

## **Ethnic Identity Crisis of the Migrant Garos in the Dooars Areas of West Bengal: Some Recent Challenges**

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### **Abstract**

The migrant Garos of the Dooars region migrated from the Garo hills and resided in the tea garden and forest centred Dooars region of Jalpaiguri district for many years ago. In this new ecological setting, they have been adopted themselves. But due to the imposed restriction on the access to forest products, gradual decrease of forest resources, low wage earning rate in the tea garden, dominance by several Hindu caste groups and some other circumstances they have been facing the more crises which ultimately forced them to change their own traditional way of living. Linguistically they are not able to maintain purity but rather become gradually habituated to a more mixture language. Nearly all the migrant Garos are converted to Christianity as a result they have loose many of their traditional practices and features. Now a day's, forceful Christianization within the community and strong rivalry between various Christian groups of these migrant Garos sometimes create an identity crisis. Not only that, in the question of matrilineality they almost have lost their traditional identity. To realize the actual situation the study has been conducted in the Dooars areas of northern West Bengal with the help of various traditional anthropological field methods.

**Key Words:** Migrant Garos, Ethnic identity Crisis, Christianity, Matrilineality, Dooars

### **Introduction**

The northern portion of West Bengal specially Dooars and its adjoining areas is the extension range of North East India from the point of ecological, racial, ethnic and social points of view. This area is the homeland of various ethnic groups with diversified cultures. They are speaking different languages and dialects. Generally, it is believed to be a melting pot of diverse races, castes, tribes, religions, languages and cultures (Garg, 2007). Dooars area is very famous for its eco-geographical features as well as for its variety of population. Especially different ethnic groups have been residing here for a very long time. Most of these ethnic groups have migrated from other places due to several reasons (Samanta, 2020). The term ethnic group or ethnicity was coined in contradiction to race, since although members of an ethnic group may be identifiable in terms of racial attributes, they may also share other cultural characteristics also like as religion, traditional occupation, language, or politics (Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, 1998). Ethnic identity in a sense refers to ethnicity which consists of the subjective or symbolic use of certain aspects of culture by the members of the ethnic group to differentiate themselves from other ethnic groups of that area.

Generally, the concept of ethnic identity thus combines both social and cultural criteria which focus specifically on the interrelation of cultural and social processes in the recognition of and interaction between such groups (Samanta, 2018). In this context, it can be mentioned here that linguistic, racial and cultural features are very important (Macmillan's Dictionary of Anthropology, 1986). Most of the time based on the linguistic differences between various ethnic groups can be demarcated

fruitfully. On many occasions, language has become an increasingly sensitive and political issue, becoming the basis for organizing interest groups. It has been a major factor in shaping ethnic relations in multiethnic societies (Haokip, 2009).

Generally, the concept of ethnic identity thus combines both social and cultural criteria which focus precisely on the interrelation of cultural and social processes in the identification and interaction between such groups. In this context, it can be mentioned here that linguistic, racial and cultural features are very important (Macmillan's Dictionary of Anthropology, 1986). In case of language, it is observed that many times it differentiates one ethnic group from the other and based on that it demarcates ethnic boundaries. It is a very age-old phenomenon. On many occasions, language has become an increasingly sensitive and political issue, becoming the basis for organizing interest groups. It has been a major factor in shaping ethnic relations in multiethnic societies (Haokip, 2009).

### **Objectives of the study**

The ethnic status of the migrant Garos in the study areas has been influenced to some extent by various factors or in different ways. In the present paper an attempt has been made to find out the actual situation of their ethnic identity crisis and emerging challenges through the following ways.

### **Methodology**

#### *Study area and study population*

The study has been conducted mainly in the Dooars areas of the Jalpaiguri district. The field area has mainly been restricted to the adjoining areas of Alipurduar. A very significant number of tribal groups inhabit there. The fieldwork has been conducted in the Garambasti village (J.L. No 43, P.O.- Damanpur, G.P. No. – 2, Block – Kalchini, P.S. – Kalchini, Sub-division – Alipurduar, Dist. – Jalpaiguri) and its neighbouring area that is very near to Alipurduar Municipality. The said village is situated almost in the boundary of Baksha Reserve Forest of Kalchini P.S. of Jalpaiguri district. This is mainly a tea garden centred village and it is surrounded by the Jitpur tea garden. The village is entirely a Garo tribal inhabited village. Mainly these tribals are migrated here from other places. These migrating tribal groups have extensively used local forest resources and other local resources for fulfilling their daily requirements.

