

# Society and Economy in North-East India

Volume 2

**Editor**  
**FOZAIL AHMAD QADRI**

Thirteenth to Eighteenth centuries constitute a very crucial phase of the history of North East India. Many significant developments took place during this period and, hence deserve the attention of historians to a great degree. Unfortunately, several consequential areas have remained unattended. Most of the studies done so far center around and focus on political and cultural developments. The Department of History, North-Eastern Hill University has always considered the socio-economic context in which various institutions emerged and developed as a *desideratum* of it's thrust area for research activities.

In the present volume, scholars of the region as well as outside it have tried to focus their attention on society and economy for an integrated view of the socio-economic, cultural and political history of the region. Each theme covered by the essays can be developed in full length studies in course of time by the contributors themselves or other scholars, for which the sources and the methods of enquiry and analysis have been indicated by the respective scholars.

**Rs. 750/-**  
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IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

VOLUME 2

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# SOCIETY AND ECONOMY IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

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Editor

Fozail Ahmad Qadri



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## Foreword

The period from 13th to 18th century A.D. was crucial in the precolonial phase of the history of North East India due to the emergence of states within the regions and the attempts of the Turko-Afghan and Mughal rulers of Bengal and Delhi to extend sway over the region. The Koch, Jaintia, Dimasa, Tripuri and the Meitei states emerged from the indigenous social base. Most of these included both plains and hills inhabited by different ethnic groups, while the Ahoms established a state in the Brahmaputra Valley by conquest. The origins of the Meitei (Manipuri) and the Tripuri states are dated much earlier than the 13th century, but they bloomed into the statehood in this period. Similar is the case with the Jaintia state. The Dimasas had experienced the rudiments of state formation processes in the Sadiya region of the Brahmaputra Valley, but the state under them was more or less confined to the Dhansiri Valley, with the headquarters at Dimapur, in the 13th-14th century when they came into contacts, and eventually conflicts, with the Ahoms. The Koch state also began to emerge in about 13th century A.D. after the decline of Kamarupa. All these states were monarchies or kingdoms in nature. They generated socio-economic influences for the societies within the states, and the areas outside the states were also directly or indirectly influenced by those factors that caused the rise, consolidation and growth of the states. The chieftaincies — outside the states, also internalized some of these changes. The Khasi *hima* or syiemships were political organizations of their own type; in fact, unique in many respects, but the state formation processes were certainly on-going within the type till the colonial interventions. The Mizo chiefships also showed tendencies towards state formations. The impact was equally clear in cases of the Nagas and the Arunachali tribes in the hills bordering the Brahmaputra

Valley. Some of these non-state polities also could have perhaps eventually emerged as states had the indigenous polity formation processes not been artificially arrested by the British colonial interventions in the beginning of the 19th century.

The society and economy experienced major changes in this period — the Mughal Rule in Bengal and Lower Assam and then the rise of the authority of the English East India Company in Bengal in the 18th century were also important contributing factors, besides the formations of states and polities at the local levels. The Srihattarajya in the Barak-Surma Valley eclipsed in this period; the lower part of the valley passed under the successive rule of the Turgo-Afgans and then Mughals, and finally, the East India Company, with the rest of Bengal, while only the upper portion of the valley, namely, the Cachar plains, formed part of the Tripuri state, Khaspur state and the Dimasa state in rapid succession before the British annexation. These factors generated indirect motivation and specific influences in matters of administrative and institutional changes within the region. The Bhakti-Sufi impact on the society in the plains was significant in many respects; the universal appeal of love and brotherhood associated with the rise of neo-vaishnavite movement of Srimanata Sankaradeva in the Brahmaputra Valley and the Gauriya Vaisnavism of Srichaitanya Mahaprabhu in the Barak-Surma Valley, and the influence of Azan Fakir in Brahmaputra Valley and of Hajarat Shah Jalal in the Barak-Surma Valley, and the works of many other Sufi saints were wonderful factors of humane social development. The long and short distance trade, particularly the hills-plains economic relationship through trade for which strings of markets emerged in the foothills and the borders between political formations, is another important area of historical interest. In fact, trade and trade-routes across the region and with the neighbouring countries had evoked British interest in the region in 18th century, which ultimately resulted in the colonization of North East in the 19th century.

A national seminar organized by the department of History, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, on 'society and economy in North East India during 13th to 18th Century', on March 3-5, 2003, addressed the issues outlined above by involving the in-house scholars of NEHU and selected experts from other institutions and Universities in the country. The seminar was in

continuation of the one held in March 2002 on the same theme for the period ending roughly in 13th century A.D., the proceedings of which have already been published as *Society and Economy in North-East India, Volume 1*, edited by Professor Mignonette Momin and Dr. Cecile A. Mawlong. We are now introducing *Society and Economy in North-East India, Volume 2*, of the same series, and contains revised versions of the selected papers that were presented in the second seminar. Our colleague, Professor F.A. Qadri, who was the convenor of that seminar, has edited the volume with remarkable affection and care. We expect this volume also to be appreciated by a wide circle of readership, like our earlier publications, and to inspire further research in the history of North East India. It is my pleasure to inform that Volume 3 (19th–20th century) of series, which emerges out of our third national seminar on the theme held in March 2004, is also almost ready. We look forward to the responses and comments of the experts on our volumes on *Society and Economy in North-East India*, which is a thrust area for us under the Special Assistance Programme (DRS) of the University Grants Commission.



