



Research Paper

## Livelihood Patterns of Garo Community: A Study on a Village in Tangail District.

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### Abstract

The Garo is a notable matrilineal community of Bangladesh living in Mymensingh, Netrakona, Gazipur, Tangail and Sherpur districts. As an indigenous community, the Garo people have not been provided with equal socio-economic and political rights compared with the mainstream Bengali people. The main objective of this study is to analyze the livelihood patterns of the Garo people including their socio-economic and demographic condition, daily activities, present culture, conversion of traditional practices, existent challenges and recommendations to overcome those challenges. Ethnographic case study methodology has been used in this study to present a factual description of their living conditions which evidentsignificant changes in the livelihood patterns of the Garo people owing to their contiguity with the mainstream Bengali people. The traditional practices and culture of the Garos are facing the threat of extinction due to the changes resulting from impacts of modernization, urbanization and conversion to Christianity. A number of existing challenges has been tracedwithin the Garo community which should be resolved through far reaching planning on the part of the government and Non-Government organizations to preserve the traditional and individual culture of this distinct ethnic group.

**Keyword:** Livelihood, Pattern, Indigenous people, Garo, Community, Changes

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### I. Introduction

The Garo (Mandi) Adivasi, is a distinguished matriarchal community of Bangladesh, now living under challenges to lead their traditional lifestyle. Although the population of Bangladesh is not consistent with other countries of the world, socio-cultural differences exist among the people living here. On religious basis, 91% of the population is Muslim, 9% is Hindu, Buddhist and Christian community. Bangladesh is a country of cultural and ethnic diversity, with over 50 indigenous communities, along with the majority of Bengali population. According to the census of 2022, the country's indigenous population is approximately 16,50,159 which represents 1.8% of the total population of the country. Indigenous people with their distinct languages, tradition, culture, values, and customs contribute significantly to the rich cultural heritage, ecology, and sustainable development of Bangladesh. However, indigenous people are often deprived of basic rights and civil services promised by the government as mentioned in the constitution. Consequently, they are regarded as the poor, illiterate and backward populations of the country. They are being exploited and deprived as the minor groups due to the indifferences of the authority and local administration. The indigenous people are gradually disappearing because of the deprivation and negligence in terms of socio-economic status, political context and market economy of Bangladesh. According to the data of several research and reports, these ethnic communities are often considered as the "Marginalized population." Among these groups, the Garo is one of the largest indigenous communities living in the North-eastern parts of the country especially in Gazipur, Mymensingh, Netrokona, Tangail, Sherpur, Jamalpur and some parts of Sylhet close to the Indian border. There are almost 76,846 Garos in Bangladesh, many more Garos live in Meghalaya in Indian side but there exists discrepancy between the government official figures and private estimations (Census Report: 2022).

Almost all the Garos are bilingual because they have to speak Bengali in addition to their Garo language (Bal, Ellen: 1999). Garos have their own language which is called Achik Katha or Mandi. The traditional Garo religion is Sangsharek, which is almost abolished and practiced by very few Garo people in some areas. Over the years, most of the Garos have been converted to Christianity and a few into Islam (Bal

Ellen: 1999). According to their inheritance system, men do not inherit property from the parents; all goes to the women (Chowdhury, K.A.N: 2007). Their residence pattern is matrilineal as the husband moves to the wife's house after marriage. Now a day, the Garos are facing huge challenges to cope up with this modern lifestyles and to sustain their traditional practices. The traditional Garo society is changing widely; it has accepted and absorbed many traits from other surrounding communities. Conversion of their former religion and present changes in livelihood patterns are the main concerns in this study. From an analytical perspective, the investigation has intended to find out the challenges existed in their community and to recommend strategies to overcome those challenges from their community in Jalchhatra village under Arankhola union at Madhupur Upazila of Tangail district.

### **Objectives of the study**

The main objective of this article is to know the livelihood patterns of Garo community, including some other specific objectives which are as follows:

1. To know the socio-economic and demographic condition of the Garo community;
2. To reveal their daily activities and changing patterns of those activities in present time;
3. To explore existing culture of Garo community;
4. To find out the existing problems of Garo community and
5. To incorporate suggestion and recommendations for minimizing their problems.

