

A Study on Biographies of the Garo Community in Terms of Colonial Cultural Invasion and Modernity in the Village of Hariakona, Sherpur, Bangladesh

Khabir Uddin, Jagannath University, Bangladesh

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Abstract

In Bangladesh, the Garos is one of the most prominent matriarchal indigenous groups. They have lived in this country for generations, preserving their own tradition and lifestyle. The Garos has an extensive religious, social and cultural heritage as the matriarchal group. As a result of colonial cultural invasion, this rich history, tradition and the distinctive diversity of Garo society has been diminished. Today, the Garos own identity is in danger of extinction. Especially with the conversion of Christianity this terrible cultural invasion started in the Garo community. In addition to the contact with modern civilization, a significant change has taken place in Garo society. Garos prefer to use plastic and polythene instead of different materials that were used in their daily lives, such as bamboo, tree leaves or clay household items. The Garos has abandoned the traditional jumchas, and they have started farming in the modern way. The use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides on land has been expanding at an alarming rate. New and complex diseases have also been increasing at this time. The existence of the Garo is threatened by changes in their way of life due to colonial cultural invasion and modernization. The results of the study are obtained by using a qualitative method. Primary data are given greater importance, in addition to secondary data. A focus on the changes and crises faced by the Garo population at Hariakona village in Sherpur district has been placed on their way of life. In this study, possible solutions for the cited crisis are proposed which will help to realize a general change in Garo's livelihood.

Keywords: Cultural Invasion, Colonialism, Modernity, Garo, Christianity

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Introduction

The lifestyles of the Garo people have changed significantly as a result of modern civilization. The Garos have a very eco-friendly and diverse natural way of life before they come into contact with modern civilization. The matter of naturalism is reflected in Garos beliefs and social festivals. In order to satisfy the different forces in nature, Garo society has a centuries old religious and social practice of offering favorite food items such as vegetables, fruits, meat or alcohol. The ancient practice of worshiping different gods and Goddesses while harvesting, sowing seeds or selecting land has also existed in the past. In essence, these activities made the Garos religion animistic. But these old religious beliefs and social festivals of Garos have been lost through the influence of modern civilization. Now, before sowing seeds or selecting land, the Garos don't feel the need to satisfy the god with alcohol and meat on the land. The impact of modernity has brought about changes in society, politics and health across the Garo. As compared to the past, there has been less social harmony and unity between Garos. The Garos have lost their political power and are included in the state's rule. They've lost the right to their land. They are now submitting themselves to court for settlement of land disputes or inter alia. Health changes also appear to be significant, in addition to social and political change. In the Garo community, consumption of crops and vegetables which are grown with chemical fertilizers and pesticides increases the incidence of various new and complicated diseases. Moreover, the average life expectancy has also decreased. Qualitative research methods reveal the changes that have taken place in the Garo society as a result of colonial cultural invasion and modernization. A survey of a particular village has been carried out, aiming at fully identifying the changes and current crisis that have occurred. Secondary data sources have been obtained from various previously performed studies, books and reports on the subject. Understanding how the traditions of a particular population change as a result of colonial cultural invasion and modernity is an essential part of this study.

Literature Review

Garo's an indigenous people living in Bangladesh. Due to the influence of modern civilization, Garo people are losing their identity day by day. The lifestyle of this tribal people is full of diversity in certain parts of the mountains and plains. There is quite a lot of research in the area of Garos. The researchers who had come to the Indian subcontinent since the beginning of the British period had been looking at the Garos. An analysis of the Garo's lifestyle needs to include research articles and books, as sources of secondary data that were included in this study.

