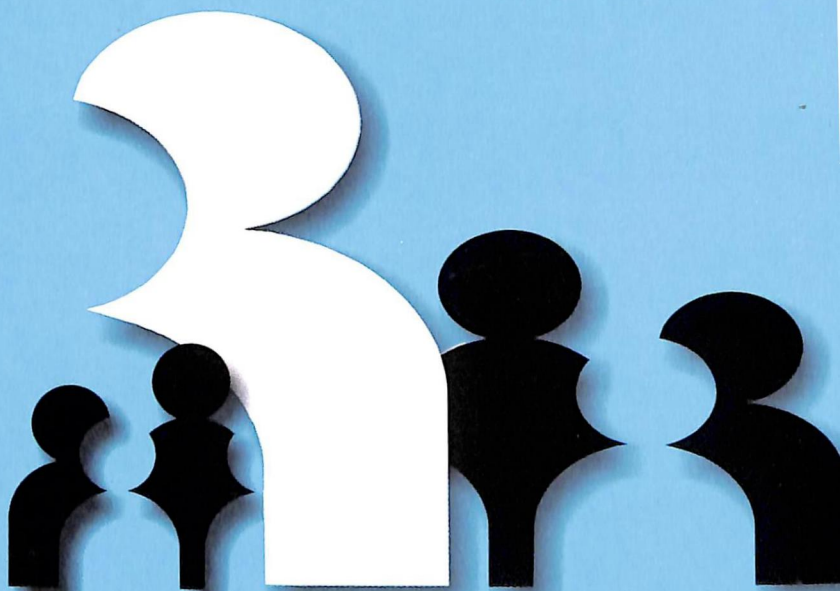


Bangladeshi Immigrants in Meghalaya

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Causes of Human Movement and
Impact on Garo Hills



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Preface

The study takes up unauthorized human movement into Garo Hills, Meghalaya during 1964 and in 1971, the periods of political upheaval in erstwhile East Pakistan and the impact of Bangladeshi immigrants on the Garo Hills of Meghalaya.

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Sengjrang N. Sangma

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Introduction

The study of human movement from Bangladesh to Garo Hills of Meghalaya has been taken up because since the period around Independence involving the creation of India, East Pakistan and West Pakistan out of the single sub-continent, the flight of refugees into Garo hills is a frequent occurrence. So frequent is the problem of disturbances along the Indo-Bangladesh border and so great is the problem posed by a huge number of refugees crossing the border at regular intervals since 1947 that the government of India, during the tenure of Mrs. Indira Gandhi as the Prime Minister of India, was compelled to take the extreme step of 'liberating' East Pakistan in 1971. December 16, 1971 is observed by Bangladesh as the day of victory from the rule of West Pakistan.

The problem of unauthorized human movement into India from Bangladesh has had an adverse impact on demographic balance, economy, environment, administrative machinery, social and political condition in India.

Bangladeshi Immigrants in Meghalaya

The population in the former East Pakistan has the same composite structure as India. Religion wise there are Hindus, Muslims, Christians and those practicing indigenous faiths. On both sides of the border there are Garos, Hajongs, Baniyas and other scheduled castes. The pattern of flight has been more or less the same on every occasion.

This study takes up the human movement into Garo Hills during 1964 and in 1971. Both were periods of political upheaval in East Pakistan/Bangladesh.

The official records of Garo hills show that in 1964 there were no Muslim refugees at all. Greater percentages of refugees were Garos and Hajongs. Classification has been done community wise.

The break up of refugees in 1971 was done according to the breakup of religions groups in official records. The records show that the number of Muslim refugees exceeded Christian refugees. The causes of the flight are also recorded in the available documents.

The shifting of the refugees to interior camps, the management of the camps, the attitude of the government towards them, rehabilitation, land reclamation and repatriation are the subject of study in this research project.

Chapter I

The Land and the People

Garro Hills was a part of Assam state till April, 1970 before Meghalaya was born. On 2nd April, 1970, it was inaugurated as an autonomous state, but full fledged statehood was declared by the Indian Union on January 21, 1972. After the declaration as a State by the Indian Union, it became part of Meghalaya state. Garro Hills was only a small district with head quarters at Tura till 1976. The total area of the district is 8,167 sq. km. It is divided into three district of East, West and South Garro Hills, with head quarters at Williamnagar, Tura and Baghmara respectively. According to 2001 census, the total population of East Garro Hills is 247,555; West Garro Hills 515,813 persons and South Garro Hills 99,105 persons.² East Garro Hills district was created in October, 1976 and South Garro Hills district created in June, 1992. There are three sub-divisions: they are Resubelpara subdivision, Dadengre sub-division and Ampati sub-division.

