

# MIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT OF THE GAROS COMMUNITY IN RI BHOI DISTRICT, MEGHALAYA

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**Abstract:** *The Garos are the inhabitants of North East India, particularly concentrating in the Garo Hills districts of Meghalaya. However, few of the branches of this tribe are scattered in some areas of neighbouring states of Assam, other North Eastern states, West Bengal and also in Bangladesh. Due to geographical contiguity of these areas, the Garo population spreads over the entire region in greater or lesser concentration. "Garos" in our study mainly refers to those inhabiting in the Garo Hills districts of Meghalaya. There are different views regarding the meaning and use of the term 'Garo'. Major A. Playfair in his work "The Garos" holds that Gara or Ganching is a sub-tribe which first received the appellation of Garo who lived in the southern portion of the Garo Hills. Gradually the name has extended to mean all the inhabitants of the hilly region (Playfair, A., 1975). In course of time 'Gara' came to be pronounced as 'Garo'. Playfair is of the view that the Garo is merely a corrupt form of the name of one of the sub-tribes. J.B. Bhattachajee in his book "The Garos and The English" (1978) writes "among the Garos there is a section of the tribe namely 'Gara - Ganching' who inhabited in the southern part of the Garo Hills region. In course of time the term 'Gara' being distorted become a 'Garo' (Bhattachajee, J.B., (1765-1874). Thus according to J.B. Bhattacharjee Gara was the original term. According to 2001 census Garos constitute 31.41% of the total population of Meghalaya. The Garos constitute the majority of the population of the district (Statistical Handbook of Meghalaya, 2008-2009). With support to the above literature it had been observed that presently migration of Garos to Ri Bhoi District shows a high population of migration day by day. And as compared to their earlier life conditions it had shows positive impact of migration decision taken for them presently. The Garos migrants are hard working groups who have their aspired mobility of not only individual but to the community group as a whole. They desired to live a better standard of life, expectations of upward social mobility, to improve in education field, employment opportunities. All this dimension mutually influence each other and (re)shape the lives of Garos migrants who are presently struggle for better living. The study reveals that the Garos migrants women are very hard working they are very independent when it comes in supporting the family in times of financial crisis. Thus, it shows that the Garos women are not only hard working, supporting the family but also they have contribute to the requirement of the society in terms of productivity and in market sectors in every day to day life.*

**Key Words:** Migration, Garos, Mobility, Settlement, Demography.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

The Garos are the earliest human group that migrated into North East India from the Tibetan Plateau during the pre-historic period; the evidence of this being the Garo villages found across the Brahmaputra Valley, including many in and around the Guwahati metropolitan area and spread far and wide as far as the Chindwin valley in Myanmar. It is often put forward that the famous Kamakhya was a Garo shrine before it was stolen by the patriarchal Aryans during the reign of the Koch kings.

The origin of the term 'Garo' has been a subject of controversy. Different historians and writers have given diverse opinion about the meaning of this term. The tribe itself is known to outsiders as Garo but the Garos call themselves as 'A.Chik' or 'Mande'. There are twelve sub-tribes of the Garos.

They are:

1. The Chisak
2. The Matchi
3. The Matabeng or Matjangchi
4. The Ambeng
5. The Dual or Matchi-Dual
6. The Atong
7. The Gara-Ganching

8. The Chibok
9. The Ruga
10. The Me.gam
11. The A.wes or A.kawes
12. The Koch or Kotchu or Kochus.

According to Major Playfair, the Gara-Ganching sub-tribe received their appellation of GARA and that the name was extended to all the other sub-tribes and in time it became corrupted from 'Gara' to 'Garo'. Again, he says that 'the Garos never use the term except in conversation with a foreigner and always refer to themselves as A.chik (hill man), Mande (the man) or A.chik Mande. Yet another explanation is that the term Garo is derived from the Bodo word 'Gau' which means to separate and migrate. In Bodo, Gaoro-Gaolang also means to become separated gradually. The Bodos and the Dimasas regard the Garo tribe as being separated from them as 'Gao' or 'Gaoro'.

