

ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC PAPER

**Livelihood resilience in the face of the
cultural assimilation of the Garo
community in Bangladesh**

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted on the indigenous Garo community living within the Madhupur areas of Tangail district and consisted of 180 sample households. The respondents through a sample survey with the help of an interview schedule and descriptive statistics to analyze data. Study shows that 114 couples have built their house away from the husband's or wife's parents, 46 are staying in the bridegroom's house but are independent, 43 couples are staying in the bride's house but are independent, 61 are living away from the bridegroom's house. It is a major change caused by a change of religion. The author recommended that the specific lifestyle of the Garo population must be preserved through proper documentation and Governmental recognition. In addition, fostering livelihood resilience among the Garo community involves preserving cultural heritage, integrating ecological wisdom, and empowering individuals to navigate cultural assimilation.

Keywords: *Garó community, cultural assimilation, changing livelihood, livelihood resilience*

JEL classification:*Q01*

INTRODUCTION

There are 1.2 million Garó community or 1.13% of the country's total population. While there are certain similarities among the indigenous groups living in Bangladesh, each group also has unique historical experiences, languages, social structures, cultural norms, religious identities, economic systems, and political frameworks.[3] Despite having gained independence from Bangladesh for over forty years, the Garós remain one of the most marginalized indigenous communities in the country and continue to fight for constitutional recognition (i.e. since 1971). They must overcome numerous socio-political and economic obstacles to preserve their distinctive culture and customs.

The Garó tribe has a much higher rate of food insecurity than the national average of 25.6%. The percentage of Garó tribe members who received microcredit was also significantly higher at 80%. According to Bleie (2005), the people who identify as Garó to outsiders prefer to refer to themselves as Mandis. The Garós are a distinct ethnic group who also go by the name Achik. The language spoken by the Garó people is called Achchik Katha. The Garós have their clothing, just like any other indigenous group. Garó used to paint tree bark in the past. Their residential pattern is matrilineal; following marriage, the husband moves in with the wife. The conventional Garó society is evolving significantly; it has embraced and assimilated many traits from other communities which have a greater influence on their traditional marriage system.[1]

One of the most significant indigenous communities in Bangladesh

with a unique ethnic identity is the Guru. They are primarily found in the districts of Gazipur, Mymensingh, Netrokona, Tangail, Sherpur, Jamalpur, and Sylhet in northeastern Bangladesh. Our goals have been to look into this community in Bangladesh's Tangail district, specifically in the Galchatra, Madhupur upazila. The majority of Garo people are typically bilingual because they speak Bangla and their native language, Achchik Katha, similarly. Tribes can consist of a relatively small group of people, whereas ethnicity encompasses a wider range of communities. Bangladesh's state fabric is becoming more dynamic as a result of the diversity of our culture brought about by the presence of tribal communities. A study on the biodiversity of the Modhupur Tract carried out by Partha (2003) revealed certain issues related to agricultural activities that the Garos face. These include issues with irrigation, the high cost of irrigation fuel, cattle damage to crops, deforestation, and an increase in the number of outsiders residing in the Garo community. Tribal people's means of subsistence have generally expanded, in part due to necessity and in part due to personal preference. Natural resource scarcity is one of the primary external driving forces behind the current shifts in livelihood. Additionally, education alters perspectives and values, which in turn affects youth's preferences for livelihoods above all else. Investigating the livelihood patterns, cultural shifts and assimilation, vulnerability, and coping mechanisms in vulnerable situations among indigenous households is crucial.[6] The research will specifically pose important questions regarding how indigenous people in the study area are changing their way of life and assimilating into their culture.

The research study, which is a part of the larger investigation, aims to explore the changing livelihood and cultural assimilation due to societal transition in Garo societies. The Garos have been increasingly marginalized and ignored in national discourse. The overall aim of the present study is to assess the changing livelihood

pattern and find out the factors affecting their cultural change in selected households. The present study is carried out to fulfil the following specific objectives:

1. To assess the changing livelihood pattern and income status of the indigenous Garo community in selected households
2. To find out the cultural change and assimilation of their community
3. To identify the challenges that are responsible for their socio-economic progress and recommendations are needed to solve this problem.

THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

Marginalized communities all over the world are increasingly faced with a series of socio-ecological and cultural stressors, which have an impact on their quality of life [13]. The Garo community, like many marginalized groups worldwide, faces a myriad of social-ecological stressors that significantly impact their biocultural resources and livelihoods. These stressors can include climatic changes, ecological shifts, socioeconomic challenges, and political factors. In the face of such adversity, the Garo community has developed adaptive strategies rooted in their local knowledge and resources to enhance their *livelihood resilience*. Livelihood resilience refers to the ability of individuals, communities, and ecosystems to withstand and recover from shocks, stresses, and changes while maintaining their well-being and adaptive capacity [14]. It emphasizes the adaptive capacity of livelihood systems in the face of wider transformational changes. In this context, the livelihood analysis should be the basis for planning, prioritizing and eventual monitoring[9].

RESEARCH METHODS OF THE STUDY

Three unions were selected for the research - Aron Khula, Mahismara and Golabari. The target population of the study was Garosh. The sample consisted of 180 respondents. mixed methods were used in the research. Data was collected between August and October 2022. Primary data was collected personally from respondents through a sample survey using a structured and pre-tested interview schedule. The collected data were coded and analyzed using SPSS software within the objectives of the study.

Socioeconomic status of respondents' households

Table 1: Age distribution of respondents

Age categories (years)	Number of respondents	Percentage %
15-30	36	20
31-45	54	30
46-60	72	40
Above 60	18	10
total	180	100

Source: sample survey 2022

Age: In this study, the age groups of the selected sample respondents were classified into three categories according to the working age classification of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [4]. These categories include ages between 15 to 30 years, ages between 31-45 years and ages of 64-60 years and above 60 years. Table 1 shows that 20 % of respondents were 15-30 years old, 30% of respondents were between 31-45 years old 40% of respondents were 46-60 years and 10% belonged above 60 years. Age had a

significant negative impact on their household food security.

Table 2. The educational level of the respondents.

Education level	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Can sign only	13	7.22
Primary	29	16.11
Secondary	93	51.67
Above secondary	45	25.0
Total	180	100

Source: sample survey 2022

Education: The educational level is very important because it plays a significant role in efficient management practices and successful production. Education levels were classified into five categories. Table 2 reveals that 7.22% of respondents can give signatures only, 16.11% received primary education, 51.67% received secondary education and 25% of respondents received above secondary education. Based on the opinion of Nahar et al. (2020)[17], more than 56% of household heads had no formal education in Chittagong Hill Tracts. Jannat et al. (2021) [16] found that the majority (43.7%) of tribal farmers had no education, while only 30% of non-tribal farmers were illiterate in Bangladesh. About 32% of the tribal people had low literacy rates in Chapainavabganj district of Bangladesh [8].

Table 3: A secondary source of income by respondents' household

Occupation (secondary income source)	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Day labour	38	21.11
NGO worker	51	28.33
Garments	35	19.45
Government service	3	1.67
Business	22	12.22
Women parlour	31	17.22

Source: Sample survey 2022

Occupation is one of the most important attributes of socioeconomic characteristics. The distribution of occupation varies greatly depending on how much respondents are involved and what level of income they earned from their present occupation. It was observed that respondents were involved in various kinds of occupations, such as agriculture, day labour, garment labourers, NGO workers, service, etc. Table 3 shows that among the total respondents, 28% of respondents were occupied as NGO workers. About 21% of respondents were engaged as day labourers. Only about 19.45% of respondents were garment workers. About 1.67% of respondents were engaged in government service and about 17.22% of respondents were involved in women's parlor. One group of scientists examined the socio-economic condition of tribal people [15]. On that occasion, they discovered that among tribal people, 60.94% of households are involved in daily agricultural activities.

