

A Human Settlement with a Distinctive Economy: Spotlight on the Struggles of the Underprivileged Kuri Community, Sylhet Bangladesh

Tanjima Siddika & Farhana Hoque

Abstract

The community is a collection of residents who reflect each other's individual jobs, lives, settlement patterns, customs, and cultural frameworks. Communities also pass on their customs from one generation to the next. Maintaining local communities within a country is important, and preserving cultural traditions helps to enhance neighborhood engagement in cities. This research work intends to explore a specific community heritage known as the Kuri community in Sylhet, Bangladesh. They are one of the most deprived communities in Bangladesh. They have distinct professions in snack making, like parched rice, puffed rice and many savory snacks. The business is continuing from time to time and from generation to generation. Though their economic condition is underprivileged, their community bonding and neighborhood are impressive and strong. The aim of this paper is to find out their origin, lifestyle, settlement pattern and economic activities. This study will investigate the relationship between the spatial organization of domestic space and working space. Also, it's a matter of concern that there is no research identifying them or preserving their professional identity. In this paper, the study collected data from the locals of Masimpur, where the majority of them currently dwell. In accordance with the study's stated aims, a questionnaire survey was conducted as part of the qualitative research design process. In the work, their way of life, style of settlement, financial circumstances, and current state of their own specialized occupation have been found and documented after analyzing these data.

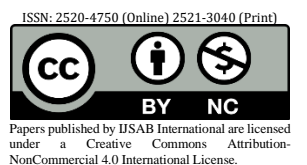


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Introduction

One of the newest themes in developing cities is community involvement, which has received extensive discussion in academic and professional literature about the methods and instruments used in urban environments (Anthony, 2023). The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has declared that cultural heritage can be tangible, such as buildings and surroundings, or intangible, such as local customs and ways of life (Prompayuk & Chairattananon, 2016). One important aspect of intangible cultural legacy is the wealth of knowledge and skills that are passed down from one generation to the next. Knowledge has a huge social and economic impact on both minority groups and traditional social groups. Intangible cultural heritage is expressed through associated artifacts and cultural sites as well as through practices, expressions, knowledge, and abilities that people identify as being a part of their cultural heritage. It is passed down through generations and is continuously renewed, giving humans a sense of identity and continuity (Petronela, 2016). The Kuri community exhibits its own ideals, has a distinctive settlement pattern, and has an intangible economic impact due to their passionate involvement in the family-run industry of creating snacks. "Kuri" those who have this title in their names, such as Bimal Kuri, Rani Kuri lived in the "Kuri community" or "Khaipatti," as it is known locally, which is situated along the Surma river in Sylhet City. The Kuri people's occupation is the most significant of all their traits. They have pride in it and have maintained it for a long time. Traditionally, they prepare and sell sweet and savory snacks like parched rice (khai), puffed rice (muri), Flattened rice (chira), nimki, and chanachur etc, which are well-known and beloved foods, served as evening snacks. Also, these are favourite snacks that most people in this country remember from their childhood. Puffed rice is a very common traditional 'jholkhabar' (snack) all over Bangladesh, especially in rural areas where most village women can make it at home. But Kuri's are special in that sense that they showed that they are best at making it, and they also want to hold that as a profession for a long time. They make and sell their products in local markets like Bandar bazar, Kazir bazar, etc. In all traditional fairs in Sylhet, including "Rother mela" they sell their products in a festive mood. They also sell and distribute these products to different districts of Bangladesh. Nevertheless, it is a tragedy that most of these precious memory-makers live such a perilous existence with uncertain financial situations. In addition, they live in filthy dwellings that are affected every year by floods.

This research is an initial step to serve the significance of Kuri's cultural identity through architectural intervention. The authors make an effort to investigate the importance of community presence in a country's culture. In order to preserve their cultural heritage, this study intends to shed light on them, their history, occupations, and settlement patterns.

Methodology

To find out the way of life and settlement pattern of Kuri community study conducted both a questionnaire and an observation survey in this Masimpur Kuri community in May 2023. Primary data were collected from a questionnaire survey with a simple random sampling process and stratified it as per different family members to get clear data on this case study area. Primarily 20 families were selected for the questionnaire survey and the questionnaire was set to find out the demographic data like their family members, income range, age, literacy level and religion. Some questions were about their origin from when they started living here, some were amenities related. To find out their origin and history, the study depends on mainly literature review and cross-checked data to find correct information about their origin. Some open-ended question study covers their future thinking with their profession and the improvement of their living. To understand the infrastructure and built form quality an observation survey was also simultaneously completed and finally study finds six types of built

form and it is documented here by type A-type F in (Figures 6 & 7). Photographs and measurements were taken to complete the plans and drawings of this survey area.

