

# A Peep into the Life and Culture among the Urban Harijans of Guwahati City, Assam

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## Abstract

Harijans referred to as 'untouchables', 'broken or depressed class' were looked down in the society since time immemorial. Caste domination compels these people to suffer torture and humiliation in the hands of upper caste. Though the rates of discrimination and torture against them have reduced to a great extent but it cannot be said to have totally disappeared. Many fresh cases of violation against the Harijans were in newspapers now and then. The Harijans though have suffered all the odds and humiliation imposed upon them by upper caste but still they are able to preserve their unique culture and tradition. Culture represents a particular group. Harijans who were now called as Dalits have their own norms and rules and traditions which are maintained even today, which give these groups of people a special identity. These Harijans, who reside in Guwahati city, are found to be following the festivals and rituals of the main Indian population with a few indigenous practices of their own. This shows that they do not form a separate subculture. Conversions to Christianity, Islam and Buddhism have no doubt, led to acceptance of other faiths but they still have managed to retain their unique traditions in terms of language, dress and food patterns. The city of Guwahati no doubt has had an urban impact upon these people, but the normative structures of the group have helped to absorb and adapt to these outside contacts.

**Keywords:** Culture, Untouchability, Urban, Harijans, Subculture.

## Introduction

Culture provides a particularly illustrative case of a cultural institution where sharedness and disparity (as domination and inequality) co-exist with each other in a state of perpetual tension (Dumont, 1980 as cited in Arora and Sanditov 2015:2). Another important element of culture is that culture is shared by its members and this feeling of unity among its members increase solidarity and fellow feeling. The culture and tradition among the Harijan community have bound them in a social network. Culture is also considered to be distinct and relatively autonomous from social network that is defined as "influential and persistent sets of interrelationship among actors" (Spillman, 1995, p.132, as cited in Arora and Sanditov 2015:1).

Harijans are generally considered as socially excluded class, their culture and tradition mainly restricted among themselves. However, their economic importance should not be neglected either: they work as agricultural labourers, servants, sweepers, scavengers, grave-diggers, dead-cattle removers, tanners, shoemakers and so on. Economically, they live in dire poverty, and they are socially discriminated against as probably no other people in the world (Deliege 1992:156). These people celebrated their festivals within themselves as they were not allowed to make contacts with other caste population. In some parts of the country Harijans were not allowed to enter the temples of other castes, have separate wells for drinking water, even the shadow of Harijan was considered as impure by other caste population. Ever since India gained independence, she committed herself in eradicating traditional and hereditary inequalities, more specifically of Untouchability. The impulse towards equality has resulted in a policy of protective discrimination—or discrimination in reverse—toward tribes, Harijans and backward castes to enable them to catch up with the advanced groups (Srinivas 1995: 88). Though the varna model considers the Harijans as belonging outside the caste system, when

economic, social and ritual relations between castes in a region are considered, the Harijans form an integral part of the system. Today in contemporary Indian society the Shudras are known as the Dalits which is a Marathi word and means as "broken men" and presently there are 180 million Dalits categorized and classified as scheduled castes in the Indian constitution (Haseena, 2015:1).

#### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To get an idea about their life and culture
2. To know about the differences among the three linguistic groups of the same caste
3. To analysis the different traditional religious rituals that are still prevalent among them
4. To find out whether they are influenced by other castes and made changes in their own culture and tradition.

#### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of the present study is to find out whether the Harijans, a Scheduled Caste of India, form a subculture with their own cultural identity or form part of the greater Hindu society.

#### **Methodology**

The paper presented is based on data collected in the course of fieldwork undertaken among the Harijan (Dalits) inhabiting in the six selected Harijan colonies of Guwahati city in Kamrup (metro), Assam. Mixed method approach is being applied for collection of data. Focus is given to primary data collection. Data were collected by structured household schedule through interview method and participant observation. Sample of 529 households were randomly selected for study purpose. Data from secondary source such as papers, journals are also being taken.

#### **Study area**

The present study was made among the Harijans of six selected Harijan colony of Guwahati that is in Morisali Harijan colony, Rupnagar Harijan Colony, Uzanbazar Harijan Colony, Maligaon Harijan Colony, Panbazar Harijan colony and FatasilAmbari Harijan colony.