Table 4. Annual income and expenditure of the respondents.

Family Size	No. of Households	Percentage	Average Income (Tk.)	Average Expenditure (Tk)
Small family (up to 3)	24	13	123520	113760
Medium family (4 to 6)	92	51	278540	263540
Large family (7 and above)	64	36	268430	251480
Total	180	100	223496	209593

Source: Sample survey 2022

The expenditure of farmers depends on their income . Based on their income, they adjusted their expenses. In the study area, the respondents spent their income on fulfilling basic needs such as food, clothes, housing, children's education, medicine, purchasing production inputs, utilities, leasing or mortgaging lands, festivals etc.[12]. Income earned from agricultural sectors like cereal crops, livestock and poultry, fisheries, homestead gardening, forest and others like NGO workers [8]. Parlour business, garments workers, and day labor were considered to be farm income in the monetary value of the above-mentioned agricultural activities. Table 4 shows that the average income and expenditure of the respondents were Tk. 223496 and Tk. 209593 respectively. For the small family group, the average annual income was Tk. 123520 and expenditure was Tk. 113760. At the same time, the average annual income and expenditure were Tk. 278540 and Tk. 263540 for medium family and Tk. 268430 and Tk. 251480 large family, respectively. The highest proportion of the tribal respondents (85%) annual income

was up to Tk. 60000 in Chapainawabganj district of Bangladesh [18].

Income distribution and Changes in annual income of the respondent's H/H

Based on this score 41% of the total livestock and poultry rearing respondent's annual income is above Tk. 75000 and 43 % of the fruits and vegetables growing respondents. Cash in hand, cash in the bank and savings were increased by 71.6 per cent, 53.5 per cent and 38.5 per cent respectively in livestock and poultry-rearing households. Cash in hand, cash in the bank and savings increased 73.5 per cent, 58.0 per cent and 41.5 per cent respectively in fruits and vegetables growing households. In livestock and poultry rearing households, their percentage of annual income has changed to 56.74 per cent and 92.08 per cent of annual income has changed in fruits and vegetable production.

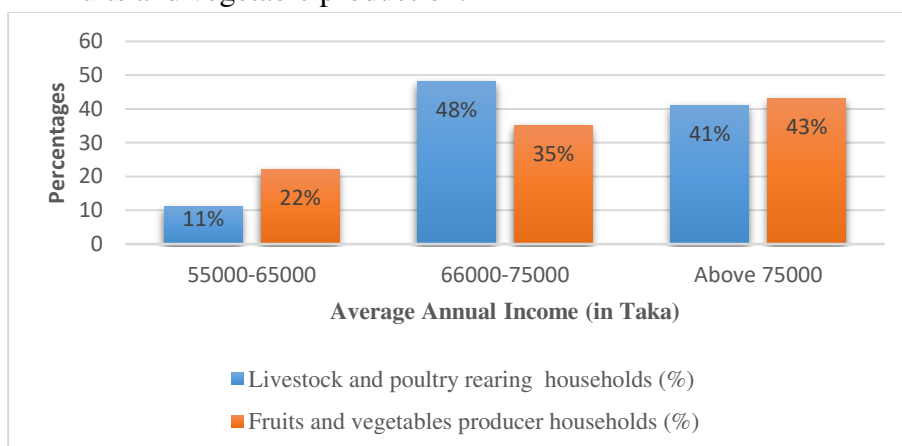


Fig 1. Income Distribution of the Respondents (In Percentage)

