

Garos Settlement, Migration and Cultural Traits: An Overview

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Abstract: Garo is a unique matrilineal community in Bangladesh with distinct cultural features, migrated from highland of China, particularly from Tibet to Indian sub-continent, eventually to Bangladesh. There is shortage of evidence-based information on Garo migration and settlement, also conflicting viewpoint exist on the issue. The fundamental focus of this article is to analyze the Garo origin, settlement and their migration to Bangladesh. Accordingly, the study emphasizes on Garos ethnic origin and their travel to Indian sub-continent as well as to present day Bangladesh. During this expedition, Garo faces terrible challenges and tries to settle many places in the last centuries. Garos' cultural origin is distinguished, where they practice matrilineal system with unique inheritance system, marriage, religion, kinship grouping but nowadays, transforming significantly but some traditional beliefs and practices are still observed among the Garos. Case studies, observations, FGDs and interview methods have been utilized to collect the ethnographic data from the Garos of Modhupur of Tangail District. We have very little, unreliable and unclear historical evidence on the Garo origin, settlement and migration, but whatever information we have, that represent their Garo ethnic origin and settlement in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Garo, matrilineal, origin, settlement, migration, ethnic, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

Garo or *Mandi* is a distinguished ethnic community in Bangladesh, particularly known to the outside world for their distinct matriarchal system, mostly living in the northeastern region of Bangladesh, particularly, Mymensingh, Tangail, Sheerpur, Netrokona as well as in some adjoining areas of Sylhet District near Indian frontier. There is no precise historical documentation of Garo migration to this region, although in the past, most of the Garos settled in the foothill areas of northeastern borders of Bangladesh, and later, they gradually moving to the plainland. According to 2022 Census reported, there are 76,846 Garos live in Bangladesh (BBS:2022) but Bal (1999:5) mentioned that during the time of 1999 around 100,000 Garos lived in Bangladesh, although many more Garo lives in Meghalaya, on the Indian side. Garo settlement in India expands up to the Khasi Hills of Assam, Tripura, Shillong, Nagaland, and West Bengal. In Assam, the Garos are concentrated in a few districts surrounding the Brahmaputra basin, which includes Karbi Anglong District as well. Their major concentration, however, lies in the southern border of the districts of Goalpara and Kamrup. Many Garos live in Chumkudina area of the then Kolkata District. In Tripura, Garos live in the south Tripura, and in West Bengal, they live in the districts of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Bihar (Chowdhury,2007:40).

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Bal (1999) also added that there is, however, a disparity between government and private estimates on the total number of the Garos in Bangladesh. A big number of Garos have settled in Modhupur *Upazila* of Tangail District, particularly in the *Sal* forested areas, where the ethnographic field study has been conducted. However, a few Garos live in Sreepur *Upazila* of Gazipur District, and some Garos are also found in the bordering areas of Sunamgonj districts. A remarkable number of Garos are now residing in Dhaka, Chittagong and Gazipur city, for the purpose of education and employment. A small number of Bangladeshi Garos today live outside the country, mainly being in the United States, Canada, UK and Australia for perusing their higher education and seeking immigration (Chowdhury, 2007:41).

Garos have their own language, which is called *A'chik Katha*, but almost all the Garos are bi-lingual, because they speak in their own language among themselves, and speak in Bengali language, while interacting with their Bengali neighbors (Bal,1999:12). Garo's traditional religion is known as *Sangsarek* (Khaleque,1982: 46) but nowadays, almost all the Garos have been converted to Christianity (Bal,1999:21) with a very insignificant number to Islam and Hinduism. Another colorful trait of the Garo is their unique kinship system, which serves as the primary organizing factor of Garos social life and specifies the roles of men and women in the society. Every Garo belongs to his or her mother's lineage or *Mahari* and takes their family name from their mother (Khaleque,1982: vii). Garos inheritance system is also very distinguished and related to their matrilineal ethos, where men do not inherit any property from their parents; all properties are inherited by women. Another distinct feature is that Garos still follows matrilocal residence pattern, where husband moves to wife's house after marriage (Chowdhury,2007:171).

