

Cultural Transformation of the Garo: Causes and Implications

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Abstract: Garos' socio-cultural practices have been transformed significantly over time, and varieties of internal and external factors are responsible for these transformations. Observing the realities of contemporary Garo society, the author investigated the causes of changing pattern of the Garo culture. The discussion centered around the causes. Garos' cultural changes had been occurring among them for the last many years, and having a greater impact on Garo live, culture and identity situation. Garos are now much connected at the local, regional, national and international levels to uphold their rights and recognition. Some of the institutions organize Garos at national and international level to uphold their rights, demands and recognition.

1. Introduction

Cultural change is a very complex phenomenon as the culture of a community or of a nation is absolutely shaped and reshaped by the variety of socio-economic and political factors. It is therefore essential to concentrate on cultural transformation that take place continuously in every community. While analyzing the transformation of a culture, it always has far-ranging causes and effects on human society (Dennis, 2006:1). The main focus of this chapter is to investigate 'why Garo culture is changing' and its implications in Bangladesh. Accordingly, it emphasizes on the causes of Garos' cultural changes that had been occurring among them for the last many years, and having a greater impact on Garo live, culture and identity situation.

2. Background of the Garo

Garo or *Mandi* is a distinguished ethnic community in Bangladesh, particularly known to the outside world for their distinct matriarchal system. It is estimated that their current population in the world is nearly half a million; most of whom live in northeastern India, particularly in the Garo Hills areas of Meghalaya state (Bal,1999:5). Nowadays, Bangladesh is home to around one hundred thousand Garos (Bal,1999:5) majority of them being concentrated in the bordering *Upazilas* of Mymensingh, Tangail, Jamalpur, Sherpur and Netrokona districts. However, a few Garos live in Sreepur *Upazila* of Gazipur District, and some Garos are also found in the bordering areas of Sylhet and Sunamgonj districts (Chowdhury, 2007:41). While referring on the number of Garo population, 1991 Census reported that there are 64,280 Garos live in Bangladesh (Census Report, 1991, BBS) but Bal (1999:5) mentioned that during the time of 1999 around 100,000 Garos lived in Bangladesh. Drong added that there is however, a disparity between government and private estimates on the total number of the Garos in the subcontinent (Drong, 2004).

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Garos mother tongue is *A'chik Katha/ A'beng*, which belongs to Bodo group of Tibeto-Burman linguistic divisions. According to Chowdhury (2007:42), Garo language still occupies some certain aspects of Tibetan language having certain similarity with them, and some of their views, ideas and values having relation to Bangladeshi Garos. They are currently bilingual, speaking both Garo language *A'chik Katha* and majority language Bengali. Today, Garo language is heavily influenced by the nearby majority Bengali language (Bal:1999,12).

Garos traditional religion is known as *Sangsarek*, which is an animistic type of faith and believes in different spirits *Mites* or *Middi*. Nowadays, almost all the Garos have been converted to Christianity. Matrilineal Garo community is very much distinguished for their unique marriage, inheritance, kinship and other social organizations that are under transformation. Traditionally, the Garos are an agricultural community. The study observed that agriculture is still the primary employment of the Garos. Majority of the Garos used to cultivate wet rice, banana, turmeric, dragon fruits, and pineapple. As a matrilineal ethnic group, women play a prominent part in agricultural activities, and perform the majority of home and agricultural work in the Garo community.

Garos are now transforming in different parts of their life and while they are changing then Garos are discarding many of their traditional traits and accepting outsider cultural elements. As a result, more socio-cultural transformations, that are happening among the Garos, are likely to have implications for the Garo's future cultural conditions. This chapter is the part of an ethnographic research focusing on the cultural transformation and identity situation of the Garo people of Bangladesh. Case studies, observations, FGDs and interview methods have been utilized to collect data from the Garos of Modhupur of Tangail District. Based on the data given by the respondents, it is found that following internal and external factors are responsible for Garos' cultural changes.

3. Different Causes of Garos' Cultural Transformation and Its Implications

With the influence of several internal and external factors, Garo culture and life pattern are transforming rapidly. There are no much more researches on the causes and implications of Garos' cultural transformation. Chowdhury (2007:217) conducted research on the Garo of Sherpur in Bangladesh and claimed that five external causes are responsible for the cultural change among the Garos; those are: (i) conversion to Christianity, (ii) introduction of formal education, (iii) changes in the mode of agriculture (vi) changes in land ownership system and finally the influence of neighboring people. Some other studies such as Nakne (1967) Majumder (1978), Sangma (1981, 1985), Islam (1986), Barling (1997, 1963), Marak (1997) Khaleque (1982, 1998), Marak (2005), Bleie (2005), Chowdhury (2007), Bal (2007), Islam (2008) discussed on cultural changes but did not focus on the causes and implications of Garos' cultural changes.

Based on the study, the present paper found following factors to contribute to the cultural transformation of the Garos which encouraged Garos to transform from traditional setting to a new setting. The causes are (1) conversion to Christianity, (2) introduction of formal education, (3) government policies and initiatives, (4) integration with the globalized system, (5) market economy, (6) access to modern agricultural equipment, (7) occupational diversification, (8) Bengali settlement in the area, (9) changes in existing livelihood, (10) wet rice cultivation, (11) economic insecurity, (12) migration to the city,