Source: Author

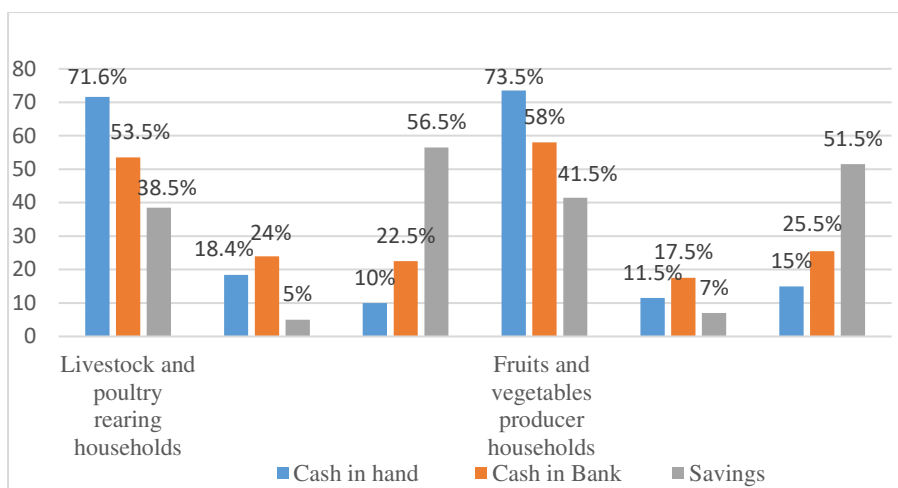


Fig. 2. Changes in financial capital (In percentages of total respondent's number)

Source: Author

Changing livelihood pattern

The guiding assumption of the DFID approach is that people pursue a range of livelihood outcomes by which they expect to improve their assets and reduce their vulnerability. Five types of assets form the core of livelihoods in The DFID Framework for Sustainable Livelihoods consists of the following: (1) Human capital (2) Natural capital (3) Physical capital (4) Social capital and (5) Financial capital.

Human assets: A human asset is an intangible asset or quality. It can be classified as the economic value of a worker's experience and skills. These assets include; education level, training, brainpower, skills, healthiness and other things employers' value such as faithfulness and reliability. Acquiring these assets people can develop themselves and improve their living standards. Table 5 shows that education, health status, knowledge and skills and leadership were good for 43%, 52%, 49% and 37% of the

respondents, respectively.

Table 5. Distribution of household according to human assets (Rank 1-5; 1= Low, 2-3=Moderate and 4-5= Good).

Human capital contents	Good		Moderate		Low	
Health status	93	52%	76	42%	11	6%
Formal education	78	43%	84	47%	18	10%
Experience and Training	73	41%	91	51%	16	09%
Knowledge and skills	89	49%	77	43%	14	08%
leadership	67	37%	74	41%	39	22%

Source: sample survey 2022

Table 6. Distribution of respondents according to financial assets

Items	No. respondents	Percentage	Average value (Tk.)
Cash income	156	87	25600.00
Gold or silver ornament	92	51	39670.00
Savings and deposit	132	73	47980.00
Credit in investment	140	78	37650.00
Poultry birds	77	42	16590.00
Livestock	58	32	52780.00

Source: sample survey 2022

Financial assets: A financial asset is a fundamentally liquid asset that obtains its value from any contractual claim and major types, which include cash or cash equivalent, savings, loans and receivables, etc. Financial assets are usually more liquid than other tangible assets, such as commodities or real estate. Table 6 shows that about 87% of the respondents had cash in hand, about 73% of the respondents had savings, about 42% of the respondents had poultry birds, 32 % of the respondents had livestock, about 51% of the respondents had gold or silver ornament and 78% of the respondents invest credit in their own productive farm and the average value was Tk. 25600.00, Tk. 47980.00, Tk. 16590.00 Tk. 52780.00 Tk. 39670.00 and Tk. 37650.00 respectively.

