



Partition (1947) and the Garos: On Search for Identity in an “Insecure” Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT:

The 1947 Great Divide is the most significant signpost in the evolution of South Asia as a socio-political unit. After having drawn the boundaries of two independent states, India and Pakistan, the British had finally withdrawn. If there was cause to rejoice at the end of Colonialism, the celebrations were undoubtedly marred by a tragic partition along religious lines. The Partition of 1947 brought un-expectable horrors to the life of the people of the tribal communities on the border areas of North East India and East Pakistan, irrespective of community, creed, caste, tribes, geography and identity. To the Garo people (a tribal community belong to North East India), the partition of the Indian subcontinent was a tragic event. It was the outsiders who sliced the international border through the area of traditional Garo settlement, leaving the majority of the Garos North of the Borders in the Garo Hills in India, but also isolating a substantial minority in East Pakistan. The border was drawn to correspond as closely as possible to the topographic boundary between hills and plains. The hills would belong to the Garo Hills District while the plains went to Mymensingh. Garos were thus stranded between India and East Pakistan. The international border has separated the Garos from the hill Garos since 1947. In this paper attempt will make to show how mobility (transnational connectivity, social and economic mobility) plays an important role in the everyday life and future aspirations of the indigenous community of the Garos in East-Pakistan (later Bangladesh) who were on search for identity in an alien homeland. (*Keywords: Partition, Identity, Tribal Community, East-Pakistan, Mobility etc.*)

Garos: Aspiring Migration and Mobility in an “Insecure” Bangladesh:

All around the world people are exposed to information and imageries that may have been generated in far-away places, but by implications became part of their everyday lives. These cultural imaginaries, whether “realistic or not, are widespread and have real life consequences. They do not only produce new self- images, aspirations and ideals, but also transform notions of belonging and mobility.¹ The people known as Garos, from the Garo Hills and adjacent (lowland) areas in India and East-Pakistan, have never constituted one unified and self-defined in group, although British Colonial rule indeed produced a feeble notion of an imagined Garo community. Hence the

international border of 1947 formalized certain distinctions between hill Garos and lowlanders that had existed much longer and gave a further impetus to the articulations of ethnic identities in different spaces.²

The international border has separated the East Pakistani (later Bangladeshi) Garos from the hill Garos since 1947. The Partition of 1947 resulted in a much stricter division than ever before. Although trans-boundary mobility has never stopped, Indian and East Pakistani Garos increasingly developed in a different direction. They were more oriented towards Dhaka, influenced by Bengali language and culture and were affected by the distinct political developments before and after the Bangladesh Liberation Movement of 1971.³ Nevertheless differences between hill Garos and those from the Bengal plains have existed much longer. Differences between the (Indian) hill Garos and (Bangladeshi) lowland Garos is also reflected in the names they give themselves. Bangladeshi Garos called themselves Mandi, which means “human being”. They refer to the Garos from the Garo Hills as Achik” (hill person)⁴

To the Garo people, the partition of the Indian subcontinent was a tragic event, but it was an event over which they had no control. It was the outsiders who sliced the international border through the area of traditional Garo settlement, leaving the majority of the Garos North of the Borders in the Garo Hills in India, but also isolating a substantial minority in what is now Bangladesh to the South.⁵ The borders that divides the Garo Hills from Mymensingh district was surveyed in 1870's at the time of when the Garo Hills were formally annexed by the British. The border was drawn to correspond as closely as possible to the topographic boundary between hills and plains. The hills would belong to the Garo Hills District while the plains went to Mymensingh. The Garo hills in turn became a part of Assam while Mymensingh belong to Bengal and this meant that, long before the boundary became an international one, it brought significant administrative differences.⁶

Not only this while demarcating the boundary, there were attempts made by the majority community of bordering Mymensingh district to include as much of the tribal land as possible into the East Pakistan territory by manipulating the demarcation and border officials. Garos were thus stranded between India and East Pakistan though they belonged to neither Muslim nor Hindu community.⁷ In a revealing presentation Malini Sur showed how the conversion of agricultural land into provincial and national territories, and religious and political mobilizations that defined affiliations and citizenship, altered prior conceptions of locality and belonging. The entangled histories of two peasant and border communities who may be broadly described as Muslim cultivators of Bengali origin and the mostly Christian Garos tells the story of rice wars along the edges of colonial Assam and eastern Bengal.⁸