**(J.B. Bhattacharjee)**

Coordinator

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NEHU, Shillong  
25th March, 2005

## Editors' Note

The vastness and variety of source material for the history of Pre-Colonial Northeast India is by now acknowledged. The Persian chronicles along with *Firman*, *Akhbarat*, etc. for the study of the Sultans of Bengal and the Mughals *vis-à-vis* Northeast India, *Buranjis* for the Ahoms and some other neighbouring groups, *Manipuri Puias*, including *Cheitarol Khumbaba* and *Laitarol Lumbaba* for Manipur, *Rajmala* for Tripura and a variety of epigraphic and numismatic evidences which constitute the chief source of information for constructing the history of the period, there is non-political literature of different type: folk-tales, folk-songs, sufi *Maktubat* (epistles) and *Malfuzat* (collection of conversations) including hagiographies, besides these there are also travel accounts in foreign languages like French, Dutch and Portuguese. There are scores of surviving oral traditions in a variety of language in the length and breadth of the region which are now being used by historians, anthropologists, sociologists and other social scientists. With the changes that have taken place in the historiographical concepts, it has become imperative for a modern historian to tap and utilize as many as varied sources of information for the study as it is possible. In the present volume readers and scholars are going to encounter a fair combination of all these sources of information.

The essays in this volume are the revised version of papers that were presented in a National Seminar held in March 2003 that covered society and economy in the region 13th-18th centuries. It was a part of a series of seminars organized by the Department of History, North-Eastern Hill University under the ongoing UGC-SAP-DRS programme. The present volume is second in the series of publications on Society and Economy in North-East India. In her essay, 'Trends, Possibilities and Problems in

History Writing in North East India: Economy and Society in 13th–18th Centuries', Manorama Sharma has made an attempt to focus on the works which are representative of the historiographic trends. She, however, maintains that most of these works are in imperialistic or nationalistic traditions and stresses the need to examine and write history from people's perspective drawing from other contemporary sources reflective of the socio-economic conditions. Mignonette Momin in her, 'Socio-economic Linkages in the Decline of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa', ascribes the decline of the state to the lack of political acumen of the individual rulers, expanding agrarian economy with various tribal groups, their political assertion leading to the emergence of new ruling families in the Lauhitya region like the Chutiyas, Bhuiyas and the Koches. She has examined the emergence of these kingdoms and the parallel decline of Kamarupa-Pragjyotisha. J.B. Bhattacharjee in his essay on 'Economic Dimension of Meitei State Formation in Manipur' delves into the theoretical formulations on the role of economy in state formation and situates the factors in the context of state formations in Northeast India contending that surplus generation, extraction and redistribution was a common factor in state formation in almost all cases. He contends that despite the paucity of sources, a careful analysis of the recorded data reveals that the process in Manipur was not different from the pan-Indian model of state formation. J.B. Ganguly's essay, 'Economic Aspects of State Formation Process in Medieval Tripura' highlights the state formation in Tripura under the chiefs belonging to the Tripuri tribe and examines the transition from the primitive communal mode of production to a tribute paying mode, according to the author was as the most crucial in the process.

T. Gurung in her essay, 'Emergence of Ahom Monarchy in Upper Assam' examines the role of the three principal ideological influences i.e. kinship, caste and the neo-vaishnavite ideology in the functioning of the Ahom monarchy and concludes that the neo-vaishnavite ideology finally proved to be the alternative to two other ideologies as the Ahom monarch patronized the Satras as the focal point of social organization. 'Agrarian Dynamics and Technology in the Ahom State' by Sanjeeb Kakoty traces the surplus generation of the Ahom state to their unique technology as found in the study of plough used for cultivation of rice, which is the staple grown principally by the people.

C.L. Imchen in, 'Historical Reconstruction of the Relations Between the Nagas and the Valley Kingdoms' has made an attempt to reconstruct the Naga socio-political systems that developed in tandem with the formation of kingdoms in the neighbouring valley. By using oral and ethnographical data on the basis of a comparative analysis with the tribes of Africa, which he concludes more or less have many resemblances. S.K. Bose in 'Ao Naga and Their Medium of Exchange' examines the status of Naga economy and the medium of exchange prevailing in the Naga economic organization. A.K. Thakur's, 'Aspects of Socio-Political Formations in Pre-Colonial Arunachal Pradesh' examines the role of technology in the evolution of pre-colonial socio-economic and political formations with particular reference to the technology of defense and agricultural technology.

