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STATE OF INDIGENOUS CULTURAL PRACTICES AND ROLE OF SCHOOL CURRICULUM: A CASE STUDY OF THE GARO COMMUNITY IN BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

The central purpose of this research paper is to explore the nature and underlying reasons of the decaying cultural practices of the Garo community, a South Asian indigenous group inhabiting in Bangladesh for decades. The leading research question is: 'What are the elements of the Garo's culture in danger and why?'. The Garos have their century long own distinctive language, food habits, dress patterns, and also religion, which is, in many respects, different from the mainstream Bengali cultural practices. Garo language- Achchik Katha, traditional Garo religion- Sangsarek, traditional dress and ornament pattern, food and drink pattern, and nature of being matriarchal and matrilineal in family- are the cornerstones of the Garo culture. However, study unearths that all these traditional and cultural elements and practices of Garo are on the verge of extinction. Children and youths of the new generation know very little about their own culture and, as a consequence, there is a growing tendency among them to be assimilated into the mainstream lifestyles. For many, school curriculum- medium of instruction, contents, pictures, textbooks, background of teachers, language of textbooks- is thought to be one of the major factors behind this cultural loss. The schools, where most of the Garo children attend, are no different from the mainstream schools in any respect; predominance of the Bengali traits and rhetorics is ubiquitous in every component of the curriculum. Contents relating to the Garo or any other indigenous groups are too little to represent these groups of people. In addition, the predominance of the mainstream culture and conversations in the media, literature and entertainment industry, as many Garo people opined, is playing a significant role in the decay of the Garo culture. In other words, the hegemony of the Bengali culture in every sphere of life has made it difficult for all other indigenous cultural elements to survive. Whatsoever, in order to cease any further disappearance of the cultural norms, study suggests, contextual curriculum needs to be introduced which will entail language of certain textbooks and instruction in Garo language, with a particular focus on the religious, historical, traditional and cultural aspects of the community. Establishing a museum exhibiting Garo history, tradition and culture will add some significant values to this effort, which will ensure smooth transfer of necessary knowledge to the newer generations of Garo children. Furthermore, the extent of the representation and presence of the indigenous groups need to be extended in the media, literature and entertainment industries, which will contribute to the enhancement of self esteem and confidence of the Garo children and youths. In doing this research, both qualitative and quantitative data were used from both primary and secondary sources. For primary data, in addition to the interview and FGD, the textbooks of the Primary and Junior Secondary grades have been thoroughly studied.

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KEYWORDS

Contextual Curriculum, Cultural Predominance, Mainstream Culture, School Curriculum.

1 Introduction

Bangladesh is home to 45 indigenous groups with approximately 1.6 million people covering 1.8% of the total population (Census Report, 2011). The Garo, being one of the largest indigenous groups, are based in the north-eastern parts of the country particularly in the districts- Gazipur, Mymensingh, Netrokona, Tangail, Sherpur, Jamalpur and a few in Sylhet adjacent to the Indian border. There are approximately 260,000 Garos in Bangladesh, while, much greater number of Garos live in the Meghalaya, India (Census Report, 2001). Bilingualism is common among most of the Garos as they are supposed to communicate in Bengali along with their own Garo language (Bal, 1999), which is called *Achchik Katha* or *Mandi*. *Sangsharek*, the traditional Garo religion, has been disappeared from the mainstream community of Garo, though practiced by a handful of Garo people in several areas, since most of the Garos have been converted to other religions (Bal, 1999). The Garos are very notable in the South Asian communities for being matriarchal in nature, every Garo follows his or her mother's ancestry and accepts mother's family name. And as per Garos' tradition, men do not receive property from the parents; women inherit all (Chowdhury, 2007). The nature of Garo's residence is matrilineal, husbands move to the wives' house following marriage. However, the traditional practices and rituals of Garo society in regard of language, religion and family structure is on the verge of decline due to the ubiquitously hegemonic presence of Bengali culture. This research aims to investigate the nature of the crumbling state of Garo culture with an extended exploration of the reasons in the light of the perceptions of the Garo people. The focus question of this research study is- 'What are the elements of the Garo's culture in danger and why?'. In conducting this study, data have been collected with both closed ended and open ended questions primarily from interviews and FGDs with people from Garo community and observation of the current school curriculum.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Origin of Garo Ethnic Group in Bangladesh