Origin

The Sylhet region of Bangladesh has an extensive heritage of tradition, civility, and culture that is somewhat unique from other parts of the country (Islam et al., 2016). Literature characterizing Kuri as a community and their vocation contains relatively little yet powerful information. From the book 'Shrihatter Itibritto–Purbangsho' we came to know that from the 1901 census, the number of Kuri people who lived in Sylhet was 223 males and 175 females. Also, it was stated that Kuri lived in Sylhet, which was known as Shrihatta and they were basically businessmen. They boiled the paddy to create the best parched rice, which was very well known at the time (Choudhury, 2009). It serves as a reliable historical reference for their line of work. In search of their origins, the study attempted a questionnaire survey to collect information about them. Most of them lived in Masimpur and came from Ajmiriganj (an upazila of Habiganj district, Sylhet). A number of Kuri families who had resided in Masimpur remain connected to their relatives who still live in Ajmiriganj. Rivers including Kalni, Kushiya and Ghaniabanga, Bagha and Dhiga beel surrounded the Ajmiriganj upazila, (Banglapedia, 2021) which is indicative of its water-based geography. Ajmiriganj was one of the important riverside commercial markets in the 19th and 20th centuries that served as a commercial trading point (Choudhury, 2009). Those are now extinct in the lap of time, and the commercial point also changes in its own way. In search of a better marketplace for their business, the Kuri people of Ajmiriganj came to the Sylhet Masimpur area and started living with Kuri people here more than 100 years ago. About Sylhet city's previous commercial growth, the research finds that Sylhet was the center of significant administrative and commercial growth during the reign of Shri Chandra in the 10th century A.D. (Kanungo, 1999). In the Mughal era, traces of commercial activities are evident along these riverside localities, from the present-day Circuit House area to Sheikh Ghaat (Ali, 2014). Kali Ghaat, Sheikh Ghaat and Bandar Bazar shown in (Figure 1a) are the parts that still serve the same activity structure as they have since their earliest times. In this case, in Masimpur the study area, there is a brook called Goalichara which had a prominent use at that time. The study found that the wetland around the southwest periphery of Chalibandar – now a residential area – had been connected with Surma through this canal, which provided direct access for boats to pass through during the rainy seasons (Chowdhury & Elahi, 2022). In the 1934 map of Sylhet Town, when Sylhet was under Assam province, the Masimpur area was not on the city map, and Goalichara acted as the periphery of the city territory (Figure 1a). Additionally, Manipuri community and Kuri community were here, evidence shows that Rabindranath Tagore visited this Masimpur area on November 6, 1919, and he was fascinated by the Manipuri dance (Sinha, 2009). Therefore, it's clear those communities were here when the 1934 map was created. Moreover, this area has been under the Sylhet City Corporation (SCC) after the liberation war of 1971. Even if the location is still the same, the expanding population is having an adverse effect on their quality of life. So, in search of their migration, the study finds a connection that the commercial growth along the Surma River of Sylhet played an important role in this matter. Most of the Kuri people came to Sylhet from Ajmiriganj, shown in Figure 1(b), via waterways like the Surma River and they came here for commercial purposes and economic advancement. Outside of Sylhet, they also live in different parts of Bangladesh. Kuris live beside the Meghna River and they are fishermen by occupation. They sell and catch fish for their livelihood. The Kalni River, a branch of the Surma River, empties into the Meghna River only 45 miles after passing through Ajmiriganj. Kuris' primarily resided in the Ajmiriganj and Masimpur areas of Sylhet. Additionally, all of these locations have the trait of living next to a river belt (Choudhury, 2009).