The Garos constitute less than ten percent of the ‘other peoples’ of East Pakistan (later Bangladesh), an extremely marginal segment of just one percent of the total Bangladeshi population. Since the 1960s, Garos have begun migrating to cities such as Mymensingh, Chittagong and in particular Dhaka in ever increasing numbers. However, only a minority of Garos are citizens of Bangladesh and the large majority live in the Garo Hills of Assam. The international border has separated the Garos from the hill Garos since 1947. The Bangladeshi Garos were more

oriented towards Dhaka, influenced by Bengali language and culture, and obviously affected by the distinct political developments before and after the independence war of 1971.⁹

Battles for the Golden Grains:

During the colonial period, the border did nothing to interrupt the ties of kinship and friendship that united people on opposite sides, but even before the boundary was surveyed, the differences in topography implied differences in technology. Wet rice in particular, was easier to grow in the flat areas than in the hills, and wet rice in turn invited more permanent and more private land tenure than was appropriate for the Jhoom agriculture of the hills. Differences in religion and social organisation seem to have been minimal, however.¹⁰ The Garo settlement in East Pakistan (Bangladesh) has been mostly found to the area, where the Modhupur forest once grew. This is about half way between the cities of Tangali and Mymansingh and it is separated by about 75km. from the border area of Mymansingh district. About 15000 Garos (according to the census of 1971) lives in Modhupur.¹¹

In respect, of the technology of wet rice together with and architecture and other material culture of the Garos made themselves little differ from the Bengali neighbors. Both because of the lack of Bamboo and because of the need for security against thieves, houses are built from mud in the style and by the techniques of Bengal. Most tools and equipment's are also like those of the Bengalis. The Garo men even wear *lungis* and women frequently wear *sarees*. The equipment's and techniques that they used to grow rice are also indistinguishable from those used by their Bengali neighbors. Wet rice became more productive than dry rice in the flat lands and Jhoom is no longer capable of feeding everyone. In addition to wet rice, they also grow dry crops, but hey grow them on fields that, with the help of fertilizer. Land is no longer left follow, and the forest is given no chance to grow. Pineapple, sugarcane, mustard, ginger, and a wide variety of other fruits, roots and vegetables are grown, some to be eaten and some to be sold, but all are grown on permanent fields. Of course private land ownership has spread in Garo hills too but it has been completely dominant in Bangladesh. Bangladesh land tenure may suggest direction in which land tenure in the Garo hills is lightly to move.¹²

The basic patterns of land tenure may grow out of the type of agriculture and the particular crops that are grown, but Govt. policy has also had a powerful influence. Land ownership has been made terribly complex and terribly insecure in the Madhupur area by the refusal of the Government, to give consistent recognition of the Garo rights. The Garo people of Madhupur used to be shifting cultivators, except for a portion of their wet fields, hey never had legal papers giving Govt. recognition to their ownership. Much of their wet lands, all their dry fields, and even their house have been regarded by the Gov. as "Kas" land, undeveloped and belonging to the govt. the Garo area was declared to be national forest. It was placed under the jurisdiction of the forest department and efforts have ever been made to relocate the Garo out of their homeland. So far, the Garo have mostly managed to resist relocation, but they cultivate land over which their tenure is insecure. The thread of displacement looms in the background.¹³

Without Government recognition, dry land and unregistered wet land can buy and sold, rented, mortgaged or given in sharecropping just as if it were registered. The sale price for registered land was lower than for registered. Permanent land ownership has important consequences for the distribution of wealth. There were differences in wealth among the villagers, but without private land ownership the amount of land a person could use was limited. No one accumulate land to be rented or mortgaged to others.¹⁴ By, contrast labourers can be hired by the day or year, and land can be let out to sharecroppers. As a result, land ownership has become very unevenly distributed. Some people have a great deal; others, who have none of their own, are forced to work as a day labourers or as sharecroppers on other peoples land. Agricultural technology, land rights, and distribution of wealth in the flat south were probably destined to diverge from those of the hilly North, quite apart from Government policy, but the border has imposed important administrative differences.¹⁵