Harijans of Guwahati have their own unique culture and tradition. Guwahati, the gateway of Northeast India, is situated on the banks of the Brahmaputra. The population of Guwahati city is 957,352 according to 2011 census. Guwahati is inhabited by both tribal and non-tribal groups of people. A section of people outside the state have also settled in this region for trade and commercial purposes. The Harijans were not the original inhabitants of Assam but they have migrated from Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Punjab. These people were brought during the colonial rules in Assam. These people were brought for the purpose of cleaning works. The Harijans were thus brought and settled in different parts of Assam. Guwahati became the main center for settlements of Harijans as most of the Government offices and administrative works were centered here. The Harijan people in Guwahati belong to three different communities and they are Bihari (from Bihar), Telegu speaking (from Andhra Pradesh) and Punjabi (from Punjab). These people live together in colony wise settlements detached from

the main caste populations. Guwahati is the hub of colonies for Harijans living together since decades. These colonies of Harijans are centers of culture as these people are maintaining their unique traditions. One can get a view of three different cultures under a same roof among these Harijan colonies. The neighboring caste population has also played an effect on their culture.

#### **Festivals and Harijans**

Harijans who were called as 'Untouchables' practice rituals with or without a Brahmin priest, they have their own priest who conducts some of their rituals. Such as in Sawani Puja, the Bihari Harijans selected among themselves a person for performing the rituals. Likewise, in Pindi Puja and Chat Puja also no Brahmin Priest was called instead the Harijans themselves performed the rituals. The Telegu Harijan also performed Nag Puja, Pongal all by themselves, but sometimes they called a Telegu priest for performing other rituals connected with birth, death and marriage. Likewise, a Punjabi Harijan called their Guru from the Gurudwara for performing some rituals which are very important. A Guru may be a Punjabi Harijan the senior most people from the colonies or sometimes they called Gurus (non-Harijan) from the Gurudwara which is situated outside the colony. Rituals as well as belief is portrayed as varying systematically from top to the bottom of local caste hierarchies (Moffatt 1979: 244). Thus, Untouchables are said to practice fewer and briefer ritual actions than those of higher castes and to be more inclined towards possession and shamanism than toward priesthood and asceticism (Fuchs 1950; Berreman 1964, 1972; Miller 1966; Kolenda 1968, as cited in Moffatt 1979:244). Like other Hindus the Harijans also follow all the Hindu festivals. They celebrate Diwali, Durga puja, Holi and many other festivals. But along with it there are other special festivals or pujas which are of special importance in their society such as 'Sawani Puja', 'Pindi puja', 'Ganesh puja' and 'Jhulan puja'. 'Sawani puja' is also known as 'Sitala puja'. Some said that it was the puja of 'Goddess Durga'. This puja is usually done in the month of June or July (sawan). In this puja a member from Bihari Harijan group from the colony is selected by the people and he or she has to perform all the rituals connected to this puja. In this puja an altar is prepared usually in an open and clean area. In that altar an earthen pot filled with water and on it mango leaves with a coconut is placed. They put red color flag around the altar. Branches of neem trees, banana saplings and bamboo saplings are tied together and placed in four corners around the altar. The altar is decorated with different colors of flowers usually red one is more preferable. Earthen oil lamps and incense sticks are burnt there. Sacrifice of pigs is another significant feature of this puja. 'Pindi puja'/'Kuldevi puja' is another important puja, but it is not celebrated on a community basis as 'Sawani puja'. This puja is done according to the convenience of the household among the Bihari Harijan group, who performs the puja. This puja is done usually once in a year. In this puja no idol is worshipped, instead two mud balls representing God and Goddess were being

worshipped. The mud balls were considered very sacred by the people. These mud balls were called as 'pindis'. On the day of puja at first the devotees who are supposed to perform the puja clean the mud balls with little drops of water and milk and apply fresh mud which they have brought from their native place (some devotees have brought the mud from holy Ganga river). They cover the 'pindis' with red clothes and put flowers over it. They offer fruits as 'prasad'. They also sacrifice a pig on the occasion of this puja. In this puja only close relatives of a family are invited. Chat puja' is another important festival of the Bihari community. This puja usually starts after a week of Diwali festival. The Bihari community celebrates this festival with very strict rules and regulation. This puja continued for three days, which were followed by strict fasting. On the first day sweet rice is offered to God which is known as 'Kharni'. Cleaning of the house and self is done on this day. The sweet rice is taken by the devotee in the evening time after that not a single drop of water is taken by them till the last ritual that is on the third day of sun worship. On the second day the devotees carry the (things) 'prasad' that were to be offered to the Sun God to the water bodies which were near to them. The devotees put a holy pot 'kalas' filled with water and mango leaves on the top on the place of worship. An earthen oil lamp of five sides 'panchmukhideepak' was lighted. The devotees offer a sweet food called as 'thakwa' made of wheat, sugar and ghee to God. The devotees worship the setting sun and rising sun in this puja by offering water, milk and other fruits and vegetables. After completing the evening puja the devotees take all the offering to their homes, at mid-night before sun rise, the devotees again return with fresh fruits and vegetables and do puja on the same spot done earlier in the evening. The morning sun is worshipped by offering milk, water and other fruits. The devotees break their fast by taking the 'Prasad'. Other than this Ganesh puja is also celebrated by the colony people. They celebrated the festival for five days in which a priest from outside their caste, a Bihari Brahmin priest is brought for performing the rituals. 'Jhulan puja' is also another important festival of the people. In this festival various idols of Lord Krishna were installed. In this puja no priests were invited, instead of which the children of the colonies arrange the puja and do all by themselves. The Telegu speaking people also have the unique traditional festivals which are being followed in Guwahati. Along with the other festivals of Hindus they celebrate 'Pongal' which is their main festival. In this festival they worship their God and Goddess along with their ancestors. They celebrate this festival on mid of January. In this festival sweet rice 'kheer' is prepared and offered to the God. They wear new dress on this occasion and close relatives were invited on this festival. Various snacks of rice were prepared in this festival. 'Nag puja' is another important event of Telegu Harijan community. This puja is usually done on a community basis on holy mud heaps. These mud heaps were houses of snakes. As such mud's heaps are not easily available in urban areas and in its absence artificial mud heaps were created. The mud's heaps were offered yellow