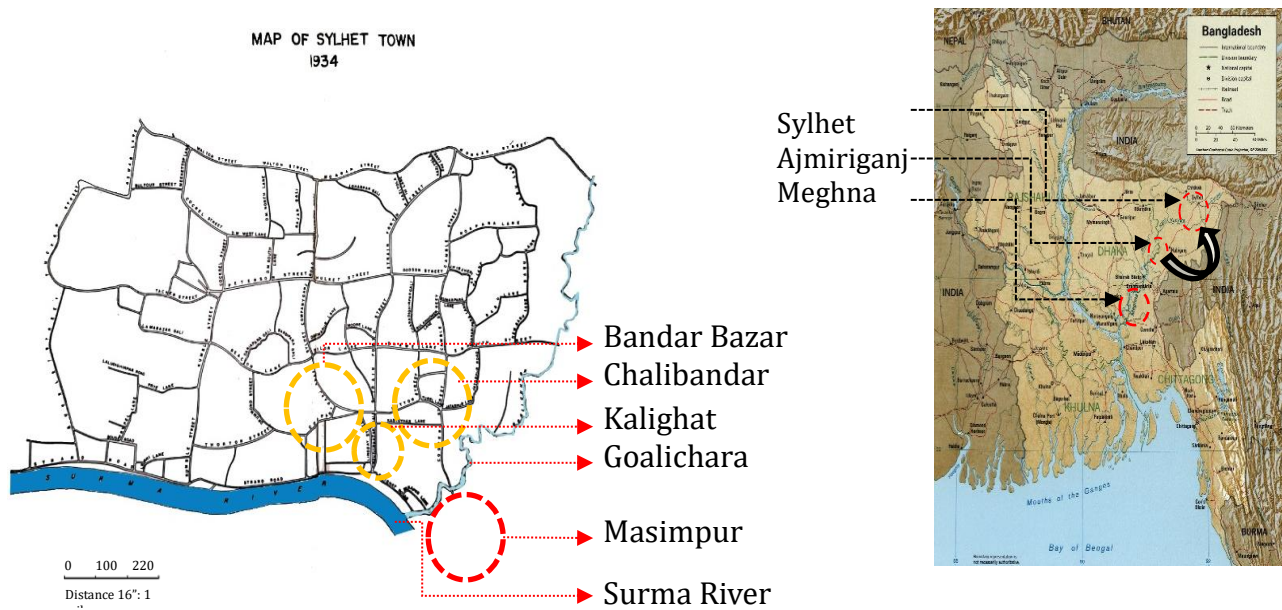


Figure 1: (a) Map of Sylhet city area in 1934. [Source: (Ahmed, 1999) modified by Authors], (b) Sylhet River Map. [Source: (Agency, 1996) modified by Authors]

Study Area Profile

Respecting the diverse contexts, numerous groups are allowed to emerge in Bangladesh. According to the profession, the Kuri community is among those that are also well-known for their unique profession. Kuri people have resided in Sylhet's Masimpur locality for more than a century; this area is currently at ward number 23 under the jurisdiction of Sylhet City Corporation. The location is depicted in Figure 2 at coordinates $24^{\circ}53'08.18''$ N latitude and $91^{\circ}52'38.09''$ E longitude.

Surrounding's and Neighborhood

Settlement tradition is an all-encompassing strategy that "strengthens neighborhood and individual assets and increases collective capacity to address community issues" (Hirota et al., 1997). The Masimpur area also reflects some settlement traditions and neighborhood. The Kuri community people are surrounded by individuals of all religions and ethnicities. In the north-side area, there is a brook which is known as Goalichara lying with the community parallel to this area. For this, a body of water can be seen in the background behind the houses on the north side of Kuri Community. However, all the north side structures visually obstruct the stream from the Kuri community street. Also, a local transport stop is located on the north side prior to the beginning of the Goalichara bridge. There is a local Community area towards the south locally known as Muslim Community (Figure 2). People who are well-known as part of the Sylhet ethnic group live in the Manipuri community on the west side of the Kuri community. Alongside the Surma River lies a commercial area, specifically a dry fish market that is the one of largest in Bangladesh. Besides, there are numerous community shops and a vegetable market that exist under the commercial zone. Lastly, all the zoning areas are shown in the Figure 2.

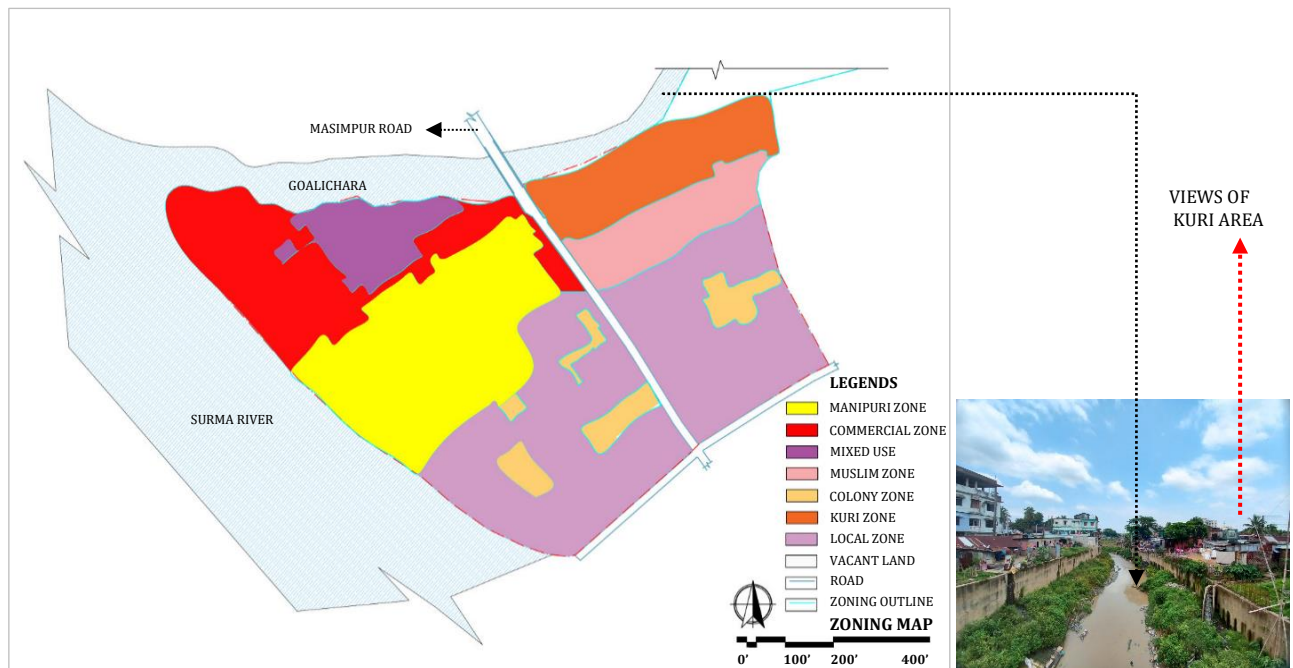


Figure 2: Zoning Map. [Source: Generated by Authors from Google earth]

