

## THE TRANSFORMATION OF LIVELIHOOD PRACTICES AMONG THE GARO COMMUNITY: A STUDY ON TANGAIL DISTRICT

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### ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the Garo ethnic group, which is among the most neglected indigenous people in Bangladesh. The study aims to understand their livelihood pattern from the past to the present and to identify the factors that have led to changes in their livelihood. The research was carried out among the Garo community residing in the Madhupur pazila located in the Tangail district of Bangladesh. The study used both historical and exploratory data, with historical data being obtained from secondary sources such as books, journals, reports, and census data. The study used qualitative research methods and selected 13 Garo people through purposive sampling. The study found that Garo's traditional way of life is under threat, and they are adopting a completely new way of life due to various internal and external factors such as Christianity, NGOs, globalization, and social development. As a result, their traditional culture, including language, food habits, dress patterns, and religion, is under threat. The study also revealed that the Garo people face various problems such as health, sanitation, communication, electricity, and security. They need better transportation systems, more educational facilities, easy communication and government and non-governmental assistance in terms of material and financial support.

**Key Words:** Garo, Livelihood, Changes, Madhupur, Community, Indigenous People, Culture, Festival, Land Ownership.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh has approximately 54 distinct Indigenous groups, with the majority residing in the northern and southeastern plains. About 20% of these groups are located in the CHT region, and most of them practice Buddhism. Christianity is the predominant religion among Indigenous communities residing in the plains. The Garo community is one of the largest minority tribes in Bangladesh. They reside in several districts including Mymensingh, Netrakona, Jamalpur, Sherpur, Tangail, and Sunamganj. They migrated to Bangladesh from Tibet and Burma and refer to themselves as Mandi or Achchik depending on whether they live in the mountains or plains. Despite being concentrated in the border areas of Mymensingh, the Garos have a significant presence throughout the country. According to the the Population Census (2011), the population of ethnic communities was 1,586,141, consisting of 797,477 males and 788,664 females, which made up 1.10 percent of the total population of the country (BBS,2011).In the Population Census of (2022), the number of people belonging to ethnic communities living in Bangladesh is only 1,650,159, with 824,751 males and 825,408 females. There are only 76,846 Garo people in bangladesh (BBS,2022).However, activists advocating for the rights of indigenous peoples claim that the actual number is at least 3 million. Garo community in Bangladesh are primarily an agricultural community. The majority of Garo people are bilingual as they need to communicate in both Bengali and their native Garo language(Bal, Ellen: 1999).The Garos follow

a matriarchal system where girls have property ownership and children use their mother's last name. In their system of inheritance, it is the women who receive all the property from their parents, while men are not entitled to any inheritance (Chowdhury, K.A.N: 2007). Despite being a non-literate society, the Garo people have a rich culture and belief system that includes supernatural beliefs, transmigration, and the immortality of the spirit. The traditional attire of the indigenous people in Bangladesh conceals new hues. These tribes possess all the features of a separate ethnicity and coexist amidst a diverse range of lifestyles, cultures, and artistic expressions. Their society preserves ancient customs, culture, and language through the ages. The Garos have a festive culture and practice various rituals and customs, including producing their own alcoholic beverage called 'chu.' Their main livelihood is agriculture, but they also engage in handicrafts and other activities. Although the Garos have undergone significant changes in language, clothing, and culture due to interaction with Bengali and Christian influences, their traditional cultural and family norms continue to exist.

## **2.OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The main objective of this article is to ascertain the transformation of livelihood practices among the garo community residing in tangail. There are several specific objectives which include:

1. To investigate the transformation in their socio-economic and demographic conditions over time, from the past to the present.
2. To reveal out the transformation of cultural and religious practices of Garo community;
3. To identify the professional changes of Garo community;
4. To explore the Government and Non-Government organizations initiatives and
5. To find out the current livelihood challenges of Garo community and to offer recommendations to address these challenges.

## **3.METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY**

The study has been employed through qualitative research method. The principal method was case study. This study has been carried out on Garo people at Madhupur Upazila in Tangail district. Thirteen (13) people of Garo have been selected from different Villages of Madhupur upazila considering their different levels like age, marriage, educational status, profession, religion as a total sample through purposive sampling technique for the study. At the time of collecting primary data, I used in-depth interview, observation techniques and secondary source of data included books, journals, periodicals, reports etc.