rice, milk, and various seasonal fruits. Vermillion was also offered on those of mud heaps. Earthen oil lamps were lighted on this occasion. The Telegu Harijans of Guwahati observe a special ritual on the occasion of 'Diwali'. They light a fire post made of bamboo erected on their garden. The bamboo post is first offered puja which is usually done by the head of the family and thereafter it is lighted with fire. The people have the belief that the more the flame of the fire the more God will be impressed by them. The Punjabi Harijans also does not lack behind in celebrating their festivals. They celebrate the 'Guruparabs' as their main festivals. In Guwahati they celebrate mainly 'Guru Gobind Singh' and 'Guru Nanak's birthday'. These mark the death and birth anniversaries of their Gurus. In these festivals complete reading of 'Guru Granth Saheb' takes place. In addition to these 'Kirtan' and 'Kathas' were recited. Free food which is called as 'Langar' is prepared and distributed. In 'Langar' everyone is welcome and everyone can help in the preparation of food. 'Nagar bhraman' that is taking out a procession of 'Guru Granth Saheb' also takes place. In addition to these Punjabi Harijans celebrate 'Baisakhi' which takes place on 13<sup>th</sup> April every year. On this occasion the Punjabis visit the 'Gurdwaras' and offer prayers. 'Kirtan' is arranged on that day. Lori festival is another Punjabi event and this festival commemorates the passing of the winter solstices. In this festival a bonfire is arranged before the night of Makar Sankranti (13<sup>th</sup> January). The Punjabi Harijans also organize this festival in their colonies where they sing and dance their traditional dance Bhangra dance. Traditional food items are prepared on this festive occasion. The festival date of the Harijan community falls almost on the same date when Bihu is celebrated in Assam and thus it doubles the joy of festive mood among the people in these Harijan colonies. Thus, they observe most of the festivals and rituals like the mainstream Hindu population. Only in some pujas and rituals do they engage a priest from their own community. So here comes the concept of Moffat's replication. To replicate is to reproduce someone else's institutions or to move practices from one context to another. Moffat himself stresses that Harijans replicate whenever they are excluded (Deliege 1992 :160). When a Brahmin priest does not prefer to perform rituals for them, they select someone from their own community to do the same.

Christian missionaries played a notable part in humanitarian activity, especially in providing education and medical aid to sections of Indian society most in need of them---Harijans, women, orphans, lepers and tribal folk (Srinivas 1995: 52). It is interesting to note that there are some Harijans (Punjabi and Telegu speaking ones) of Guwahati city who have changed their native religion and adopted Christianity. So in addition to celebrating the above festivals Christmas, Good Friday, Easter Sunday were also observed by these 'converted section' (religious converted) of Harijan community. These people usually go to the church and offer prayers. It is interesting to find that though these sections of Harijans have changed their religion but still they maintain some of their common traditional rituals. The

causes of such conversion may be either to escape discrimination or for getting financial benefits as these missionaries provide financial help to such people.

### **Rituals Associated With Birth, Marriage and Death**

There is a ritual associated after the birth of a child and this is observed among the three Harijan communities. The Punjabi Harijan whispered the 'Mool Mantra' into the ear of a new born baby, while in the Telegu and in Bihari community also 'Mantras' are whispered into the ears and offerings are made to 'Kuldev /Kuldevi' after a considerable period of time. The Punjabis visited 'Gurudwara' where the verses of 'GurugranthSaheb' is recited and there itself the name of the child is fixed while the Bihari and Telegu community arrange a ritual along with a puja where the name of the child is being decided. Rice giving ceremony 'Annaprāsana' is found among the Bihari and Telegu groups where rice is put into the child's mouth for the first time followed by elaborate religious rituals but this is absent among the Punjabi Harijan groups.