Garos are a distinct ethnic community in Bangladesh. They are quite careless to know their origin (Burling, 1997). Many of the interviewees told that they are in Bangladesh for a long time because their ancestors also

lived here. However, question arises, what is the particular or real history of the Garos living in Bangladesh? The study found that the vast land where Garos once populated is recognized as Tibet, which lies in the center of Asia. The Garos ancestors lived in a province of Tibet that glided slowly into eastern India and Burma (present Myanmar) from the uplands of the Himalayas and the movement is assumed to have begun as early as 1000 B.C at least and it is thought that Garos developed their settlements there during pre-historical phase (Bal, 1999). With the passage of time, Juming (hill cultivation) or the shifting cultivation started as the traditional method of cultivation, and for this method of cultivation, the vast or large forests were cut down. The Garos thereafter spread towards southwestern side, middle and eastern part of Tibet in search of new area of cultivation. During this period, the Garos started wandering and the tribe broke up into different branches under the leadership of their respective chiefs like Jappa Jalimpa, Sukpa Bonggipa, Auk Raja, Asilik Gitel and Raja Sirampa. A group of Garos crossed the high mountainous regions (Chowdhury, 2007). Moreover, subsequently they moved towards western side of the bank of the river Tista. Later on, they came to the place known as Kalompura now under North-Bengal where they stayed for several years. Again, they moved towards south and occupied a place called Cooch Behar for four hundred years. Before other tribes, Koch and Kacharies who also probably sprung from the great Becho dominated the coming of the Garos probably this land, family to which the Garos belong (ibid). Later on, they settled in Tukeswas hill, situated about three miles west of Krishnai in Goalpara district. In this neighborhood, the Garos appear to have become rich and prosperous. As per the common belief among Garos, a Garo kingdom was founded and Abrasen was its first reigning Prince. The Garos widely spread and occupied the plains and some foothills of Garo hill district. They occupied the plain district of Cooch Behar, Mymensingh, Sylhet, Rangpur, Goalpara, Tangail, Netrokona, Jamalpur, Sherpur in Bangladesh (Bal, 1999).

2.2 Cultural Threats of Garo

The Garos are, as Chowdhury (2007) states, one of the largest ethnic groups and "major ethnic communities" (Islam, 2002) in Bangladesh, and they belong to a different culture, language, belief, dress pattern and food habit. The predominant feature of social relationship of the Garo is the matrilineal family pattern (Islam, 2002).

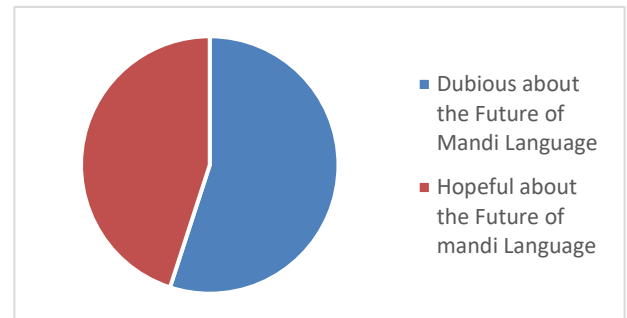
The Garo lifestyle is very primitive; in past Garo male used to wear pagri and gando while female used to wear dokmandi (Playfair, 1998). However, the existing culture, language, and their tradition is in challenging form as, Playfair (1898) found, they have no written document about their history, language, and ethnicity, while, Burling (1997) argues that the constant pressure of the current world- a new outlook regarding agriculture, religion, formal education and the necessity of bilingualism with the trend of increased involvement with different groups are causing challenges for Garo culture, which most of the time happen in family, marriage, religion and culture. In addition, Khaleque (1998) explains that a few small ethnic groups that belong to the category “extri-tribal” have lost their distinct identity, culture, and traditions. They are integrated with the mainstream Bengali society and culture and the pattern of family is in the process of change. The pressure of urbanization, industrialization, education and the Bengali culture in general as well as globalization are the major catalysts of the change process. This paper, for the first time in the academia, reveals the perception of the Garo people about the extinction of their cultural practices. In addition, analysis of the primary and junior secondary curriculum to find out the extent of presence of the indigenous people, particularly the Garo will add some new insights to this field.

3 Methodology

The data were collected in May 2021 with the support of one research assistant. The location of the study was Madhupur Upazila under Tangail district and Kalmakanda Upazila under Netrokona district in Bangladesh. Garo based areas of these sub-districts have been chosen for the study. Primary data were collected through respective field in-depth interviews, FGDs and researcher's observation of the existing school curriculum, whereas through scanning different organizations' annual reports, existing literature like books, journal, articles, newspaper and expert opinion, secondary data were collected. Since the study involves both qualitative and quantitative study, FGD played an important role in understanding the perception of the participants through open ended questions. For FGDs, common places where people usually gather in the afternoon were selected. (N=50) 50 people (25 female and 25 male) were interviewed (who were selected under categories: 30 respondents above 40 years old and 20 respondents in between 25 to 40 years). A total of 3

FGDs held with the elder people of the villages. These FGDs were instrumental in bringing information that were missing in the interviews. The participants for interviews and FGDs were selected through random

Figure 1: Perception of the Garo people about the future



purposive sampling. Since the study was self-sponsored one, the duration and size of data collection is relatively smaller. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected.