Because of current socio-economic and cultural transformations, Garos are now changing in every aspect of their life. While the Garos are changing then they are discarding many of the traditional traits and accepting outside cultural elements, although Bleie (2005:35), mentioned, still today Garo's unique matrilineal culture and kinship system distinguishes them from other communities of Bangladesh. There is very few research on Garos settlement, migration and cultural traits in Bangladesh, which has prompted me to conduct this research on issues in learning more about them through an ethnographic investigation.

2. Objectives and Methodological Contemplation

The prime focus of this paper is to examine Garos ethnic origin, settlement and migration to Bangladesh. Hence, it explores the nature of Garos ethnic origin, geographical migration and settlement during the last centuries. To appear into the specific focuses, particularly the study addresses following questions such as: where the Garos' comes from and the process of their settlement in Bangladesh? Accordingly, what are the ethnic origin of the Garos in Bangladesh?

This paper is the outcome of a village based ethnographic study conducted in 2021-22 for doctoral research in two Garo villages, named *Chunia* and *Joynagacha* of Modhupur *Upazila* in Tangail District of Bangladesh. Here, villages are taken both as geographical and social units. Multi-method approaches have been utilized to address the issues during the fieldwork to understand the Garo society holistically. In the study, different

ethnographic tools and techniques were used for obtaining field data including participant observation, total enumeration of two villages with structured questionnaires, In-depth interviews, KIIs interviews, case studies, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Visual methods such as photography and videography were also utilized in ethnographic study. The study has focused on indigenous points of views (Porsanger:2004) and utilized secondary sources of information for discussing the historical past and position of the Garo community.

3. Garo Settlement and Migration to Bangladesh

Very few scholars have conducted research to know about the history of the Garo settlement and migration. However, writing a full history of the Garo migration and settlement proved difficult due to the shortage of sufficient evidence. The earlier records and evidence that we uncovered were largely created in the last centuries. There are existing contradictory perspectives on the issues. According to Chowdhury (2007:46) before British colonial control, Garos were not recognized to the outside world. Even during the early stages of British occupation, they were known as a tribe of people with no history. Dalton (1872:65) took the initiative to compile a descriptive analysis of Bengal's tribal people. He was also skeptical about their early history and mentioned that Garos have no tradition regarding migrations, they imagine themselves to be indigenous, and the only people with whom they claim alliance are the Buts and the English. On the other hand, another European researcher Playfair (1909:8) mentioned that Garos have a very distinguished story of migration from Tibet, of their arrival in the plainlands at the foot of the Himalayas, of their wanderings eastward up to the Brahmaputra valley, and of the subsequent retracing of their steps until they came to the plainlands which lie between the river and the mountains they now reside. They appear to have remained here for some time before making the final migration into the Hilly Garo area, that is currently home to the Garos.

Hence, it is evident that we have extremely limited evidence on Garos' migration, and conflicting viewpoints exist in the subject of Garos migration, although there is agreement on the fact that they migrated from Tibet (Burling,1997). It is also stated that Tibet is not their land of origin, and some scholars have mentioned that Garos are migrated from ancient China, which has since become a part of Mongolia. It is said that in the southwestern region of China, there exist different indigenous tribes that are originally not Chinese and speak languages that are completely different from Mandarin (Baldwin,1934; quoted by Chowdhury, 2007:47). It is assumed that these are the ancestors of Garo and later these people start to reside in the hills of Eastern Assam and upper Burma. This viewpoint is heavily supported by Milton S. Sangma, in his book 'History and Culture of the Garos'. Here, Sangma (1981:23) mentioned that most probably Garos have migrated from ancient China and there is a group of Tibeto-Chinese racial connection among the Garos.