### **Major Findings of the Study**

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

The Garo ethnic group are the largest minority group in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, Garo people call themselves 'Mandi'(Bleie, 2005). The exact origin of the Garo tribe is not known, but according to their own folklore and legends, they believe that they originated from Tibet and then migrated to Meghalaya in India and various regions of Bangladesh including Madhupur, Haluaghat, Dhubaura, Susang Durgapur, Srivardi, Nalitabari, Jhenaigati, Dharmapasha, Taherpur, and Bishwambarpur. The Garo community were isolated from the outside world before the British colonial rule in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. During the colonial period, the British authorities became interested in the natural resources and potential for commercial agriculture in

the hills of present-day Bangladesh, which were inhabited by various indigenous communities, including the Garo people. According to Major Playfair, a pioneering Garo scholar, the Garo or Granching' sub tribe first received their appellation of Garo and that appellation was elaborated to all the residents of the mountain and it turned debauched from Garo to Garo (Playfair, 1998). Ball Ellen says about the Garo origin, even though there are several variations among different Garo subgroups, they all share a common origin and have always considered themselves portion of the same community (Ball E, 1999). There is a strong influence of Bengali language in Mandi, reflected in the use of Bengali words and sentence pattern. (Burling, 1997), However, nearly all of the of the respondents do not know their specific origins, some respondents said that they came from India and others suggesting a Tibetan origin.

### **Demographic Information**

The main aim of the study was to gather information about the demographics of the respondents, which included questions about their family structure, age, sexual identity, religious beliefs, attitudes towards changing family patterns, and nature of the family. Initially, I asked each respondent to provide details about their family size and structure, and while some showed interest in answering, most seemed shy and reserved. When I asked about their age, many were unsure and couldn't recall their exact age, and some had to rely on others for assistance. I also inquired about their educational background and literacy rates, and found that most respondents were unable to read or write. Additionally, I asked about the occupations of their family members, and discovered that most were involved in agriculture, while others were students or employed in various services. While conducting my research, I discovered that significant part of the respondents had poor demographic backgrounds. Many were illiterate and belonged to vulnerable populations. These individuals were unable to provide accurate information about their family and personal details, and they lacked the ability to sustain their livelihoods or enjoy modern amenities. It is a tragic situation for everyone involved. Due to their lack of education, they are not aware of the importance of family planning and do not prioritize the well-being of their family members.

### **Attire of Garo Community**

The attire of the Garo community is now quite similar to that of the Bengalis. Garo men wear lungis, genjis, trousers, and shirts. Many of them prefer to wear lungis and also wrap a colorful thin towel, similar to a gamcha or dhuti, around their lower body. Garo women usually wear orna, sarees, blouses, kamij, petticoats, salwars, but they also wear at home their traditional costumes. During the British colonial rule, Garo men started wearing half-pants and shirts, and later, they began wearing dhutis and shirts. In the past, Garo women used to formerly worn silver jewelry, however, only wealthy women now wear gold ornaments. According to some respondents, the traditional Garo attire consists of dakmanda, daksari, and gandu, but nowadays, they also wear lungis, shirts, and pants like most people. Garo men wear gamchas or dhutis, and women wear sarees, skirts, and trousers adorned with religious and natural motifs such as leaves, flowers, and the eyes of gods. Their clothing styles have names such as gando, katib, salchak, marang, unpon, and riking.

### **Food Habits**

The primary food of Garo people is rice, and they especially enjoy dried fish, particularly the puti species seen in bhati area. They use a lot of green chili in their curries and enjoy a variety of vegetables such as brinjal, bottle gourd, pumpkin, chichinga, corolla, jheenga, and kidney beans. Garos have adopted many food habits from their Bengali neighbors and often consume rich foods like hotchpotch, pulao, and biriyani. However, they still have a fondness for Spirituous liquor, bamboo shoots, pork, mushrooms ,turtle, which they personally distill , is a necessary component for hosting guests,festivals. According to some respondents, the Garo diet includes rice, pork, beef, mutton, and vegetables. They generally prefer to eat healthy foods. However, they previously consumed alcohol at home when they were younger. The Garo food culture has evolved with modern times, and people have started to eat more like the local population. The traditional wine drink used to be an essential element of their daily food, but because of their christian values they no longer using alcohol. Today, the Garo community's food habits have changed slightly, and their favorite dishes include dried fish, pork, rabbit, donkey, beef, and chicken, which they produce themselves. They enjoy a drink called 'Chu' and consider it an important part of any program or event.