The Garos, who call themselves A-chiks, are the second largest tribe in Meghalaya. As such they are the dominant tribe and inhabit the greater parts of the present Ampati Civil Sub-Division. The Garos have a strong tradition that they have come from Tibet. According to their legend, the ancestors of Garo inhabited a province of Tibet named Torus, where without any apparent reason they started on a voyage of discovery under the leadership of two chiefs Jappa-Jalima and Sukpa-Bongipa. The contact between the British and the Garos started towards the close of the 18th century after the British East India Company had secured the Diwani of Bengal from the Mughal Emperor, Shah Alam II. By the end of dry season in early 1873 the whole of Garo Hills had come under British occupation.

However, the culture of modern Garo community has been greatly influenced by Christianity. *Nokpantes* are glory of the past and all children are given equal care, rights and importance by the modern parents. The Garo language belongs to the Bodo branch of the Bodo-Naga-Kachin family of the Sino-Tibetan phylum. As the Garo language is not traditionally written down, customs, traditions, and beliefs are handed down orally. It is also believed that the written language was lost in its transit to the present Garo Hills. However, the modern official language in schools and government offices is English and the modern generation is more inclined towards English.

## 2. MIGRATION AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE GAROS:

The early history of the Garos is shrouded in mystery except a few references here and there in the legends and myths. The different epic lores of the Garos portray the glorious aspects of the history of the Garos nine hundred years back when they were independent and powerful with their capital at Gaur, now in ruins in modern West Bengal (Rongmuthu 1967). The Garos have also a tradition that in the dim and distant past their forefathers, i.e., nine headmen, the offspring of a Hindu fakir and a Tibetan women, came down from the northern mountains, and after a halt at Koch Behar, made their way to Jogighopa and thence cross the Brahmaputra to Dalgoma and so finally into the Garo Hills (Endle 1911,1975). Some of the Garo traditions are also recorded in the Gazetteres of the Garo hills district. It is recorded that the Garos originally came from Tibet and settled in Koch Behar for about 400 year (Sangma 1984). Some similarities in the Tibetan and Garo vocabularies tend to confirm their belief. It is noteworthy that Yak's tails are highly priced and regarded as sacred things by the Garos. Yak is not found in the Garo Hills but it is said that their ancestors while migrating from Tibet brought Yak's tails with them, and they have preserved them from generation to generation. It is easy for the Garos to obtain Yak-tails from the different fairs in the Kamrup and Darrang districts, or from Bhutia pedlars, but it is difficult to explain their reverence for the animal and their use of its tail, if they had never had any traditions respecting it (Playfair 1909).

Another version on the origin of the term 'Garo' is that while the tribe of our discussion was migrating from Tibet they had a leader whose name was 'Garu'. It is very probable that after his name the followers came to be known as 'Garos'. In the former days Tura\* was known as 'Dhura' derived from the 'Durama Hill'. The word 'Garo' is supposed to be a derivative form of the word 'Dhura'. This word was later on applied to the similar group of people residing in the hilly regions to the south of the Goalpara district of Assam.

The Mandehas were also known as Mandai or the Garuda. Accordingly their residence is known as Garudachala. Now a days Garudachala is known as the Garo Hills. Manu Samhita and Kalika Purana, a work on the 10 century A.D. also say that the homeland of the Mandehas was on the sea shore of the Lohitya Sagara or the Red sea. Lohitya Sagara is also known as Purva Samudra which means Eastern Sea. In the Yogini Tantra, a work of the later period of 16 century A.D. there is a reference to the residential area of the Mandai's which was known as Manda Saila. Scholars assume that the name 'Mande Saila' comes from 'Mandeha' which is found in the Ramayana. (a) P.C. Nath agrees that the bird which tried to rescue Sita from Ravana was the king of birds Garuda and the name Garo has been derived from the name 'Garuda'. However, according to some other scholars, the Bangalee and Assamese people who were the dwellers of the plain areas used to call this tribal group as 'Garos'. This is why they came to be known as 'Garos'. 14 Edward T. Dalton holds that 'Garo' like Naga is a term applied to this people by the Hindus.

