

# Indigenous Housing and Settlement Pattern of Patro (Laleng) Community in Sylhet

Shubhajit Chowdhury, Kawshik Saha

**Abstract:** Patro community is one of about fifty indigenous communities in Bangladesh. They live in Sylhet and their population is decreasing day by day. They have a distinct culture, historical background and lifestyle, which are manifested in their significant housing and settlement pattern. Though the economic condition is so poor, their neighborhood and community life is strong. This article attempts to search for the pattern language and archetype of their settlement pattern. Although there is no research work on settlement pattern of this community, there are some works on their socio-economic and socio-cultural condition. Moreover, this study tries to collect information from three Patro villages in the deep forest near Sylhet Sadar. After analyzing these information, it is expected that an archetype of the Indigenous housing and settlement pattern of Patro (Laleng) Community will be found.

**Index Terms**—Indigenous Community, Patro Tribe, Indigenous-Housing, Settlement-Pattern, Neighborhood.

## I. INTRODUCTION

‘Patro’ is one of the indigenous community of our country. The original name of Patro community is ‘Laleng’. The meaning of ‘Laleng’ in Patro language is stone, ‘Pathor’ in Bengali and ‘Pattor’ in regional language of Sylhet. Their occupation was to collect and sell stone coals by making it from wood. In Bangladesh, Patros used to live in the Sylhet metropolitan area. The presence of these people is unknown to most of the people of Bangladesh as they want themselves to be hidden and live in deepest part of the forest adjacent Sylhet city ( Mri, 2007: 431). Development of a indigenous housing as well as settlement depend on the activity pattern, available building material, socio-economic condition, socio-cultural activities, neighborhood, environment and geo-climatic factors. This paper tries to identify the ethnicity, habitat, socio-economic, cultural practice, building material and technique of this community. Five villages in the forest near Sylhet Sadar were surveyed as the sample area.

## II. ETHNICITY AND HISTORY

By various specialists (Chakrabarty, Chatterji and Hye) Patros came from the origin of Tibetan-Himalayan Peoples, popularly known as Bodo. The Bodos (pronounced Bo-Ros) are an ethnic and linguistic community, early settlers of Assam in the north east of India. According to the statistical Report (Indian National Census 1991) there were 1.2 million bodos in Assam which makes for 5.3% of the total population in the state. Bodos belong to a large ethnic group called the Bodo-Kachari. (See Fig-01) Another belief is that the Patros are the descendent of ‘Mongolic Monokher’ family. Patros

belongs to the Bodo sub-section of Bodo-Naga section under the Assam-Burmese group of the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Tibeto-Chinese family. (Chatterji, 1951:12-30) Patros are therefore, the branches of the ethnic group named Boro. As the references indicate these people are migrated to Assam from south-west china via Tibet and Bhutan in ancient times. They developed the north east part of India including north east part of Bangladesh. Though they believe, there is no known historical background of Patros of sylhet except the information that Raja Gour Gobinda, the last Hindu ruler of Sylhet was one of their tribes (Sultan, 1984: 3). But there is a probability that most of the Rajas in Sylhet and Kachhar, contemporary to Gour Gobinda came from the new or partial Aryanised Tibeto-Burman families.(Chowdhury, 1992: 12-26). Patro practice is also a mixed practice of Tibeto-Burman and Aryan culture. (Mri, 2007: 434) Since the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century tea-cultivation was introduced in the Sylhet region by British companies. Moreover the crisis of cultivable land led more Bengali People to migrate in the villages of Patro people. Poor, illiterate and minority Patro people could not protect their land from the Outsiders. In 1947 and 1971 a Large number of families migrated to Assam and Meghalaya (Talipara, Kachhar, Dawki, Tajpur Ojai, Lonka, Jamunar muk, Patrakandi). (Chakrabarty, 2000: 63)

## III. LOCATION

As mentioned before Patros used to live in the whole of the present Sylhet metropolitan area.