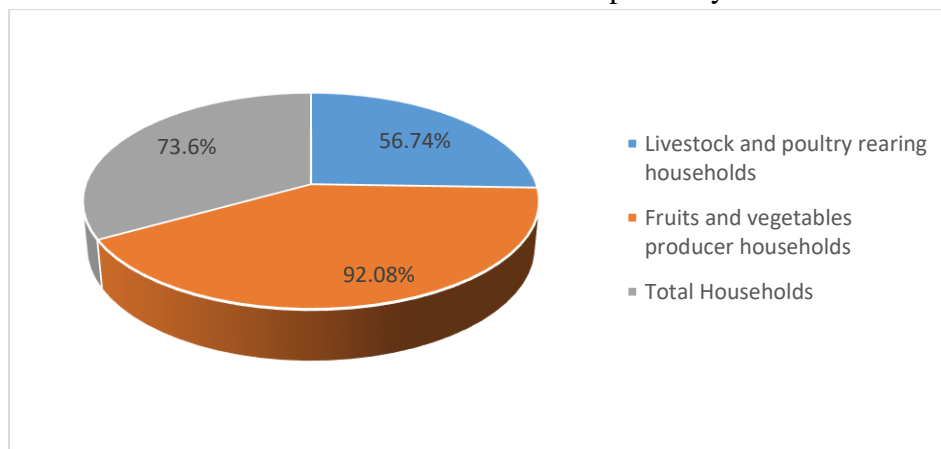


Fig 3: Changes in annual income of the respondents (comparing to last 5 years)

Source: sample survey 2022

Social assets: A social asset is an attribute that has value only because of the social institutions governing society. Social asset involves network and communication (kinship and patronage), formal and informal social relationships, common rules and sanctions, women empowerment, leadership etc. Social assets help people to work together and help each other to improve their

community. Table 7 reveals that 64% and 17% of the respondents said Group forming was good and moderate. 50% and 36 % of respondents reported they had a strong relationship with God and NGO officials. About 58% and 55% of the respondents had social recognition and communication networking respectively. 61% and 53% of the respondents said community participation and achieving status through education respectively.

Table 7. Distribution of respondents according to social assets
(Rank 1-5; 1= Poor, 2 3=Moderate and 4-5= Good).

Components of social capital	Good		Moderate		Poor	
Community or social participation	110	61%	40	22%	30	17%
Group forming in development activities	115	64%	30	17%	35	19%
Relationship with GO and NGO partner	90	50%	65	36%	25	14%
Social recognition by the local community	105	58%	45	25%	30	17%
Achieved status through education	95	53%	30	17%	55	30%
Communication and networking	100	55%	35	19%	45	25

Source: Sample survey 2022

Human capital

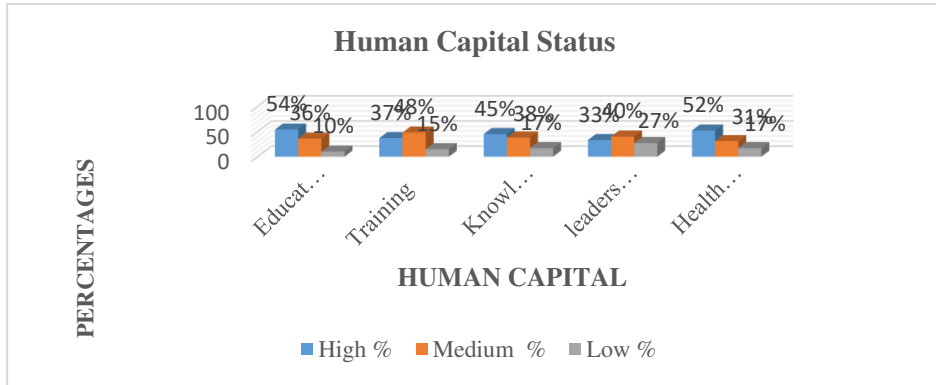


Fig. 4. Human capital of Garo Households.

The above figure shows that 54 % 37% 45% 33% and 52 % of respondents reported their education, training, knowledge and skills, leadership and health status are high respectively whereas 36%,48%, 38% 40% and 31% reported medium level.