Hair shaving ceremony known as 'mundane' is done where the birth hair is shaved and offered to God but this ritual is absent among the Punjabi community. Instead the Punjabis need to keep the hair covered and tied. Among the Punjabi community there is a ceremony known as 'DastarBandi' (Turban ceremony). In a family when a boy reaches a certain age usually 11 -16 years he is to be taken to a 'Gurudwara' and there in the presence of the 'GuruGranthSaheb' and following 'Ardas' his first turban will be ceremonially tied on by the Granthi, an elderly relative or an elderly Sikh. The 'Granthi' will explain the importance of keeping long hair and wearing a turban. This ceremony designates the respect with which the turban is regarded. The turban is such a significant article of faith that many Sikhs consider it to be more important than all the other things. After the 'Dastar' ceremony and his initiation into the 'Khalsa' the young Sikh has to incorporate the five Ks in his life (uncut hair, steel bracelets, wooden combs, cotton underwear and steel dagger). There are no religious rituals related to biological maturity (initiation rites) among the Telegu, Punjabi, and Bihari Harijan community and no taboo were found to be observed during puberty.

The Harijans of Guwahati follow the general rules of Hinduism. So accordingly they cremate the dead in the cremation ground. The rituals followed by the three Harijan groups may be different but they have some common elements in them. The Telegu and Bihari Harijan follow the 'pinda' rituals which is done so that the departed soul attains 'Moksha'. The family members follow some rules for about eleven days and after that some rituals were performed where close relatives were invited and a feast is also arranged. Asthis (bone pieces) were collected from the funeral pit, which were later deposited on any holy river. These rituals are followed by almost all the three Harijan groups. After a Sikh dies the 'GuruGranthSaheb' is being read continuously for eleven days while among the Telegu and Bihari

community 'Kirtan' is being recited on the 13<sup>th</sup> day. Purification of the house and its family members is done. Cow dung and basil leaves were used for this purpose. A small ritual is being observed every year for peace of the departed soul. It was found that though the Telegu communities were vegetarian and offer vegetarian food in almost all rituals but nowadays they offer non vegetarian food items on the day of feast. It was found that many customs and rituals have changed among all these three Harijan groups. The culture of neighboring people has made an influence on the life style and on their religious rituals of Harijan community. The Christian converts have been following the Christian rituals in their life and they maintain their own unique identity. Thus a blending of different customs is seen among the Harijans of Guwahati city. In Assam, the Harijans are free to participate in any other rituals and are allowed to do puja in any other temple but there are some restrictions as they were not allowed to enter into the kitchen of puja temple where only Brahmin priests were allowed. The Harijans were not allowed to offer cooked food into the temple. But compared to the discrimination the Harijans have to face in their native land it is nothing. Harijans were not allowed to enter into every temple or into the main entrance of a temple but in Assam they are free to enter into the main temple. For these reasons also many Harijans have built separate temple or prayer hall for themselves where they were free to offer puja. The Christian Harijans and non-Christian Harijans live together in the colonies. Sometimes it becomes difficult to recognize them. Some Christian Harijans have changed their names as for example John, Marry, Peter etc. The womenfolk of those who have converted to Christianity do not put vermilion on their forehead. Sometimes the Christian converts do not change their names and even the Christian Punjabi Harijan maintain their Pagritradition even after their conversion.

Culture to a great extent depends on the environment. As the Harijans are now the inhabitants of Assam they have mixed with the Assamese cultural environment. These people equally celebrate Bihu and are well accustomed with different ethnic food items. Harijans were well versed with Assamese language and could speak fluently. The wearing of dark color clothes and heavy jewelry in marriages or other festive occasions has changed to lighter ones which are usually found in Assamese society. But still we can identify these people by their peculiar dressing style and looks. Harijans have adopted Assamese language and even prefer to send their children to an Assamese medium school but not out of any compulsion. Many Harijans have lost their accent of speaking in their native language. Vast transformation has occurred in their society. Women of Harijan community in their native states use veils on their forehead but in Assam they are free to move without a veil.