(13) changes in work and income, (14) introduction to modern technologies, (15) impacts of modern transport and communication system (16) various development initiatives especially roads and highways, (17) impact of urban majority culture, (18) exposure to modern media especially TV, radio, film, Facebook (19) some internal movements for modern education and awareness run by young Christian Garos and so on. It means that the cultural pattern and the lifestyle of the Garos are changing with the influences of those causes. In this transformation process, modernization has multilayered impacts, which is influencing various other elements and somehow transforming Garos' historic traditional cultural patterns into a new pattern. In the following part of the chapter, we want to describe and analyze 'why the Garo culture is changing' as well as major factors, that have contributed and responsible for Garos' cultural transformations and their implications;

i) Influence of Christianity

In Bangladesh almost all the Garos are now converted to Christianity which has a significant impact on the Garo community and has promoted various transformations in different aspects of Garo life and culture (Burling,1997:176). In the Garo inhabiting areas, Christian Missionaries and Churches were established long ago and it supported Garos in a variety of ways. Christian Missionaries build schools, community centers, hospitals, rice banks and other structures, which directly influenced Garos' life and culture (Bal,2007; 136). However, nobody could provide accurate information on when the Garo exactly began to accept Christianity. Although most of the people do not have any confusion that the first Missionary Church in the Garo region was a Baptist Church in Birisiri, Netrokona, which was built in 1892. Later on, Catholic Church followed the Baptist Church who also simultaneously established their first Missionary Church in 1912 which is only a few kilometers away from the Birisiri. Subsequently, the Catholic Church grew in popularity and became the largest Church of the Garos in Bangladesh. At present, there is approximately 67 percent of the convertees among the Garos who belong to the Catholic Church and the remaining 29 percent are coming from the Baptist group (Bal,1999: 22).

During the study, we have found that the converted Christian Garos believe in Jesus Christ whom they consider to be the son of God. The Christian Garos also believe that God has created the universe and they are the descendants of Adam and Eve, who lived in the Garden of Eden. Although the traditional Garos used to believe in the *Sangsarek* religion, which had several *Middis/Mites* as their spirits, the Garos used to appraise the *Mites* by offering different worships. Nowadays, they worship one God and have faith in heaven and hell but still they continue to conduct some of their traditional religious practices, which are completely incompatible with Christianity, yet are still practiced in some Christian Garo houses.

Christian Missionaries arrived in this area absolutely with their European values and attitudes (Islam, 2017:285) and they have been able to influence the Garos in adopting modern lifestyles, including their worship system, education, beliefs, spirits, marriage, property ownership, inheritance, cultivation system, family values, festivals, kinship system, matrilineal practices and even their individual naming pattern (Marak, 2005:9-18). At present, Garos no longer practice their ancient marriage system, nor do they observe the prior rituals of marriage ceremonies. On the other hand, all Christian

principles of the marriage system have now been substituted among them in their culture. The traditional inheritance system of the Garo community allows only women to inherit any moveable or immovable property of the household, but nowadays, they are transferring land to their sons. Their traditional inheritance system is no longer practiced in the community today, and their gender role is also now changing accordingly. This changing pattern of inheritance and gender roles are significantly influenced by the combination of Christian perceptions and Western modernity. According to the findings of the study, women's position in the Garo society is deteriorating, and the society as a whole is shifting from a matriarchal to a patriarchal system.

According to Bal (2007:131), Christianity provides Garos with a significant identity marker; it has a major impact on their socio-economic, psychological, cultural, and political status; it influences their outlook on life and the world, identifies them with a sense of belonging to the world that extends far beyond the borders of Bangladesh, provides new educational and professional opportunities, and regulates relationship within their community and with others.

Conversion to Christianity brought changes among the Garos of the study villages. As we asked them why did they choose to convert to Christianity? One of the elderly informants said that he was converted to this religion at his young age and he also added that like many others, he had been converted to Christianity with the assistance of Christian Missionaries, making him privileged and allowing him to connect with a larger Christian community around the world.

Erila Nokrek, aged 65 years old, is a converted Christian Garo woman who lives in Dhaka. According to Erila, around 50 years back, she was converted to Christianity along with her parents. As mentioned, our family was inspired by a neighbor who accepted Christianity as religion a few years before. With that neighbor, we went to Catholic Church at Farmgate, Dhaka and were baptized by a father. By that time, many more Garos have already been converted to Christianity leaving their own religion. We accepted Christianity without any financial gain, however, after conversion our family became part of the Christian club, welfare society and Christian community of the city which definitely supported us in many ways. After conversion to Christianity, I began to follow the Christian faith and principles as possible. Today, all my relatives, friends and family members are Christian. With the conversion, I feel proud and blessed as a Christian Garo.

According to Islam (2008:60), one of the key reasons as to why Garos have adopted Christianity is their instant economic gain in the form of direct or indirect financial help offered to the newly Baptized Christians. Christian missionaries converted the Garos into Christianity and those who accepted the new religion were offered free treatment, food, education, financial aid, jobs, loans, seeds even sometime legal assistance against majority oppression. At present, with the help of Missionaries, Garo society to some extent become accustomed to modern education, new system of agriculture, market economy, and different livelihoods as well as gained sort of recognition from government administration which has encouraged Garos to live in a stronger position in the world. Simultaneously, Christian missionaries are always acting as a social 'pressure group' to promote and conserve the Garo by providing economic security and advancement. Due to

all these reasons, the Garos have accepted Christianity for their socio-economic emancipation as well as for their social stability.

Different scholars conducted research on Garos' conversion to Christianity and a majority of the studies (see Burling, 1963, 1997, Majumder 1978, 1972, Khaleque 1982, 1985, 1998, Islam 2001, Bal 1999, 2007, Chowdhury 2007, Islam 2008) found that Christianity however, failed to influence Garo kinship system and social organization significantly; although Christianity appeared in their lives with European patrilineal values, practices and culture. Some of the studies suggested that the missionaries particularly were drawn to their matrilineal way of life and were amazed at the resilient kinship structure of Garo society where 'matriarchal values' worked reasonably well in practice.

It is also observed that Garos' conversion to Christianity has influenced differently and almost fragile their traditional matrilineal system. Several traditional matrilineal family features have now lost their significance. Regarding festivals and ceremonies, the influence of Christianity is greater upon the Garos. Surrounding the study villages, Christian Churches are located which made a direct influence on their social, cultural and spiritual life pattern. Chowdhury (2007:219) has given an account of the impacts of Garos' conversion to Christianity and stated that even some of the newly converted Christian Garo villages are known as *Mariamnagar* to many people. Christianity is a patrilineal religion, and other than *Khasia*, all non-Garo Christians of Bangladesh are patrilineal. For the Garos of Modhupur, the arrival of Christianity opened up an opportunity to form a sense of belonging with other non-Garo Christians of Bangladesh and around the world. As a result, psychologically they are conditioned to accept many things from their Christian patrilineal brothers.