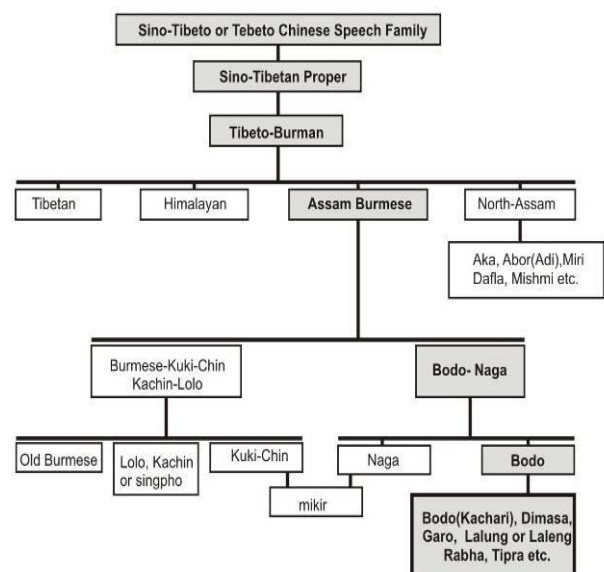


Fig.1. Origin of the Patro

After Hazrat Shahjalal (R) defeated Raza Gour Gobinda; the Patros were forced to move away in the deepest parts of the surrounding forests of Sylhet. At present they live in that forest of outer range of Sylhet city, Guainghat town and some villages of Moulavibazar district. The population was 2033 from 402 numbers of families and 23 numbers of villages. (Source: Field Survey, 1996-97)

#### IV. SOCIO ECONOMIC CONDITION

The occupation of Patros was to cultivate paddy, collect and sell stone coals, making coal from wood etc. At present they live almost hand to mouth. Most of them are peasant or axe man their income completely depends on the landlord and nature. Fishing, selling fire woods are their main means of living. They also farm different vegetables and spices in their yard. Due to lack of Education they are not in city based jobs. During the survey a few numbers of Patros were found to work as day laborers and private drivers. (Chakrabarty, 2000: 59-68). They only have the ownership on the land they live. Rests are sold. So they work on others fields. The literacy rate among the patros of Bangladesh is very low. Each village has only three or four literate people. But currently some local government schools and NGOs have taken initiative to literate the Partro children with the children from main stream society around them.

**Table: I Present Ownership Condition of A Sample Village Mukampunji (Hye, 2007:43)**

Class	Family numbers	Percentage (%)
Landless	17	94.45
0 – 1 Bigha	0	0
1 – 15 Bigha	1	5.55
over 15 Bigha	0	0

#### V. SOCIOCULTURAL ACTIVITIES

A duality in Religious practice was found among Patro-people. Like other ethnic group they practice their own distinct belief and rituals. Their belief system seems to be completely and fundamentally similar to Hinduism to any Stranger. But in detail there are so many factors distinct from Hindus. Now a day's some of them are naming this practice as Brahma dharma, although this is not that Brahma dharma of Raja Ram Mahan Roy. Like other Bangladeshi Hindus their main religious festivals are Durga puja, Dol purnima etc. In certain place of Moulavibazar some of the Patros found converted into Christian under the Christian missionary. They have their spoken language but no written system. The language is known as Laiungtor or the Language of Lalung. But they can speak bangle and local Sylheti language as well. They have about 12 casts or 'Gotros' within themselves but marriages don't take place between same casts. The casts or Gotros are Tonra, Lonkirai, Gobrai, Aloï, Lonkhuroi, Tukriroi, Khaklaroi, Kenglaroi, Tiparoi, Baroi, Ponbabui, Tonrabaroi, They have seven ways of marriage. They have a traditional ceremony called "Baghai seba" which is dedicated

to the tigers of the jungle so that they don't harm them. Bengali New Year is also a big celebration for them. Cultural occasions of Patros are mainly held in their courtyards except for the Major programs like Durgah Puja or Dol Purnima, which are held in a place called Sheba-Kola. Patros are very friendly, hospitable and very simple people. They are often cheated by their neighbors, the land they own were taken from them by cheating. So they avoid communication with other dwellers in their land as a defensive mechanism. (Chakrabarty, 2000: 39-58)

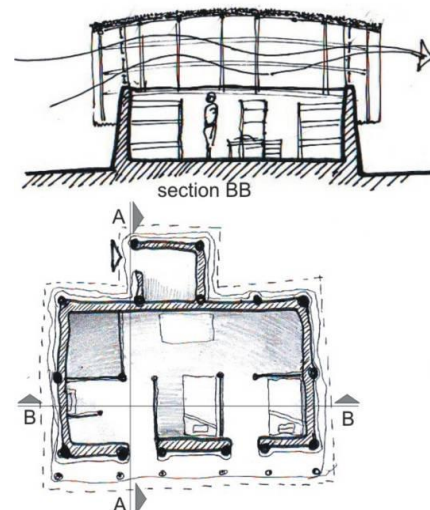
#### VI. ARCHITECTUTRAL CHARACTERISTICS OF PATRO SETTLELMENT

The settlements of five Patro villages in Kalagul forest (Alaibar, Kushal, Dadharani, Paikpara and Makarkhala) near Sylhet Sadar were visited to collect the information.