### **Definition of the key terms**

**Livelihood patterns:** Livelihood is defined as a set of activities essential to everyday life that are conducted in one's life span. In this study, livelihood patterns mainly refer to the way of life style, food habit, dress code, religion, festival, marriage and family structure, and households of Garo people.

**Indigenous people:** According to the UN, indigenous peoples are inheritors and practitioners of unique cultures and ways of relating to people and the environment. They have retained social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the dominant societies in which they live. (ILO: 169)

**Culture:** UNESCO has defined culture as the set of distinctive, spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a society or a social group, and that it encompasses lifestyle, art, and way of living together, value systems, tradition and beliefs. Here in this paper, culture refers to beliefs, customs, lifestyle and traditions of the Garo people.

**Conversion:** Conversion is defined as a change of attitude, emotion or viewpoint from one stage to another. Here in this study, conversion means the changing patterns of life style of the Garo people such as religious, customs, occupation and so on.

**GO and NGOs:** A government or state agency is sometimes an appointed commission, a permanent or semi-permanent organization in the machinery of government that is responsible for the oversight and administration of specific function. According to DPI: Department of Public Information, United Nations, Non-Government Organization is a non-profit, voluntary citizen's group, which is organized on a local, national or international level to address issues in support of the public welfare. In this study, Go and NGOs refer to organization which are working at Madhupur to provide the Garo people with welfare services in health, education, employment and economic sectors.

### **Methods of Data Collection**

This study is an outcome of short field work that has been conducted on Jalchhatra village under Tangail district. Participatory observation and case study were our basic techniques and intensive field work. Five people including farmer, day labourer, housewife and students were selected using purposeful sampling to collect data. An integration of case study and in-depth interview with the respondents has been followed. Thus, participatory observation and case study were the basic methods used for building rapport.

### **Findings and Discussions**

#### **Origin of the Garo Community**

Garo is a distinguished ethnic community of Bangladesh and they prefer to call themselves Achik or Mandi. They are easily distinguished from the Bengali mainstream by their physical structure which resembles Southeast Asians such as the people of Thailand or Philippines. According to their ancestors, thousand year ago they had migrated from Tibet to the Indian subcontinent and set up their inhabitation which is now known as Kuchbihar. The present field observation shows that Garos of Madhupur areas claim that their ancestors had shifted here more than a hundred year ago. They came here in search of livelihood as well as a secured life. However, most of them are unknown to their exact origin.

#### **Food Habit**

The staple food of Garo is rice which is commonly served with fish, meat, lentils and vegetables. Dried fish is their most favourite dish. Use of excessive green chilly and soda water is a distinguished feature of their cooking.

However, now a day very few Garo families use soda water in cooking as their taste and recipes have been changed over time. Garos have now become habituated to cook and eat like their Bengali neighbors. Though their food habit has changed a lot, they are still very fond of pork, turtle meat, eel and vegetables like bamboo shoots and mushroom. Spirituous liquor distilled at home is very popular item generally served for entertaining guests as well as during festivities. Drinking liquor as a part of refreshment was available at their home; with the passage of time, the habit of drinking at home has been changed. It is evident that the former food habit of the Garo people has undergone a significant change and at present they mostly follow the food habit of local Bengali people along with their own traditional food habit.

### **Attire of the Garo people**

At present the dress code of Garos is quite similar to those of the Bengalis. The male wear lungi, genji, trousers and shirts with an extra large sized colorful thin towel or gamchha like dhuti to cover the lower part of their body. Most of the Garo women wear their traditional dress 'Dakmanda' at home which is designed with artistic paintings. However, they also wear shrees, blouse, peti-coat, salwar, kamij and orna. The Garo women preferred to wear silver ornaments earlier but nowadays the female members of well to do families wear ornaments, mainly of gold. The modern common dress of the male is Jana or Nengti. Sometimes marks of leaves, flowers, eye of Gods etc. are found in their clothes as the resemblance of religious and natural signs. They have named Bengali dresses of their own such as Gando, Katib, Salchak, Marang, Unpon, and Riking etc. So, along with the traditional attire, the Garos are tending to follow mainstream Bengali dress code exceeding the cultural disparity.