4 Findings

4.1 Nature of the Current Cultural Practices

4.1.1 Language

The Garos are distinct from other tribes in Bangladesh in many ways mostly perhaps for their language. The Garo language is known as Mandi or A-chik or sometimes Garo Language. The Mandi language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family (Chowdhury, 2007). According to the respondents, the primary language of communication within the Garo communities is Mandi, while Bengali is the medium of communication outside of their community. Bengali is used as their second language. Though 100% respondents can speak in Mandi, 55% of them are seriously dubious about the future of their language after 20 years because of the predominance of the Bengali language in every sphere of their lives and the absence of writing form of this language.

4.1.2 Religious Beliefs

The traditional religion of Garo is Sangsarek (Sattar, 1975). “The things that we find very powerful are known as Gods. For their satisfaction, we devote or worship them using our rituals”, says an interviewee.

Garos people, as the study found, believe in many of these Gods as sign of fortune, protector from ailments and driving forces of joy and bad luck. They think the Sun, Moon, Stars, Thunder and Rain as the sources of strength. Departed soul of a dead person stays in *MongoSangram* and *Chikmang*, with a chance to meet the souls of relatives. Then the soul stays at *Missal Charms*. And this is where gods will be judging the worldly deeds of the people. After the completion of the judgment, souls would come back to the earth. The soul will return as a man if it is righteous. However, if the person did misdeeds in the past worldly life, he or she would come back to the world as an animal or a tree. Tatar, Saljong, Susime and Calcame are of many Gods worshiped by Garos. As per Garos' belief, only Khamal (priest) has the idea about the presence and doings of the Gods. Therefore, Garo people usually reaches out to the priest (Khamal) for cure of many ailments. People believe that priests (Khamal) are taught different Montro (hymn) in dream (Sattar, 1975). However, 90 percent of the respondents are not practicing the rituals of Sangsarek as many of them have converted to other religions. People are increasingly trying to get merged into the mainstream crowd in terms of religious identity, as thought by a participant in the FGD.

4.1.3 Family Structure

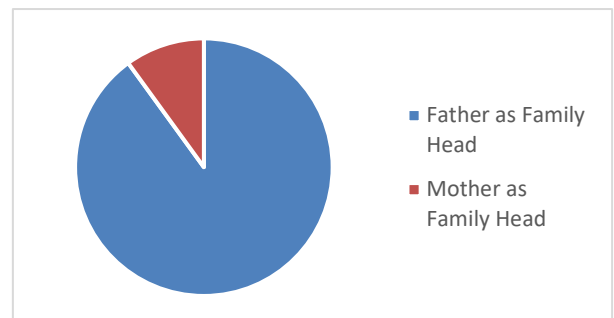
According to the Banglapedia (Islam, 2006), the Garo society is based on kinship with the mother or female line, mothers receive property as heirs, and they lead their respective families as head. Husbands usually manage the family works. As family name, the children take their mother's name. As said by the Garo customs, daughters inherit the family property.

However, in 90 percent respondents' families, fathers are the head, while children are naming by mothers' name in 100 percent families as per their custom. In addition, 100% of the respondents are of the view that the family properties are distributed equally between the all- male and female.

4.1.4 Dress Pattern

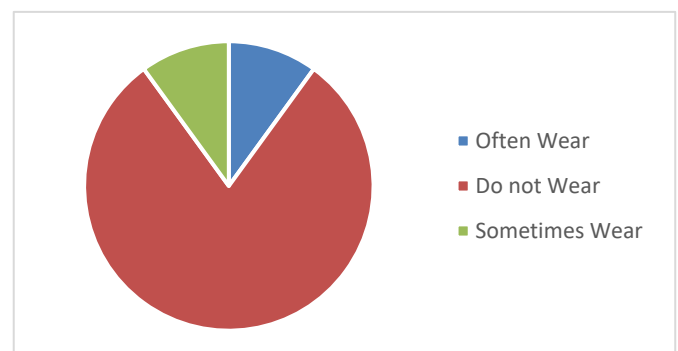
As like as other indigenous groups, Garos also have their own dress pattern. According to Benglapedia, Garos, in the past, used to wear the barks of trees (Islam, 2006). However, the traditional dress of modern day Garo males is *JanaorNengti*, while woven short skirts are preferred the Garo people with a comparatively higher status. The women cover their breast by tying a piece of small fabric