Socio-Economic Condition

The total Kuri area is approximately 7-8 acres. Approximate there are 180 families living here. The field study reveals that Kuris' are incredibly amiable and honest people. Even though the area is rather crowded, everyone still lives there and helps one another. To solve the unfortunate disputes among each other, there is a ward council; they solve the issues, and everyone respects their decision. The questionnaire survey reveals demographic information, which is shown below. Figure 3(a) illustrates that teenage and young adult percentages are at their maximum (25%). Figure 3(b) shows the female population is 57.2% and the male population is 42.8%. Additionally, Figure 3 (d) explains the family size ratio. The highest number of family members is 4 to 5, which is 75%. The literacy rate among the Kuris' is very low. The maximum number of people only gets a chance to have primary education because their economic condition is very poor. The community is primarily made up of nuclear families. In the Kuri community, Hinduism predominates as a religion at 100% in percentage terms. They observe the festivals in accordance with their religion, and there is a temple within the community that aids in all the celebrations. From generation to generation, the Kuri people have carried on this business of producing crunchy savory treats like puffed rice, parched rice, and many more. When creating snacks at home, both male and female family members engage in the process. In a patriarchal society, the income member is connected to the profession directly. Some people produce it and sell it from their carts; some of them own factories and provide their stores; yet others also work as employees in these factories. Due to the unfavorable effects of the rainy season on their chosen profession, some people turned to other professions, like day laborers or fruit vendors, seasonally. The state of the economy is catastrophic. The majority of people currently live in poverty. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic and other natural disasters put the lives of those in the lower economic groups in quantifiable condition (Rahman & Alam, 2022). Some people depend on loans to get by on a daily basis. Figure 3(c) shows that more than 60% of people live below the poverty line and that the range of monthly incomes is insufficient. Their economic situation has a negative impact on their quality of life. They were unable to finish their studies because of their financial situation. They solely own the property on which they reside.