### **Accommodation of Garo people**

The Garo generally built houses with available natural resources such as bamboo, cane, timber, wood from rubber trees and dried palm leaves. The traditional process of building houses is to build houses with the help of one's own family and fellow villagers. The practice of building houses with natural resources has been substituted by modern houses made of tin, bricks etc. Garos who live in hilly area retain a very limited amount of furniture made of bamboo and cane in their houses. Furniture is very important in their society since furniture symbolizes their social status as well as socio-economic condition. At present wooden furniture like chair, table, wardrobe, steel almirah are found in many Garo households. The former earthen utensils have been replaced with metal and aluminum utensils. It is observed that the Garo of plain area generally use a large number of utensils in comparison to the hilly Garos. With the advent of modern civilization and improvement of socio-economic conditions, remarkable changes have been noticed in their household patterns which is alike the native people.

### **Celebration and Festival**

Wangala (Harvest festival and thank giving to God) and Christmas are two major festivals of the Garo community celebrated widely in almost all Garo inhabited areas. The Wangala is the most significant and traditional festival of the Garos which is performed after the end of harvesting. Generally, it is observed in the month of October to December and regarded as a "thanks giving" ceremony to Misi –Saljong also known as Pattigipa Rarongipa (The great giver) for blessing the human beings with rice harvest of the season. This festival has been practiced traditionally by the Garos from time immemorial. It is performed annually among almost all non-Christian Garos living in hills, but the time and dates of celebration vary from time to time.

Under the influence of modern civilization and foreign culture, the "Wangala" which bears cultural identity of the Garo is losing its attraction. When the Christmas day arrives, the Garo people go to church before they commence the celebration with their neighbours. Garos who are converted to Christianity celebrate Christmas as their main festival and offer traditional sweets and cakes to friends and relatives. They decorate their home with local handmade decorations and hang artificial stars on their roof top to signify the culture of Bethlehem.

Since the majority of the Garo people now follow Christianity, Christmas has become the main religious festival replacing the older practice of celebrating Wangala. Christmas is celebrated rigorously with the cooperation of other communities, surveillance of local administration and financial support from non-government organizations like World Vision, Proshika, Karitas etc.

### **Family structure and Marriage system**

The Garo community is the strongest matrilineal community of Bangladesh and in their society women are more empowered than any other communities. According to the matrilineal system, the female members become the head of the families and girls are supposed to inherit family properties. Subverting the matriarchal family structure, some Christian Garos are now distributing land ownership and family resources between both girls and boys.

Since 98 percent of the Garos are now Christian and most of them are Catholic, the wedding ceremonies of Christian Garos are followed by the rules of Christianity. However, in choosing bride and bridegroom Garos still follow their old customs and tradition. Generally, the parents of the brides take initiatives for their daughter's marriage and send proposal to their near relatives. The father of the girl shall first send proposal to his nephew (son of his sister). If they have no nephew (son of their sister) of their own, they may send proposal for any other son of their kin sister (cousin). Overturning their former practice of sending boy to the in-laws, now a day the girls also come to the in-laws to live permanently. In case of catholic rule, the guardians take the bride and groom to the father of missionary where their names and address are recorded and declared to the general people in the next Sunday prayer. This announcement of marriage is called "Ban-Prakash" in Christian ritual. The wedding ceremonies are followed by music, dance and feast for entertainment. The practice of providing gifts to the new couple is still followed in their marriage system. Thus, the traditional family structure and marriage systems have changed a lot due to the advent of modernizations, conversion to Christianity and social changes.

### **Conversion of Religion**

At present the main religion of the Garo people of this area is Christianity whereas the Garos used to practice their own traditional religion earlier. However, in the fifteenth decade the Christian missionaries established their camp in Garo locality and after few years they succeeded to convince the Garo to change their traditional religion (Sangsarek) and to convert to Christianity. Their traditional religion is not concerned with a specific God or worshipping idols and they do not bother about sin and virtue, heaven and hell. They believe that some trees, stones and hills are the abodes of the spirits and therefore, after death the Garos perform funeral rituals so that the soul of the death person cannot do any harm to them. They attend the ceremony after the funeral and pray for the departed soul and offer gifts. Like all animistic religions, their practice consists of the belief in multitude of beneficent and malevolent spirits. More than 98% of the Garos proudly consider themselves Christian. Christian missionaries have significant influence upon the Garos and the Garos mainly started being Christianised from the early 19th century when American Baptist missionaries had been established in the Garo hilly areas. The Garos have shifted from their old belief "Shangasarek" to Christianity but still most of them tend to follow their earlier customs. In this religious transformation, they come closer to modern civilization and become more aware of the changing lifestyle of this contemporary era. Majority of the Garo people are now Christians because of modernization, influence of Christian missionaries and spread of education among people, however, they still endeavour to follow their traditional culture and social values.

