary data and the target group population is people of Kurmi Caste in Barak Valley. For data, five (5) area/locality selected for the purpose where kurmis are found in fairly concerted way. These areas are i. Clever house-Bhorakhai area, ii. Joypur-Rajabazar, iii. Kashipur-Arkhatipur are in Cachar district, iv. Dullavcherra area of Karimganj District and v. Koiya area of Hailakandi Districts. As the total number of population of Kurmis in Barak valley are not available in the census of population. For the study a total one hundred (100) household (twenty from each locality) are randomly selected from each of the kurmi dominant locality. In total 100 number of household were interviewed with the help of well organized structure questionnaire so that appropriate information about Kurmis could be collected. Apart from these, oral interview also have been made with the member of the

household sample size of the locality who is aged more than 70 to have an idea about the growth of Kurmis in this valley.

## Results and Discussion

The researcher has analyzed the descriptive sample characteristics of the households of Kurmi in Barak Valley. Different types of social indicator has been identified and displayed in table form along with explaining the figure thereon.

**Growth of Kurmis in Barak Valley:** The success of tea plantation experiment in upper Assam encouraged to the British authorities to develop more tea business in other districts of Assam. Barak valley was also viewed as important for the British in the sense of commerce as because the climatic condition and soil of Barak valley was also suitable for tea plantation like other parts of Assam. Captain Thomas Fisher, the first superintendent of Cachar (Present Barak Valley) began to plan to develop plantation like other parts of Assam. The first tea plantation of Cachar district started at Barshangan (near present Kathal tea garden) in 1856 by G.Williamson, who had a large number and flourishing tea plantation in upper Assam<sup>3</sup>.

The arrival of tea garden labourers into this valley was a historical and tragic incident, for they are treacherously brought to work in tea plantation. Like the other tea garden labour, Kurmis are also brought here as tea garden labour by ship. The kurmis were brought to Karim ganj and Silchar (Headquarter of Cachar) from Narayanganj, Calcutta (Present Kolkata) through Goalundo ghat – a place near the confluence of Padma and the Brahmaputra river<sup>4</sup>.

In course of time they abundantly scattered throughout the valley beyond the tea plantation areas. They now identifies as both Tea garden and Ex -tea garden labour community in Barak Valley. The Kurmis who were imported from different district and different state of India settled here for more than 150 years, made Barak valley their permanent place of abode. This is their fourth and fifth generation. Of the tea tribe inhabitant in Barak valley, one greater section of it belongs to kurmi caste, who speaks Bhojpuri dialect in this valley.

The Kurmi community appears to be a very dominating caste among the tea garden communities in Barak Valley. By an interview with Mr Gopal Kurmi, aged about 76, it came to know that their grand father migrated to Badarpur through Bangladesh by ship from Baishali district of Uttar Pradesh by British to work as tea garden labour in Dullavcherra tea garden. Similarly in a conversation made with Mr Ram Shankar Kurmi aged about 79 states that his ancestors were migrated from Kashi to serve as tea garden labour by British.

**Socio Economic Condition of Kurmi:** Socio economic condition of Kurmi is not as so good as ought to be. To study the socio economic status and to identify the factors which influence the socio economic status of Kurmis in Barak Valley, a few number of socio, economic and demographic variable has

been identified by the researcher on the basis of field experience. Knowledge about the literacy level, family size, income level, occupation status, health condition, operation land holding etc. will serve the purpose. In this section tabular representation about the feature of household are described.

**Table-1**  
**Sample Characteristics**

Size of the Household	Male	Female	No of Sample size
100	61	39	100

Table reveals that scholar has surveyed 100 household and collected 100 sample size, out of which 61 are male and 39 are female.

Economic enrichment and good earnings is the fundamental means through which a civil society and civilization perfectly achieved. Economic condition of any society depends on the size of the family, earning of the family, health condition of the family, literacy level etc. Family size is total number of family member in the household of the each sample respondent. Generally it is found that the size of the family have inverse relationship with the socio economic status of the respondent. The following table reflects distribution of the sample unit (area wise) and the average size of the household.

**Table-2**  
**Area wise distribution of sample size**

Area	No of Household	Total Family Member	Average size of the household
Clverhouse-Bhorakhai	20	112	5.6
Joypur- Raja Bazar	20	96	4.8
Kashipur- Arkhatipur	20	102	5.1
Dullav cherra	20	109	5.45
Koiya	20	123	6.15
Total	100	542	5.42

Table-2 reflects that average family size among kurmis household is 5.42, it seems to be little higher. Larger the family size will hamper the economic life of the family.

The range of monthly income of the sample households as shown in Table-3 reveals that majority 41 percent of the sample households are tied up in the Monthly income range of Rs. 0-5000 range while 27 percent are in the monthly income range of Rs. 5000-10000. While 14 percent household is under 10000-

15000 group. Only one household is found who earns more than 40000 monthly income of the sample household.

**Table-3**

**Monthly Income Distribution of Kurmi Households**

Income Range (monthly)	Number of Households
0-5000	41
5000-10000	27
10000-15000	14
15000-20000	6
20000-25000	7
25000-30000	0
30000-35000	2
35000-40000	2
More than 40000	1

The Table-4 shows that pattern of occupational background of the Kurmis residing in survey areas. The Table reflects that largest number of sample size engaged in tea garden as worker as primary source of occupation. 56% of the household among the sample size engaged in tea garden for their occupational livelihood. Similarly, 21%, 2%, 16%, 3%, 2% are engaged in agriculture and allied, government service, daily wage, private job and others respectively. Of course, a few household from the sample size also found that they are engaged in secondary source of occupation too.