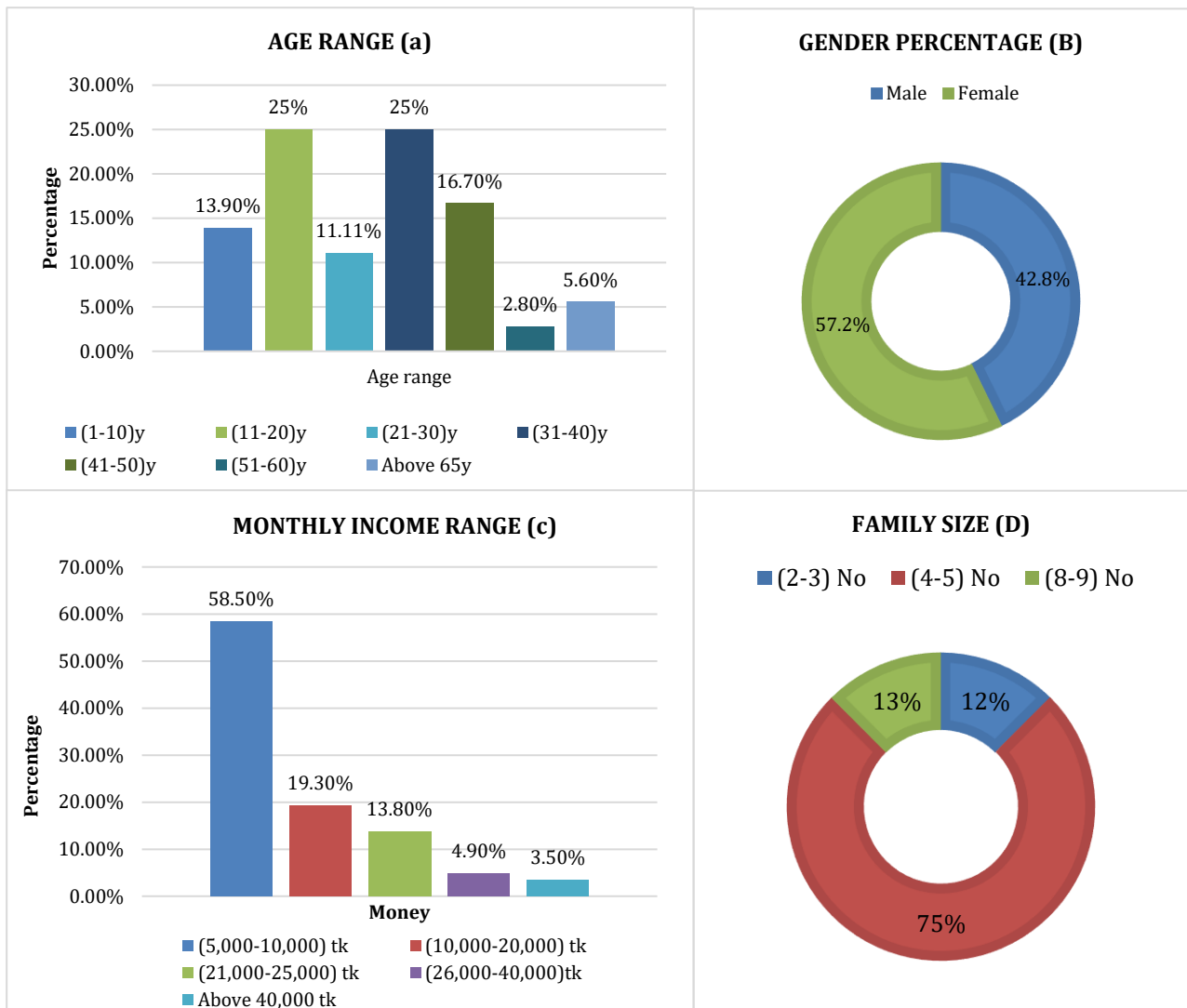


Figure 3: Demographic data (a) Age range, (b) Gender percentage, (c) Monthly income range, (d) Family size. [Source: Generated by Authors from questionnaire survey]

Settlement Pattern and its Evolution

In Masimpur, the settlement pattern of the Kuri community developed in an unplanned way, and due to the linear character of the road, the settlement here also converted into the linear pattern shown in Figure 4. This secondary but connecting road in this community plays a vital role in their lives as it is the only open space that connects all the houses and builds their neighborhood in an enclosed but comfortable way. With the growth of the population, the houses expanded towards the north side and the south side longitudinally. As a result, the horizontal expansion makes the housing more congested. Because of the patriarchal system of land ownership, land is allocated to male family members based on their ancestors. There are a few amenity facilities inside the community, such as a temple, a graveyard industry, and community shops, which support their daily needs. One important feature of housing is that affluent and poor people coexist in the same dwelling, which is an important trait since it promotes interpersonal relationships. Lastly, there is a gymnasium and sports complex within a short distance of this community area. But a boundary wall restricts the direct access from the Kuri community area.

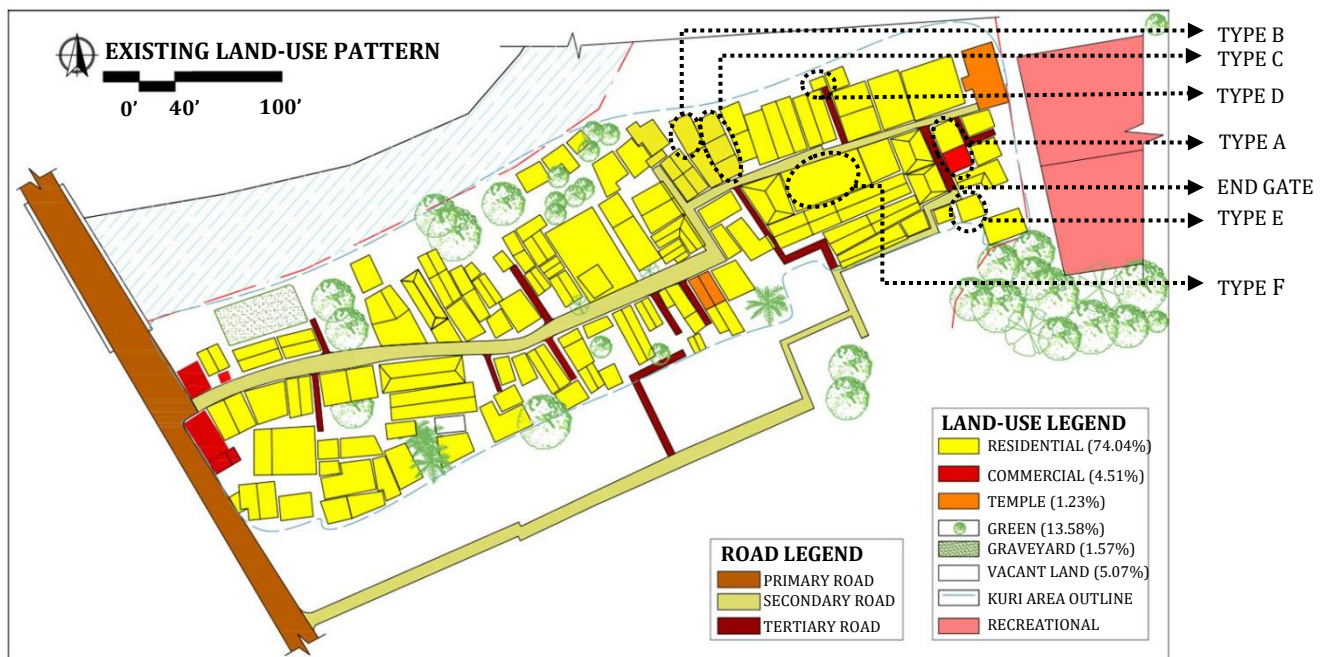


Figure 4: Land use pattern of Kuri community. [Source: Generated by Authors]