All these viewpoints are not exclusive proof, as there is very few historical evidence to back up the ideas. However, based on the observations, we might stand that Garos might have migrated from different locations of ancient China over time for various reasons, and then settled in Tibet, where they may have stayed for a longer period before migrating to

the Garo Hill areas of Indian subcontinent (Bhattacharjee, 1987). Garos are members of the vast mongoloid race, which is found throughout the central Asia, northeast Asia and east south Asia. Aside, from biological similarities, the Tibeto-Chinese relation is also supported by language, religion and verities of other cultural features (Burling, 1997:6).

Following many sources and rigorous argumentation, we can see that Garos migrated from ancient China, but they subsequently moved to their current geographic location which required many years of layover in several countries and places. Existing evidence indicates that throughout their journey to find a suitable area for settlement, the Garos dispersed and went to different locations. According to Chowdhury (2007:49) during this voyage Garos had to travel through the most inaccessible roads of dense forests, hills, rocks, mountains, and rivers like the mighty Brahmaputra on this journey. We can easily imagine that during their long journey, they may have encountered internal feuds, wars, and hostility from other ethnic tribes and kings. It is assumed that while they were moving from one location to another, they were driven away to number of other locations. During their journey, Garos had to settle in various parts of the Indian subcontinent and, eventually, in Bangladesh.

We do not have specific documents to determine, when and for how exactly Garos first arrived in the Indian subcontinent. There are several points of view on this, but the most widely recognized concept is that the Garos migrated from Tibet in different groups to various directions at different times. Dalton (1872), Playfair (1909), Majumder (1966), Sattar (1971), Khaleque (1982), Marak (1982), Islam (1986), Sangma (1981), Bhattacharjee (1987), Sangma (1993), Jengcham (1994), Homrich (1996), Burling (1997), Bal (2007), Marak (2002), Bale (2005), Chowdhury (2007) mostly supported Garos Tibeto-Chinese connection of origin and traveled to Indian subcontinent and later, to Bangladesh region. Scholars attempted to trace and present Garos origin and settlement in the subcontinent mainly through the investigation of popular stories, folklore, legends, and verses.

Garos migration is continued and moving from place to place in the region, particularly for subsistence. During the recent past, because of several reasons, Garos left Bangladesh, particularly following the partition of Indian subcontinent, they move from East Pakistan (present Bangladesh) to India. During the communal violence that occurred in 1947 and 1965, there was a great influx of the Garos. In 1947, many Bangali Muslim refugees from Assam arrived in northern Mymensingh, followed by other poor and landless Bengalis from other places. Garos, however, coexisted with the newcomers in several places and live side by side with them but a considerable number of Garos from the border areas fled to Indian side. Another influx occurred during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. Some Garos also actively participated in the liberation battle, there are some valiant freedoms fighters among the Garos. Like majority Bengalis, Garos were also victimized by Pakistani atrocity, and many of them fled different regions of India. Following the liberation war of 1971, many Garos returned to Bangladesh, while some others remained in India (Chowdhury, 2007:54). The study also identified some other factors that contribute to Garos inflex, as like many Garos left Bangladesh due to economic hardship, land grabbing, torture by majority Bengalis, and deforestation on Bangladesh side as forest is the inseparable component of the Garo way of life. Newly established Meghalaya state in India includes the Garo Hills, also invited Garos to move from Bangladesh to Meghalaya province of India.

4. Cultural origin and entities of the Garos

Distinct cultural features of the Garos allow us to recognize the Garo origin. In the village study, it is observed that different shared cultural traits differentiated Garos from other groups and explicitly project Garo ethnic origin. Basically, Garo songs, language, Chinese resemblance, dress, food habit, *chu*, *kima*, *Kamal*, *Dama*, dance, history, women social position, unique inheritance and matrilineal dominance in their community contribute to present Garo ethnic origin. The ethnographic investigation has found the following cultural practices that shape Garos' distinct cultural origin in Bangladesh:

4.1 Garo Matrilineality

Garo is a matrilineal community and for this reason, they are very well known to the outside world. Traditional culture and life patterns of the Garos are influenced by their matrilineal life and practices. It is difficult to determine when the matrilineal practice began among the Garos, however, there are various perspectives on the genesis and development of the Garo matrilineal system. Garo matrilineal system means taking mother lineage name, passing property through female line, husband moves to his wife house (matrilocal residence), following *masokani* principle and so on. All these distinct traits or principles distinguished Garos from other communities but now under transformation.