Christianity plays a significant role in the educational, social and economic progress of the regions. It has transformed their perspectives and outlooks and provided new opportunities for work, income and employment options (Islam, 2001:32). According to Chowdhury (2007:218) Christianity induced changes in the housing pattern among the Garos of the region. The majority of the educated male members wish to build their own household after marriage in order to live a more independent life.

Various incentives were offered, resultantly a rapid conversion of the Garos to Christianity occurred in the region. Acknowledging the contributions of Christian Missionaries, one of the key informants wondered that, 'was it not possible to help the Garos without converting them to Christianity'? It would be more rewarding to the Garo people, and their age-old culture, if this could be accomplished. Garos to some extent want to blame that they have lost many of their traditional cultural features and social origins for accepting Christianity as their way of life. Bal, (1999:20) mentioned that it is because of their Christian religion that nowadays Garos are able to maintain such a distinct identity.

ii) Influence of Neighboring Bengali People

According to the ethnographic stories, Garos are living in the Modhupur *Ghar* from the remote past and their ancestors had settled here centuries ago. Later on, Bengali people moved from other parts of the country and settled in these areas (not supported by documentation). According to Bal (2007), there were no Bengali Muslims in the Modhupur *Ghar* area before the partition in 1947, only a few families in the south. When

the Pakistan government came into power, the Muslims started to move into this area (p.174). In 1947, some of the Garos left the newly created Pakistan, and moved to India. Similarly, many Muslims from the Indian side move to Bangladesh and settled in Garo living areas. Bengali settlement has influenced Garo life and their culture in numerous ways. As the Bengalis settled there, Garos have obviously been influenced by Bengalis (Bal, 1999:19). Playfair (1909) mentioned that ethnographic evidence helps us to comprehend the cultural contact of the Garos with plains dwelling Bengalis, which had begun long before and the process of integration initiated by the British colonial rulers.

Due to neighboring patriarchal Bengali influence, Garos are today moving towards patriarchal rules and principles. Once, the Garos are widely known to the outsider world for their unique matrilineal structure which they adapted, centuries back. There are different viewpoints regarding when and why Garos accepted matrilineal system. Baldwin (1934), mentioned that century back, for some reasons Garos moved from the patrilineal to matrilineal system. On the other hand, Playfair (1909:87) referred that probably Garos had copied the matrilineal from the neighboring matrilineal *Khasis* community. However, there is shortage of evidences to support the concept of shifting from patrilineal to matrilineal. Nowadays, the Garos from Telki village who have been converted to Islam, do not practice matrilineal practices anymore, but practices patriarchy as like Bengali Muslim people.

Through the Bengali settlement, the Garos came in contact with Bengalis and learned how to use the plough. Nowadays, almost all the Garos rely on agriculture for their livelihood and used to farm wet rice cultivation and other cash crops, particularly the banana and pineapple production. Although, some of the Garos have different perspectives on how they learned wet rice farming, and shared that Christian Missionaries supported and provided them with the technologies of wet rice cultivation. However, without exception, in every village of Modhupur, Bengalis are residing alongside with Garos. Consequently, Bengalis' influences on Garos daily lives are significant, which can be seen in every aspect of the Garo lives.

It has been observed that with the influence of neighboring Bengali people, Garos have gradually been changing in their eating habits, songs, dresses, language, rituals, behavior, and even in their housing pattern. In Modhupur, the Garo language is spoken only within their families whereas Bengali is widely spoken for all other purposes. Different Bengali words have been incorporated into the Garo language and dialect. The housing pattern of the Garos have also been changed as a result of modernization and Bengali influence. We have found that most of the Garos live in houses made of mud and iron sheet, but there are some houses that are made of bricks, cement, tin and other accessible materials. It can be said that today's Garo residences are almost similar to nearby Bengalis houses.

According to Islam (2008:37), traditionally Garo men worn a narrow piece of cloth called '*Ningty*' (Dalton, 1892:65), but now they mostly put on *Lungi* and women put on *Sari* and *Kamiz* instead of their traditional skirts. Even the traditional cuisine has disappeared; they now use several types of *masala* (spice) following the Bengali recipes. They are also introduced to dishes like *polau* (spicy rice), *korma* (curry), *parata*, *ruti*, *pitha*, *muri* and other Bengali cuisines. According to Burling (1997), in the Garo community, today the small everyday material objects of life are no longer distinguishable from those of their Bengali neighbors.

During the field enquiries, it is also observed that nowadays, young Garo men dislike to move to bride house or father-in-law's household after marriage which was customary practiced among the matrilineal Garos from long past. The practice of moving bride house is always undermined in the neighboring Bengali community, and somehow matrilineal Garos are also impacted here by neighboring Bengali sentiments.

Sumel Mri, aged 42 years old, is a Christian Garo, lives in Chunia village of Modhupur Upazila. He is an agricultural day labor, has attended primary school and completed class V. He stated that staying at wife's house as son-in-law is considered as a sort of male dishonor, and often regarded as disgraceful. He also stated that I believe this form of matrilineal behavior is not good and sometime we do not feel comfortable within it, and it prevents men from utilizing their potentiality and authority significantly. He also stated that we cannot disrespect male position in residence choice since we live in and are surrounded by men's world. In the Bengali culture, husband who lives in wife's parent's house, refer him disrespectful and termed as 'gharjamai', this Bengali attitude may have some influence on our Garo culture.

Neighboring Bengalis people are accustomed to take father name for their children which is also influencing the Garos. According to Burling (1997:245) among urban middle class Garos, tendency of naming children after their fathers has been increased which is a significant break in Garos kinship system. If the current trend continued, it will lead to serious barriers where present-day kinship regulations are concerned. As result, the newly settled neighboring Bengalis are challenging the Garo ethnic identity because of the imposed patriarchal norms among the Garo culture.