Ellen Bal's "They Ask Me If We Eat Frogs: Garo Ethnicity in Bangladesh" provides a critical investigation into the category of tribes in South Asia. Specially, it focuses on one tribal community, the Garos of Bangladesh. It also deals with the evolution of Garo ethnicity. 'God and the Garos' tells something important about the cultural and religious sector of Garos." The Strong Women of Modhopres' reviews the history of the Garo people of both India and Bangladesh since they were first encountered by the British more than two centuries ago. Particular attention is paid to the unusual matrilineal kinship organization of the Garos and to the special role that women play in this society. 'Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal' by E. T. Dalton discusses the history of ethnicity of Bengal. It includes the history and lifestyle of Garo. 'Indigenous Communities, Cultural Survey of Bangladesh' provides the cultural diversity of Bangladesh. It also represents the ethnic culture of Bangladesh. 'British Annexation of Garo Hills' provides a detailed analysis of the events which led to the British

annexation and administration of the Garo Hills. Religious syncretism involves the harmonious fusion of multiple religious ideologies, rituals, and customs into a distinct, unified belief system. 'Religious Syncretism Among the Bangladeshi Garos' and 'Syncretism in the Religious Belief and Rituals of Achik Mandi Ethnic Group of Bangladesh' transpire how Garo community abandons their traditional religious convictions and wholeheartedly embraces a new faith. 'Garo Customary Laws and Practices: A Sociological Study' discusses the administration of justice among the Garo. This study is intended to raise new questions on the changing lifestyle of the Garo community.

Objectives

- To draw a portrait of Garo community and investigate how colonial cultural invasion has affected their way of life.
- To discover how modernity oppresses their cultural life, and destroys their socio-economic and political system, it also affects their tribal farming, production method.

Significance of the Study

The study indicates to the contemporary changes of Garo community of Bangladesh. The research contributes to a better theoretical understanding of how a population is subjected to colonial cultural invasion and modernity. The study's rationale is to learn more about how an indigenous group is ripped from its roots. Finally, the research helps to understand how the Garo people's traditional way of life is highly under in danger. The study's significance in providing potential solutions to recover from the crisis and return to the Garo people's traditional way of life.

Methodology

Qualitative method was applied in the study. In addition to firsthand observation, interviews and surveys are conducted. Interviews and surveys have shown changes in the Garo's way of life. Their agriculture, food habits, social structure, and values are all influenced by modernity. Secondary data was assembled to provide a historical portrait of the Garo community. Cross-checking was done after collecting primary data.

Research Area and Garo Community of This Village

Hariakona is a village in Block 5 of the Singbaruna Union No 1 at Shribordi Police Station, Sherpur district. The northeast and southwest sides of it lie on the Indian state of Meghalaya's Zero Line. International boundary line 1091 to 1095 is considered as part of the village. To the south of Hariakona is a part of Chandapara and to the southwest is Babelakona village. There is a Primary School, Women's Club, Christian Initiative Society, Sundari Youth Group, two Baptist churches and one Catholic Church in the village.

Greater Mymensingh is mainly mentioned in the Garo inhabited Area of Bangladesh. Garos are living in nearly all the Sherpur district except for Garo Hills on Mymensingh, Birisiri and Netrakona. Different groups of Garos had already established themselves throughout the various regions when they first arrived in this country. A group of Garos reached the south part of the Garo Hills along the Someshwari river, after establishing their kingdoms at Susong Durgapur, Mymensingh and Bhawal areas in Dhaka. "In present-day Bangladesh,

there are still a lot of Garos living in the six thanas of Sherpur district, including Nalitabari, Haluaghat, Susang Durgapur, Kulmakanda, and Shribordi” (Sangma, 1993).

It is said that the village of Hariakona was founded 300 years ago. “According to popular belief, this village was inhabited by a number of Garos, including Dinang Bura, Shawan Chambugong, Mingrin Mrong, Rudu Marak, from the neighbouring districts of Madhupur and Meghalaya in India” (Sangma, 2020). Apart from the Garos, Kochs, Hajongs and Burman people also lived in Shribordi upazila. In Hariakona, there are 165 families. There are 1,000 people in total. All of them had left their own religion and turned to Christianity. Here the ratio of Baptists and Catholics is 70:30. The village has two Baptist and one Catholic Church. Agriculture and animal husbandry is a major source of livelihood for the Garo community. Those who do not have land work as day laborers on other people's land. Many of them are looking for a livelihood in the nearby towns and cities. In 2021 Hariakona has been connected to electricity. A narrow road has been made for movement through the Jhura (Jhura means narrow canal). Most bridges made of trees and wood are wobbly and dangerous.

