



THE IMPACT OF MODERNISATION ON TRADITIONAL GARO CULTURE AND PRACTICES IN MEGHALAYA.

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Abstract:

Modernisation has significantly impacted on the cultural and traditional practices of indigenous Garo communities in Meghalaya. The Garo people, an indigenous group mostly living in Meghalaya, India, as well as in parts of North-East India, West Bengal, and Bangladesh, have seen significant changes in their rituals, beliefs, and way of life as a result of modernisation. The customs, culture and socio-economic conditions of other communities or tribes have also been impacted the Garos, especially in the areas of the outside of their traditional districts. While a large number of Garos have embraced Christianity, they have largely adhered to their customary laws traditions and practices. However, Christian Garos do not practice polygamy or the religious rites and practices of Non-Christian Garos. This paper explores the impact of modernisation on Garo traditional practices, specifically language, social structure, rituals, and economic activity. While modernisation has resulted in higher living standards and greater access to education and technology, it has also contributed to the deterioration of indigenous customs and traditions. This paper suggests that in order to preserve the Garo people's distinctive culture, a balance between modernisation and cultural preservation must be achieved.

Keywords: Modernisation, Garo Tribe, Indigenous Tradition, Cultural Preservation, Economic Transformation.

Objective:

- To study the impact of modernization on the traditional practices of the Garo people, including language, social structure, and economic activities.
- To examine the positive and negative effects of modernization on Garo cultural identity and traditions.
- To identify and recommend strategies for preserving and promoting Garo cultural heritage in the face of modernization.

Methodology:

The research is based on a qualitative approach, utilizing historical accounts, ethnographic studies, and secondary sources such as academic papers, books, and government reports. Observations, Interviews and case studies from various Garo communities provide insights into the ongoing transformation. Comparative analysis is conducted to examine shifts in traditional practices over time, emphasizing the role of education, technology, and economic development in shaping cultural identity.

Introduction:

The Garos, a major indigenous tribal group residing in Meghalaya, have a rich cultural heritage deeply rooted in centuries-old traditions, beliefs, and social practices that define their unique identity. The term, “Garo” or A`chik” or “Mande” refers to a Tribe who call themselves as “A`chik” or “Mande” and who are aboriginally born of indigenous Garo mother and father. The Garos are one of the remaining three matrilineal tribal communities of North-East India.

One of the most distinctive features of Garo society is its matrilineal system, in which lineage and inheritance pass down through the mother's side of the family. This system has historically defined the Garo social structure, with women playing an important role in home and owner of property while men are responsible for custodian and guardian of the property as the head of the family. Garos are dependent on agriculture for their livelihood, and traditionally practiced a slash and burn cultivation (jhum cultivation), hunting, and forest-based occupations. The emergence of new economic options, such as wage labour, entrepreneurship, and government employment, has expanded their sources of income. While these changes have enhanced economic stability and resource availability, they have also resulted in the collapse of traditional farming techniques, affecting their relationship with environment and ancestral lands. This paper explores the effects of modernisation on the matrilineal system, livelihood, and other traditional components of Garo society, emphasising the difficulties in keeping cultural identity while accepting transformation.

Origins and Migration of the Garos.

The origin of Garo migration remains a subject of speculation. According to legends, the ancestors of the Garos inhabited a province of Tibet called Torua. Without any apparent reason, they embarked on voyaged of discovery a land or territory under the leadership of two chiefs, Jappa-Jalinpa and Sukpa Bongipa. Overtime, they settled in various parts of West Bengal and the north-eastern parts of India, residing there for over a hundred years before marching towards Dhubri, Assam and eventually entering the present-day Garo Hills.

Impact on Language and Communication

Language is an important element of cultural identity. Traditionally, the Garo language, which is part of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family, has been used as the major ways of communication. Garos are divided into twelve sub-dialectical groupings that speak somewhat different dialects. There are few cultural and customary differences between these sub-dialectical groups (with the exception of Me`gams, who have connected with Khasis in culture and dialect by studying Khasi literature in schools). The foundation of each Garo dialectical group is slight dialect differences based on settlement location and contact with other cultures. They are; Chisak, Matchi, Matabeng, Ambeng, Matchi-Dual, Atong, Gara-Ganching, Chibok, Ruga, Me`gam, A`we, Koch or Kotchus.