We do not have enough evidences to confirm when the Garos of Modhupur got exposed to outside culture. According to Islam (2008:61) in the early days, there was no Muslim population in the Modhupur *Ghar* area except some small ethnic groups of people who were surrounded by lower caste of Hindus. According to Chowdhury (2007), upon the arrival of the Muslim population, there was no conflict, rather Bengali and *Sangsarek* Garos were living side by side and were able to maintain separate identity in many aspects of their social life. However, increased Bengali settlement and engagement with Bengali neighbors has had an overwhelming influence on them. At present, almost there is no absolute Garo village in the area, and all other villages have mixed population, resulting in substantial influences in every aspect of life.

It is also observed that today's Garo younger generations have increased their engagement with Bengali neighbors, which has a significant impact on Garo ethnic minority people, and their culture. As a result, there is widespread ethnic cultural fragmentation in terms of Garos originality and lifestyles.

iii) Influence of Formal Education

A few decades ago, school based modern education system is introduced among the Garos, which are creating huge impact upon their life and culture. Christian Missionaries established schools and began providing formal education to the Garos (Burling, 1997:190). There were some social movements among the Garos for taking modern education, which were organized by a number of young educated Christian Garo men in the 1920s and 1930s called *Achik Shongho* under the leadership of a college

student named Lolit, where they moved around the villages to make Garos conscious of their social and economic position, and to encourage them to send their children to school, they would sing the following song:

Wake up *Achik* Children!
 Why are you still lost in sleep?
 Get up, Garo people, Get up, Garo people!
 Stand boldly on your own land
 Send your children to get education (Bal, 2007:169).

As mentioned earlier, modern education is a new concept for the Garo villagers, although they had own traditional system of passing knowledge to the next generation. Nowadays, the majority of the Garos are educated and literate, and some of them even are highly educated, and working in various cities of Bangladesh. It is also observed that the literacy rate among the Garos is higher than the national average. Many of the elderly Garo people who did not receive formal schooling attended adult literacy programs operated by the missionaries. This modern education or formal schooling has greatly influenced and changed the Garos, and accustomed them to a modern way of life.

Similarly, educated Garos have very few professional possibilities in their villages; and it is assumed that city life is more appealing for them than village life (Sangma, 1985:7). As a result, some Garos moved from village to cities for achieving better education and employment, where they began adopting contemporary practices into Garo culture.

Despite the fact that Garo children have to begin formal schooling in the Bengali language but there are Garo speaking teachers in every primary school in the area of Garo villages. Bangladesh Government has the policy of facilitating primary education in the mother tongue, however, nowadays this is not possible for the Garos, because their language does not have any written form.

According to Chowdhury (2007:228) after acquiring education in foreign language, educated young Garos become increasingly accustomed to Bengali commodities and are influenced by the Bengali culture. He also added that the educated Garos who live in the cities are less familiar with traditional practices than the Garos who live in the villages. Garos who live in the cities are much more patrilocal than those who live in the villages.

William Dazzel, aged 55 years old, lives in Chunia village of ModhupurUpazila. He has completed Bachelor of Commerce (B. Com), serves as Chairman of ModhupurUpazila Garo welfare society. He stated that most of the educated Garos try to get a job in non-agricultural sector but in the village, there is very little scope for them except teaching, so educated people are interested in moving to towns. Garos who are living in the town are less connected to traditional Garo setting. He also stated that due to modern education, Garos are now connected around the world, aware about their rights, and to some extent empowered in their own region. Educated Garos are visiting government offices and advocating as the ambassador of our own community. Modern education provided different options to the Garos, but it is also discarding our age-old traditional cultural features.

In addition, modern educational system is to some extent linked to urban cultural context, particularly in occupational domains which deteriorates the practice of traditional life pattern among educated Garo people. More importantly, the formal education and official working environment had transformed ethnic communities to the modern type of systemic mind-set (Chowdhury,2007:227); as a result, the formal system's regulatory mechanism made a cultural gap between educated and uneducated Garo generations.

iv) Influence of Urbanization

Urbanization is a set of living conditions that provides residents with numerous opportunities. As a process, urbanization has inevitable influences on several aspects of human existence, including social, economic and cultural spares. Garo living areas are no longer considered urban areas in terms of urban opportunities anymore. Hence, to some extent, we can feel some influence or touch of urban characteristics of living, which are new to the Garo way of life. There is now electricity, roads and some urban commodities available in the study villages. As there is electricity, so well-off Garos now use TVs, Cell phones, VCRs, recorders, motorcycles, water pumps, and in some cases, satellite connections to watch foreign television channels. Some Garos contact with others via cell phones and read newspapers regularly. Some of the Garo houses have urban amenities such as fan, chair, table, bookshelf, tea, and first aid box available. Although, almost all the Garos are agriculturalists, some families are now reliant on non-agricultural sources of income. Different urban elements brought significant changes in the attitude, culture and behavior of the Garos (Chowdhury, 2007: 230).

Some young Garos from the study villages work as maids, cooks, beauticians, gardeners, guards, drivers and even office workers outside the villages, particularly in Dhaka. On the other hand, numbers of Garo girls now work in the beauty parlors, particularly in Tangail and Dhaka. Some of the girls are employed as maids in prosperous Bengali families and in foreigner's households in Dhaka. Many Garos believe that if their younger generation can reach town, they will be able to find work and would help their family economically. According to Drong (2004:34) among the expatriate community in Dhaka, particularly in the diplomatic areas of Baridhara, Bonani and Gulshan, Garos have a good reputation for being educated (often knowing some English), diligent and honest. Foreigners are also known for paying their employees well, therefore the Garos consider these employments as golden chances. The lifestyles of the urban Garos are largely similar to those of their majority Bengali neighbors. Urban Garos' food habits, clothes, behavior are significantly different from those who are living in the Garo villages.