According to Late Jabong D. Marak, a Garo historian, there were various hill tribes living in the middle parts of Tibet. There was also a place known as 'Garu Pradesh', whose inhabitants were called 'Garu' or 'Garo'. It is inferred

that from that place the Garos came to India.<sup>16</sup> Referring the Souvenir of All India Garo Union 1981-82, Mihir N. Sangma writes that the term Garo is derived from the Bodo language.<sup>17</sup> P.C. Bhattacharjee in his notes on “Bodo, Garo and Sans ” expresses a similar view. He holds that the Garo might have a Boro origin. It is believed by some that Garo is a branch of the greater “Boro” tribe which got separated from the main tribe.

During the course of their migration they had to stay for different length of time in different places. They had to migrate from one place to place to another. So it was a very long and continuous process. This analysis of the term Garo indicates that the Garos themselves had coined the word and came to be known by that name. Mr. Surosen G. Momin, former president of Garo Sahitya Sabha says that the word ‘Garo ’ is actually not an A chik word. The Garos mainly adopt jhum system of cultivation which is known the Assamese as ‘GarV system. A bri and A chik word means hill. ‘A ba cha ‘ram a bri ’ in A chik language means the hill where the jhum cultivation is done. In course of time ‘Gari ’ distorted to ‘Garo’.

The British started to call the hilly region the “Garo Hills ” where the tribe practicing jhum cultivation lives. Some Garo people felt that during early days taking advantage of their innocence and ignorance they were called “Gadha Garu” (meaning fool like a cow) by others. S.N. Dubey says that the term Garo was given to them by non-tribal of plains people. The English people began to call this people as Guru and later on as ‘Garo’? Accounts of Garos migrated from Tibet along the source of Chindwin, Salwin and Irrawady rivers: It is believed that a group of Garos inhabiting in the Eastern Tibet, while wondering in search of fertile land for jhuming came down to the south-eastern part of Tibet. They continued their journey till they settled on the Chindwin and Salwin river valleys. In search of convenient places, Raja Sirampa, Kotta Nagrenpa, koroan Dalgipa, Rikwa Nengjapa, Ageng Randa, Agong Resingpa, Mugrik, Salmijang, Noe, Jaje, Noche, Norejane and Nangre Dese, who were said to be in the group are still regarded as the forefathers of the Garos. While coming along the source of Chindwin, Salwin, and Irrawady rivers, they reached the province of Burma. The Burmese king received them friendly. The Garos stayed there for several years and practiced jhuming. This method of cultivation is still practiced in Burma. The Burmese people called this system ‘Tangya’ cultivation. The Garos settled on the bank of the river Irrawady under the leadership of ‘San Ban’. This place was known as ‘Mandalaya’ in Burma. There the Garos stayed for many years. The Burmese people regarded them as aboriginals of Mandalaya. As the inhabitants of Mandalaya they came to be known as, ‘Mande\ In this context Robin Burling writes “The most frequent suggestion about the Garo homeland is Tibet, probably because Tibet is both exotic and suitably near. Others wonder if the Garos might have come, instead from Mandalaya, I presume this is because the Garos often call themselves ‘Mande’ (which otherwise means ‘people’) and ‘Mandalay’ sounds enough like ‘Mande’ to make it a good candidate for a point or origin”. However, Burling is convinced neither Tibet nor Mandalay could be the original homeland of the Garos. <sup>63</sup>The Garos further proceeded towards western side along the north bank of river Chindwin. They entered into the high mountainous regions of present Nagaland and reached Dimapur. At that time Dimapur was the capital of Karachi kingdom. The Garos has to fight with the Karachis there. In Dimapur, the Garos were divided into two groups. One group moved towards Sibsagar district and stayed for a short period. Dr. Mihir N. Sangma in his book on “Unpublished Documents on Garo Affairs” (1993) has mentioned about three groups of Garos who have migrated from Tibet through three different routes.