Road network

The primary road that links all of the secondary community roads is called Masimpur road (Figure 5a). Kuri community has one secondary street that is connected to the primary community street, and this is the only roadway with a straight connection to every home on both sides. This secondary road is connected to a few tertiary routes as well (Figure 5b). Additionally, the secondary road's width, which is about 6-7 feet, is adequate for van circulation. Moreover, the tertiary road is quite tiny, with a range of 3 to 4 feet in width, making it unsuitable for any automotive activity, as shown in Figure 5 (c). Furthermore, there is a collapsible gate at the end of the Kuri area road, and that road is connected to the Muslim community area in Figure 5 (d).



Figure 5: (a) Primary Road, (b) Secondary Road, (c) Tertiary Road and (d) End gate. [Source: Authors]

Architectural Characteristics

Built form and household

One-bedroom, single-tin-shaded houses are the official representation of an individual home in the Kuri community. The majority of the residences enters from the road and lacks a plinth. The houses are mainly rectangular in shape. They contain mostly one room, a kitchen with working space and a toilet (Figure 6). When a family expands, a partition wall like the ones in types A and C of Figure 6, is used to divide the bedrooms of two brothers. Though most of them

use common toilets, attached toilets are very rare, and only a few of them can manage to build toilets. The majority of residences are one storey, although a few wealthy Kuri individuals have recently built several 2 or 3 storey buildings as well. The study surveyed a 3-storey building with a quite well decorated pattern on the front facade, but the strong character of living in one bedroom is also present in this apartment shown in (Figure 7). They still follow the tradition of having limited furniture in one room of their house.

Room

Due to their economic condition, the Kuri people could not afford much furniture. They use minimal equipment. The majority of the room's interior features a bed, a space for prayer, and a wall for hanging clothes. Some people who are in better shape have a wardrobe for clothes. Most of them have their own prayer space (Figures 6,7). The lower space beneath the bed is mainly used as storage. The total area of a room is about 100 sq. ft. to 180 sq. ft., and the room wall thickness is 3" to 5", depending on the construction material.

Kitchen

Despite installing their kitchen in the interior part of the house, the Kuri does not follow any orientation requirements. The kitchen is spacious since it serves as their workspace for making food, as shown in Figures 6 and 7 (Type: A, B, F). The size of the kitchen varies from 35 sq. ft. to 60 sq. ft. The burner in the work area is constructed of mud and lights on straw or a wooden stick. Others, without a workplace, produced food in the kitchen using a gas stove or cylinder.

Roof

The roof primarily slopes on two sides which is known as Dochala pitched roof. The interior height varies from 7' to 11' because of the slope. In this community, most of the houses are single-storied and they use tin (C.I. sheet) with wooden frames and bamboo bracing as roof material. The most important part of this roof is, it is the only way of ventilation for those houses as they put a part of the C.I. Sheet movable. It also works as top lighting and solves the ventilation of this room and kitchen (Figure 6). In Kuri community survey also finds several brick buildings with a roof made of concrete or R.C.C. slabs (Figure 7).

Toilet

The sanitary conditions are very unhygienic. Only 15% of people used attached toilets in good condition. In addition, 16% used shared toilets that were constructed with the help of NGOs, as shown in type E (Figure 6). Moreover, 15% of people use unhygienic toilets. In order to maintain privacy, the toilet area is not even covered sometimes, shown in type C (Figure 6).

Ventilation

The majority of Kuri single-story homes are not properly ventilated. A few factors contribute to this. One explanation is that there is no space between the residences because they are arranged in a crowded manner. Another factor is that properties with secondary road entrances have windows on the front facade and are ventilated through their windows (type C, Figure 6). Houses that were located away from the secondary road, however, lacked wall apertures, and through the roof, ventilation is accomplished. The opening is crucial for the ventilation and illumination of the space. However, the kitchen and bathroom, which are situated to the north, offer adequate openings.