Kinship:

Neither, the permanent land ownership or greater wealth differences, nor wage labour has yet brought any fundamental reordering of kinship and even ideology of a new religion has had only a small impact. There have been changes but they are subtle by comparison with the profound changes in agriculture, technology, education and religion.¹⁶The Garo cling to their matrilineal descent by assigning children to the moiety (Sangma or Marak) and to the named lineage of their mother. Matrilineal kinsmen are as important as ever.¹⁷ However, Garo kinship is changing in East-Pakistan, but it should not be forgotten that the changes are occurring within a generally very stable system. However, Christianity affected their kinship system to little amount. The changes took place in the prohibition of polygyny. Since polygyny was never common among the Garo eliminating it was hardly a radical step, but it did force one significant adjustment. When polygyny did occur, it was usually to provide for a woman who had been widowed. The dead husband's lineage would give her a younger man as a replacement, but the Garo felt that the new husband deserved a new wife in addition to widow, so he promised a second and younger wife, often the widow's own daughter.¹⁸

The second change that came with Christianity was the decisive end of bridegroom capture. Traditionally, it was the girl's parents who took the initiative in arranging marriages. They would send out a gang of young men who would physically capture a husband for a girl. However gradually they abandoned the formal capture of grooms and changed the dynamics of marriage arrangements.¹⁹ Apart from Christianity, pressure on the kinship system has come from both economic circumstances and from their Bengali neighbors. Further permanent land ownership encouraged new rules for inheritance. They chose one daughter as their "Nokna" (heiress) and she would belong to the lineage of her mother. She inherited all the physical property, stores of grain and crops in the fields but she couldn't inherit permanent right to land. Everyone had the right to clear the *Jhoom* fields, so the heir's shad to advantage.²⁰

Marriages:

In Bangladesh, the Garos do recognize two kinds of marriages and characteristically, they call them by Bangali names. They said that the older and the most frequent type of the Garo marriage were to “bring the *jamai*” the ‘son in law’. Sometimes however, they “bring the *bo*”, the ‘daughter in law’ instead. The differences do not necessarily implied permanent residents in the village where the couple get married. ²¹Changes in the rules of inheritance, together with the Christian prohibition on polygyny conspire to make the “Nokram” system less secure among the Bangladeshi Garos. The Garo, who form but a tiny minority in East-Pakistan, were inevitably influenced by the attitudes of their Bengali neighbors. Gradually, people began to question the customs of their own ancestors. Thus, there are pressures for change but the actual changes so far have been modest. ²²

Political Crisis:

In a recent history of Bangladesh, Willem Van Schendel provides an elaborate account of the historical and contemporary complexities of national identity formation processes in Bangladesh. He points to the paradoxical relation between two dominant and competing models for identification: the Bengali and the Muslim identity.²³ The shared Muslim identity stood at the basis of independent Pakistan, free from British domination and different from Hindu dominated India. The Bengali identity gained momentum in the struggle against West Pakistani domination. Garos and many other Bangladeshis do not adhere to these competing identifications. This non-Bengali, non-Muslim, non-Hindu Bangladeshis—roughly estimated at the one percent of the total population- are neither Muslims, nor Hindu, and they have always remained to some extent, excluded from mainstream polity and society as well.²⁴

The Garo community in East-Pakistan was traumatized by violence in 1964 and again at the time of the war of liberation in 1971. These events hit the Garos of North Mymensingh hardest.