### **Assistance of Government and Non-Government organizations**

In Bangladesh, NGOs have emerged to play an important role in the overall development of the people, including the Garo community. A number of NGOs are working in the Garo inhabited areas of Madhupur such as Grameen bank, BRAC, ASA, NSDP, CCDB and others. Christian NGOs such as Caritas, World Vision, YMCA, WCA are also active in Madhupur who run a number of awareness raising and development programs for villagers and also provide working opportunities for many Garos. These NGOs sponsor for the education of the Garo children and provide scholarships for the students. A wide range of programs such as providing micro-credit schemes, running night schools for raising adult literacy rate, family planning, maternal health program, sanitation, immunization, income generative training programs etc. have been launched in these areas with a view to bringing qualitative changes in the life of the Garo people. On the other hand, there are many Government organizations working for the welfare of the Garo community which provide services such as health care, free education, old allowance and arrangement of income generative programs.

### **Existent Problems**

A number of crucial problems are traced within the Garo community such as poor communication system, health issues, insecurity of girl, early marriage, dominance of native people, wild elephant attacks, lack of educational institutions, shortage of pure drinking water etc. However, the main crux of this area is land ownership problem. There is an allegation against the native people for taking possession of the land and properties of the Garos. Since the existence, social status and cultural status of the indigenous Garos are intimately involved with land, landless indigenous Garos are endangered today. They have become helpless and destitute by losing their land. Scarcity of educational institutions and employment opportunities lead to inferior lifestyle inflicted with poverty. They are also deprived of modern medical facilities which compel them to go to the rural doctor and quacks. Falling into the trap of extreme poverty, their former subsistence of peasantry has been replaced by new occupation of day labour. Being deprived of economic, political and social rights, the Garo people are leading a miserable life suffering from social insecurity.



## Major Recommendations

Through a profound observation and case study, it is found that the lifestyle of the Garo community has undergone radical changes. Development of modern civilization and progress in technology and communication system have discerning influence on their lifestyle. As a result, multiple changes have been encountered in food habit, cultural practices and religion of the Garo people. Due to some serious issues such as communication deficiency, health and sanitation problem, unemployment problem, inadequate pure drinking water, land ownership issue etc. the Garo people are lagging behind from the mainstream citizens. Considering these existent problems, a list of recommendations are given below:

1. In order to establish the rights of the indigenous people, a tribal commission or missionary should be formed whose responsibility should be delegated to the person elected or nominated by those tribes.
2. To implement the rights of the indigenous people to their own land and forest, a joint venture of the tribal leaders and government is required. Legal action must be taken by the government to recover the land of indigenous people which are occupied through fake documents and illegal ways. In order to protect the rights of indigenous people, appropriate enforcement of the existing land laws should be ensured.
3. Homeless indigenous people can be rehabilitated in the demesne land of the government with accurate ownership.
4. The government must have a distinct economic plan for the Garo's economic development comprising allotment of specific budget for their annual development. However, during taking decision, the government will discuss with the Garo leaders including indigenous forums. To preserve the market rights of the Garo people should be preserved at local level and fair wages should be provided to the Garo workers and day labours.
5. A separate research institute or museum can be established to research Garo culture in order to develop their cultural, historical features through practices as well as preservation.
6. The government must take effective steps to evaluate and control the activities of NGOs working in Garo inhabited areas. It should be monitored that multiple NGOs will not work on equivalent issues.

## II. Conclusions

Today's Garos are Bangladeshi citizen beyond their ethnographic identity. Since their original Garo or Mandi identity has become insignificant due to certain variations in religion, lifestyle and cultural practices, a crisis of recognition and self-esteem has extended in every sphere of their life. According to a modern psychoanalysis, there is a great crisis among the young Garo people about "Garoism" and "Christianity". All these internal reasons are separating the Garos from their old traditional lifestyle. Therefore, they have become the marginal population in the existing state structures. They must be vocal to earn their rights by ignoring all pride and emotions. The empowerment of the Garo people can be achieved through the integration of active role of the Garos and cooperation of the government to ensure their human rights and to preserve their heritages.

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