William Dazzel, aged 55 years old, lives in Chunia village of ModhupurUpazila. He stated that some of the Garos of our village are living in the town, particularly for the purpose of jobs and education. As these people return home, they bring with them a variety of cultural values and customs, which have a significant influence on Garo culture. Nowadays, we are much more exposed and connected to outsider culture, and mixing with outside people and culture, that is also putting huge impacts to transform our traditional culture. He urged that city living second generation Garos are less interested in maintaining ties to their traditional roots and culture. These forms of isolation are resulting in a variety of lifestyles among the city

dweller Garos. These types of changes in Garo lifestyles are causing larger transformations in our traditional way of life. He also pointed out that city dwelling Garos maintain their ethnic lifestyle and culture among themselves, through attending different Garo community events and activities, and much more aware on their social roots and Garo identity.

A few decades ago, Garos used to be confined to their own villages and had limited physical mobility, but at present, many Garos have the access to travel from village to village and even to towns. According to Islam (2008:64) there was no market in these forested settlements except ModhupurBazer which was almost 10 kilometers away. Some Garos used to buy kerosene, salt, suger, tobacco, dried fish, cloths, earthenware pots and other commodities in exchange of selling their timber, pineapple, banana, paddy and other items. However, nowadays, there are tiny shops within the villages.

It is also observed that at present almost all the Garos are moving out of their villages for variety of reasons and communicating with outside people. As these people return home, they bring with them a variety of cultural values and customs, which have a significant influence on Garos cultural traits and values. According to Burling (1997:57) as result of social mobility, Garos are now much more exposed and connected to outside culture, and mixing outside culture with their culture, that is putting huge impacts to transform their own traditional culture.

It has been observed that, as result of urban influences, the residential patterns of the Garo have been changed, and now the newly married couples choose to live in a neolocal system rather than move to the bride house. Their traditional joint family arrangement has also been affected by the touch of urban culture, now they are transitioning to a nuclear family. Changes in life pattern always invites moderation from a conventional to a modern pattern. Nowadays, Garos are affected by this process and are to some extent linked to urbanization. Consequently, Garos lifestyle and culture have been changing radically.

v) Effects of Government and Non-Government Interventions

Bangladesh government has a distinguished administrative structure to manage its activities across the country; of which, *Upazila* administration is one of them. It is a lower-level structure to support field level government activities including development initiatives. Each *Upazila* has different government departments for supporting the inhabitants including education, health, housing, food, agriculture, police, livestock, social welfare, immunization, sanitation, youth development, women's affairs, rural development, irrigation, cooperative movement, Anser-VDP (Village Defense Police), LGED and others (Chowdhury, 2007:232). As per colonial legacy, every *Upazila* is divided into multiple Union Parishads (UP), and Union Parishad with wards, which are made up of two or three villages. All of the above-mentioned government departments are mobilizing their grassroots activities and development initiatives in each and every village through this field-based administrative setup; the Garo villages under the Modhupur*Upazila* are no exception. Through all of these procedures, Government influences and development activities are evident to support the Garos and to regulate the law-and-order situation of the villages. One of the research participants LipshonMankhin (45) who lives in Chunia village in Modhupur*Upazila*, claims;

We Garos usually fear and try to avoid government offices. We believe that Garos are not expected persons to them. We know government has many departments to serve the citizens, but we do not find that much cooperation from them. We also know that the government of Bangladesh has some special supports and facilities for ethnic people but as low land ethnic group, we do not get these facilities. It usually goes to ethnic group of CHT, we rarely receive government support in Modhupur. He also added that we do not have prominent leaders like CHT, who work for their own benefits.

According to Islam (2008:67) GoB policies are encouraging Garos to assimilate to the majority Bengali culture, hence the Garo are left unattended as a different ethnic minority, and denied official patronization to preserve their traditional culture. The majority of the Garo informants expressed fear and no interest in speaking out against government policies that are affecting the Garos. Some of the elderly respondents stated that after the British period (1757-1947), different governments paid very little attention to preserve Garos' rights and interests, but during the Pakistan period (1947-1971), the policy of the government was very harsh which has badly affected the Garos. During that period, Pakistan government grabbed ethnic peoples' land and property for so-called government development projects without compensating and negotiating with them. They also added that following the liberation war of 1971, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the Father of the Nation and as head of the country, remained silent to let them stay in their homogenous way of life, although ethnic people of the country also participated in the liberation war.

After the assassination of Sheikh Mujib, on 15 August 1975, *Bongo Bir* Abdul Kader Siddique, *Bir Uttom*, one of Mujib's followers and well-known freedom fighter started insurgence along with the northern border and recruited many young Garo men in his guerrilla force to fight against the military government (Bal,2007:190). Later, General Ziaur Rahman as President of the country, actively pushed Bengali settlement in ethnic areas, including Garo living areas. Others argue that as a result of those forced assimilation attempts, Garos have become more cautious and active in claiming their ethnic rights and identity status. Like many other ethnic minorities of Bangladesh, the Garos are also getting some additional benefits from the quota system particularly in government service (Islam, 2008: 67) but the villagers stated that their numbers are very insignificant.

Since independence in 1971, there has been a proliferation of government programs targeted at Bangladeshi rural communities (Karim,1990:X). Similarly, being a highly populated developing country, in Bangladesh different Non-government Organizations (NGOs) have begun to contribute to the country's socio-economic advancement. As result, different evidences are there that NGOs play a significant role in the development fields of Bangladesh (Islam, 2001). Still today, NGOs are playing an important role to bring qualitative change in the lives of all people, whether they are Garo or not. Many NGOs are operating their activities in the Garo residing areas of Modhupur *Upazila* including BRAC, ASA, Grameen Bank, SKNF, Proshika, NSDP, CCDB, and others. Many Christian NGOs including CARITAS, World Vision (WV), YMCA, WCA, Habited for Humanity (HB), National *Adivasi* Council (NAC), National Coalition for Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), Bureau Bangladesh (BB), Seven Adventist Church, *A'chikMichik* Society, World Concerns (WC) and others are working there. All the NGOs

carry out a variety of development projects for the people, as well as provide assistance to a large number of Garos. Among the Garos, most of the NGOs are providing education, health, nutrition, micro-credit, and legal assistance and sometimes sponsor children and provide scholarships for the village students and others (Burling, 1997:206).