Results and Discussion

1. Identity of the Garos as an Ethnic Group

In Bangladesh, the Garos are one of the old matriarchal tribes. They have a long history with nature and soil in this region. For thousands of years, they had survived as the original inhabitants of this land by their own way of life and cultural traditions. Anthropology says that Garos are members of the Mongolian race whose original habitat was in Tibet (Kamal, 2007). They moved to India later during the Vedic period. The origin of the name ‘Garo’ is disputed by scholars. In particular, it is due to the lack of reliable information on Garos written history. There is also some insight into their ethnographic history in the debate on the origin of the Garos name. They don't call themselves ‘Garo.’ In their own language, they don't have a word like that. This is a foreign name. The Bengali are thought to have given this name. In that context, it is appropriate to quote Hamilton. From 1807 to 1814 AD, he visited Rangpur and parts of the Garo Hills. In light of Garos interview at that point, he referred to: “According to my studies, the word ‘Garo’ is Bengali, and there doesn't appear to be a universal term for this country; instead, each of the tribes that make up the nation itself has a name that is unique to them” (Bal, 2007).

The first residence of the Garo is believed to have been Tibet. They've come to India from there.

Both verse and prose have been used to tell the story of migration, but the former is extremely difficult to understand due to its excessive use of allegory and poetic license, as well as its antiquated terminology. The only useful notion we can extract from the abundance of detail is that there was a widespread migration of people from beyond the Himalayas into the plains to the south of them. In addition, the names and the story's circumstances have been altered. (Playfair, 1909)

It is widely believed that the Garos are descendants of ancient China. Today's Mongolia and a part of Tibet belonged to China in ancient times. The Garo are closely related to Kehdeo people who live in the southern part of China.

It is not implausible that the Keh-Deo and Garos are the terminals of a race that originated in northwest China between the upper reaches of the Yang-tsi-Kiang and Ho-ang-Ho rivers but moved to a more hospitable climate and friendly soil. This migration wave could have easily been broken eastward and westward, which would have affected the rock-like, fierce, and warlike tribes that later inhabited the hills of eastern Assam and upper Barma. (Baldwin, 1934)

In India there is a wide range of habitat for the Garos. The Garos live in various parts of India, including Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura and West Bengal. In Bangladesh, the Garo population mainly lives in Mymensingh, Jamalpur, Sherpur and Netrakona. In Dhaka, there are about 5 000 Garos. In addition, there are some Garos living in Chittagong, Sylhet, Moulvibazar and Habiganj for the purpose of education and employment. Burling's comments regarding the number of Garos living in Bangladesh can be accepted.

Bangladesh is home to about 1,00000 Mandais, the most of whom reside in a few-kilometer-wide area that runs along the southern edge of the Garo Hills. India and Pakistan became independence when British India was divided in 1947. The Garo population has steadily spread among Bangladesh's Mandis. (Sadia, 2021)

2. Christianity as a Tool of Colonial Power

In Bangladesh, The Garos are one of the indigenous peoples. They've lived as primitive humans in this country for a long time, bearing their own history and culture. Researchers estimate that Christianity infiltrated the Garo society of Bangladesh for about 150 years. Although in India, the Portuguese were the first Europeans to spread Christianity. Pope Louis X signed a contract with the Portuguese Government on 7 June 1514. In accordance with this agreement, Portuguese Catholics were allowed to preach in India, establish dioceses, appoint bishops and lay priests. Eventually the influence of Catholicism started to fade, when Portugal lost its position in trade competition with Britain.

Among the Garo tribes of Bangladesh, the first preacher of Christianity Rev. Rupert Bion. In 1853, at Durgapur area of Mymensingh he preached Christianity to 400 Garos. Between 1872 and 1882, Christianity was first established in this area.

2.1 Christianity in Hariakona Village

Compared to a long history of Garo inhabitants living at Hariakona, the arrival of Christianity was very early. Before the establishment of the church, a primary school was established in the village of Hariakona. According to the authorities, Hariakona village did not have enough resources for church management in its early days. So, as a strategy, a primary school was set up to create a sufficient number of persons to run the church. Although the primary school was founded in 1942, because of lack of infrastructure activities could not begin at that time. A church was set up in Hariakonaa village three years after the school had been fully operational. In 1945, the Hariakona Baptist Church was founded.