Figure 2: Percentage of the head of family



on their backs. Many women, now a days, prefer to wear Sarees, skirts and Pajamas (trousers). Their outfits hold both spiritual and natural signs i.e., leaves, flowers, eye of Gods, etc. Gando, Katib, Salchak, Marang, Unpon, and Rikingetc are of the popular names of their dress (Sattar, 1975). According to the study, as many as 80% of the respondents do not wear these dresses while only 10% always wears and the rest 10% wears sometimes. Almost all the participants are of the view that the future of their traditional dress in very bleak. In addition to the dress, they put on variety of ornaments. Traditionally Garo women love ornaments very much. In traditional society, every Garo woman wears various types of ornaments. Both men and women make slit/cavity in their body and wear ornaments and most of them are made of bronze. They believe that if they slit many part of their body then evil cannot do them any harm and they will become healthy. For this belief, they make some slit in ear and wear rings. Among the ornaments, Noding, Mantak, Sangon, Gaksudas, Pankanasetc are mentionable. According to the study, as many as 80% of the respondents do not wear the dresses while only 10% always wears and the rest 10% wears sometimes.

Figure 3: Percentage of the people wearing traditional

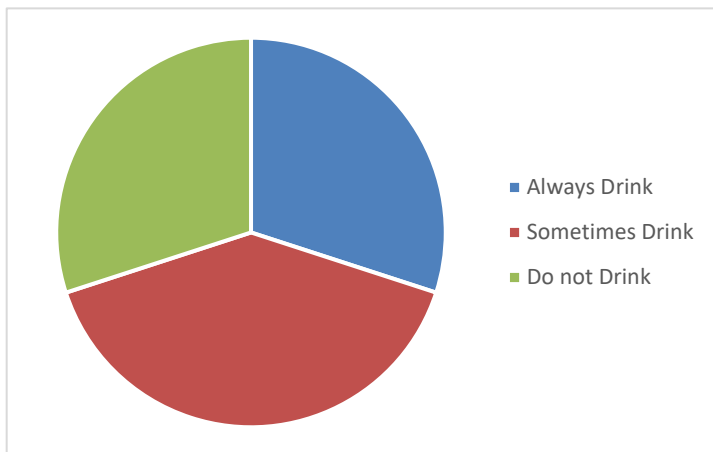


4.2 Food Habit

There is a proverb in the neighboring Bengali communities that ‘Garo eat what they find’ (Sattar: 1975). Benglapedia (2006) reads that there are some overstatements about the food habits of

Garo people; they eat all animals except cat, which is their totem (Islam, 2006). *Chu* is a traditional and favorite food item for the Garo people. They traditionally cannot think of celebrating a occasion or ceremony without drinking *Chu*. Absence of *Chu* means the event is incomplete. This is a monumental drinking item for them. According to the data collected, 30% usually drinks *Chu*, 30% do not drink, while the rest 40% sometimes drink.

Figure 4: Scenario of drinking traditional item- *Chu*



5 Discussion

5.1 Garos’ Perception about the Reasons for Cultural Decay

5.1.1 School Curriculum

According to the villagers, medium of instruction in the school, language of the curriculum and Bengali speaking teachers, which play a significant role in their children’s communication process, are posing substantial threats towards Garo language; school going kids feel comfort to use Bengali and sometimes Garo- Bengali mixed language in their common conversation both outside and within the community. “If a six- or seven-years old kid starts his schooling in Bengali”, a respondent questions, “will it be any difficult for him to shrug off the importance and forget his ancestral language?”. “There is no dedicated book for our children in the school that talks about our tradition and culture. Our next generation

is now becoming unaware of our cultural distinctiveness”- says a participant in an FGD. The textbooks that children read in the schools do not represent Garo culture at all. The picture used and the examples given almost all are from the predominant Bengali culture. Although a very few words written for the indigenous people in the ‘Bangladesh and Global Studies’ subject, according to the Garo people, they are misrepresented there.

5.1.2 Influence of Bengali Culture

Being the mainstream and state language, Bengali appears to be extremely influential in every sphere of life, so are the other components of Bengali culture. “News or documentary about our traditional occasions are hardly telecast in the television or publish in the newspapers”- says a university going interviewee. The participants are of the view that this little or no representation of the Garo people in the media make their children and youths feel marginal. Children and youths are always habituated to see the dress pattern and food items of the Bengali people in the media advertisement, documentary, magazine, drama-movies, and books. The absence of Garo in the mainstream media, as participants in FGD think, creates a sense of periphery among the Garo children about themselves. This factor is leading them to absorb the mainstream culture in their daily lives.