There are various opinions regarding the origin of the Garos matrilineal system. It is assumed that Garos used to practice a patrilineal system among them in the distance past. The matrilineal system emerged later due to desperate necessity originating among them. They cancelled the patrilineal system of marriage, kinship and inheritance because they found it unsuitable for various reasons and accepted matrilineal system of kinship rules and inheritance principles to protect their endangered community property as well as to ensure the tribal society's close integration and continuity (Chowdhury, 2007:67). As mentioned by Playfair, probably Garos have copied matrilineal system from the neighboring Khasis community of the Indian sub-continent (Playfair, 1909:87). According to Baldwin, (1934) Garos accepted matrilineal principles about 500 or 600 years ago at a communal assembly that took place at the Bachelors Dormitory Banepani *Nokpanthe* located at Misikokdok Hill in Garo Hills (p.151). Marak (1985) also supported the idea of Garos shifting from patrilineal to matrilineal system and mentioned that the assembly was hosted by Amisangsa of the Garo Megam subtribe. The conference of Banepani *Nokpanthe* was presided by Raja Siramp, and Raja Do'pa served as the jurist (p.138) and following significant decisions were made in the assembly:

The inheritance system should always be passed down through female line and never to men line.

Parents must keep their last daughter as heiress daughter (*Nokne*) or the one to whom they are willing to stay and grant the inheritance.

The nephew of the father of the household must be adopted as son-in-law, and he must care for his mother-in-law and father-in-law until their deaths.

Following the matrilineal system Garo will be taking mother lineage or *Mahari* name or title for their children.

Referring Baldwin (1934) Chowdhury also (2007:68) mentioned that following reasons or factors might be contributed to the change from patrilineal to matrilineal principles.

To distinguish them from other patriarchal communities, Garos absorbed the matriarchal system.

Another significant cause of transformation was to safeguard their landed property. If men inherited the property, and marry outside the *Mahari*, then land shifted one tribe to another. Following the matrilineal marriage system, the land would be reversed accordingly.

Last but not the least reason for accepting matrilineal system was that most of the village male were sometimes killed due to continuous fight, or their numbers were severely decreased. Hence, they found matrilineal system as a safe gourd to their immovable property.

In the ethnographic fieldwork, it has been observed that still today the Garos try to employ matrilineal system in their rituals and practices, but this is transforming day by day. It has also been found that the matrilineal system is largely derived from Garos collective lifestyle and practices, but due to several reasons the significance of the matrilineal system is reducing. It is also observed that, following Garos matrilineal inheritance system, transferring property only to women or daughters is no longer accurately practiced today; there are several evidence of transferring property to man as well. All assets inherited or acquired by the man after marriage traditionally become the property of his wife, is not practiced among the Garos. If this trend continued, Garos again might be transformed into patrilineal culture and society in future. It is also observed that the Garos who have converted to Muslim religion in Telki of Modhupur *Upazila* do not practice matrilineal practice anymore.

4.2 Garo Songs, Dresses, Foods Habits

Garos have always had colorful traditional cultural practices that manifest their beliefs and rituals. Their cultural features set them apart from other people and culture, that acknowledged Garos' collective living patterns and ethnic entity. To understand Garo people and their distinct cultural origin, the most significant endeavors are to discuss their songs, dances, festivals, dresses and food habits. Garo songs, music and dances form a unified totality, that is a distinguishing feature of their culture. According to Homrich (1996) Garo song, music and religion owe its pre-Buddhist tune and is suspected to be originated in southwest China and Western Tibet. These represent their colorful traditional life patterns, and daily life.