However, modernisation, particularly through formal education and media, has resulted in a decline in the usage of the Garo language by younger generations. English and Hindi have grown in popularity in schools, workplaces, and in urban areas and leading the original language to gradually decline. The decline in the use of one's indigenous language may lead to the loss of indigenous knowledge, culture and traditions embedded within the language.

Transformation of Family Structure

Traditionally Garo people, an indigenous ethnic group primarily residing in Meghalaya, India follows the matrilineal system, with inheritance passing through the mother's side. Property and clan membership were inherited through the mother. The youngest daughter known as *Nokna*, inherited the family property and was responsible for managing the household. In Garo society, women played a central role in family affairs, while men are the mere custodian and guardian of the property as the head of the family, such as hunting, agriculture and community leadership. After the marriage, a Garo man has to typically move to his wife's family home (matrilocal residence). This unique method has historically influenced family structures.

However, modernisation has created new economic and social factors, resulting in changes in family structure. Inheritance patterns have also become more flexible, with some families dividing property between sons and daughters, departing from the traditional female inheritance. The growing influence of nuclear family structures, migration to cities for work, and intermarriage with non-Garo populations have all damaged the old matrilineal framework. Furthermore, younger generations increasingly prefer modern life styles, causing a loss in the traditional communal living practices that once marked as the Garo society.

Changes in Religious and Ritualistic Practices.

The Garo community's religious and ritualistic landscapes has changed dramatically during the last few decades. Traditionally based in animistic beliefs, with ceremonies centred upon spirits, nature worship, and clan deities like, (Misi Saljong, Chorabudi, Tatara Rabuga, Goera, Kakame, Susime etc.), the Garos have witnessed a major transition since the introduction of Christianity in the nineteenth century.

The arrival of American Baptist missionaries marked a beginning of large-scale conversion in the early 1980s. Catholic missionaries and other Protestant denominations eventually followed as well, creating their own churches, schools, and mission programs. Today, the Garo Hills are primarily Christian, but this adoption has not been uniform. Instead, it has resulted in another layer of societal division: Christian denominationalism.

As in many Christianized indigenous communities around the world, denominational conflicts developed between Baptists and Catholics, resulting in times of misunderstanding, competition for converts, and parallel institutional development (schools, medical missions, etc.). While overt tensions have decreased over time and peaceful coexistence now mainly prevails, significant societal barriers remain, particularly in the context of inter-denominational marriages.

Remarkably, in many circumstances, it is more difficult for a couple from different Christian denominations to marry than a couple whose clans share a kinship, which is actually prohibited by customary laws. While clan-based exogamy is a widespread social norm, Christian doctrine has added new difficulties. Couples of various denominations frequently confront resistance from church officials about wedding rites, recognition of sacraments, or raising children in one religious tradition, resulting in familial and societal pressure.

Other major shifts in religious and ritual traditions are:

- Traditional rites and festivals, such as Wangala (the harvest festival), are on the decline, while they are still observed, but as a cultural rather than religious event.
- Replace ritual specialists (Kima, Nokma, or Kamal) with church-based leaders, particularly pastors and catechists, to guide moral and spiritual life.
- Burial customs have moved from ancient practices to Christian funeral rites, with marked graves and memorial services replacing older animist death ceremonies.
- Youth participation in church activities such as Sunday schools, singing groups, and Christian youth fellowships has increased, frequently replacing traditional clan or village ceremonies.

Economic Transformation:

The Garo people's economic life has traditionally relied on subsistence agriculture, particularly jhum cultivation (shifting cultivation), forest-based activities, and trade systems within village communities. Jhum cultivation, despite being labour-intensive and environmentally damaging, was more than just an economic activity; it was also a cultural practice strongly rooted in the Garo worldview. It required collaborative labour, seasonal rituals, and information passed down through generations. In addition to farming, the Garos relied on fishing, hunting, weaving, and bamboo and cane crafting. The community-based economic system promoted collaboration and social solidarity under the leadership of the Nokma, the traditional village chief.

However, modernisation, resulted in by the introduction of formal education, Christianity, government schemes, and increased infrastructure, has resulted in major changes in the Garo Hills' economic environment. One of the most notable changes is the gradually decline of jhum cultivation. Government policies and market incentives have boosted settled farming and the production of cash commodities including areca nut, black pepper, cashew, and rubber. While these cash crops provide more revenue, they also contribute to environmental degradation, such as deforestation and soil depletion, and weaken traditional agricultural knowledge systems.