### **Family, Marriage and Village Councils**

Joint family system and nuclear family are the two basic divisions of family. Nuclear family which mainly consists of married couples and their children

own or adopted is a very common feature of urban society. But in contrast to urban society joint family predominates in rural society. Joint family is formed when several related nuclear families live in one household. Cooperation and mutual support is significant feature of joint family. Today in urban setting and even in rural setting the original form of joint family is not found as we can see many families living in a common household but having separate kitchens with separate living rooms and bathrooms. But in crisis situation they help each other. Such types of new form of Joint family are more frequent among the Harijan colonies. The Harijan of Guwahati follows patriarchal system. The father is the head of the family and his decision is accepted by all. Mother in their society also has equal right and her decision is always given special value. Women in their society maintain avoidance with father-in-law and other senior male members. The restriction becomes lesser with the increase of age of women in a family. In most cases wearing of 'payal' making tattoo mark and nose ring for a girl is compulsory in their society. The relationship of a newly married bride to the members of the groom's family who were younger than her is not much formal or rigid. The girl after marriage is not highly welcome to stay for long in her native marital house. This is considered as bad for these people. Gift giving to the daughter's husband, 'Jamai' is very important and sometimes it becomes compulsory for them. As Harijans are living in a patriarchal society they follow the rules and regulation of it. In their society property is shared by the male members of a family and it is usually divided by father and in his absence it was divided by the mother. But now at present a girl gets equal share of property from her parents and if she is a widow she also gets the part of property which used to belong to her husband. Sometimes Gharjowai or resident son-in-law also gets a part of property of his wife's parents but it depends on the wish of bride's parents or guardians

Marriage among the Harijans of Guwahati is mostly arranged marriage. Most of the marriages are fixed by parents. There are also good number of love marriages which is later on arranged by taking the consent of both the bride's and groom's families. But there are a few cases of elopement cases when their love is not approved either by their parents or also by the society. But in such cases also if the eloped couple wishes to join the main stream of their society they have to pay a fine in the form of cash or sometimes in the form of feast to their society members and then only their marriage is accepted by the society. Marriage outside the religion and community is also found. They are found to marry from Bihari community outside their caste and also from Assamese caste population. Thus there is now evidence of inter-caste and inter-community marriage among them. If they marry outside their religion, that is, if they marry a Muslim or a Christian then they are not allowed to participate in the religious festival and rituals of the community. Marriage rituals are elaborately followed by the three Harijan groups. Ceremony of 'Haldi, Matkhor' are very special for Bihari Harijan community. Among the Telegu Harijan

community groom usually comes to bride's house on the day of marriage. The showing of 'arundhatisitara' (star) in the sky by the groom to his bride is an important part of their rituals.

The marriage ceremony among the Telegu Harijan community is mainly conducted by the Telegu priest who is called from outside. It is found that the Telegu people are mainly vegetarian and almost on all occasions they followed vegetarian diet. But nowadays under the influence of other neighboring people like the Bihari and Punjabis they also take non-vegetarian food items. Sikh Harijan conducts their marriage at 'Gurudwara' in presence of their close relatives. Later on a feast is arranged for the guests. Taking a sword by the groom in his hands is an important part of their marriage ceremony. Though they belong to the same caste, it is noticed that the marriage ceremonies for the three groups vary. Living in the city brought about certain changes in their food habits too. The Telegu speaking group also serves non-vegetarian food. The Bihari group invites a Brahmin priest to conduct the marriage rituals, preferably non-Assamese.

Village council system is another important political system among the Harijans society. These council acts as guard houses of the people in the colonies. Village council system consists of an elderly person of the colony whom they address as 'Gaon Bura' / Pradhan who takes decision regarding any matter related to their disputes which may arise in their society. The Gaon Bura is a common person who is selected by the elderly persons of the colony. The 'Gaon Bura' is usually a male and no female is appointed for this post. The 'Gaon Bura' may belong to any community either from Bihari, Punjabi or from Telegu group. His decision is highly respected by all the members of the colony. In almost all the colonies under survey there is the presence of the village head man. This is because Guwahati was once a small area and gradually it transformed from semi rural to urban area. The system of 'Gaon Bura' has been there in these colonies since the first day of the settlement of these colonies. This 'Gaon Bura' is not appointed by the Government but by the people itself. If there are any disputes regarding land, marriage, theft, etc., the people of the colony prefer to go to 'Goan Bura' and listen to his decision and if they are not satisfied with it they are free to approach the police. Before giving his decision Gaon Bura consults some of the elderly and respectable persons of the colony. Caste panchayats or village councils 'played a very major role in the governance of matters related to the cultural, social and economic life of the community' (Singh 2000: 83). These councils in the urban areas also 'provided enormous structural and cultural resilience to the local communities to maintain their autonomy and also to regulate their responses to cultural and social contacts with other cultures' (Singh 2000: 83).