##### A. Built form and household

Houses of Patro Community are mud-hut. But there are some identical orders. (See Fig-02). They try to make the entrance of their house towards south or east. But it is not a mandatory rule like the main part of vernacular Bengal. Largest facade avoids west side. The total area of a usual house is about 15'x40'. Larger houses reach up to 20'x55' the area depends on the number of the members of the family. Wall thickness varies from 1' to 1'-2". There is an indoor kitchen and an outdoor kitchen for each family. The indoor kitchen is 8'x6'about and rarely used for cooking. The outdoor kitchen is mostly used. The interior height 10'x8' while the roof slopes down making the exterior height less than about 5'. The indoor kitchen's ceiling is about 7' to 9' high. The height is low at the entrance, but proportionate to human scale in the indoors.

**The Roof:** The roof is either straw built with bamboo bracing or thin shade with wood frame and bamboo bracing or tin shade with wood frame and bamboo bracing. During surveying some cases were found to be brick build houses with concrete-slab roof or tin shade, but are rare.



**Fig.2 Plan of a dwelling Unit**

The roofing system is popularly known as Dochala in Bangladesh. The roof is made of straw with strong bamboo bracing. The roofing material depends on the economic condition of the dwellers. The angle of the roofs found to be approximately 45 to 50 degrees.

**Indoor kitchen** however can be oriented towards any direction but the *Kula* (mud range) should be east or north oriented. Same rules go for the exterior kitchen too. The prayer space is to be faced east or north direction, so that they can pray towards east or north. The *Gola* or the granary remains in the front walls of the room interior.

**Expression:** The expression of frame like bamboo work in the exterior side is also a structural member. Decoration of flower and leaves are seen in these houses. Most of the houses have a curved sculpture or picture of their deities in the interior side of the wall above the main entrance. The mud used in the wall is reddish due to high iron content. The walls are traditional mud built with the thickness of at least 1'. In the interior partition, they use mud covered bamboo mat. Bamboos are the main structural element of these houses.

**Interior:** The room arrangement of the Patros' house is very different from the other mud house of Bangladesh. We, the Bangali people use to build a house hold around a family court yard surrounded by three or more built forms. But a single built form is used for a single house hold of a Patro family. Each built form contains several spaces like living space, sleeping space, kitchen, prayer space etc in a single arrangement; can be compared with the arrangement of modern apartments. The partition between two rooms is a thin mud covered bamboo structure. There is also a *Gola* or granary in each house by the side of prayer room. The bedroom is about 10'x12', the living rooms are about 8'x6' and the prayer room is about 4'x3'. The kitchen is used for keeping cattle at night. (See Fig-3)

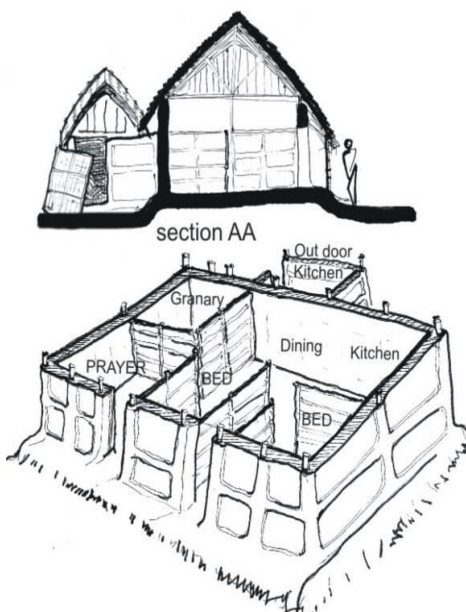


Fig.3 Interior A dwelling Unit



Fig.4 the Roof and the Gable

**Ventilation:** There is no window or opening for ventilation. But they achieve the comfort in a different way. The walls or partitions do not touch to the roof. There remain about 8' high triangular perforated partitions (see Fig-4). This opening plays the vital role for room ventilation. Some of Patro people say that windows make easy for bandits and robbers to enter this house. But history tells, window less houses are their long tradition, may be traced back to the cold Tibetan region where windows are prohibited to protect themselves from cold. (see Fig-2 section and 4)