### **Household System**

The traditional Garo houses in the hills are simple and contain minimal furniture, often just a bamboo floor or a raised platform. Occasionally, visitors of distinction may be offered a rough wooden seat or cane-bottomed chair. Many households possess wooden chairs, tables, stools, wardrobes, and steel almirahs. Household utensils and implements have also evolved, using earthenware replaced by metal as a sign of social distinction. As conditions improve, aluminum plates replace earthen plates for daily wage earners, while brassware utensils and luxury goods such as tea sets, chinaware plates, and glasses are used by those at greater economic level. Both plain and hill Garos use different types of baskets for various purposes, with varying shapes and construction materials. Coiled cane baskets called Dhama are widely utilized in the plains for storing household items. Some respondents said living in small, inadequate houses made of mud or thatch, but with time, their socio-economic conditions have changed and they now build their homes with tin, wood, and other materials. While some respondents noted improvements in medical facilities, others stated that access to healthcare was still inadequate. Overall, while the Garos used to build their homes with leaves and hays in ancient times, they now use modern materials like tin due to improvements in their socio-economic conditions. the Garo people's living conditions have improved, but challenges remain, particularly for manual labor.

### **Festival of Garo Community**

Garo celebrate seven main festivals from the beginning to the end of Jhum cultivation. These are Aaofata, Denabilsia, Agalmaka, Miamua, Rongchugalla, Jamegappa and Wangala. However, now-a-days they are not dependent on Jhum cultivation (Homrich 1996).Currently, Garo community celebrates two major festivals: Wangala and Christmas Day. Wangala is considered the most significant festival and is celebrated after the rice harvesting season is over, typically between October and December. It is ritual of "thanksgiving" in order to honor Misi-Saljong, additionally acquainted Pattigipa Ra Rongipa or "The Great donor" for blessing them with a good rice harvest. A day before festival of Wangala, a ritual called "Rugala" using the Nokma is performed, where the authentic rice beer along with offerings include vegetables ,boiled rice to Misi-Saljong. The following day, the "chatso" ceremony performs by the Nokma, burning incense

to signal the beginning at his home's main pillar for the week-long Wangala festival, which has been a traditional practice for the Garo people for centuries. When Christmas Day arrives regarding the Garo community, they attend church before beginning the festivities. This day is a national holiday and is celebrated formally worldwide. Garo Christian friends and family exchange greetings of "Happy Christmas Day," which signifies celebrating the wonderful day, and offer traditional sweets and cakes. According to many respondents, they prefer to celebrate "Wangala" because it is a traditional festival that still exists within the Garo. However, some people from different castes have started celebrating it by themselves, which should not be happening since the festival is for the entire Garo community. The leaders organize this festival locally and centrally, and it is celebrated every year by October's end. The Garo community has undergone several cultural changes due to their conversion to Christianity. Because of this, traditional festivals like "Wangala" and marriage customs have also changed. They now celebrate Christmas Day and follow Christian practices. Garo community's traditional marital system is also disappearing. As a minority community, they face numerous problems when celebrating their festivals and wedding ceremonies. These problems include the non-fulfillment of demands by local leaders, harassment of girls during festivals, and insecurity caused by native people.

### **Transformation of Religion**

The traditional religion of Garo people is called 'Sangsarek', in which they consider certain things and forces of nature to be powerful Gods. They worship these Gods through various rituals in order to seek their blessings and protection from harm. Some of these Gods are believed to bring good luck, heal diseases, and determine happiness and misfortune. The Garo people have faith in the power of the sun, stars, moon, thunder, and rain. They also have faith in a supreme God who created the universe and controls the other smaller Gods. The Garo people also have faith in the transmigration of souls after death. The departed soul travels to a place called Mong Sangram and then to Chikmang, where it meets other departed souls of relatives. It then rests at Missal Charms, where a judgment is made on the person's previous life deeds. If the spirit is virtuous, it will be transmigrated to the earth as an animal or a tree. However, if someone dies with debt, their soul will be reborn as a dog. If someone commits suicide or is killed by a wild animal, their soul is believed to transform into a ghost, witch, or evil spirit responsible for various diseases, fear, and misfortune. They worship several Gods, including Tatar, Saljong, Susime, and Calcame. They believe that only the Khamal (priest) can identify the presence and functions of the Gods, so they often seek the Khamal's help for the treatment of illnesses and for carrying out devotions.