Like many other ethnic communities, Garos songs, music and dances are the most significant aspects of their sacred elements, worship, rituals and ceremonies. The most important dances of the Garos are named as *Dokru sua*, *Kilpua*, *Doregata*, *Ambre-Rurua*, *Chambil Mesara* and *Ajema*. All these dances are performed at religious services and funeral functions. As Banglapadia:2006 (<https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Garo-the>) mentioned that Garo dances and songs are strikingly like those of the Malaysian hill tribes Orang *Asli*. According to Sattar (1975) Garo dance and songs are typically differentiated

from others because they have religious significance, and they feel that these are ways of pleasing Gods or spirits. He also added that when the Garos sing songs, music, and dance at festivals, it becomes an essential part of their traditional existence. Garo songs are essentials to their way of life, which is committed to the *Middi* or spirit and composed about their surroundings. They have a variety of songs for various occasions such as harvesting, death, birth, marriage, funeral and so on. Furthermore, songs serve as a means of transmitting knowledge and information, such as ethical songs for teaching ethics, idealistic songs for teaching the philosophy of human life, simple songs for dealing with various aspects of daily life, and songs that are particularly designed to cover festivals, ceremonies and religious functions. Among the Garo songs *Gong Doca*, *Raca*, *Dorata*, *Damru*, *Noh-aang Amritong*, *Chaori-Shika*, *Kara Sogla*, *Casi Rimang*, *Nipillah* and *Namil* are notable (Islam, 2008:36). To sing Garos' songs, they use a variety of musical instruments, particularly the *Dama* which make the program more unique. All these songs distinguish between them and reflect the cultural and ritualistic aspects of Garo life.

Garos have colorful and distinct outfits that they wear to different festivals and occasions. In the remote past, Garo used to wear the barks of trees in the jungle, presumably to conceal themselves from animals and other bodies. Short skirts are the common dress of Garos which are woven by themselves. The women cover their breasts by *Bukbandoni* or knotting a piece of short fabric on their backs. The male also wears *Gamcha* or *lungi* and many women wear *Sharis*, skirts and trousers (Banglapadia:2006 <https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Garo-the>). Dalton, (1872) has given a detail description of Garos traditional dresses and mentioned that the Garo females sole garment was a piece of cloth less than a foot in breadth that just meets round the loins. On the other hand, Garo males' sole garments was a long and narrow strip of cloth, which is worn as a girdle round the waist, and passing from behind between the legs is brought up again to the waist (p. 66). In the study, I have not seen a single male wearing narrow piece of cloth and any women wearing on *Bukbandoni*. Currently, Garo women wear colorful skirts or *shari* and man wear normal *lungi*, pant/trouser and shirt. Traditional Garos dresses incorporated both religious and natural marks like as leaves, flowers, eye of Gods and so on. The names of their outfits or costumes are *Gando*, *Salchak*, *Katib*, *Marang*, *Unpon*, *Riking* and so on (Sattar, 1975). Furthermore, Garos wear several types of ornaments that complement their clothes. During my field investigations, it is observed that there are basically no big differences between Bengali and Garo clothes currently.

In the case of food habits, Garos used to eat a wide variety of foods in the past, but this has now changed dramatically. Regarding the dietary habits of the Garos, there is a proverb in the majority Bengali community that says, '*Garos Jai Pai, Tai Khay*' (Garos ate anything, they found). There are some exaggerations regarding Garos' dietary habits, but in fact they ate all animals except cat, which they considered as their religious totem (Bal, 2007). However, the Garos' eating habits have changed significantly, and they now mostly consume fish, rice, pork, rabbit, ass, beef, milk, vegetables, and poultry that they grow themselves. *Chu* (rice beer) is their favorite drink item, and it is used in all the festivals and ceremonies, even though it has been reduced for a variety of reasons, including harmful for health (Jengcham, 2007).