Dulal Simsong, aged 55 years old, is a Garo elderly man lives in Joynagacha village. He has elementary education and passed class IV. He said that he took a micro credit from an NGO and bought a cow for rearing and ploughing, but once he became sick and unable to pay some of the installments, later with the support of local rich Bengali Muslim, they made me bound to sell the cow and had to pay back three times more than I borrow from them. He added that almost all the Garo people in our community are very easy-going, simple and illiterate. So, some NGOs try to cheat them. He also said that we are also benefited by NGOs, regarding health, education, hygiene, livestock and agricultural planning.

Some other NGOs have developed different initiatives particularly micro-credit, family planning, saving newborn lives, leprosy programs, adult literacy, sanitation, cultural protection, immunization, crop diversification, income generating training, livestock farming, and others for the villagers. Those programs improved Garos' livelihood, material growth, and awareness but they could not ignore the ill treatment mechanism operated by the NGOs. It is also stated that Garos' rights to self-determination were not promoted by the NGOs, however, NGOs' interventions have brought larger change in traditional Garos' life and culture.

vi) Influence of Modernization

Different scholars tried to uncover modernization in different ways, but it is essentially a process of western integration of culture and life patterns (Giddens,1990:7). Under this process, traditional cultural practices are mostly disappearing, whereas the modern and majority cultures are increasingly prevalent in all across the world (Chowdhury, 2007:231). Without exception, the age-old traditional culture of the Garos is altering and embracing many features from other cultures as a result of contact with modern society and the majority culture.

It is agreed by all of us that electricity is the prime indicator of modernity, all the houses in the study villages are facilitated with electricity (Zetleys,1977). The villagers informed that if any Garo household became unable to afford electricity the neighboring families supported financially to get the electricity connection. Although electricity is a new phenomenon among the Garos, they have embraced it as a flair from modern science. Some Garos initially hesitated to accept electricity connection at their home but later they welcome it cordially. Some Garo houses now have Television, VCR, Cassette Recorder, cell phone, even refrigerator and so on. According to Islam (2008:69) having television, some Garos watch Bangladesh Television (BTV) but they also watch different private channels, Indian channels, English networks and others with the support of an antenna. In their spare time, people now move around less, rather prefer to watch television. They are encouraged to adopt outside culture and practices, as a result of this satellite culture. It is observed that today there is a touch of modernity in some aspects of Garo life. Garo farmers now utilize a variety of modern methods and equipment in their farming, which has had a significant influence on their traditional beliefs and cultures.

Some Garos are using power tillers and shallow machines for agricultural purposes which are new parts of Garo life. Similarly, instead of using centuries old traditional healing practices, Garos now use modern medicine. Due to Missionaries hospitals, nowadays, traditional healing methods have been replaced by modern medicine permanently. Due to the touch of modernity Garos are losing their long traditional way of life, culture, knowledge and skills which are inviting greater change in some other parts of Garo life. According to Islam (2008:70) Garos, who were a self-sufficient isolable whole with a separate social structure and culture, are now experiencing enormous transformation due to modernization. When Garos are having more ties to modern culture and lifestyle, they are losing their traditional matriarchal structure, clan organization, family as well as their traditional religious beliefs.

Modernity is also influencing Garos' traditional social structure and communal economy, as well as building newer socio-economic mobility. It is also observed that due to modernity Garo people have gradually changed in many areas including agriculture, livelihood, inheritance, occupation, kinship, household structure, leadership, matrilineal values, and religion, all of which are bringing structural changes among the Garos.

vii) Influence of Social and Occupational Mobility

The distinguished matrilineal Garo ethnic community was confined in the forested condition and their settlement pattern was mostly clustered type. Garos' physical mobility was very limited, because they were used to traveling within their own settlement. Due to several reasons, they are now exposed to the larger society, and have interacted with other people and different culture, which has enforced them to social mobility (Islam, 2008:63). As a result, the Garos are no longer an isolable ethnic group, rather they now part of wider society with social mobility, which is encouraging them to accept outsider culture as closely as possible.

During the early time, there was no market in the surrounding areas, but now in every village, there are small shops, tea stalls, and medicine corners that serve as a meeting spot with the members of the ethnic communities of the region. Traditionally, Garos are agriculturists, but now some other occupational, including weaver, wood cutter, beautician, pineapple trader, bamboo trader, school teacher, NGO worker, van/rickshaw puller, shopkeeper, and others, live in the villages; giving villages a wider occupational mobility. This professional mobility is a relatively new element among the Garos, and it is encouraging people to pursue a variety of occupations and lifestyles.

Among the Garos, trading was primarily limited to agricultural items, and goods were exchanged only within adjacent village marketplaces (Chowdhury, 2007:227). The most important trade crop among them were pineapple, chilis, timbers and banana farmed in the villages. In exchange of those items, Garos were used to buy tobacco, salt, kerosene. In the study area, the villagers of Chunia, at present trade chili, vegetables, bamboo, rice, pineapple, dragon fruit, banana, goats, poultry, and so on, which they trade in the nearby *Upazila* and district market, quite distant from the villages. It is observed that due to occupational diversity some of the Garo households saved some surplus money after their yearly expenditure, which sometimes they use to purchase opulent products for their family comfort.

Some of the respondents stated that in the past, when there was no road connectivity in this area, Garos had to rely on country boats as their only means of transportation to

reach the markets, where they could buy their essentials including dried fish, tobacco, salt, kerosene, cattle, goat, pig, clothes, earthenware, pots and so on. Because of occupational mobility, the socio-economic life pattern of the Garos has been transformed, and social contact with diverse individuals has increased. As a result, marital relationships inside the traditional matrilineal system have been decreased, and marriage outside the village has been increased.