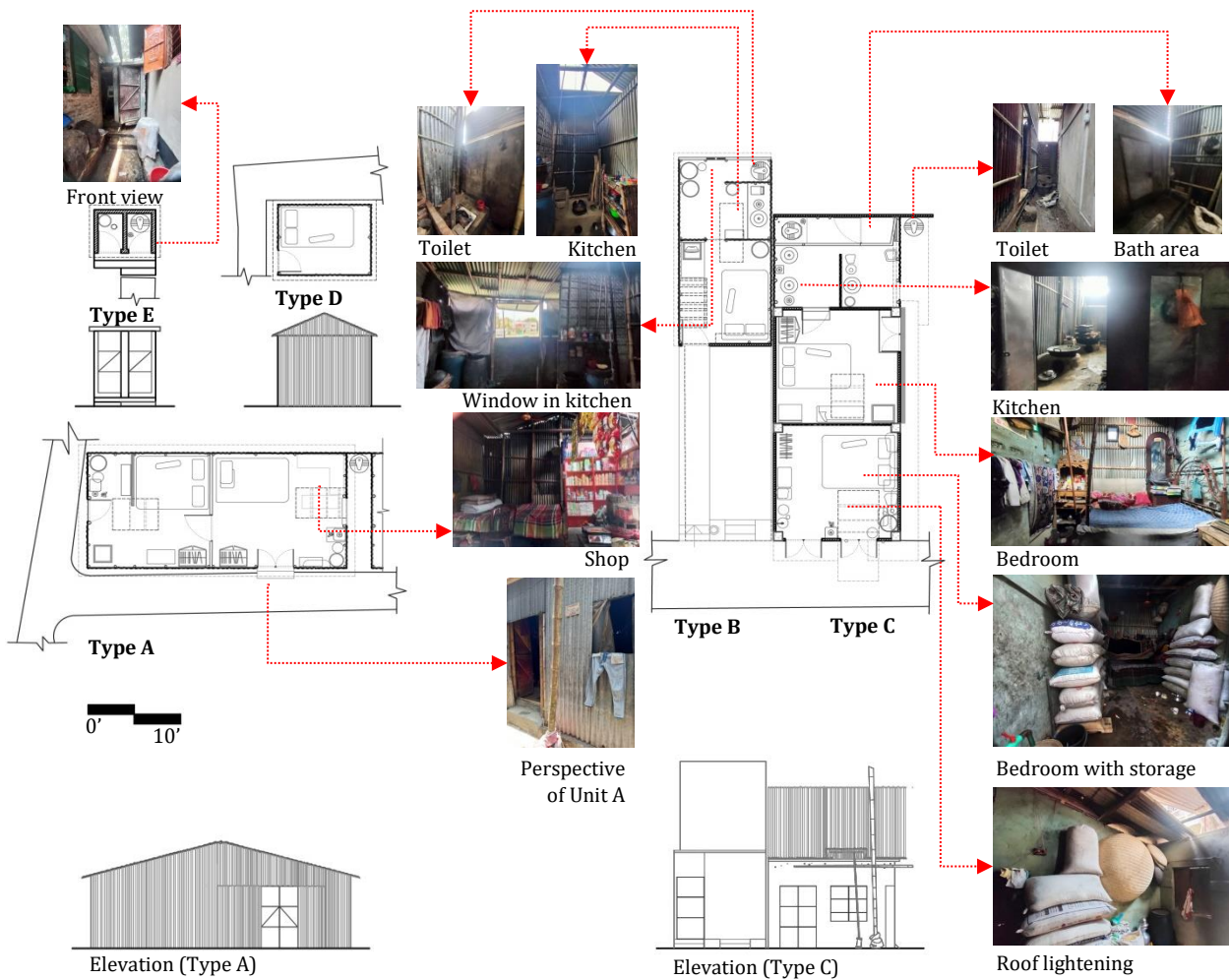


Figure 6: Built form details. [Source: Generated by Authors]

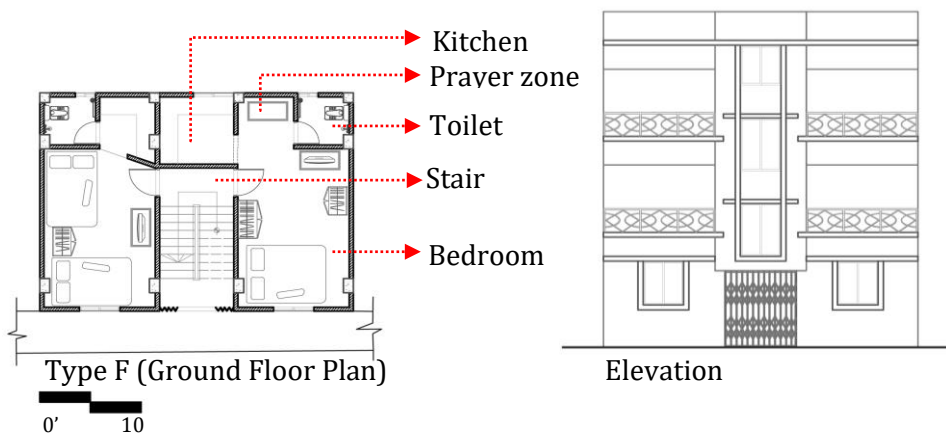


Figure 7: Recent Brick Built form details. [Source: Generated by Authors]

Material and construction system

In the study area, the construction technology and materials of the houses are based on their economic status. About 60% of homes have tin (C.I. sheet) roofs and wall joints with wooden or bamboo frames. Many of them borrowed money from various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and built their single bedrooms' brick walls using post-lintel technology when a recent, terrible flood occurred in 2022 (Zahid, 2022). However, continue to use the outdated tin roofing system with functional top lighting. Those who are financially wealthy

build two storey or three storey buildings. The material details and construction system of houses are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Material and construction system of existing houses.