Garos are well known for their sports and games. The Garos' most popular game is *lati khela*, which they usually play after the end of harvesting. Nowadays, the younger Garos are much more used to playing football and cricket. In the remote past, as part of game Garos used to collect and decorate their dwellings with human or animal skulls, whom they attacked and slaughtered in the plainlands, displaying emblems of dominance. The traditional songs, dances, games and dresses of the Garos demonstrate that they had colorful cultural characteristics, but throughout time they embraced many features of outsiders' culture and lost many distinctive traits. Changes in Garo dress, dietary habits, songs, dance, and music brought greater changes among other components of Garo life and culture.

4.3 Garos Prime Festivals

Garos perform numerous festivals throughout the year, which is an important marker of their distinct cultural origin and entity. *Wangala*, *Rangchu Galla*, *Denbilsia*, *Agal Makka* or *Achirokka* are the most celebrated festivals among the Garos, regardless of religious transformation. Followings are brief description of the prime Garo festivals:

Wangala: It is the largest of all social festivals celebrated by agriculturalist Garos, which is observed equally by rural and urban Garos. Garos from all over the world, including Bangladesh and India, celebrated the festival as colorful as possible (Zaman:2004). In Bangladesh, it was traditionally observed for two to three days by three or four neighboring villages together. *Wangala* is currently celebrated for one day in metropolitan areas as an attempt to preserve the Garo ethnic community's age-old heritage and to show their roots to the younger generation. This colorful larger event is now celebrated through a variety of fun favorites such as sports, fair, food, art, game and cultural show and others. Usually, *Wangala* festival is held after the harvest, and during this time, Garos visit their relatives and neighbors, enjoy the festivities, and drink *Chu*. On the first day, the priest, known as '*Kamal*' performs some rituals, mostly inside the house of the *Nokma* of the village. Garo men and women dressed in colorful costumes performed traditional dances with oval-shaped drums (*Dama*), flutes and various brass instruments. During *Wangala*, people in some places wear traditional dresses, especially '*Dakmanda*', *Daksari* and feathered headgear (*do'me*) and dance with music. The *Wangala* is an identical festival of the Garo culture and best known for its distinguished colorful features.

Rangchu Galla: It is another identifying festival of the Garo culture, held just before harvesting of paddy. '*Rongchu*', means rice cooked until dry and crisp to the *Mite*. The traditional Garos celebrated this festival at night by offering the *Cheera* of new paddy to the fortune spirits of *Jhum* land (Khaleque,1982:53). Garos used to clear a corner of *Jhum* land where *Cheera* of new paddy was offered to the spirits wrapped in banana leaf. Some fruits, particularly *Jambura* (pomelo) or *lebu* (lemon) were also served with some *Chu* mixed rice. In *Rangchu Galla* celebration, songs and drums were also performed (Jengcham, 2007:415). Following their conversion to Christianity, Garos of Bangladesh mostly do not practice this festival and its offerings, but they keep the spirit of the festival alive a quietly as possible. Though *Rangchu Galla* is diminishing but still today some Garos practice this offering for the wellbeing of the crops in the fields, which is an important origin marker of the ethnic Garo.

Denbilsia: It was a significant festival of the traditional Garos which was celebrated as the first festival of the year, usually between January-February, following the completion of clearing new *Jhum* fields for cultivation. It was one-day event held at the *Nokne*'s house. Generally, majority of the villagers gathered at the *Nokne*'s house in the morning and built a bamboo-altar adjacent to the house. During the festival, the *Nokne* sacrificed a pig or a goat at the altar, and the meat of the sacrificed animal, as well as other foods such as rice, fish curry, and others were prepared. The Garos of the village enjoyed the feast at midday and used to drink *Chu* in the evening. After the festival, people began to dance, sing, and play musical instruments in the evening, which continued until late at night (Khaleque, 1982:51). Nowadays, Garos celebrate this traditional festival on occasion, but not exactly as their ancestors did. There are some deviations, but it is a great identifier of the Garo culture and entity.