Photograph 1: While Praying in Hariakona Baptist Church

2.2 Strategy of Christianization and Beginning of Cultural Invasion

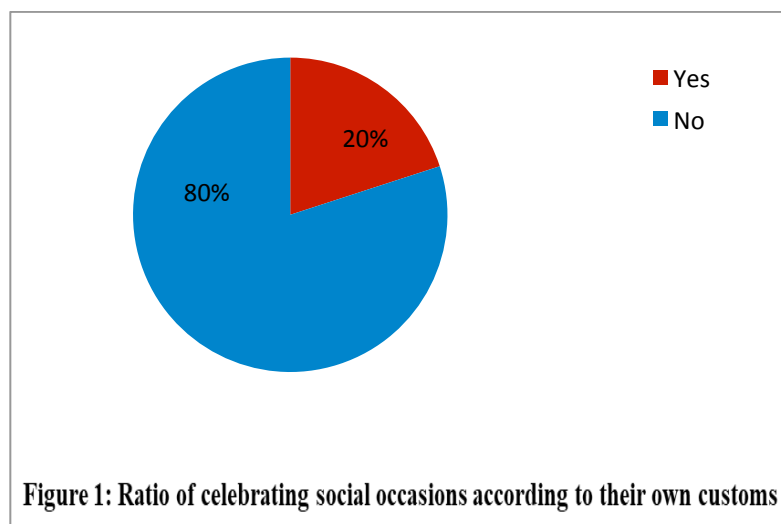
Christianity in the indigenous Garo people is a very interesting concept, according to Christian missionaries. As the primary strategies, they focus on social development issues such as education and health care. According to them, these people living in the mountains are uneducated and barbaric. To spread the light of education among them is a sacred duty of the missionary. They've also given a great deal of importance to health care. People who lived in the mountains were supplied with medicines and vaccines for a wide range of complex, incurable diseases. In particular, incentives for the development of different infrastructure such as road and bridge have been provided. In the area of social development, short term training has been provided. As a result, in the greed of temporary needs, the indigenous people used to step into the missionary's trap.

Under the circumstances, missionary work may seem to be good and public service. But there was a terrible evil intention behind it. Tribal people were described as inferior in the name of education. The colonial power has been described as superior. They have dismissed with scorn thousands of years of rich indigenous knowledge. They've been told that they wouldn't be free if they didn't take modern education provided by the missionaries. In those days, a wave of powerful propaganda had been generated among the tribes to convince them that modernization was needed for improving society and keeping up with times. In other words, it is easier to govern and control the population when they lose access to their own rich world of knowledge. Missionaries mainly focused on creating a gap between self and other that means the indigenous group and the colonial power. The tribe's own medical system was destroyed by the discovery of new diseases in the tribe's society and the provision of antidotes and modern medicines to those diseases. They are linked with a market system, which is brought about by modern healthcare practices. In the name of building infrastructure in the hills, their own house building methods and materials have been destroyed. There is also the commercial mindset, and a vast negative attitude to capitalism's social system. In destroying the mountain environment or an overall ecological balance in this area, it plays a major role. It's about Christian missionaries coming into tribal societies in the hills, to undermine their identity by spreading education, providing medical care and social development.

The missionaries reported that, despite the many obstacles in the hills, they were still trying to civilize the savage people. For example, in the preaching of Christianity in the village of Hariakona, the authorities said:

Difficulties of road communication, environmental problems, lack of proper education, decreasing of social traditional, spiritual values and practices are realities of the village, but we are struggling to advance. The village is surrounded by hillocks and in the middle of the village the belatti brook (chinning) is flowing. (GBC, 2022)