There has been a simultaneous increase in wage labour and government employment. Many Garos have abandoned traditional livelihoods in favour of careers in education, the military forces, healthcare, and other administrative services. Urban migration is increasing, particularly among the younger generation, who seek paying employment in cities such as Tura, Shillong, Guwahati, and elsewhere. This transformation has improved economic mobility, but has also resulted in a detachment from traditional lifestyles and land-based practices.

Modernisation has had a huge impact on the Garo economy, disrupting traditional practices such as weaving, bamboo crafting, and cottage industries. These abilities, which were historically rooted in home and communal life, are now being commercialised to fulfil external demand, raising questions about cultural authenticity. However, with the help of self-help groups and government programs, some communities are discovering methods to adapt while conserving traditional techniques. Garo women, who are crucial to economic life because to their matrilineal status,

have grown more involved in microenterprises and cooperatives. Many people have received financial access and training through projects like the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), but they now have to balance traditional tasks with new economic responsibilities.

Another significant development is an increase in migration and remittances. Many Garo youngsters are leaving their villages to pursue school and employment in urban areas, sending money back home to help their family. While this increases household income and access to modern conveniences, it also results in a progressive loss of traditional knowledge and cultural customs. Overall, economic transition has resulted in both development and disruption, creating new opportunities while contributing to ecological imbalance and cultural degradation. A sustainable approach that combines growth with the revival of indigenous skills, eco-friendly practices, and cultural tourism is crucial for maintaining Garo identity in the face of modern change.

Positive and Negative Impact of Modernization:

Modernisation has resulted in some positive benefits for the Garo community. Improved access to education has enabled many people, particularly youth and women, to seek higher education and find work in government, education, and healthcare. Infrastructure improvements, such as better roads, energy, and communication networks, have increased connection and opened up new markets for local products. Health awareness and access to medical services have both improved dramatically. Furthermore, government schemes and NGO initiatives have fostered rural business, encouraged skill development, and promoted financial inclusion, allowing many Garos to participate more actively in the broader economy and raise their standard of life.

However, there are serious disadvantages to these developments. The decline in the usage of the Garo language, the deterioration of clan authority, and the destruction of traditional practices are all direct results of cultural neglect during the modernisation process. Younger generations are becoming more and more estranged from their heritage as indigenous customs lose significance in day-to-day living. The social fabric of Garo society is further strained by the growth of consumerism, environmental deterioration brought on by unsustainable farming and deforestation, and the loss of communal life. Without deliberate attempts to include cultural preservation into development planning, the Garos' rich legacy runs the risk of being displaced by swift and frequently imbalanced modern impacts.

Challenges to Cultural Preservation

The Garo people faces numerous challenges in sustaining its traditional culture amidst rising modernity. One major problem is the loss of traditional knowledge from elders to younger generations. With the spread of formal education and migration for employment, young Garos are becoming more disconnected from their roots, with less interest in traditional language, rites, and practices. The Garo language is under threat, especially in cities where English and Hindi, predominate, resulting in the decline of oral traditions and cultural expressions. Furthermore, the erosion of crucial social institutions like as the Nokpante (bachelor dormitory) and village elders' reduced influence have weakened communal structures that once maintained cultural continuity.

Another significant concern is the commercialisation and commodification of Garo traditional activities. Festivals like Wangala are now regularly organised for tourism or political purposes, thereby losing their spiritual and community meaning. Furthermore, the widespread influence of Christianity, while beneficial in many ways, has resulted in the marginalisation of indigenous animist rituals and beliefs. Urbanisation and insufficient state support for documentation and cultural preservation lead to these problems. Without collective efforts to revive language, rituals, and traditional knowledge systems, the Garo people's rich history risks being diluted or lost entirely.

Conclusion

In conclusion, modernisation has had significant effects on the Garo tribe's traditional culture and practices in Meghalaya, presenting both opportunities for development and risks to cultural continuity. While advances in education, the economy, and technology have raised living conditions, they have also led to the extinction of indigenous languages, rites, and social institutions. To preserve Garo heritage, it is important to incorporate cultural education into school curricula, archive oral traditions, support traditional artisans, and establish platforms for intergenerational knowledge exchange. Establishing cultural centres, encouraging youth engagement in traditional customs, and developing collaboration among community leaders, scholars, and politicians can all assist to ensure that modern progress coexists with the preservation of the Garo tribe's vibrant cultural identity.

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