William Dazzel, aged 55 years old, lives in Chunia village of Modhupur Upazila. He is a community leader of the area and serves as Chairman of Modhupur Upazila Garo welfare society. He is a Christian Garo and has born and brought up in this village. He argues that we have been converted to Christianity, but we still retain our traditional rituals and practices. He added that we have lost many of our traditional Sangsarek religious rituals and practices but still we do practice different socio-cultural practices of traditional Garos, including language, songs, dance, drink, salutation, looks, inheritance, kinship system, lineage title and others which represent our distinct origin. He mentioned that nowadays we Catholic Christian perform 'Dama' and drink 'Chu' with the permission of the Churches. He also said it is true that following conversion to Christianity, we had to leave many of our cultural features and had to accept many unknown cultural characteristics of Christian culture and influence. Still, we have many common socio-cultural features, which support us to project our distinct Garo origin, despite many changes in our life.

4.4 Chu (rice-beer)

Chu (rice-beer) is a popular and traditional drink among the Garos. Following the ancient tradition of the Garos, drinking *Chu* is not only a source of recreation, but it is also required for successful completion of any ceremonies and rituals. Some of the respondents also shared that the Garos become unable to perform the marriage ceremony and rituals if they do not drink *Chu*. According to Mrong (1999) in a traditional marriage ceremony, Garos must entertain guests by offering *Chu* regardless of religious affiliations. Garos believe that both men and women must consume *Chu* during their festivals and marriage ceremonies. Although the use of *Chu* has been reduced in recent years, every Garo still respects the tradition of drinking *Chu*, and some of them used to drink it occasionally. Thus, drinking *Chu* is one of the remarkable markers for both the Garo men and women to represent their distinct Garo culture and origin.



Chu (rice beer) making pot at Modhupur *Upazila* of Tangail District (Photo taken by author, 2020)

4.5 Special *Dama* (Drum)

'*Dama*' is a special musical instrument of the Garos which is used occasionally for special events. Among the traditional Garos '*Dama*' has a spiritual value and was played on some very special day under the control of the *Nokma*. '*Dama*' is a long and thin drum made of wood having hollow inside; thickest in the center and narrowing away at both ends. For covering both the narrow ends, animal skin, usually cow leather, is used. This '*Dama*' was not allowed for everyone to use in any ordinary event, rather, only designated people and occasions were permitted to use it, as it was a great part of the *Sangsarek* Garo culture. Traditional Garos' religious faiths, which is animistic type and worship *Middi*, sacrificed animals and keep their horns, bones at home as sacred elements. Garo traditional religion is much more associated with the unique musical instrument *Dama*, which is still practiced among the Garos, and is a significant marker of Garo culture and entity.



Dama (special musical instrument) at Garo Village Cultural Centre at Chunia (Photo taken by author, 2020)



Scrificed animal horns which are kept in Garo house as a sacred object at Chunia (Photo taken by author, 2020)

5. Differential Features of *Lamdani* and *Abori* Garos

Traditional Garos are commonly recognized around the world as a group of people who predominantly live in the Hills, even though they have been living in the plainlands for a long time and used to cultivate like other non-hilly people. Garos are found in both plains and hills locations in Bangladesh and India and are roughly separated by their features. As a result, two types of Garos are found in Bangladesh, which are known as *Abori* (raised land) and *Lamdani* (plainland) Garos. Although, in true sense, the study villages are not very different in terms of geographic features and mostly lie in the same nature of plain ground.

Research findings indicate that *abori* (raised land) Garos differ from *lamdani* (plainland) Garos in many respects of their lifestyle and culture. According to Bose (1980), Hilly Garos are more traditional, and they were more accustomed to traditional practices. Hill Garos usually underestimate plain Garos because they compromise with plain inhabitants and discard their ancient traditional practices. *Abori* Garos used to speak in their original language, which differed greatly from that of plains Garos. *Lamdani* Garos' behavior, language, everyday life, clothing and other habits have all changed considerably. Playfair (1909:4) conducted a comprehensive ethnographic study among the Garos and classified them into two sections such as hill Garos and plain Garos, and he stated that 'I have the Hill Garos in mind, also the plain Garos who inhabit the plains belong to different categories and have lost many of their cultural characteristics. Plainland Garos prefer to call them *Mandi* and Hilly Garos refer to recognize themselves as *A'chik*.' The word *A'chik* is used for the hills, and the Garos who live in the hill regions are known as *A'chik*. The Garos settled in the hillock areas use the word *Mandi* and some *A'chik Mandi*.