Garo people used to follow their traditional religion, which involved beliefs in spirits dwelling in trees, stones, and hills, and a complex system of mourning ceremonies to protect the soul of the deceased. However, early in the 19th century, Christian missionaries arrived in the region and began to establish missions. Over time, many Garos converted to Christianity, influenced by the persuasive abilities of the missionaries and the allure of valuable gifts. Some respondents attribute their conversion to Christianity to the persuasive abilities of Christian missionaries and foreigners influence who have gifted valuable items to their king. Others have converted to Christianity due to a personal conviction in the teachings of the Bible and belief in God. The majority of Garos living in the study area of Madhupur have embraced Christianity, but there is still a significant portion that adheres to their traditional religion, Sangsarek. Some Garos have also converted to Islam or other religions. However, it is observed that after converting to Christianity, many Garos are disregarding their traditional customs and adopting new practices. Many Christian Garos

believe their being more modern than those who still follow Sangsarek. Notable alterations that have occurred among Garos who have converted to Christianity include the loss of traditional customs, a shift in employment opportunities, changes in clothing styles, a transition from matrilineal to patriarchal family structures, and alterations in dietary habits, among other things.

### **Health Status**

Currently, Garo community's health status is in good shape. The majority of Garo people attribute illnesses to displeasing God and Goddess or curse of inactive spirits. Therefore, they offer sacrifices to appease the spirits and seek relief from their illnesses. Garos consume diverse food items including natural vegetables and have preference for drinking wine made from boiled rice. Although the Garos have a lower incidence of diseases, malaria remains a common ailment among them. The Garo people unable to access to sufficient social amenities, particularly healthcare facilities that are functional and meet their needs. They have to travel lengthy distance to access medical care in government hospitals. Moreover, several of the mission clinics located in the community do not possess adequate medical facilities, which is a major concern for the rural areas of Bangladesh. (Gain 2011). According to one respondent, when they fall ill, they usually seek treatment at government hospitals. In the past, they have lack of knowledge about health hygiene and treatment procedures, relying solely on traditional practices, but now they have received training and awareness from Christian missionaries and government organizations. Another respondent mentioned that while a hospital is present in the community, the services provided are insufficient, and in case of emergencies, they go to Madhupur or Mymensingh or Tangail for better treatment. The Garo community experiences various health issues because of their ignorance about proper hygiene, sanitation, and disease prevention. To address this, both government and non-government organizations offer training and awareness programs to improve their health. When they fall ill, they typically seek medical assistance from both government as well as private hospitals, but they are not content with the standard of care delivered by government facilities.

### **Occupation of Garo Community**

The Garos have been relying on nature and almost over 4000 years, jhum cultivation has been practiced. However, in recent times, some members of their community have started engaging in professions other than farming, such as fishing, to earn a better living. While farming remains the primary source of income for some families, others have diversified their sources of livelihood and are now engaged in teaching, employment, and business. Many people in the community have migrated to cities in quest of better-paying jobs, such as day labor and garment work, as they find it difficult to sustain their families on income from agriculture alone.

The primary occupation of Garo people is farming, which supports about more than 85% of the community. However, in the last few decades, They have been adjusting to new technologies and job opportunities. A respondent said, there has been increasing the rural-urban migration in the Garo community, with people leaving to study, receive medical treatment, find jobs, and seek economic opportunities in the city. The result is, many Garos have had to change their professions to earn sufficient wages. They are currently seeking employment in public and private offices, garment stores, beauty parlors, tea gardens, factories, police and military services in Dhaka and other urban areas and also a significant number of Garos are employed in the Bangladesh Civil Service. However, Garos are often classified as unskilled and occupy lower positions in the

occupational hierarchy due to their low educational status. They also tend to have more irregular and seasonal employment compared to non-Garos.