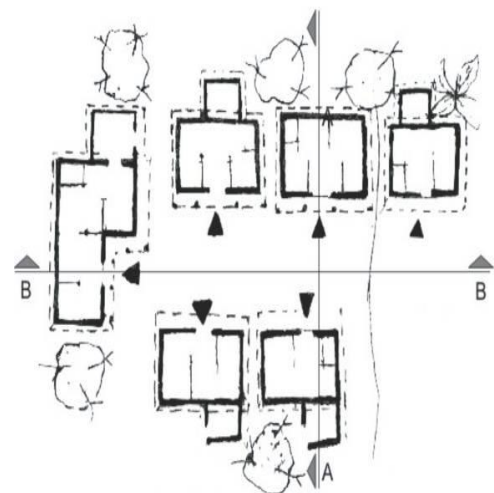


Fig. 5 Planning of Patro settlement

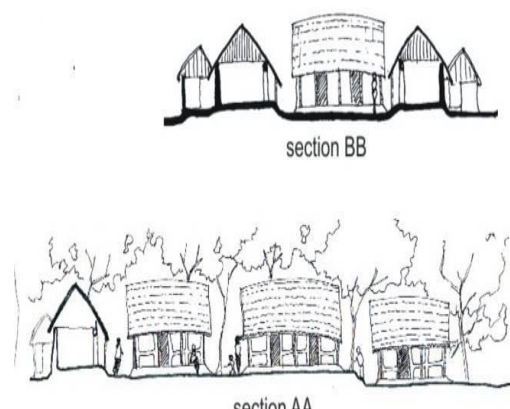


Fig. 6 the Settlement

**Circulation:** The only openings are doors. These doors have no sill, only an opening in the wall. However a strong bamboo fence is used for security. These fences can be locked from

inside with a bamboo stick. (See Fig-5)



Fig.7 The front to the house

### B. Housing & settlement Pattern

**Housing pattern:** There is no private court yard, just a linear courtyard for all families of the settlement. Rectangular houses face the linear court yard. Their housing follow linear pattern because with population increases their house grows by length. They are generally peasants and don't need any large courtyard to sundry paddy. So the courtyard they use is quiet utilitarian for their group-leaving. (see Fig-05 & 6)

**Surrounding environment:** As an outcast they live in the deepest part of the forest of Kalagul. They are surrounded by Forest trees and often teagardens or hills. Sometimes these villages seem to be situated along side of a *Chhara* (canals of fresh water from hills) or a pond. Most of them don't own any cultivation land but the land they cultivate remains by the side of their village. They cultivate vegetable alongside their houses. (see Fig-08)

**Transportation and Communication:** Most of the villages don't have minimum transportation facilities. After crossing a particular place most of time they have to walk a long distance to reach home. Sometime water bodies like *Chhara* needed to be crossed to reach a village.

**Neighborhood:** In their community the sharing is very strong. They share same outdoor court yard both for private and community activities. On the other hand they complain that the neighboring people, mostly Bengalis, are not very friendly to them. They experience harassment and neglect most of the time. Outer people often rob them at night, steal cattle and cut down their vegetables.



Fig.8 Top View of a Patro settlement (Source: Google Earth)

## VII. AN IDENTICAL ARCHITYPE

Analyzing all the findings, now we may try to find the archetype of Indigenous Patro housing.

1. A single built form for a single family.
2. Orientation of a single built form can be from any cardinal direction.
3. All functions (Sleeping spaces, prayer space, living space, granary and indoor kitchen) are in a single built form.
4. Low height entrance blocks direct sunlight or driven rain. A unique process for glare and precipitation control.
5. There are no windows on walls. But the thick mud-wall ensures a comfortable temperature and the cross ventilation through perforated mat-like partition in interior and exceptionally on the clearstory position.
6. There is an additional outdoor kitchen attached to the back side of the main house and its entrance is from the rear.
7. The entry of all dwelling built forms for each family are from a common court yard.
8. All families use the court yard for common function as well as private function. So their community interaction is very high.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

Patro people have a settlement pattern and indigenous housing of unique archetype, a successful community interactive dwelling space. In present situation, the community is in socio-economic and cultural threat. For lack of security they keep themselves apart from the outer world. More research works and proper step from government and NGOs are needed to ensure their social security and community living. Some NGOs (Like FIVDB) have took some awareness and educational programs for children but not sufficient. The neighboring Bengali people of their locality should respect the Patro people, instead of being a threat for the community.

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