5.1.3 Lack of Conservation

The writing form of the Garo language has been obsolete and gradually getting disappeared. The children and youths have almost no idea about their alphabets. The majority of the participants are of the view that their language may not exist after 20 years, as the writing form is evaporating. There is no initiative in place to conserve the writing form of the Garo language. Other historical and traditional elements are also on the verge of disappearance. Absence of a dedicated museum or books, the participants think, are of the main reasons behind such disappearance and fear of loss of the cultural components.

5.1.4 Representation of Garo in the School Curriculum

Observation of the latest textbooks (circulated in 2021) under the national curriculum for primary and junior secondary grades (grade-I to grade VIII) gives the following (table-1) results. Subjects that can possibly include chapters on the indigenous people and culture were taken under scrutiny. Bangla, English and

Bangladesh & Global Studies (BGS) subjects were the curriculum. observed to find out the presence of the Garo people in

Table-1: Presence of Garo in school curriculum of 2021

Grade	Subjects	Total Chapters	Chapters on Indigenous People	Chapter on Garo	Remarks
I	Bangla	56	-	-	
	English	30	-	-	
II	Bangla	19	-	-	
	English	28	-	-	
III	Bangla	22	-	-	
	English	39	-	-	
	BGS	12	-	-	
IV	Bangla	23	-	-	
	English	42	-	-	
	BGS	16	1	-	
V	Bangla	17	-	-	Under the chapter on indigenous people, discussion on Garo drawn
	English	35	-	-	
	BGS	12	1	1	
VI	Bangla	17	-	-	
	English	35	-	-	
	BGS	13	-	-	
VII	Bangla	20	-	-	
	English	9	-	-	
	BGS	13	1	-	
VIII	Bangla	24	-	-	Under the chapter on indigenous people, discussion on Garo drawn
	English	10	1	-	
	BGS	14	1	1	
Total		506	5	2	

The data in the table-1 exhibits the sheer underrepresentation of the indigenous people, particularly the Garo in the national curriculum. The absolute dominance of the mainstream Bengali culture can be witnessed in every chapter of the textbooks. Nearly 1% chapters deal with indigenous people, whereas small excerpts under the chapters dedicated for indigenous people addressed Garos only for 2 times.

6 Policy Recommendations

Deeper further study to sort out the nature of the decay To sort out the nature and explore the deeply rooted

reasons of this cultural decay, further studies are to be held. The study may examine the extent of presence of the indigenous people in the national curriculum at school level along with the directives of state policies regarding them since the inception of Bangladesh in 1971. The study may include a large sample size including even the Garos living in India.

6.1 Contextual Curriculum

Contextual curriculum is perceived as a localized and pragmatic one drawn in line with the particular sociopolitical climate of the school context (Jansen,

1988). Introduction of a contextual curriculum for the Garo community may develop the situation. The process may include a few ways: a) Adding additional 1-2 textbooks in Garo language which will solely represent Garo's indigenous culture, tradition and history. These additional books will be taught in addition to the existing textbooks or in the place of religion studies in the schools based in Garo community. b) Introducing Bangladesh and Global Studies (BGS) book in multiple formats, each version shedding focus on a particular community or context. c) Creating Garo's language as another medium of instructions along with Bengali in the Garo community schools. This move may play an instrumental role in protecting Garo language. d) Recruiting more teachers from Garo community in the schools operating in the Garo based areas. Moreover, ensuring increased representation and extended presence of the indigenous people in the school curriculum or textbooks will enhance the chance of the survival of indigenous culture and tradition.

6.2 Conservation of Garo Culture

Cultural conservation talks about organized efforts to protect traditional cultural knowledge, customs-rituals, materials and the natural resources. Among them, traditional cultural resources i.e., vernacular architecture, sacred landmarks, ethnic foodways, and folk arts are tangible in nature (Nolan, 2006). Building museum may be a way out to conserve the cultural elements of Garo, which will allow their upcoming generations to know about their roots. In addition, producing books focusing on the distinctiveness of the Garo community and their civilization may be a good source of records for the future generations.

7 CONCLUSION

Main cultural components of Garo are under a serious threat of extinction. New generation of this community is being influenced severely by the mainstream Bengali culture. Absence of contextual curriculum, underrepresentation in the media and lack of initiatives for cultural conservation are of the main reasons, as Garo people think, behind this status quo. The extent of presence of Garo people in the national curriculum is also concerning. However, Government initiatives in line with community expectations can evaporate the fear of losing Garo cultural traditions.

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