Changing physical capital

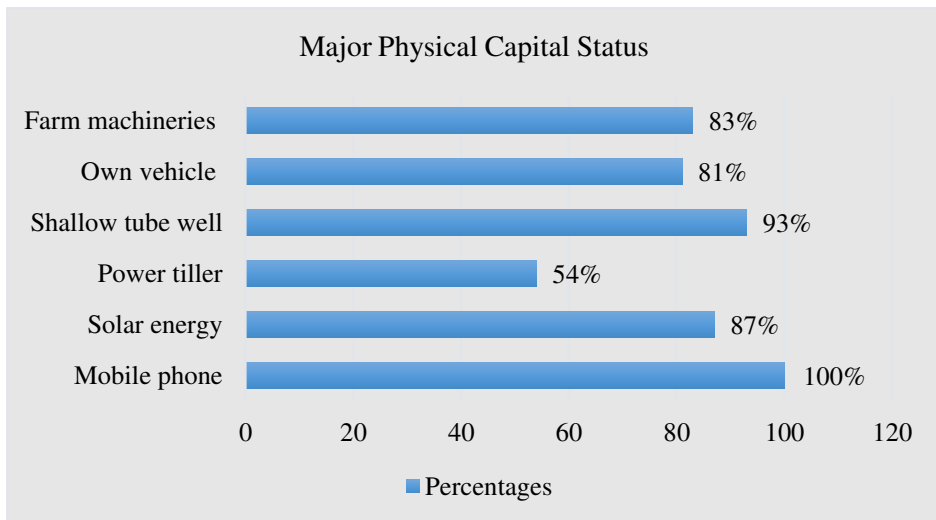


Fig. 5. Major physical capital status

The above figure shows the current major physical capital status of the Garo community 100%,87%,93%,81%, and 83% of respondents reported mobile phones, solar energy, shallow tube well, own vehicles and farm machinery respectively. And only 54 % said they own a power tiller.

Major cultural change and assimilation

In the Garo tradition, the man goes to the woman's house after marriage. Women who are not heirs can stay in their parents' home for a short time after marriage (a year or two), until they establish independent households and separate from their parents. The graphs show that 114% of couples built their house away from the husband's or wife's parents, 46% stay at the groom's house but are independent, 73% of couples stay at the bride's house but are independent, 74% said they belong to the groom's family. The pattern of residence after marriage in the Garo community is shown in the figure 6 below.

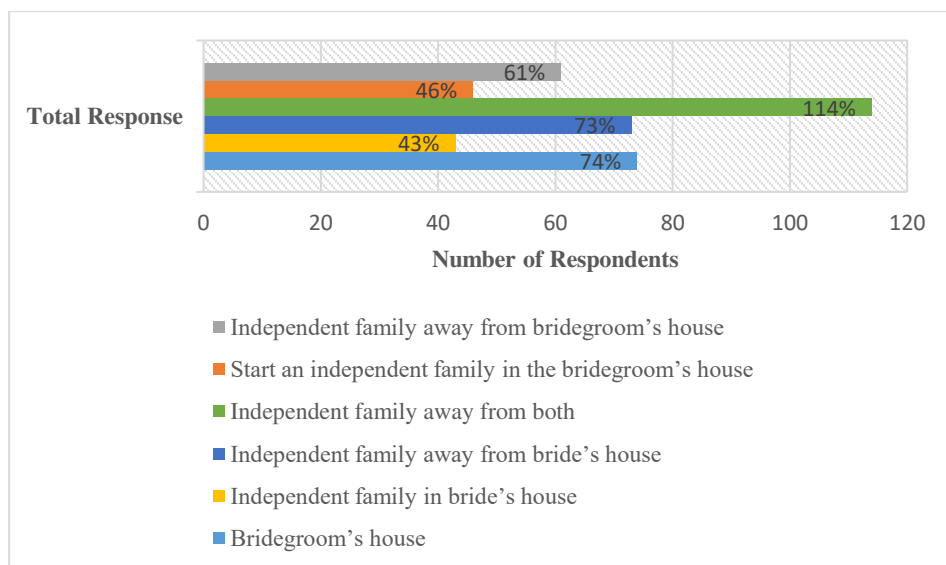


Fig. 6. Changing Residential pattern after marriage

Traditionally, the marriage was negotiated and even formalized. Table 8 reveals that the Council played no role in the marriage mentioned by 20 males and 5 females. In Modhupur upazila, 12 male and 15 female respondents said that the village elder played as a middleman, the village council formalized the marriage of only 7 males and 10 females and only 11 males and 8 females said that their roles as fixed bride prices. Most of the Garo who have been converted to Christianity exclude the village council completely. It is a major change caused by a change of religion.