#### **Conversions among the Harijans**

Conversion to other religion is found among Harijan community. Conversion among the Dalits started from colonial period. The Missionaries plays a great role in conversion not only among the Dalits but also with other caste population. Missionaries saw

Dalits as human beings with body, soul, feelings, and emotion, unlike dominant castes who saw them as instrument of toil (Mohan 2015, p.4 as cited in Sekhar 2019:10). Harijans were not forced for such conversions but they change their religion on their will. Therefore, the real (body) and reflected (shadow) were enfolded in the politics of annihilating untouchables from receiving love and acceptance from society (Guru and Sarukkai 2012, pp.81-86 as cited in Sekhar 2019:10). The support the missionaries provided to the Dalits support them to come out with confidence. So from the period of colonial rule the Harijans got converted to Christianity. The touch of the missionaries was liberating and humanizing for Dalits who were treated and made to believe for centuries that their body, presence and with their touch, even the (Hindu) gods become

polluted (Neelakantha Sastri 1935, p.15 as cited in Sekhar 2019:6).

There are some Harijans who are found to be ashamed to disclose their identity for fear of being tortured or humiliated. So after they have converted to other religions they change their names. In Tamil Nadu as well as in parts of the country, the poor and the oppressed, in particular the Christians among them are unwilling to be identified as Dalits and have for the most part rejected the imposed identity, which does not meet their need (Clark 1962:207). Thus in order to live in dignity Dalit community embraces other religions. Even in the case of conversion to Buddhism, it was part of political mobilization of the Dalits under the leadership of B.K. Ambedkar which made them accept his ideology of conversion as a necessary part of acquiring self-healing and getting rid of the stigma as untouchables (Ayrookuzhiel 1994:3).

**Table 1: Percentage of change in some customs among the three Harijan group from six Harijan colonies of Guwahati city Kamrup (metro) Assam, 2017-2019.**

Customs	Bihari Harijan	Punjabi Harijan	Telegu Harijan
Serving of alcohol to guest in marriage/family function	43%	50%	20%
Pork meat in Marriage ceremony	42%	20%	15%
Traditional dress in any occasion	75%	73%	78%
Special priest of their own community	73%	79%	84%
Following their traditional norms –restriction of some food/ daily alpna drawing	39%	38%	74%
Change in food habits and preferring Assamese food	32%	31%	27%
Fluency in speaking Assamese language	59%	55	43
Following their traditional dressing style	72%	72%	76%

The above table reveals the percentage of change in customs among the three Harijan groups of Guwahati city that is Punjabi, Bihari, and Telegu Harijans. Though serving alcohol to the guest in marriage function/family function is not that common among the Harijans but in the present days Bihari and Punjabi Harijans still serve alcohol and only a small percentage of Telegu Harijans follow this custom. Likewise, pork meat is also to a great extent now not that popular in their society. But still a percentage of Bihari Harijans are still consuming pork but the other two groups avoid pork. The three Harijan groups prefer to wear their traditional dresses and most of them follow their traditional dressing style. In this regard the womenfolk of their society are more prominent than their male counterparts. For performing their traditional rituals these people call their specific priests and it is only in rare cases that they call priests outside their own community. And in these regard the percentage is high in the entire three Harijan group. Considerable percentages have opted for Assamese food and in this regard the highest

percentages are the Bihari Harijans, followed by Punjabi Harijans and Telegu Harijans. Most of the Harijans from the colonies could speak Assamese language fluently and the percentage is highest (59%) among the Bihari Harijans, followed by (55%) Punjabi Harijans and (43%) Telegu Harijans. Again the Telegu group is more rigid in maintaining their age-old customs even though they might have accepted Christianity in large numbers in comparison to the other two groups.

The word Harijan is not in use in Assam and instead these people were addressed as 'metor'. Methor is a 'derogatory term' which means "those who clean shit" (Guardian 2018 as cited in EASO 2018:3). In Assam the Harijans were also called as Methor because of the cleaning works they are assigned. In a study named 'Sanitation Success Stories', it is mentioned that pit-emptying is done by sweepers which are usually called 'methor' in Bengali (Hanchett 2018 as cited in EASO 2018:3). The Harijan colonies were addressed as 'metorpatti' but now such terms are not in use.

**Table 2: Percentage of Harijan population following their traditional practices among the three Harijan group from the six Harijan colonies of Guwahati city Kamrup (metro) Assam, 2017-19**

Percentage of people	Bihari Harijan		Punjabi Harijan		Telegu Harijan	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Traditional dress	12%	50%	40%	58%	55%	64%
Traditional work	65%	63%	64%	58%	52%	44%
Traditional food	55%	66%	67%	71%	72%	80%
Use of Native language	78%	76%	88%	76%	89%	88%

The above table reveals the attitude of the Harijan people towards their own traditions. In matters related to their traditional dresses the

percentage is high among the Telegu Harijan with 64% females and 55% males wearing dress in their traditional styles but they wear such dress when they

remain at home only. In terms of preference for their traditional work the highest percentage is found among the Bihari Harijans, next comes the Punjabi Harijans, while it is lowest among the Telegu Harijan group. While in matters of traditional food

Telegu Harijans occupy the top category with 80% females and 72% males than the other two groups. All the three groups use their native language to communicate among themselves.