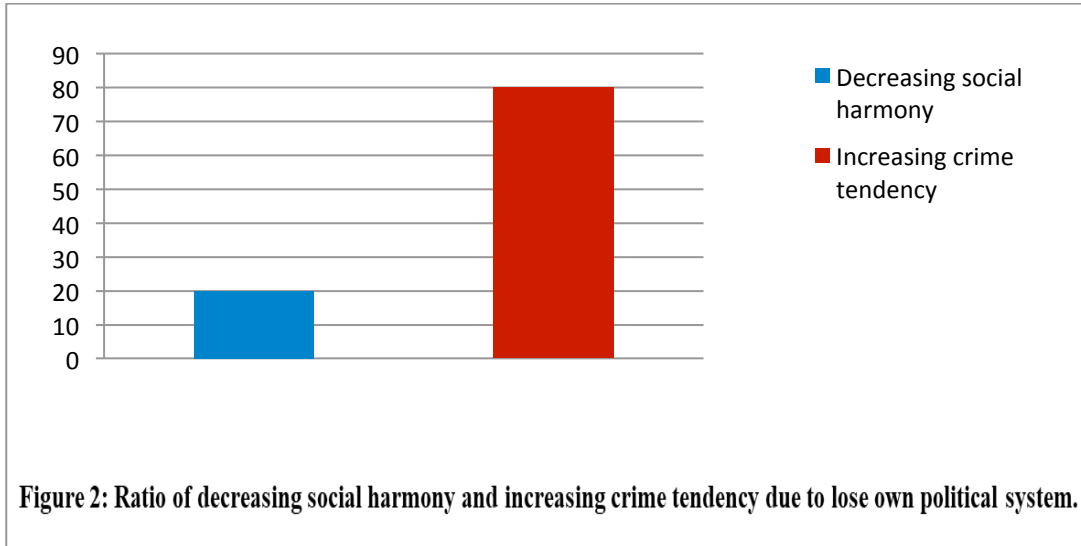
However, external factors are to blame for these difficulties and crisis. Indeed, these crises have not affected the livelihood of the Garo people in Hariakona village. Instead, the missionaries exaggerated these crises so that they would be able to gain entry into a village as representatives of civilization. It means you need a dying patient if you want to be a great doctor. One's medical knowledge can only be judged to be successful and outstanding if he is able to cure the patient. Likewise, missionaries have systematically created incurable diseases in the indigenous Garo community. It's established that the Garos society is barbarian and uncultured. Colonial ruler took up the role of a great servant and physician at that time. The separation of people from their origins, culture and history is the main goal of a colonial power.



In order to reach Christians in the village of Hariakona, three essential points have been identified:

- Each and every believer of the church will be stronger spiritually and financially is our target.
- Children will be grown up in proper atmosphere of faith and we want to work for that. Utilizing of youths power and making of self-employment opportunities in the society. We have many spiritual, and social development planning.
- The church runs primary school developing of modern education.

The church's purpose has been to capture the new generation's brains. The method may be similar to boarding school. If a new generation is brought up with new beliefs, tradition can easily be broken. The purpose of the church is successful if it educates the indigenous people in modern education and sends them to different workplaces outside traditional occupations. That is, the only aim of the Church is to somehow alienate the indigenous group from its own roots.