Garos women are staying outside their villages for employment than the majority of Bengali women. Burling (1997:243) Garo women are always free not only to move around their own villages, but to travel to other villages for jobs, trade and occupation. Garo women of the villages are employed outside the villages, particularly in Dhaka and Chittagong cities. They are involved in various types of work, mostly in the beauty parlors of Dhaka and earn relatively more than other unskilled or semi-skilled workers. These Garos always maintain contact with the villagers and transfer money to their parents. According to Chowdhury (2007:226) when they return to the villages, they carry along with them different norms and values from other cultures, primarily majority Bengalis patriarchal values, which get mixed with traditional norms and values, and forming a new cultural set-up. Occupational mobility and diversity have opened up new possibilities as well as invited greater integration with the majority Bengali community.

viii) Influence of Technological Changes

Technology and human being have an interconnected relationship to influence each other (Mesthene, 2007: 19). It is also said that technology shape human culture largely. In case of Garo or other small ethnic communities, this is more relevant. Due to the introduction of new technologies, particularly in the cultivation methods, Garos have been transformed significantly.

Chowdhury (2007:231) mentioned that another gradual change in plough agriculture is taking place where villagers are now cultivating several types of rice that require certain professional skills, such as knowledge on how to use modern inputs like pesticides and chemical fertilizers and so on. It reduces traditional female skills, knowledge and approach in rice production. Similarly, pineapple, mango, dragon fruit, turmeric, and banana cultivation have recently been introduced in the villages with the technical assistance of the agriculture department, signaling a shift from traditional rice cultivation to cash crop cultivation, which requires different techniques, inputs, knowledge and professional skills and is subsequently influencing the Garos.

It is also observed that Garos are now mostly using power tiller instead of cows for ploughing the land. Both the study villages are found to use power tillers for cultivating the agricultural land by the farmers. Among the Garos, this technological incorporation increased male dominance as it transforms the division of labor, and some people believe that only men can maintain the power tiller which is reducing the need for physical labor (Chowdhury, 2007:232).

William Dazzel, aged 55 years old, lives in Chunia village of Modhupur Upazila. He urged that some of the Garos are exposed to different types of technologies including cell phone, television, cassette recorder, power tiller, shallow machine, motorcycle, desktop computer, laptop, battery run three-wheeler, and other machinery which are influencing Garo life and culture widely. All the villagers are not getting access to those technologies

equally, so this access to technology is inviting socio-economic gap among the Garos. It is true, with the access to technology we are now connected with global culture and practices, which has a significant influence upon our beliefs and culture.

Hence, it is evident that technology is shaping and reshaping Garos' life and culture in the name of modernity, and thus transforming the pattern of Garo's living to some extent not by force but by the will-processes.

ix) Influence of Changes in Land Ownership System

The Garo economy is mostly dependent on agriculture, and land is the main source of their agricultural production. Centuries ago, particularly during the pre-British era, the Garo had control over their land and forest which they utilize to cultivate in joint efforts, that was the noticeable feature of Garo's traditional lifestyle. However, with the arrival of the British in India, and particularly following the introduction of the *Zamindari* system in Bengal, the unconditional free land in India collapsed (Karim, 1961). The Garos' traditional customary land-based joint economy was gradually destroyed, and they were forced to adopt the British Indian modern land system. In some cases, the government has taken their forested land, which was previously used by the Garos, in the name of development initiatives and forest conservation.

According to Khaleque (1998:35), the changes in Garos' traditional land management systems brought to the private economy and free-market economy that connected with the global economy, which undoubtedly breaks Garos' age-old culture and lifestyle. This type of change in the land ownership system brings socioeconomic inequalities among the Garo. At present, land owner Garos utilize the landless Garos as day labor for cultivation. On the other hand, the landless Garos who have no land have to work as a daily labor in order to survive.

According to Islam (2008:74), due to the break of the joint economy, various occupational differentiation and necessities have been developed among the Garos. Garo landowners are easily adapting to the new technologies and modern opportunities. Landowner well-off Garos' sons and daughters are receiving quality education outside the village, and after graduation, they are trying to work in a variety of professions including teachers, nurses, government servants, human rights activists, development workers in local and international NGOs, and even some are pursuing higher education outside the country. On the other hand, those who are landless are mostly unable to cover their daily necessities to survive by simply daily wages. It is also observed that Garos who are poor and landless also trying to move out of the village to work in other trades, particularly in Dhaka. Some of them are now getting involved in beauty parlors, the garment industry, watchmen, missionary services, rickshaw pullers, house servants and other jobs. Hence, as a result of changes in the land ownership system, land subsistence Garos' traditional lifestyle is sapping, and they are losing their cultural roots in their own territory.

x) Influence of Market Economy, Trade and Commerce

Trade, commerce and market economy were unusual things among the traditional Garo ethnic community; in the past, Garo traditional economy was not at all involved in trade and commerce. Whatever, they required, they usually obtained it from the local *bazar* in

return of their produces, and were not engaged in business. However, at present, some of the Garos are already engaged in small businesses, such as clothe stores, tea stalls, sewing, shops, vegetable selling, pineapple trading and other necessities of life in their village. Traditional Garos have hand based weaving system, but they are now threatened due to machine based weaving activities.

In the study villages, pineapple, turmeric, banana and other fruits are key cash crops but they cannot get much benefit from such production, and often struggle with the competitive selling price of the products in the existing market. Some Garos also believe that they do not get fair price of their banana and pineapple due to middlemen, and because of the market system is solely dominated by Bengali business people. According to Khaleque (1998:54) there are variety of reasons for the absence of Garos in the marketplace such as (a) Garos were traditionally used to agrarian and tribal living, trade and commerce are always viewed negatively by them. (b) Bengalis controlled market situations entirely from beginning to end. (c) Bengalis are hesitant to pay the fair value of the commodity in the market transactions. (d) Shortage of capital for business, as Garo lack the capital required for trade. (e) Illiteracy, as education is directly tied to trade and profit loss calculation.