These are -

1. One group of Garos migrated from Tibet along the source of river Tista or Tarsa as they call it towards south western side of Tibet under the great leadership of Jappa Jalimpa and Sukpa Bonggipa.
2. Another group of Garos came from central Tibet. They moved towards the south along the source of river Brahmaputra under the leadership of Alak Raja, Asilik Gitel, Durka, Buia, Rengwa, Salbong, Suakpa and Nenggilpa etc.
3. The third group of Garos who moved towards the south-eastern part of Tibet along the source of Chinwin, Salnein and Irrawady rivers under the leadership of Raja Sirampa, Kotta Nangrepa and Muga Dingcheпа.

### 3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

According to one legend the Garos believe that their traditional home was Tibet. This hypothesis can neither be rejected nor accepted because it was not based on any historical or archaeological evidence; but it is generally believed by many authors like Barkataki and Sangma that the Garos migrated through the routes of Tibet from either western or northwestern part of China. Regarding the origin of the Garos, Dalton in his book Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal states on this subject that the Garos have no tradition of migration, they believe themselves to be autochthonous, and the only people with whom they claim alliance are the Buts and the English’ (Playfair, 1975 : 8) Playfair however refutes this theory as only a legend and emphasises the existence of a very distinct story of migration from Thibet. Playfair states that the Garos are of the stock known as Tibeto- Burman, which drifted into Eastern India and Burma across the plateaux of Tibet. Their language and few of their ideas still retains some similarity with Tibetans. Majumdar (1980) also believes that the exact route of migration of the Garos into undivided Assam is quite obscure. Based on the linguistic and other cultural affinities with the Kacharis and the Rabhas, two major plain tribe of Assam,

he regards the Garos as the first Mongoloid immigrants into this part of India perhaps preceded only by the Khasis of Meghalaya.

R.J. La Polla has given a fascinating survey of a formidable succession of migrations in China and in the Tibeto-Burman world. I would never argue that migrations do not occur, but I also wonder if LaPolla has not gone a bit too far. For example, he describes the ancestors of the Burmese as migrating down from the north and as displacing the Karens and Mons who, however, gave much of their culture to the Burmese. Might not the history be better described as one in which some Mon and some Karen shifted their language to Burmese but continued to practice much of their older culture? Randy J LaPolla, 'The Role of Migration and Language Contact in the Development of the Sino-Tibetan Language Family', in Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald and R.M.W. Dixon, *Areal Diffusion and Genetic Inheritance: Problems in Comparative Linguistics* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.225-254.

#### **4. GARO MIGRANTS SETTLEMENT IN RI BHOI DISTRICT:**

The Garos community who presently settled in the jurisdiction of Ri Bhoi District are part of the residents of the District who had migrated from different part of Meghalaya i.e. Khasi Hills and Garo Hills. A majority of the Garos who had migrated to this district are from Garo Hills. Presently settled in an around the foothills of Nongpoh Constituency and Jirang Constituency. Majority of the village in which the Garo Migrants community have become dominant in the present settlement are mostly found in the Border sates of Meghalaya and Assam which falls in Ri Bhoi District, Jirang Constituency. Presently the migration takes place is in a faster streams especially areas like Byrnihat, Jorabad, and Pillangkata areas. The villages which are densely populated by the settlement of Garo migrants Community are namely Mawiong, Garo Nongthymmai, Nongladew, Maska, Rongsawkona, Bara Killing, Jorbill, Nongspung, Iongkhuli, Dehal, Santipur, Maikhui, Umpher though some groups scattered and settled in some part of the District but it have been witnessed that majority of the Garo Migrants search shelter in an around Border Areas.

##### **4.1 SETTLEMENT PATTERNS:**

There was a village by the name Jorbill (present day Bara Killing) where the early Garos initially settled after migrating from Garo Hills. Most of the Rural Dominated Garo migrants Villagers are no more in existence. Since the Garos shifted their settlements from the previous settlement to the present day near by the Highway in the Border of two States Assam and Meghalaya. They are presently settled in Rongsawkona, Umpher, Pillangkata, Maikhuli, Iongkhuli. The Garo villages which are still in existence in the Remote areas mostly in Byrnihat Areas are Santipur, Dehal, Narbong, Rupa Pani, Lower Balian. The Garos Migrants also strictly follow the traditional Garo matrilineal norms and practices of Chras and Maharis.