Bangladesh is primarily a flat land region, apart from a few hills in the Chittagong Hill Tracts areas and small Hillocks in the outskirts of greater Mymensingh, where the majority of the Garos live. Burling (1997:11) stated that Garos in Bangladesh are classified as lowland Garos, and that in greater Mymensingh region and near the Indian border, they constitute most of the hillock Garos. As a result, there are plainland Garos as well as hillock

Garos, and there are some differences between the two groups of Garos in terms of traditions, language, cultivation, lifestyle and practices. Bal (2007:12) mentioned that in the subcontinent, the lowland Garos have their own history(s), and an international border has separated them from hill Garos since 1947. Lowland Garos have long interacted with the Bengali culture; the geographical features of the plains require different agriculture methods, and a different way of life; and the political position of the two places differed long before the partition (Chowdhury, 2007:61).

Traditionally, Hilly Garos practiced with *jhum* cultivation based on burn and slash agriculture. Plain Garos, on the other hand, were accustomed to wet rich farming, ploughing lowlands and growing wet rice in their fields. Almost a century ago, Playfair (1909:35) wrote that the nature of the soil on which they cultivated completely prevents the use of the plough by the hill Garos, but those who inhabit the plains have long been accustomed to the same method of farming as their neighboring Bengalis and Assamese. However, there are some fundamental and ritualistic distinctions between Garos living in the *lamdani* (plainland) and in the *Abori* (raised land) regarding their behavior, language, beliefs, cultivation, everyday life and practices but in true sense, none of my study villages are included in the *Abori* category.



Garos farmer using power tiller to plough the land at *Lamdani* village of Modhupur (Photo taken by author, 2020)



Modern irrigation pump at the *Lamdani* Garo village of Modhupur (Photo taken by author, 2020)

6. Conclusions

Garo had a long journey toward present day Bangladesh, in the way they settle in many places before reaching to Bangladesh, and in the way what they obtained from the forests and rivers in their settlements supported their subsistence well, and they were mostly self-sufficient. Garos have long tradition of migration, and they travelled from ancient China, particularly from Tibet through foot hill of Himalayas to eastward of Brahmaputra valley and arrived at Garo Hill areas of Indian subcontinent, and eventually to Bangladesh. Tibet-Chinese linguistic and racial connection heavily supported this viewpoint. There is very little information on the origin, settlement and migration of the Garos, and at the same time, their early history of migration and settlement is quite unclear due to lack of reliable written historical evidence. During British India (1757-1947), their land was forcefully occupied by the British Hindu and Muslim *Zamindars*. The Garos were forcibly removed from their forested land by the Pakistan Government (1947-1971) as part of its administrative policies to increase Bengali settlement, and to create Reserve Forest.

Nowadays, Garo society is to some extent going to be encapsulated within the wider Bangladesh society, as the Garos have learned the Bengali language, converted from their traditional religion, gained newer inheritance system, abandon traditional marriage system, transformed from older kinship principles, gained methods of wet cultivation, and food habits, clothes similar to Bengali people, and adopted various western and Bengali traits as well as practices; but they still maintain their ethnic origin as a distinct Garo ethnic community, however, is undergoing with a process of massive transformation.

Today, Garo requires government patronization, and they also need to have own interest and willingness to uphold their traditional culture and entity. Garos should have control over their natural and forested resources, must have their self-determination, stronger political organization, separate ministry or development authority, constitutional recognition, appropriate social support services, written form of their traditional language, education in their own Garo language, research on Garo situation and support from different civil society groups are important to safeguard Garo cultural entity and recognition in future. The study finds that Garo origin and entity appear to be unaffected but if these transformations continue, what will happen in future is unresolved. More ethnographic research is required in future to dig deeper and to comprehend the issue.

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