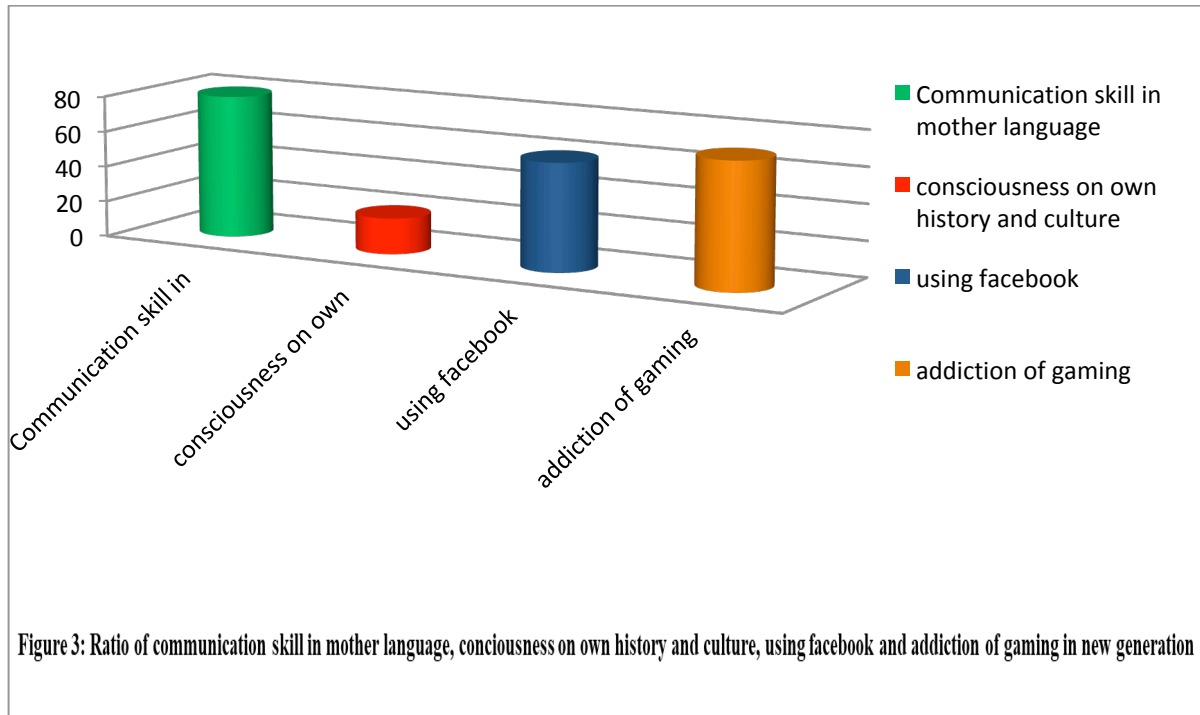
3. Changes Brought About by Modernization in the Lifestyle of the Garo Community at Hariakona Village

3.1 Agricultural Method and Livelihood

Garos traditional agricultural method is Jumchash. Jumchas is the cultivation of crops on some portion of this mountain's slopes by burning a weed. The Garos have farmed crops on the mountains for thousands of years, and they've earned their living. They eat vegetables, fruits and roots, meat of wild or domestic animals and birds in addition to grain crops. By eating grains and vegetables, fruits and roots that were grown naturally from forests, the Garos had good health. Legend has it that strong men in the Garo community were able to single-handedly lift a thick tree from one place to the next to make the poles for the house. Accessed roads in the mountains would allow them to travel freely. Wild plant and vine parts have been used as medicinal products in case of illness.



Photograph 2: Modern Agricultural Equipment



3.2 Household Materials and Electricity

In 2021, Hariakona village was connected to electricity. Trees are used to build a few bridges. Some infrastructure is also being built. There is a guarantee from authority that better roads will be built. These arrangements are intended for improving the quality and way of life of the tribal groups. To bring them out of the barbaric state and bring them under the modern civilization. These plans and activities are, in fact, very harmful to the tribes. Only their traditional life allows them to live in happiness and prosperity. The Garos used to cook in clay pots back then. They took a banana or lotus leaf and used it as a plate. That wouldn't hurt the environment. They're using household materials like steel, melamine and plastic these days. It's terrible to use the polythene, in particular. There are lots of stores in Hariakona village, and they all have chips, chocolate, biscuits, cakes or soft drinks. They have used polythene for transporting all products bought from the nearby markets. They're throwing this polythene all over the place. As a result, every day, thousands of polythene accumulate on the hills. Land is being lost in the long run. Everyone in the village agreed in this respect during the field survey. TVs are being switched on at tea stall. The network actively promotes different programs on Bengali, Hindi and English channels. There's a majority of families with smartphones in the village. The availability of modern technology means that cultural elements from outside are easy to come by. This is leading to a loss of the Garos cultural heritage. The field survey found that 90 percent of the villagers supported it.



Photograph 3: Modern Household Materials

4. Interviews

In order to gain a clearer understanding of changes resulting from colonial cultural invasion and modernization in the lifestyle of Garo people living in Hariakona village, interviews have been incorporated into this study.

The president of the Tribal Welfare Association in Sherpur district is Pranjal M. Sangma (65). He's well known in his community as a local tribal leader.