In the field investigation, it is observed that some of the Garos are now involved in business, trade and market place. They believe that in order to conduct business, one needs to have muscle power, which they do not have, particularly to contest with majority Bengalis. Local government *ejara* (possession) of any *hat* or *bazar* near the Garo inhabited areas is taken by the Bengali traders. During this free market economy, Garos are out of touch with trade and business which has a severe negative influence on their economic condition. On the other side, as trade and commerce are under the control of the majority of Bengalis, Garos are sometimes victims of oppression.

Some of the respondents shared that in the past, Garos were not involved in microcredit, which was another contributing factor to their poor economic situation. However, when they were involved with microcredit, they observed that it has a far-reaching negative impact on them. They claimed that they have to pay high interest on small loans as they are weaker in accounting skills.

At the same time, market economy, modern trade and commerce are displacing their traditional lifestyle and cultural surroundings. In another way, today's market-based economy alters people's choices, desires, and demands, that forced some of the affluents or semi-affluents Garos to accept consumer culture over the traditional culture. In this process, modern marketing system imposes pressure on the traditional Garo mindset to be good buyers, and as a result, they lose the touch of their traditional culture and lifestyle. Thus, modern trade, commerce and marketing system is influencing Garos to change their traditional practices and life patterns.

xi) Influence of Wet Rice Cultivation

In the forested hilly region, traditionally Garo used to cultivate their land through shifting methods of agriculture, recognized as '*Jhum*'. It is a cultivation method, usually conducted in the forested hilly land following slash and burn technique. Garos were used to cultivate rice, vegetable, pineapple and other fruits by using this technique of cultivation (Khaleque, 1982:29).

This technique of cultivation was abolished among the Garos, and they switched to wet cultivation. Different ethnographic studies found that Garos adopted wet cultivation for a variety of reasons, including (a) As the Garo populations grew, *Jhum* fields became unable to provide enough food (b) difficulty to find suitable land for *Jhum* cultivation (c) Government restrictions on *Jhum* cultivation and forest burning (d) changing property ownership and inheritance system, and (e) Missionaries inspired Garos for wet cultivation. In fine, the Garos had little choice but to change to wet cultivation, leaving *Jhum* farming.

Garos have had to undergo significant changes as result of their transition to wet cultivation, including (a) individual land ownership was formed (b) The traditional Garo land inheritance system has altered, (c) some Garos become well off as they develop more wet fields, and cultivate more crops than they required for survival, making them wealthier than others. (d) some individuals become landless; particularly who were unable to create wet field.

During his investigation among the Garos, Khaleque (1998:30) observed to some extent similar findings, and stated that landlessness is a new issue in the Garo society, which came from the adoption of wet farming. Under the *Jhum* agriculture system, every household received a portion in the *Jhum* field, hence landlessness was unknown in Garo society. Wet plots, on the other hand, are divided and registered for each individual, yet some people have been unable to get wet plots, resulting in landlessness. Introduction of wet farming has brought these sorts of variations which are forcing greater change among the Garos.

Golap Chiran, aged 52 years old, who lives in Joynagacha of ModhupurUpazila. We have not seen Jhum cultivation in our villages but our ancestors who live in the hills were accustomed to cultivate through Jhum technique. He stated that Garos have captured wet cultivation long back, and as present, there is no visible differences between the Garos and Bengalis regarding the cultivation techniques. Like neighboring Bengalis, Garos use all modern methods and techniques such as shallow machine irrigation, power tiller, modern pesticide, modern fertilizers, good seeds, and so on for their cultivation. But as ethnic minority, through government policies and practices, Garo is discriminated by the larger Bengalis. Similarly, they are not supported by the local authorities and even by the government in obtaining agricultural credit, fertilizers, seeds and others for farming supplies.

When the Garos lost their traditional cultivation system and land ownership pattern, they moved from their traditional culture and lifestyle, and embraced a new set of characteristics under the role of modernization.

4. Conclusion

This chapter is an outcome of an ethnographic research conducted among the Garo ethnic community of northeastern Bangladesh. Garos' socio-cultural practices have been transformed significantly over time, and varieties of internal and external factors are responsible for these transformations. Garos have lost many features of their traditional cultural practices, yet, they continue to practice some of their traditional beliefs and rituals, which help to represent Garo as a distinct ethnic community in Bangladesh. In the

transformation process, modernization played a pivotal role, which influenced various other elements and somehow are transforming Garos' traditional cultural settings into a new setting. Due to cultural changes, Garo society is to some extent going to be encapsulated within the wider Bangladesh society. Garos have learned the Bengali language, converted from their traditional religion, gained a newer inheritance system, abandon the traditional marriage system, transformed from traditional kinship principles, gained methods of wet cultivation, and food habits, clothes similar to Bengali people, and adopted various western and Bengali traits as well as practices; but they still want to be recognized themselves as a distinct Garo ethnic community.

All these changes have not been able to create barriers to the Garo culture, life pattern and mindset. It is also found that Garos are now much connected at the local, regional, national and international levels to uphold their rights and recognition. Some of the institutions organize Garos at national and international level to uphold their rights, demands and recognition. Thus, Garo ethnic people connect themselves with other ethnic groups throughout the world, particularly through United Nations Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issue (UNPFII) and other international organizations, in order to resist their socio-cultural position in Bangladesh. As a result, the Garos are still a distinguished ethnic community with their distinct socio-cultural traits, which however, is undergoing a process of massive transformation.

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Glossary of Local Terms and Dialects

A'chik Katha-Garos language/hill people language

A'chik-hill people/Indian Garo preferred to be called this name

A'beng-Garos language

Chu-rice beer/ Garos' traditional drink

Gal-methur- cultivation through putting seeds in holes

Jhum-shifting cultivation or slash and burn method of cultivation

Sangsarek-Garos traditional religious belief

Sangsarek- Garos traditional religious belief

Polau- spicy rice *Mite*-spirit/God/Goddess

Drama-Drum *Middi*-spirit/God or Goddess