The Garos are one of the most important tribal groups of India, who are mainly famous for their matrilineality about half a million of whom live in the Garo hills of Meghalaya, northeastern India. A very considerable number of people are living in West Bengal, Assam, Nagaland and Tripura. Whereas a small number of Garo people are migrated to West Bengal and they are mainly inhabiting the Dooars areas of North Bengal those have a very close association with other tribal groups of North Bengal.

#### *Mode of survey work*

The study is completely based on direct field-based survey work. The study is based on the data collected on the various ethnic and political features at the same time special preference has been given to the economic, religious and other important socio-cultural features of the migrant Garos of Dooars areas to focus on their ethnic identity and a social-cultural mobilization also. The present paper is the outcome of in-depth ethnographical fieldwork in the said areas. The field data have been collected mainly by utilizing the pure anthropological technique. In the said research work both qualitative and quantitative data have been collected mainly in two primary phases. In the first phase of fieldwork, prime importance has been given to general information collection and in the second phase subject, specific data have been collected. In the said study door to door, information has been collected as well as individual-level data have also been given due importance. Data mainly have been collected from senior and knowledgeable family members as well as aged persons of the neighbouring areas. Not only this, top priority has been given to the knowledge and views of the traditional and modern tribal personalities of the area, administrators, labourers, religious

personalities and so on. The paper is based on in-depth interviews, FGDs, observation and case study methods. Detailed interviews have been taken with the traditional and modern political and religious personalities, administrators and local resource persons. Special importance has been given to the textual document also. In this paper, special attention has been given to every matter from a holistic viewpoint. Over all qualitative analysis is prime features of this paper.

## **Discussion**

### *History of Garo Migration*

Generally, it is observed that a very strong migrating habit is present among the Garo community since time immemorial. According to several pieces of literature, oral tradition and folk tales based information it can be said that the Garos first migrated to Garo Hills of Meghalaya from Tibet (referred to as Tibotgre) around 400 B.C. under the common leadership of Jappa Jalimpa. They crossed the Brahmaputra River during this period and tentatively settled there for getting better resource opportunities in the river valley. However no authentic historical root has been identified (Marak, 1985). Some anthropologists argue that the original home of Garos is Assam in India (Dalton, 1872; Playfair, 1975) whereas; Robbins Berling of Michigan University (1963) tried to highlight the matter in a new direction. To him "Only once have I talked with anyone who showed real confidence about Garo origins. This was long ago, during my first trip to the Garo Hills in the 1950s. At that time, I met a man who explained, with utter confidence that the Garos had come from Palestine. I have forgotten the details of the journey now".

### *Migration of the Garos to the Dooars region of northern Bengal:*

The small number of Garos also migrated to Coochbehar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling and Dinajpur of West Bengal. All those are large scale migrations. But beyond those migrations, depending on the field-based data, it can be said that the Garos of the said areas have also been practising a small scale migration. At first, they settled at Rajabhatkhawa after migration from Bangladesh where they came from the Garo Hills region. Approximately there were 40 families migrated in 1926 for clearing the forest as well as to get more jobs. Due to some mysterious reason, they migrated from Rajabhatkhawa to Garam Basti village approximately fifty years ago. In this connection, it is undoubtedly said that due to such types of frequent migrating habits generally hampered their traditional way of living.

### *Changes in the traditional religious concept:*

Generally, it is observed that the Garos traditionally follow their religion known as Songsarek, which has roots in agriculture. Most of the Garo settlements also have a common traditional belief system which is strongly related to fear and dread of the various types of supernatural powers. Due to this many scholars and researchers, sometimes wrongly think that the Garos are animists. The Songsarek belief is presided over by the Godhead known as "Dakgipa Rugipa Stugipa Pantugipa or Tatara Rabuga Stura Pantura", in time being the traditional religious concept of the Garos have been changed and they become interested in Christianity.

### *Converted to Christianity*

From the case study based and other types of information, it can be easily said that after the establishment of the Garambasti village most of the villagers have been converted to Christianity in place of their traditional religious concept. Most of the villagers have converted to Christianity by maintaining a slow and continuous process and ultimately except for the members of only three families all the villagers have already accepted Christianity as their religion. In this way, there are very few families who still follow their traditional animist-Hindu beliefs. In the study village, the majority of Garo people willingly follow Christianity. Christianity came on the scene with its patrilineal values and cultural concepts (Das, 2011). There are a maximum number of villagers are influenced by Baptists and Roman Catholic churches. . Now a days, various Christian organizations

played a very important role in forcefully converting the families to Christianization. In some cases to achieve their said target, those organizations are sometimes imposed various restrictions even boycotts also against non-converted families. As a result form, the traditional viewpoints, as well as points of security, religious behaviour and ritualistic activities the villagers, have faced an identity crisis. In the said study village three families have to face such circumstances.