Researcher: when did the Tribal Welfare Association be founded?

Pranjal: It was established in 1977. In the context of a volatile political situation following Bangladesh's Independence War, it was set up to guarantee security and peace for indigenous communities. The Tribal Welfare Association of Greater Mymensingh and Sylhet is an integrated platform for the various tribal groups.

Researcher: What's the scope of your job?

Pranjal: Currently, it works in 54 upazilas in 12 districts on tribal rights.

Researcher: Have you and your organization conducted any activities to foster education in the mother tongue, or protect its welfare programs?

Pranjal: Yes, we're organizing a day of observation and seminar. Supporting other organizations who are interested in working on this, is one of our responsibilities.

Researcher: In respect of the Garo Community's livelihood, mention a few specific problems.

Pranjal: The biggest problem we're having right now is the land issue. In pursuit of afforestation, the Forestry Department has been seizing our own land these days. In order to keep our land, we must fight in court. We'd like this land problem to go away. Another major problem is the culture of invasion.

Researcher: Can you take any action to discourage the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides in mountainous areas?

Pranjol: It's an issue of collective awareness. In addition, the Government is responsible for implementing alternative methods. On our part, we're trying to raise awareness. In this context, however, it cannot be enough to rely only on awareness.

Researcher: Thank you very much for this important opinion.

Pranjol: You are also welcome.

Identified Problems

A number of problems were identified when we observed the lifestyle of the Garo people living in Hariakona village. For example:

- Their cultural heritage is in danger of extinction as a result of the colonial invasion.
- The Achik Mandi language's extinction has been accelerated by the lack of systematic practice.
- Garos are being deprived of their land rights by the forest department in the name of afforestation.
- The influence of modernity is destroying their own way of life.
- They are going to ask the Supreme Court for a settlement of their dispute after losing their political power.
- Consumption of crops based on chemical fertilizers or pesticides is leading to a growing number of complex and new diseases.
- The environment of the mountains is polluted by plastic and polythene.
- The wild elephant attacks have damaged the crops.
- It is hard to transport the products made into a distant market, due to inadequate roads and bridges.
- The Garos are not receiving fair prices, owing to rising number of the greedy merchants.

Probable Solutions

The following solutions are suggested for the abovementioned problems:

- The creation of social awareness in order to protect their cultural heritage.
- In order to protect the language Achik Mandi, government and social measures need to be taken.
- The government should take steps to ensure the rights of Garos on their own territory.
- By counteracting the influence of modernization, we shall take concrete steps to preserve their traditional lifestyle.
- Taking necessary steps to restore their social structure and judicial system.
- Use biofertilizer rather than chemical fertilizers or pesticides.
- To avoid environmental pollution of the hills, to abandon plastic and polythene.
- In order to prevent wild elephant attacks, the Government should take appropriate measures.
- In order to ensure the transport of goods, construction of suitable roads and durable bridges.

- In order to eradicate greedy merchants and give an equitable price for the Garos crops.

Conclusion

The lifestyles of the Garo people in Hariakona village have been significantly influenced by colonial culture invasion and modernization. Each tribe has its own history, tradition, language, culture. The right to live in an area and maintain their own way of life and culture is owned by all native peoples. Colonial cultural invasion usurped that right. The primary task of the British Empire is suppression of native peoples, to consolidate their personal power or hold on to it. In repressing, the colonial power has used various tools. In various ways, the Garo people's own way of life and culture has been systematically destroyed.

In addition to colonial cultural invasion, modernity has played this role. The Garos embraced them as the various elements of modern civilization became readily available. The capitalist market system is working here at the same time. The Garo people have been forced into the trap of the capitalist economy. They have become dependent on the goods coming out of town, after losing their very prosperous way of life. The existence of Garo society was further threatened by this. The social unity of the Garo community was damaged. It destroyed its own judicial system and forced it to bow to state power. Changes in Garo society that occurred as a result of colonial cultural invasion and modernity are the main focus of this research. The research has made a significant contribution in providing effective solutions for the changes and crisis that have occurred within the Garo society.

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Contact email: lanchubangla.jnu@gmail.com