The three district of Garo Hills are situated between 25°9' and 26° of North Latitude and between 89°49' and 91°2' East Longitude.³ These three districts are bounded on the North and West by the district of Goalpara, Assam and on the South by the district of Mymensing of Bangladesh and on the East by the district of West Khasi Hills of Meghalaya.

Three districts of Garo Hills have two physical divisions, the hills and the plains. The hills of these districts, gradually sloping towards the West. Tura range and Arbella range run parallel to each another, from East to West. The hills of these districts are: Tura, Nokrek, Arbefla, Ranggira, Chitmag and Balpakram. Nokrek is the highest peak in Garo Hills with an altitude of 1,412 meters.

The Tura range and Arbella range of Garo Hills form watersheds, and from these watersheds the rivers flow down towards the plains of Bangladesh in the south and the Brahmaputra valley in the north. A number of rivers which cut the plateau are Dudhnai, Krishnai, Didak, Didram and Jinjiram flowing to the north, Ringge or Rongai and Ganol flowing to the West. Bhogai, Dareng and Simsang flowing towards South into the Surmah valley. Among the rivers of Garo Hills, the Simsang is the longest and is navigable for a distance of about 30 km.⁴ It started from Nokrek hills of West Garo Hills, flowing towards East through East Garo Hills and then it turns towards South through the district of south Garo Hills of Meghalaya, into the valley of Sunnah, Bangladesh. The Rongai Valley Project is being constructed for the purpose of irrigation on the Ringge River of the West Garo Hills.

The Land and the People

The entire district of Garo Hills is densely wooded. However, due to the practice of slash-and-bum agriculture methods⁵ or '*jhum*' by the Garo people, virgin forests and ancient trees have almost disappeared⁶ Moreover, this situation is aggravated by the influx of Bangladesh refugees as they are selling trees, bamboos and firewood for their livelihood. Besides trees, there are many rare types of plants such as orchids and pitcher plants.⁷

The People

According to the Pores Garos migrated from Tibet and passed the Himalaya through the low ranges and settled down in Cooch Behar about four hundred years ago. They were led by Jappa, Jalimpa, Suukpa and Bonggipa, whom they referred to as rajas. From Cooch Behar they came to Dhubri and then moved on to Jogigopa, near banks of the Manas tributary. There the local chief wanted the beautiful Garo girl Juge Silche⁸ for his wife but the community refused to surrender her. They hid her in a cave near the Bramahputra. Later they were compelled to leave that place. To cross the Bramahputra river they exchanged one Garo girl Dimri for three hundred plantain stems.⁹

With rafts of plantain stems they crossed the Brahmaputra River towards the South. Then they wandered towards Gauhati but they were ill-treated by the ruler. They retraced their steps and settled down near Boko in Kamrup district. In this place there were many "Tiger-men",¹⁰ who oppressed them. Therefore, they moved on to the Habraghat Pargana, which is the present Goalpara district of Assam.¹¹ For some reason at this point the

migrants broke into different branches. Some of them wandered off and entered Garo Hills. In one of the groups was Abong Noga and his wife Silme Doka, who led their people and settled down in Nokrek peak.¹²

Linguistically, Garos belong to one of the Bodo speaking groups and Bodo speaking groups are from the great Tibeto-Burman race. This race was said to have formed in the North-Eastern part of China between the upper waters of Yang-Tse-Kiang and Hwang-Ho believed to have migrated to the head waters of the Irrawady and the Chindwin. Some of them followed the course of the Brahmaputra River and some of them went northwards of Himalaya Mountain and settled down in Tibet. Some sections of them crossed the mountains and spread over the Brahmaputra valley. They settled down along the southern range of the Himalayas from Assam in the East and Punjab in the West. It was believed that in course of time the Tibeto-Burman race occupied the whole of North East India, except Khasi and Jainti Hills, which Mon-Khmer speaking family had already occupied.¹³ They had settled down in the Brahmaputra valley, notably in Goalpara and Kamrup District, and Bangladesh. Some of them migrated to the hills along the river valleys. They were head hunters who made numerous raids into the surrounding plain areas. "In 1807, four times within a few days the Garos rushed from their hills, plundered two official head quarters, fired several hamlets, and left the headless corpses of twenty seven men and women on the ground."¹⁴ The Garos believe that the souls of the dead go to a place known to them as Balpakram (the land of the spirits), and that spirit requires the soul of another to attend and carry the things which are given to the dead at the