#### *Role of Christian Missionaries in the development process of the village*

It can be said that the main differences that had existed in the society due to the arrival of the Christians are the spread of education. This has helped them to achieve the goal of providing education to those people who are considered to be isolated or backward groups. The gradual development of education among the Garos brings several changes to their traditional values, customs, practices, myths and other affairs. Not only this due to the effect of Christianity a change come in their attitude and practices regarding their traditional occupation and economy. At the same time, it is also mentioned here that the Christian influence may also help to reduce various superstitions and malpractices.

#### *Gradual shift from matrilineality*

The Garos' are one of the rear communities of India who are very famous for their matrilineal social system. Still, now they are practising these matrilineal traditions in all respect, especially in respect of marriage, family formation, property inheritance, family authority and even in village administration. The females have a very prominent role in the family formation, family authority, property inheritance, and decision-making process in the family as well as in the village administration.

#### *Increased dependency on patrilocal or neolocal residence*

There should be a silent change that has taken place in the residential pattern. From the case study based information, it can be said that although there has a tradition in this village to reside the married male in his wife's mother's house just after his marriage nowadays this system become slowly changed. Presently most of the time the married male along with his wife and children are residing in his father's house or in the separate newly formed house which means in the neo local residence. Type of residence is one of the important determinants that affect the changes that take place in any society, as well as, the changing perception of people towards traditions.

#### *Changes in the bride price pattern*

Generally, it is a common phenomenon that the Garo people do not pay either dowry or bride price in their society. But sometimes it is also observed that if after the engagement one of the parties refuses to marry, then there is a provision that the defaulting party must have to pay a fine of Rs 60/- (Marak 2000: 101). Many Garo customs and practices have changed after their Christianization but their core remains as like earlier. With commercialization, the celebrations before and after marriage have become more expensive and that has serious economic implications for them (Fernandez, et al., 2011). But in the said study area it is closely observed that the villagers gradually habituated to the dowry system. If the males are working in the service sectors or with a good family economic background is generally treated as the better groom. In these circumstances, the guardians of the various brides are generally offered cash or kinds or both to the grooms' families to negotiate the said marriage. This is ultimately an acculturated effect of the dominant Hindus of the neighbouring areas.

#### *Changes in the property inheritance pattern*

Most of the respondents have pointed out that along with the changes in other aspects; the inheritance of property by females has also faced many prominent changes for a considerable period. Generally, nowadays the daughters are mostly found to move out to form neo-local families, the family property is either divided or given to all the sons as well as daughters equally or else it is given to the son if he is going to stay with his parents at home. The majority of the respondents feel that it is not wise to restrict the son

to get anything as even sons can also take care of their parents equally well because majority percent of them express their opinion that sons are the better option in respect future shelter than the daughters. It also a acculturated views from the neighbouring dominant Hindu community.

### **Change of title**

Generally, in the case of matrilineal society, it is a very common tradition is that after marriage the title of the male has changed and the wife's mother's title is considered to be the husband's new title. But based on collected information from the aged and locally knowledgeable persons it is clear that in early times when the title of the males changed after their marriage those males have been facing a very strenuous situation. Because there is a common practice throughout the West Bengal is that after marriage the title of the female has been changed and the wife accepts their husband's title. In the case of the migrant Garos, this is the opposite system as a result most of the time the males have been facing different administrative problems. In this connection, it is also mentioned here that most of the Panchayat and other administrative personnel have very little knowledge about the traditional rules of the Garo society. So most of the time they are not interested to change the title of the male after their marriage rather they change the title of their wife.

Some of the informants have claimed that the regional Hindu cultural dominancy is another important cause for such types of emerging situations. Now a day's father's title is generally treated like their children's title and most of the time father is treated as the guardian of the family. If the mother's title is used as the title of the children in that case they should have an affidavit in the court. For a poor and lower literate or illiterate person, it is a great problem.

### **Changes in the marriage pattern**

From the field-based information, it is clear that in early times the members of this community have been practised endogamous marriage and clan exogamy. According to the villagers, the outer community marriage was strictly prohibited in their society. And in several cases, strict punishment was given to the rules violators'. But in the changing situation, the outer community marriage is a more common phenomenon today in the study area. Still, now there are approximately nine such outer community marriages taking place in the village but any remarkable punishment is yet to be offered to those rules violating persons. From this information, it can easily be assumed that the societal rules and regulations are not in an absolutely strict position.