**Table 3: Percentage of marriage outside the Harijan community among the three Harijan groups from six Harijan colonies of Guwahati city Kamrup (metro) Assam, 2017-19**

Percentage of marriage outside the Harijan community	Bihari Harijan		Punjabi Harijan		Telegu Harijan	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
	30%	22%	35%	28%	22%	18%

The above table reveals the percentage of marriage of the Harijans of Guwahati city outside the Harijan community. In this regard Punjabi group shows the highest percentage followed by Bihari and Telegu group. Marriage outside the community means they married from Bihari non-Harijan castes and Assamese caste population. The Telegu group is found to be a bit rigid regarding mate selection and marriage but the other groups are quite flexible. Thus there is evidence of inter-caste and inter-community marriages among the urban Harijans of Guwahati city.

**Table 4: Percentage of Joint family tradition among the three Harijans groups from the six Harijan colonies of Guwahati city Kamrup (metro) Assam, 2017-19.**

Percentage of Joint family tradition	Bihari Harijan	Telegu Harijan	Punjabi Harijan
	32%	26%	28%

The above reveals the joint family tradition among the Harijans from the six Harijan colonies of Guwahati. The table reveals that percentage of Joint family tradition is low in almost all the three Harijan groups. Bihari Harijan has the highest in percentage in maintaining Joint family tradition next to Punjabi and

Telegu Harijan groups. Their migration to Guwahati city itself resulted in the break-up of joint families which further increased due to space constraints, poverty, aspiration for a better life, more individuality, and so on.

**Table 5: Prevalence of Village council system among the three Harijan groups from the six Harijan colonies of Guwahati city Kamrup (metro) Assam, 2017-19.**

Domination of Village council system	Bihari Harijan	Punjabi Harijan	Telegu Harijan
	69%	65%	65%

The above table reveals the prevalence of village council system among the three Harijan groups from the Harijan colonies. It was found that in the Harijan colonies there still exists a 'Gaon Bura' or 'Pradhan' who is selected by the colony people. In this regard in almost all the three Harijan groups the colony people prefer to go to 'Gaon Bura' / Pradhan for solving any disputes. Bihari Harijan group was found to be more dependent on the Pradhan in this regard in comparison to the other groups. The other two groups also prefer to go to 'Gaon Bura' at first than to police. But under the impact of urbanization and contacts with the neighboring caste population they prefer to approach the police and the role of Pradhan is losing its importance gradually.

The Harijans since their time of arrival in Assam were found to live in colony wise settlement. This is mainly because of the fear of exclusion from the society, though Assam is much liberal in this case as there are no such cases of extreme cases of discrimination against Harijans. These colonies are known as 'Palli' and headed by a Sardar, Pradhan and Chowdhury depending on the customs and usages of each 'Palli' (Razak 2016 as cited in EASO 2018:3). These colonies also have their own informal or traditional justice delivery system called 'Panchayat' which is only for the settlement of disputes (Razak 2016 as cited in EASO 2018:3). The Harijan community in Guwahati follows Patriarchal

system where women are dominated and males exercise control in family matters. Males are given more freedom than their female counterparts. Cases of child marriages and dowry system are still prevalent in their society in the name of tradition. In absence of male heir, property is usually confiscated by other male members rather than given to female members. The practice of dowry is very common in marriage in their society. Often, they take loans with high interest to pay the dowry (Rahman 2016 as cited in EASO 2018:4). The result is that these people get trapped into the vicious circle of debts and leads a life of poverty. Discussions in the family are usually taken by the male members. But now the situation has changed as females are now not bound to follow more restrictions. Earlier a widow in Harijan society has to follow strict restrictions but now the situation has changed as women are taking equal part in every decision making. Now the consent of the girls is taken before marriage and marriage at tender age are not encouraged. Earlier there was a custom of shaving of hair of a widow after her husband dies. This custom is not prevalent in Assam but in other parts of India this custom is still evident. There is another custom among the Bihari Harijan community that the married women are to make a tattoo in their hands and it is very much compulsory otherwise no elderly person will take cooked food from her. While no such customs are found among Telegu and Punjabi Harijan

community. These customs also seem to lose its influence among the urban Bihari Harijans of

Guwahati city.