“The First Riot”: What the Garos have come to call as “the first riot” begun in December 1964, when hundreds of landless people were dumped in the Garo areas of North Mymensingh. Just where these people came from and how they got there is not entirely clear. They resorted to thievery and then they began to terrorise the people among whom they had been dumped. The Garos tells frightening stories of seeing the fires of refugee camps and of hearing cries coming through the night: “Pakistan Zindabad”. Animals and grain were stolen; some houses were burned; women were raped; some people were beaten; a few were killed.²⁵A period of anarchy when the Pakistani Government lost control undermined the Garo confidence. The Garo leaders tried to strengthen people’s resolve, and tried to persuade them to stay and to defend their homes, but some villagers were too terrified to persuade them to stay and to defend their homes, but some villagers were too terrified to fight. Most of the Garos in the affected areas lived only a few kilometers from the borders and some families begun to flee to Assam. These only increase the insecurity and isolation of those left behind. Not all areas were severely affected but those which were very

close to the border from which flight would have been easy, lost few residents. Wherever they lived, however, they were frightened, everyone felt insecure.²⁶

The East Pakistani Government finally regained control and the Government quite literally called to the Garos and urged them to return. They set up microphones along the borders and told those within hearing distance that their rights would be protected and that they should feel free to return to their homes, however, it is hardly surprising that some people concluded that Pakistan was unlikely to offer a secure home for the non-Muslims and many chose to stay in India. Therefore, those with money could find land at bargain prices. For the first time a substantial number of people who were neither the 'tribal' nor the Garo, bought land and moved into the affected area. The composition of the population began to change and the Garos begun to feel like strangers in their own villages.²⁷

Crisis of 1971:

The political climate of the border areas cooled for a few years after 1964. The Garos who returned rebuilt their farms and planted their crops in peace. Soon however, the crisis of Bangladesh independence arose, and tension mounted one again. The unrest on the border had totally different causes in 1971 than it had in 1964 but the consequences for the Garos were similar. East Pakistanis were increasingly agitating for independence. Violence escalated and refugees began to stream once more to India.²⁸

Threatened by the violence in East Pakistan and terribly burdened by refugees, India brought its troops near the border. The line that the British had drawn through the Garos homeland now became the line between opposing modern armies. Life near the border was hopelessly disturbed. Virtually, the entire Garo population of North Mymensingh fled across the border of India. Many spend months in crowded refugee camps.²⁹

While the destruction from the 'second riot', as the Garo came to call the events of 1971, was far worse than it had happened in 1964, it was less traumatic for the Garos in one respect. This time, at least they were not alone. They were not the only one to flee. Millions of others who would soon call themselves Bangladeshis fled too, the non-tribals as well as tribals, the Muslim as well as the Hindus. This time the Garos were the part of a much wider political process, and they could identify enthusiastically with the Bangladesh Liberation Movement.³⁰

With no one left at home to look after the house and farm there was awful destruction. Houses were dismantled by the Pakistani army to provide building materials for bunkers. Looters carried off household furniture and helped themselves to any animals or stocks to grain that the fleeing Garos had been unable to carry with them. Some of them even remember watching from the Indian side of the border as vandals cut down their fruit trees and tore the tin from their roofs. Once the Indian troops entered East- Pakistan, in November 1971, it did not take long to rout the Pakistani army, and Bangladesh became an independent nation. Houses had been destroyed and possessions scattered. Strangers had move into some of the deserted villages and even planted crops. As in 1964, some Garos preferred to stay in India. During the months when return was impossible, some had found work in India and they no longer wished to return to a country where they felt insecure. The proportion of non-tribal people started living

in what had once been the purely tribal area of North-Mymensingh. So many Garo refugees stayed in India that almost every Bangladeshi Garos now had kinsmen on the other side of the border.³¹

Conclusion:

In the half century since independence of the Garos in what is now Bangladesh has been profoundly different from the experience of Garos on the Indian side of the border. The terrain is different and so is the resulting agriculture, land tenure, distribution of land, culture and wealth as well. Even more important have been the administrative and political differences that the border has imposed. Both ecological and administrative pressures have pulled the Bangladeshi Garos away from their ancestors north of the border, but the continuities of the Garo culture are as impressive as the changes. The Garos in Bangladesh remain stubbornly distinct from their Bengali Muslim neighbors. Nevertheless, their survival thus far does not ensure their survival in the future. The pressures they faced can only grow more intense.

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