The changing customs before marriage in the Garo community

Among the Garo, after the solemn engagement between the two machongs (respected common mothers of a group of people), the boy and girl are not allowed to go about freely or to live together before the formal marriage. As part of the etiquette in concluding the pre-marital contract the Garo bring presents such as a cock or a bull as a symbol of co-operation between the two maharis. Many Garo customs and practices have changed after their Christianization, but their core remains. Religious change has introduced another new element in formal consent.

Table 8. Roles of village elders/council in decisions on Garo marriage Modhupur

Categories	Male	Female	Total
No role	20	5	25
Middleman	12	15	27
Bride price	11	8	19
Formalize Blessing	7	10	17
Total	49	38	87

Source: Sample survey 2022

Table 9: Changing marriage customs in Garo community

Customs before marriage	Male	Female	Total
Bride price given	19	4	23
Live together after the elder's consent	5	6	11
Family consent	11	8	19
Church clearance	40	37	77
Gifts to peer group	21	17	38
Until marriage no live together	53	44	97
Total	149	116	265

Source: Sample survey 2022

Table 9 shows that 40 male and 37 female respondents follow church clearance for their marriage, and 53 male and 44 female respondents said that until marriage they do not live together. The ban on living together is intrinsic to religious change. Only 8 female respondents said that before marriage family consent is essential and only 11 male and 21 female respondents said that they allowed gifts to peer groups before marriage 17 males. Despite religious change and commercialization, their marriage rituals and customs reveal continuity in change rather than a total break from the past.

Garos' food habits, festivals, family and marriage, and religion

➤ Food

Rice is a frequent side dish with fish, meat, lentils, and vegetables and is the main meal of the Garo people. Their favourite food is dried fish. Their cooking is notable for its heavy use of green chillies and soda water. However, due to changes in taste and

cooking methods over time, very few Garo families today still utilize soda water in their cooking. Today, Garos have developed habits of eating and cooking like their Bengali neighbours[7]. Even though their eating habits have significantly changed, they still enjoy eating pig, turtle, eel, and vegetables like bamboo shoots and mushrooms. Spirituous liquor made at home is a highly popular drink that is frequently provided during celebrations and for entertaining guests. There was alcohol available for them to use as a form of refreshment at home, but with time, this practice has altered. It is clear that the Garo people's prior eating habits have changed significantly, and they now primarily adopt both the Bengali people who live nearby and their traditional eating habits.

➤ **Festivals**

Christmas and Wangala, a harvest festival and time of expressing thanks to God, are two significant holidays observed by practically the entire Garo population. The most important and legendary festival of the Garos is called Wangala, and it takes place after harvest. It is typically observed from October to December and is seen as a "thanksgiving" celebration to Misi-Saljong, also known as Pattigipa Rarongipa (The Great Giver), for rewarding people with the season's rice harvest. The Garo people have celebrated this holiday in the past by their customs. The Garo people attend church on Christmas Day before beginning the celebration with their neighbours. Christians who are Garos celebrate Christmas as their biggest holiday and give their loved ones the customary cakes and sweets.

➤ **Family Structure and Marriage System**

The Garo community in Bangladesh has the strongest matrilineal system, and its society gives women greater influence than that of any other group. The matrilineal system stipulates that women become the family's leader and that daughters are to inherit any family assets.

The rules of Christianity are observed during the marriage rituals of Christian Garos because the majority of them are Catholic and 98 percent of the population is now Christian. However, the Garo people still adhere to their old traditions and rituals when selecting a bride and groom. In most cases, the parents of the brides take the initiative to arrange for their daughter to wed and send invitations to their close family members. The girl's father must first send his nephew (his sister's son) a proposal. They may send a proposal for any other son of their kin sister (relative) if they don't have any nephews (sons of their sisters) of their own.