time of death. Hence to send things to the spirit of the dead they were urged to send raiding parties to the plains for head-hunting. They hung up human skulls as trophies in the front verandas of their houses. This continued until the British occupation finally put an end to the practice. In 1873, order was given by Captain Williamson, first Deputy Commissioner of Tura, to bring such trophies and burn them.¹⁵

Short History

In 1765, Dewani of Bengal came under the British. The British government appointed many tributary chiefs or Zamindars to collect the tribute. Surrounding plain areas of Garo Hills were made under the authority of the Zamindars, who further sought to extend their jurisdiction into the hills. The independent Garos gave fierce resistance, as a result of which, on the out skirts of Garo Hills were seen a series of bloodshed, murder, and raids. Moreover, constant conflicts between the Garos and the Zamindars were due to the extortions made at the weekly markets.¹⁶

The British government took steps to put an end to these conflicts by appointing a Garo named Rengta as a Zamindar under the company rule in 1790, but the opposition of the Karaibari Zamindar to this more rendered it as a futile move.¹⁷

The British government sent David Scott, as a Special Commissioner in 1816, to settle the conflicts between the Garos and the Zaminders, this more, however, did not completely succeed in establishing peace. By the new regulation, Garos were exempted from paying tribute to

the Zamindar, yet the latter continued to oppress them as before. So the Garos resented the Zamindars and continued to be turbulent.¹⁸

During 1850s numerous raids were conducted by the Garos on the plain areas of the Goalpara side and in Mymensing district. Therefore, in 1866, decision was taken to depute Lt. W.J. Wiffiamson as Assistant Commissioner to the hills. The action succeeded in bringing that half of the district under British, but the interior villages in the heart of the Garo Hills *were* entirely independent. In 1872, the British Government was compelled to take the extreme measure and occupied the whole Garo Hills.¹⁹ At the end of the year 1872 three expeditions were conducted.²⁰

That time, Capt. Dally reached the appointed place which was first among the three groups. The Garo warriors named Togan Nengminja from Samanda village fought them bravely along with his people on the 12th December 1872, at Chisobibra²¹ (near the confluence place of Chiso rivulet with Simsang river), but unfortunately he was shot dead on the spot. By this act British could bring the Garos into complete submission.

The Garos live not only on Garo Hills but also in Assam and in the Mymensing district of the present day Bangladesh. According to 1891 census there were around 18,600 Garos in Mymensing district.²²

In the former days, the Garo spoke different dialects as they lived in different dialectic groups in various parts of the Garo Hills. The different dialects among the Garos are; the A-we, Chisak, Dual, Matchi, Matjangchi, A-beng or Am-beng, Chibok, Ruga Gara or Ganching, Atong and

Me-gam. Among these some dialects like Ruga are almost disappearing. It is due to the British occupation of the district, where they called upon the Missionaries to introduce Christian Religion in schools. The American Baptist missionaries were the first to come to Garo Hills and they learned the A-we dialect to write text books and translated the Bible and made it the standard literature in Garo language.

Though the Garos called themselves, 'A-chik' or 'Mande', but no one could really prove the etymological meaning of the 'Garo'.

The Garo society maintains a matrilineal system. They take their title from the side of the mother and not from the father. Heiress always inherits the family property, it never goes to a son. There are five main clans among the Garos: Sangma, Marak, Momin, Areng and Shira. These clans are divided into many sub-clans. Original inhabitants of the district, the Garos, used to write their main clan against their names, but the Garos migrating from the Bangladesh used to write their sub-clan.

In Garo Hills although Garo constitute majority inhabitants of the district in the hills, yet many other minority communities have drifted into surrounding plain areas of the district.

They are: Rabhas, Hajongs, Koches, Rajbongsis, Mech and the Bodo-Kacharies.²⁴

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