**Table 6: Customs associated with women among the three Harijan groups from the six Harijan colonies of Guwahati city Kamrup (metro) Assam, 2017-19.**

Customs	Bihari Harijan	Punjabi Harijan	Telegu Harijan
Dowry system	55%	50%	40%
Early Marriage custom	32%	32%	26%
Women in decision making	27%	29%	34%
Women in performing the religious rituals	28%	22%	27%
Practice of teknonymy by women	48%	42%	40%
Women putting veil in their forehead	28%	22%	20%
Wearing Payal/nose ring	75%	73%	67%
Forbidden of certain types of color among the widow	35%	28%	23%
Making a tattoo mark in the hands	80%	32%	20%

The above table reveals some of the customs associated with women. The table shows that early marriages are now on the decline to a considerable extent among the three Harijan group in almost all the six Harijan colonies. While dowry system is still prevalent among the Harijan community and in this regard Bihari Harijan group practices it the most among them. There may be differences in number as many people do not reveal the truth about dowry for fear of being punished. Women usually address their husband by their children's names (tekonymy) and it is almost compulsory for every woman to make 'tattoo' on their hands. Women are found to wear 'payal'(anklets) and nose rings and it is

their custom to wear them. In this regard the percentage is almost equal among the three Harijan groups in all the six colonies. Women are not found to put veils on their forehead while going outside which is usually very common in their native lands. Women are found to take part in performing the religious rituals in the Harijan colonies but still their percentage is not satisfactory in comparison to their male counterparts. Thus, though in close contact with the Assamese population, they still try to retain their traditional practices of wearing anklets, nose rings, using tattoo on their hands, payment of dowry and child marriages.

**Table 7: Percentage of opinion regarding their Attitudes towards their Traditional work among the three Harijan groups from the six colonies of Guwahati Kamrup (metro) Assam, 2017-19.**

Opinions on	Bihari Harijan		Punjabi Harijan		Telegu Harijan	
Want to continue their traditional work	47%		44%		37%	
	Male 24%	female 23%	male 21%	female 23%	male 20%	female 17%
Do not want to continue their traditional work	28%		32%		42%	
	male 17%	female 11%	male 17%	female 15%	male 20%	female 22%
Did not want to expose their caste identity	22%		27%		28%	
	male 10%	female 12%	male 12%	female 15%	male 14%	female 14%
Happy to live in the Harijan colony	45%		48%		43%	
	male 26%	female 19%	male 27%	female 21%	male 21%	female 22%
Not happy to live in the Harijan colony	32%		31%		29%	
	male 15%	female 17%	male 17%	female 14%	male 16%	female 13%

The above table reveals the different opinions of the Harijans regarding their traditional occupation, their preferences to continue in the same profession or to seek other avenues of work. Most of them from the three groups in varying percentages are not happy to continue in their traditional work but want to shift to some other jobs or want their children to find jobs elsewhere. They are also not happy to reveal their caste identity, specially the Telegu speaking group. Most of them are now engaged in some other clerical or petty jobs elsewhere and do not find it comfortable to live in those congested colonies, though they are situated in the central part of

Guwahati city (most of them). The colonies of Punjabi group and Telegu speaking group are very clean and hygienic.

### Conclusion

Harijans have a rich tradition and cultural heritage. Harijans though belongs to Hindu fold but some special rituals were specified to them. They have their own council system, own priest and their own sets of rules and regulation. The caste restriction imposed on them has made their lives pathetic. From the above discussion, it seems that they do not have a subculture or cultural tradition of their own. They are very much part of the main Indian population, be they



the Biharis, Punjabi or Telegu speaking groups. Following Moffat it can be said that they do not possess a separate Harijan 'subculture'. The cultural system of Indian Untouchables does not distinctively question or revalue the dominant social order. Rather, it continuously recreates among Untouchables a microcosm of the larger system (Mofatt 1979:3). The performance of Sawani Puja by the Bihari group gives a faint glimpse of replication. The feeling of exclusion or marginalization is not visible as such among these urban Harijans of Guwahati city. Prohibitions regarding entry to temples, attending schools belonging to other caste, celebrating festivals together and such other activities are totally not seen among these urban Harijans. The only thing that is apparent is that they live in specified colonies and that too in the heart of the city. Their colonies are also not situated outside the city or in the fringe areas (some are there) but the study colonies are all located within the heart of the city. As a result of their contacts with the Assamese caste population there has been some acceptance of Assamese traits in their culture in terms of food and language. But they have retained their own regional identities in all respects. Morever, caste discrimination is not that prominent in the Assamese society and more so in Urban Guwahati city. Therefore, they actively participate in all major religious festivals with other caste groups. This has also resulted in inter-caste and inter-community marriages among them. Harijans of Assam have migrated from their native land and has brought with them their cultural heritage. This is reflected in their customs, rituals, food habits and lifestyle. The Harijan colonies of Guwahati are the hub of three different culture Bihari culture, Punjabi culture, and Teleguculture. One can find all the diversity of three different cultures under a same platform. There is horizontal unity as they share similar caste status with other Harijans of the rest of the country.

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