### **Local resource utilization and economic dependency**

Dooars region of the Jalpaiguri district is a very resourceful area from both ecological and geographical points of view. The village is situated in a very better position, especially from various ecological niches. These ecological niches are utilized as major economic resources for maintaining their daily lively hood (Samanta, 2016). As per the situational advantage of the village, the villagers have been afforded maximum facilities from the neighbouring Boksha Reserve Forest, Jitpur Tea Garden and Sekia and Daria River.

#### *Restrictions and difficulties in the use of local ecological resources*

In the early times, the villagers were collecting various forest products from the neighbouring forest for maintaining their daily requirements mainly firewoods, wood for building up residence, various fruits roots and tubers, ropes, medicinal plants, honey, wax etc (Samanta, 2019). At the same time, they were also collecting firewood to sell in the neighbouring market, especially in the Alipurduar, Jaigaon and the fringe areas of Alipurduar. This was a major economic resource to them through which they could earn money to maintain cash financial needs mainly to purchase various essential and basic needs. From the neighbouring rivers, they were collecting fish, pila, small stones, sand etc. But the forest area of neighbouring Boxa Reserve Forest is gradually decreasing not only that the density of wild plants and animals are also very rapidly decreasing. In this connection the Govt. have

been imposed various types of restrictions. Mainly the Govt. has restricted the villagers' free movement as well as the power of the use and collection of local forest resources. Due to these restrictions, their economic lives were not only hampered but different other sides also affected.

#### *Dependency on the tea garden-based jobs*

Today tea garden-based job is not a long time dependable occupation for villagers. For a very long time, the villagers become much more dependent on those economic resources. but presently the authority of the tea garden is not so interested to take labour from the villagers of the said village rather they become more interested to do the job through a contractual wage-earning system. So in this emerging situation, the gradual increase of dependency on the tea garden but the high priced situation, low rate of wage-earning, uncertainty regarding the regularity of jobs and some other factors generally promotes a very strenuous situation.

#### **Dependency on a mixed language**

The issue of identity is based on a sense of being, knowing and believing that is constantly in the process of being re-defined (Fishman 1983), which often involves talk in any concerned matter. Ethnicity is a very common active social and cultural phenomenon that generally defines itself through connections with various situations (Jenkins 1994, 1996). In such situations, a group's original language need not remain as an objective marker of identity (Edwards & Chisholm 1987:393)

From the field-based experience, it is observed that the Garo people of the study area have the capability to talking Bengali, Hindi and even English also. Although they are communicating in the Garo language but frequently mixed up several Bengali, Hindi and Nepali terms. So, based on that it can easily be said that the migrant Garo community of the said areas have rapidly lost the purity of their language. For time being this will be treated as a very serious problem.

#### **Conclusion**

The present study area is situated in a non-tribal dominated area but with a significant number of tribal populations. Due to an in-depth study, it has been observed that after migration, the migrant Garo community has been facing an all-around change. The majority of the villagers converted to Christianity. Due to the conversion from the traditional religious stage to Christianity, the Garos have been developed new thinking in the field of economy, education, health and hygiene, and different other socio-cultural perspectives. The Garos are famous for matrilineality. But due to the changing situation, the matrilineal features and behaviour of the migrant Garo community have changed enormously. There is a tendency to shift power and authority from females to males. In most cases after marriage males are residing either in the patrilocal or neolocal residence which is the quite opposite feature of the matrilineal system. Presently they are moved to a dowry oriented marriage system. In the case of family property, this becomes a new trend that in comparison to the daughters, the sons are getting the lion's portion share of the family property. The authority of males is increasing day by day in comparison to the females and gradually the male becomes the topmost authority in the decision making process in both family as well as at the village level also. The outer community and inner clan marriage are not exceptional phenomena in the study area. Due to the imposed restriction on the use of forest products and freedom of free movement in the reserve forest areas the villagers have been facing various problems. As a result, a very long association with the forest areas has been disturbed enormously. From the economic and social-cultural point of view, this has created a pressure situation on them. The villagers are primarily depending on the tea garden-based jobs. But presently the authority of the tea garden is not so interested to take labour from the villagers of the said village rather they become more interested to do the job through a contractual wage-earning system that ultimately creates a strenuous situation. Presently In place of the traditional village councils, the modern four tiers Panchayat system fully remains active and now it is in a flourishing stage. One interesting matter is that beyond some of the knowledgeable aged persons most of the younger generations and females have no knowledge or very little knowledge about the traditional village council.

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