##### **4.2 SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP:**

The Garo migrant's community maintain a friendly social relationship among them and also with other community groups. They have not lost their identity and unique culture along with the Kacharis with whom they have historically maintained a close affinity by virtue of belonging to the same Bodo Race. The Garos migrants also celebrate the Wangala Festival every year during which cultural programmes are conducted by various cultural troupes. The Garo Students Union (GSU) in Ri Bhoi District they have played an important role in maintaining social equality and identity of the migrants groups and also some of the organizations that have been spearheading the preservation of the Garo culture, language and identity in the District and State as well.

##### **4.3 OCCUPATION:**

Majority of the Garos migrants community they depend on agriculture to maintain their existence. Women and men equally participate in agricultural pursuits. The Garos live by agriculture. They practice both permanent and 'shifting hill cultivation' which is known in the local term jhum they also practice permanent wet cultivation in the same field, owned by them, every year. Artificial irrigation and maturing are known to them. They mainly cultivate paddy (summer variety). Maize, potato, tobacco are their cash-crops every year. They also grow various types of vegetables which also give them to earn ready cash. The Hill-Garo still practice their traditional calling of 'shifting hill cultivation' by primitive 'slash-and-burn' method. In dry summer months, they cut down small trees, bushes and leave them for few days to thy. Then, they set fire to the dried woody collection. The residual ash serves them as manure to their 'Jhum' fields. Before the start of monsoon, they loosen their fields by means of a hoe or digging stick. When monsoon starts, they sprinkle the seeds of different kharif crops including bajra, jowar, and also pulse seeds; tobacco and potato seeds are also planted by them. They harvest their crops in winter season.

##### **4.4 RELIGION:**

Technically the traditional religion of the Garos may be termed as 'animistic' and those Garos who are still following the old faith are known as songsarek (Majumdar, 1966: 14). With the passage of time a new religious faith and outlook released certain new forces to cause further changes in society, creating a new religious bond among the

converted Garos. Conversion to Christianity also necessitated the denial of most of the time worn customs and traditions of the old society (Playfair, 1975 : XVII). It was in the second half of the nineteenth century that Christianity very rapid. Conversion involves not only a change of religious ideas or beliefs, it also simultaneously makes its impact felt on other institutions as well (Goswami, 1972 : 23). The acceptance and conversion to Christianity ushered in innumerable changes in the life and culture of the Garos through the efforts of the Christian missionaries more particularly the Garo missionaries. In spite of non-interference of Christianity with the social customs of the Garos as far as practicable, there were certain modifications in the Garo social structure in an effort to blend with the tenets of Christianity.

## 5. CONCLUSION:

The people of northeastern India often construct migration stories in an attempt to explain the history and present distribution of the tribes. While people certainly migrate, they rarely do so as coherent tribes, and the present distribution of ethnic groups is better seen as an adjustment to environmental, economic, and political conditions than as the outcome of migration. In this areas it have been observed that the Garos migrants community and it have been traced that the migrants Garos perceptions relating to and desires of mobility and described the multiple ways in which contemporary Garo society is mobile. The Garos migrants are hard working groups of people who have their aspired mobility of not only individual but to the community group as a whole. They desired to live a better standard of life, expectations of upward social mobility, to improve in education, employment opportunities. All this dimension mutually influence each other and (re)shape the lives of Garos migrants who are presently struggle for better living. The study reveals that the Garos migrants women are very hard working they are very independent when it comes in supporting the family in times of financial crisis. Majority of Garos migrants women are cultivators and in the evening they run a vegetables shops somewhere in the border areas of Assam and Meghalaya. Also they keep vegetables shops in the neighbor markets selling of the vegetables product of their own, market like Beltola, 15 Mile Byrnihat and 14 Mile Byrnihat and Iongkhuli Market most of the local vegetables are being produced and sell by the Garo Women. Thus, it shows that the Garos women are not only hard working, supporting the family but also they have contribute to the requirement of the society in terms of productivity and in market sectors in every day to day life.

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