### **Land Ownership**

Garo community traditionally follows a matrilineal system, which grants women significant authority, including ownership of land. However, with the rise of Christianity among the community, many have abandoned their traditional customs. The result is, the matrilineal system is declining, and land ownership is becoming more equally shared between women and men. When asked about changes in land ownership, one respondent noted that the traditional ownership of land by women has shifted, and both genders now have right to own land in their community. Another respondent shared that their wife owns four acres of land and that all family resources are under her ownership, even the family's house is in her name. Through my research, including interviews and observations, it has been determined that most Garo families once they owned land, but currently, only a small percentage (around 15-16%) have some form of land ownership. This loss of land can be attributed to several factors including illiteracy, unfavorable environmental conditions, political ignorance, carelessness, lack of awareness regarding proper land management practices, ignorance of land laws, and poor settlement surveys. Despite advancements in technology, the Garo people still rely on subsistence economies, and approximately 85% are currently landless, even though they still indirectly involved in agriculture.

### **Assistance and Service of Government and Non-Government Organizations**

The Garo community in Bangladesh faces various problems, including unemployment, illiteracy, insufficient communication, poor sanitation, inadequate transportation systems. One respondent expressed worry on the terrible state of roads in the community, while another believed that improving the communication and transportation system would help solve many problems. Another respondent mentioned specific NGOs like World Vision and Proshika that provide educational equipment and essential services like food and medicine, while a different respondent acknowledged the government's efforts in conducting awareness programs, providing healthcare services, and supporting economic development through micro-credit programs. NGOs such as Grameen Bank, NSDP, CCDB, BRAC, ASA, Caritas, World Vision, YMCA, and WCA, and government organizations provide services and programs to address these issues. However, the services offered are not enough to meet the necessity of the Garo community, which requires sufficient communication, employment opportunities and better transportation systems, electricity, and other necessities. NGOs have significantly contributed to rural development by promoting women's education, gender equality, sanitation, and awareness. However, some NGOs have also attempted to influence Garos to convert to Christianity and denounce their religion, Sangsarek. Government services include immunization, family planning, health care, old age benefits, and mother and child welfare services. The community seeks the cooperation of NGOs and the government to develop communication systems, promote education, and solve their problems.

### **Existing Problems**

The Garo people in Bangladesh is often neglected and faces numerous challenges. Among the most important issues is poor communication infrastructure, as many Garo people reside in isolated areas that are disconnected from national economic and development initiatives. Other major problems include inadequate education, lack of security, limited job opportunities, healthcare facilities, poor road conditions, and insufficient access to electricity. Additionally,

community members highlighted concerns about unemployment, illiteracy, poor sanitation, early marriage, lack of awareness about various issues. Some respondents indicated that there were many other challenges facing community, including social issues such as superstitions. The Garo community faces several issues, including communication difficulties, inadequate healthcare services, insecurity for girls, early marriage, dominance by indigenous people, poor education, and unavailability of clean drinking water. The community is seeking assistance from government to address these challenges, including the implementation of better communication infrastructure, improved education and healthcare facilities, the provision of clean drinking water, increased security measures, and development of essential infrastructure.

#### 4.RECOMMENDATIONS

Garo community is facing numerous challenges and requires assistance from the government in various areas such as improved communication systems, better education, healthcare facilities, access to clean drinking water, infrastructure development, and security. Based on the case study, many individuals from the Garo community have expressed their desire for these improvements. Addressing these issues, the study also provides a list of recommendations are given below:

1. To solve the issues of land related problems of Garo community.
2. Recognition of Garo people as Adivasi or indigenous by the state.
3. Ensure that Garos are allowed to exercise their cultural practices and traditional means of making a living.
4. Enhancing the education system, developing infrastructure and improving the facilities available to Garo people.
5. Providing healthcare services that are reflected to the cultural and traditional beliefs and values of them.
6. Establishing an institution and research center to promote their language and preserve their traditional culture and conducting research on the Garo people's traditional culture.

#### 5.CONCLUSION

The Garo community has undergone significant changes. The advancement of modern civilization, technology, and communication systems has had a noticeable impact on their lifestyle. This has led to various changes in their dietary habits, cultural practices, and religious beliefs. Although they have adapted to some cultural traits from mainstream Bengali people and Christianity, they still retain many traditional practices in their cultural and livelihood activities. However, they still face various challenges, including lack of education, communication, health problems, insecurity of girls, early marriage, land ownership, and drinking water scarcity. It is essential duty of government to ensure better education, healthcare, communication, security, and infrastructure facilities to uplift the Garo community and ensure their sustainable development. Additionally, preserving their unique cultural practices and traditional livelihood is crucial to maintaining their cultural heritage and identity.

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