Structural Component	Built type/Materials	Structure Types	Durability
Foundation	Mud	No foundation	Not sustainable
	Brick	No foundation	Not sustainable
	Brick and Concrete	R.C.C. Foundation	Sustainable
Plinth	Mud is used on the floor	Plinth level to the ground	Not sustainable
	Concrete is used on the floor	Concrete plinth raised from the ground	Sustainable
Partition Wall	Tin and timber frame	Lightweight structure	Not sustainable
	Board with wooden frame	Lightweight structure	Not sustainable
	5" brick wall	Load bearing wall	Sustainable
Wall	Tin and timber frame	Tin and timber	Not sustainable
	3" brick wall with R.C.C. column	Brick and R.C.C.	Durable but risky in disaster.
	5" brick wall	Brick and R.C.C	Sustainable
Column/Post	Bamboo	Load bearing timber posts	Durable but need to change or repair.
	Concrete	Load bearing concrete posts	Sustainable
Roof System	Wooden /Bamboo frame with tin	Pitched roof	Durable but risky in disaster.
	concrete	R.C.C. slab	Sustainable
Stair	stair steps are made of concrete	RCC staircase	Sustainable

Source: modified by Authors from (Islam et al., 2016)

Neighborhood and community activity

During the field survey, it came to light that the Kuri community contained a very special neighborhood. The only road that connects all the residences also serves as a shared area for them all. As the municipal water line is primarily in front of their homes, people are washing their clothes on this street (Figure 8a). And it's a kind gesture that all the doors are left open. Children are playing, women and elderly people are sitting in front of their homes (Figure 8b), conversing, and working, and everything is done in a normal and adorable way within this street. Their relationship appears to have transcended their struggles. It appears as though each person has an entire community space in front of their house to share in addition to his own room or residence.



(a)

(b)

(c)

(d)

Figure 8: (a) On this street, locals are doing their laundry, (b) A woman is sitting in front of her home, (c) Water level in Kuri community road during the flood of 2022 (d) Water level rise and submerged the plinth level. [Source: Authors]

Natural disaster

The area is climatically vulnerable, as almost every year in the rainy season; the area submerges in flood water. In the year 2022, the water level rose up 1.5' to 2.5' from the road level, shown in (Figure 8 c & d) which caused significant damage to numerous houses (Zahid, 2022).

Findings

Analyzing the entire scenario study's socio-economic condition leads to the conclusion that the majority of them, approximately 70–80% (from the above mention data in Figure 3c), are underprivileged and struggle daily to meet their most basic necessities. Despite their love and enthusiasm for their chosen field, misery occasionally drives people to consider leaving their special line of work. Health and higher education facilities seem out of reach for them. Their community interaction seems high, although they suffered great difficulties in the recent devastating flood. For the most part, sanitary facilities are in poor shape.

And analyzing their archetype of settlements, the study finds that a single built form with one bedroom for a single family. All needs, like sleeping, storage, prayer space, and sometimes cooking, are met in a single room. For their working purposes, most of them have an additional large kitchen, which is found at the back of their residences. From the wealthy to the poor, everyone has the practice of only using a bed as their only piece of furniture, which reflects their simple lifestyles. It is already a congested place when a family expands without any forethought; they just divide the house or room into two parts horizontally, which is alarming for the following generation.

Recommendations

Based on the most recent research findings, the study makes some recommendations for improving the Kuri community as it currently exists. Kuri people can make significant economic contributions if they receive the right training and work environment for producing such savory and sweet delicacies. Better housing arrangements could provide an improved solution for the Kuri community's kitchens, as food preparation and sales depend heavily on maintaining hygiene. Although most of their lives are uncertain, they may be made easier with improved housing and economic policies. In this regard, the government might take extra precautions or create regulations to shield those disadvantaged individuals from natural disasters like floods. Additionally, upgrades to sanitary and bathing facilities are important for those in the community who cannot keep them up due to financial constraints.

Conclusion

The study has observed that the Kuri community has an indigenous tradition of settlement patterns and a unique house form rooted in their culture, with lively and engaging communal bonding. Their passion for their work is extremely admirable, and this should be brought to light so that everyone may observe it. If governmental and non-governmental organizations gave them more attention, their hardships might be lessened. Therefore, this study is significant in recommending saving these disadvantaged people's cultural heritage as they are an asset to contribute to our economy by producing the best sweet and savory snacks, which we may eventually distribute not only on a national level but may even be a commodity to export. To conclude, a systematic procedure should be followed to save and preserve the cultural heritage of these minority groups.

Limitation of the research

The whole research work is mainly dependent on primary data. Besides, no community research work happen based on Kuri community before. As a result, there is no citation in the Study Area Profile and Architectural Characteristics.

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Conflict of interest

The authors claim that there were no competing interests in this work. All of the authors of this article have given their consent for it to be published.

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