

Koch of Modhupur

**A Demographic and Socioeconomic
Survey of a Marginal Ethnic Community**



Koch of Modhupur



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Survey of A Marginal Ethnic Community



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The Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), a non-profit Bangladeshi organization, was founded in 1993 to promote investigative reporting, engage in action-oriented research and assist people to think and speak out. Koch of Modhupur is a survey report on the demography and socioeconomic condition of the Koch of Modhupur upazila in Tangail district.

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Preface

Koch is a well-known ethnic community of Bangladesh heavily assimilated into the majority Bangalee. The 1991 population census that presented segregated data on different ethnic communities enumerated the Koch at 16,567 (8,449 in Tangail, 2,547 in Sherpur, 1,725 in Mymensingh, 3,636 in Jamalpur, and 300 in Gopalganj). The Koch people consulted reject this government estimate. They claim their number is much higher and they are spread over other districts in the Northwest.

To check the discrepancies in the population census as regards ethnic communities of the plains, we did a survey in 1997 in five upazilas of different districts. One of them was Bhaluka in Mymensingh district. While the 1991 population census enumerated the entire ethnic population of Bhaluka Upazila at 1,947, the SEHD survey found 4,919 of them in 1997 of whom 71.80% (3,532) were Koch, 18.13% Garo and 6.91% Bangshi. This discrepancy gives a tip of the anomalies in the government census.

Then to check the anomalies as regards the Koch population in Modhupur Upazila, we carried out this survey. In our household survey in April and May 2012, we have found 3,427 Koch people (833 households) in Modhupur upazila who are spread over 30 villages and seven unions. The report of 2011 population census comes as a shock to the Koch people of Modhupur. According to this census they do not exist in Modhupur at all. The Community Report, Tangail of BBS 2011 census puts the numbers of different ethnic population in Modhupur upazila as: Sawntal-13,575 persons, Garo-2,369 persons, Marma-285 persons and others-152 persons. Such presentation of statistical accounts is unprecedented. It is well known that two major ethnic communities that inhabit the Modhupur forest villages are Garo and Koch.

Our survey on the Koch of Modhupur is a pointer to a much bigger issue about the Koch people in Bangladesh. According to a recent (2015) inventory of SEHD there are 7,221 Koch households (or approximately 32,000 people) in five districts (Mymensingh, Jamalpur, Gazipur, Tangail and Jamalpur) in the North-center of Bangladesh. This inventory is a pointer to a high margin of error in the population census.

In a number of meeting, workshop and seminar the Koch people have reported there is a big number of Koch population in Northwestern districts. In a recent inventory (2014-2015) that we have carried out under a project supported by European Union and ICCO Cooperation, we have been astonished to find that there is a large community of Kshatriya (approximately to 700,000) in nine districts (Bogra, Lalmonirhat, Panchagarh, Nilphamari, Thakurgaon, Kurigram, Joypurhat, Dinajpur and Naogaon) in the Northwest (although the leaders of Kshatriya Samiti put the figure much higher). What is unique of our findings is that a large percentage of this population [who identify themselves also as Rai, Barman, Sing, Sarker, Rajbangshi, etc.] say that they are Koch or related to Koch identity. Their physical features in most instances also resemble the Koch of North-central districts. However, the leaders of the Kshatriya Samiti in Dinajpur strongly suggest that the Kshatriyas are Bangalees. One important thing to note is that there is reportedly no Kshatriya population in other districts of Bangladesh. Another important geographic aspect to relate the Kshatriya to the Koch identity is that the nine Northwestern districts with concentration of Kshatriya population is neighbors to Cooch Behar [now part of West Bengal in India] and once part of a Koch kingdom.

The indigenous Koch of the North-center and the Kshatriya of Northwestern districts who relate themselves to the Koch identity seem to be in the process of assimilation into the Bangalees. In the North-center many Koch have taken Bangalee titles (family names) and identify themselves as Bangalees.

The tendency of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) to confuse [deliberately or out of ignorance] on statistical accounts of the ethnic communities and the tendency of many Koch themselves to identify themselves as Bangalees considered, this survey report on the Koch of Modhupur is an pointer to the deep identity confusion they are in.

Philip Gain
Editor

Koch of Modhupur

The Koch is a well-known ethnic community of Bangladesh heavily assimilated into the majority Bangalee community. The 1991 population census enumerated the Koch at 16,567 in the entire country though no segregated data at the upazila level was presented. A large percentage of Kshatriya population in nine Northwestern districts who seek their identity in the Koch people, remain invisible and unaccounted for as Koch.

The Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), in its efforts to generate segregated data on the Koch, did a pilot survey on them in Modhupur upazila in Tangail district in 2012. It found 3,427 Koch people (833 households) in Modhupur upazila spread over 30 villages and seven unions. To everybody's astonishment, the Koch people do not exist in Modhupur according to 2011 population census report. SEHD's survey findings strongly support those who reject the official census on the Koch population. This is also a pointer to anomalies in the official census in case of many other ethnic communities of Bangladesh.



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