➤ **Religion**

The Garo people used to practice their traditional religion, but today Christianity is the main religion of the Garo people. Their traditional religion does not focus on a particular God or idol worship, and they are unconcerned with sin and virtue, heaven and hell. The Garos execute funeral rites in order to prevent the deceased person's soul from harming them after death because they think that certain trees, stones, and hills are the homes of spirits. The majority of Garo people more than 98% proudly identify as Christians. The Garos have converted to Christianity from their previous religion known as "Shangarsek," however the majority of them still choose to adhere to their former rituals. They undergo a religious change that brings them closer to modern civilization and increases their awareness of how modern society is changing. Bal (2000)[2] noted that the majority of Garos have converted to Christianity and a smaller number to Islam over time. Their socioeconomic, psychological, cultural, and political circumstances are significantly impacted by Christianity. Similar results, primarily of a general type, are available from developed nations. Nevertheless, the Bangladeshi context does not currently have access to this kind of research finding.[5] Consequently, a study

was created to ascertain how the Adivasi marriage system was evolving.

Problems faced by the Garo community in study area

Several limitations hinder the socio-economic condition of the Garo ethnic community in Madhapur upazila. Some of these are given below:

1. Destruction of forest areas: The Sal Forest areas regions are being destructed with the aid of many dishonest persons the locals and outsiders who reduce down the trees and sell these to the market.
2. Lack of education: From the interview, we have found that most of the parents about 70% are eager to educate their children but are not fully able to bear the expenses of modern education. Some people are still ignorant in the case of gaining education.
3. Insufficient Governmental support: The government of Bangladesh has taken several steps to give the Garo ethnic people all the facilities that they deserve as a citizen of the country. But due to some problems like lack of willingness and corruption of Govt. officers, the Garo people are not getting the proper support from the state. About 80 persons from 80 families think that they do not get proper facilities from the state.
4. Lack of financial or credit support: A large number of them are living beneath the neediness line where their employment is identified with just agrarian work. The vast majority of these individuals have minuscule territory of cultivable land work on others' property. Thus, they have low livelihoods which can't satisfy their fundamental human needs.
5. Cultural conflicts: Their customs are likewise not the same as the Bengali conventions. Where they don't feel comfortable getting together with the traditional or central programs and festivals. For that reason, there is a distinction between the standards and perspectives of Garo with other networks in Bangladesh.
6. Ignorance in social and religious beliefs: A great number of

Garo people do have not proper knowledge of their social and religious beliefs. They are still at the level of backdated and illogical beliefs which causes some superstitions that have many harmful effects on them. These wrong beliefs keep them far from modern society.

7. Traditional occupation: Several Garo people are related to their ancient occupations like farming, jhum cultivation, handicrafts, hunting, fishing etc. For that reason, they stand far from the modern variety of workforce.

CONCLUSION

Though Bangladesh might not be defined as a multi-ethnic society, ethnic attention among exceptional ethnic organizations along with the Garos is increasing because of our long-cherished state policy. This ethnic attention has been accommodated within the larger cultural system of our society by giving the right to admiration and reputation to every ethnic group. Like different ethnic groups, the Garos and their lifestyle are overlooked, humiliated, and insulted and they are very frequently handled as much fewer human beings. That is an incorrect policy adopted in a democratic country, and we have to no longer neglect that collective movement could be very important on the part of exceptional ethnic groups to make certain equality in society. We are, in fact, late. Let us be united to set up the identification of each group, along with the Garos thereby making our society surely democratic and humanitarian. As the socio-economic condition of the Garo community is converting because of their eagerness to be well developed in various factors of their lifestyle, Govt. in addition all from the civil society need to come ahead to assist the Garo people to complete their goal of being a great citizen of our country. They safeguard livelihoods by enhancing resilience to multiple stressors in fragile environment.

Acknowledgement: Bangladesh Agricultural University for research funding

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