Definite success of a community and state depend upon education and intellectual attainment. It evolves enlightenment caused fairly civil society.

**Table-4**

**Occupational Break up of sample Kurmis in Barak Valley**

Occupation	Primary	Secondary
Agriculture and allied	21	16
Tea Worker	56	6
Government Service	2	0
Daily Wage	16	8
Private Jobs	3	1
others	2	0
Total	100	31

The greater section of Kurmi community in Barak Valley hardly cultivate aforesaid phenomenon, for which they remain in the realm of feudal, sustain acute poverty and backwardness. The overall educational scenario among the Kurmis is not very satisfactory. The following table reflects the educational status of Kurmis in Barak Valley.

The Table-5 shows that level of education is very poor among Kurmi people among the sample size. Only 4% percent sample are above higher secondary level. Illiteracy rate is very high. 21percent sample sizes are found to be illiterate, which is much higher than national as well as state level of illiteracy. Percentage of illiteracy among female is much acute than male counterpart.

**Table-5**

**Educational Profile of Kurmi in the sample size**

Category	Number of men	Percent	Number of Women	Percent	Total (Male+Female)
Illiterate	11	18.03279	10	25.64103	21
Primary(1-5)	21	34.42623	13	33.33333	34
Upper Primary (6-8)	12	19.67213	08	20.51282	20
Secondary (9-10)	09	14.7541	04	10.25641	13
Higher Secondary (11-12)	05	8.196721	03	7.692308	08
Above H.S	03	4.918033	01	2.564103	04
Total	61	100	39	100	100

25.64 percent female among the sample size are found to be illiterate, whereas 18.03 percent male sample size is found to be illiterate. Further among the literate sample size, majority (34%) of the respondents are found in primary level of education i.e. in between class 1 to class 5.

Health is also an important source that reflects the socio economic condition of any society. To improve the nutritional status, World Health Organization (WHO) recommended that it is essential to implement adolescent friendly health services<sup>5</sup>. According to WHO, "Health is state of complete physical mental and social well being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." In case of social issue, it depends on the society's awareness, technology and distribution of resources. Health has strong link with the development of any society. As the people of Kurmis are mainly hails from tea garden labour community, they have to live in quarter provided by the management. But mass of the kurmis house are found unhygienic. Conditions of houses are very poor. Almost 63% houses are found made of semi pucca, contains only one or two rooms. Kitchen conditions are also very poor with bad smell.

To maintain a better healthy life good sanitation facilities should be available. But it is found that 76% of the respondent uses Kachha Latrine and 12% go for open air defecation. It is also observed that though a few cases management allotted sanitary latrine or got through rural sanitation programme launched by the government but they use it for keeping their goat, hen or use it as go-down. It is also found that due to lack of awareness and lack of local medical facilities they mostly suffered from lots of disease. Further only 5% women of Kurmis know about family planning. For treatment they first stage move towards local 'ojha'. The mean BMI of the respondents found 18.75 i.e. their weight are low.

**Cultural Pattern of Kurmi:** As earlier remarked that Kurmis are migrated in Assam from different parts of India mainly from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa (now Odisha) and U.P., Central Province etc., they still today maintains their ancestral cultural identity in Barak Valley. 100% sample sizes identify them that they are Bhojpuri community-one of the predominant community in Northern States of India. However, they also participates the local cultural activities or nontraditional festivals with great enthusiasm like Durga puja, Kali Puja, Subha Nababarsa etc. keeping their own cultural programme intact.

As Kurmis are believed themselves to be the direct offshoot of the earliest Hindu Aryan, they follow all the Hindu rituals in Barak valley. Marriages are arranged by elders of the families based on their own caste and culture. Though, not the Child marriages but early marriage is still quite among Kurmis in Barak Valley. Adult marriages are becoming increasingly preferred. Both bride and groom walked seven times round the marriage post (called Esh). The marriages are administered by the Brahmin within the Marwa (A square place where marriage ceremony took place). Inter caste marriage doesn't socially

recognized. It is highly restricted. Hardly it, can be seen in urban areas which however, get little social sanction.

Though there are several types of sub castes found in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Western Bihar e.g. Awadhiya, Ghamalia, Konchasia, Yasawar or Joshwar, Chandel, Sindriya, Patel etc but in Barak Valley only two type of Kurmi sub caste prevalent-called as original Kurmi and Bangla Kurmi (Mahato). Further inter dinning system is also not in vogue. Generally in the time of social functions like marriage, Shradha and other social significant function is provided in form of both pakki and kachhi food and is prepared by the Holoowai (Specialist in Cooking) or by the the recognized high caste called 'Panichal Jati'. People of Kurmi living in Barak Valley have great sense of religious Belief. Religion fuction as they called 'Tewhar' like Dasherra, Dewali, Acadoshi, Siv Chaturdasi, Ram navami, Sankranti, chhat etc are observed with great sincerity and devotion. 'Jeutia'-a fasting festival by the mother of Kurmis observed for the sake of their children. The system of Burning Samvat is also prevailing among kurmi culture along with the Bhojpuri caste on the eve of Holi.

## Conclusion

The major aim of this study is to investigate the socio economic and cultural activities of kurmi caste in Barak valley of Assam. The study was based on the primary data and reflects that more than 150 years time has passed living in Barak Valley but till today their economic condition is very poor. They have limited opportunity to run with the flow of present days of globalization. One of the leading reasons behind this is less scope of education and little scope of stress for education by the management, local intellectuals and administration that keeps them in a dark stage. It requires infuse substantial necessities into their sphere of life.

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