Caroline R. Marak in 'Pre-Colonial Economy and Society of the Garos' outlines the self-sufficient economy of the Garos and their later dependence on outside world and provides glimpses of their social life. Sangkima's 'Economy and Society of Pre-Colonial Mizoram,' is based on British records and the non-conventional alternative folklore materials. He contends that the economy was based on shifting cultivation and the life was migratory. Kamaluddin Ahmed attempts to reconstruct the social and economic life of the area in, 'Society and Economy in Medieval Barak-Surma Valley.' He also highlights the socio-economic forces, production relations and the political super-structure which created distinct nature and levels of social formations resulting in the division of the valley into two social patterns in the upper and the lower valleys. V. Ruata Rengsi has attempted an analysis of the problem of the surplus generation and technology in primitive societies and contends that in the Mizo society the nature of technology and ecology under normal conditions generally afforded a certain amount of surplus food in his essay, 'Surplus Appropriation and Power Structure in Mizo Social Formation.' Sahabuddin Ahmed defines the linguistic status of the area in his, 'Literary and Cultural Traditions of Medieval Barak-Surma Valley' in the context of Northeast and examines how far the literary traditions of the area was influenced by the geographical proximity with Bengal. He also surveys major Sanskrit and Bengali works by the local scholars and highlights the impact of Arabic and Persian traditions noticeable in the local writings.

Imtiaz Ahmad's 'Some Aspects of Economy and Society in Medieval Assam' makes a brief survey of two Persian sources not sufficiently interpreted and fully utilized by historians. He maintains that these sources are not free from bias and indicate some amount of arrogance on the part of the authors but provide invaluable information about which the local sources are silent. S.Z.H. Jafri's 'Agrarian Society and Local Administration in Cooch Behar and Assam During 17th-18th Century' examines the society and economy of the region on the basis of Persian sources. It also examines the management of the Mughal occupied areas in the region through local officials. Jahnabi Gogoi Nath in her essay on, 'Temple Girls of Assam: Their Role in the Society' discusses the kinds of temples in Assam which maintained temple girls and their role in the society. Drawing from a number of epigraphic evidences, the author traces the evolution of the system in Assam in context of social patterns and values in the region. Punyadhar Gogoi in 'Sericulture in Assam: A Historical Perspective' explains the socio-economic conditions of the silk growers, patronage of the Ahom kings and variety of silk worms and social categories engaged in the process of silk-worm rearing.

D.R. Syiemlieh is concerned with the role of markets in polity formations among the Khasi-Jaintia people and the geographical locations of the markets facilitating the control of markets and trade routes which were crucial in the process in his essay, 'Control of Foothills: Khasi-Jaintia Trade And Markets in late 18th Century'. S.N. Pandey's essay, 'Manipur in the Eighteenth Century' explains how the adoption of Vaishnavism was important for the Meitei rulers to get an ideology legitimizing the rule of Garib Nawaz, whose claim to the throne was contested by others. It also explains that the new Meitei society based on principles of caste and hierarchy assimilated and preserved some of the traditional Meitei customs. F.A. Qadri in his essay, 'Sufis and the Process of Islamisation in Pre-Colonial North East India' highlights the role of the Sufis, their philosophy of union, belief in non-violence and rejection of worldly needs in the process of Islamisation in the region. He argues that the immigrant Muslims played a significant social role in Bengal and Assam during pre-Colonial times, as it provided some binding force of authority, stability and assurance to people, who remained for long, 'sheep without a spiritual

shepherd.' Sufi traditions syncretised with local traditions and the Sufis adopted local language as the medium of interaction.

There were many more papers presented in the seminar which are not included in the present volume as we did not receive the revised version within the extended time. Most of the contributors are professional historians. While few are members of the History faculty, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, others are colleagues from other Universities and colleges and two of them are friends from related discipline. I extend my thanks to them for meeting the methodical requirements and submitting the papers within the stipulated deadline. Professor D.R. Syiemlieh, Head of the Department of History, NEHU, took the trouble of maintaining communication with the publishers at every stage of preparation of this volume. I am thankful to him and other members of the editorial board — Professors J.B. Bhattacharjee, Mignonette Momin and Manorama Sharma for their valuable advice in the course of editing this volume. All credit goes to them for the publication and I extend my gratitude to them. Errors in the editing, if any are my making. A special word of thanks to Mr. Abraham Nongbet for excellent typing of the manuscript of this volume.

The financial assistance for the publication of this volume has been provided by the Department of History, NEHU, Shillong, from the funds of UGC-SAP-DRS. I wish to put this debt on record. I am also thankful to Regency Publications, New Delhi, for bringing out this volume so promptly.

F.A. Qadri

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# Pre-Colonial Economy and Society of the Garos

Caroline R. Marak

Folktales and legends of Garos indicate that, except for salt they were self-sufficient to a great extent. Their stories speak of long journeys from the hills for several days especially by men, to the markets in the plain to purchase salt. The rivers and streams were full of fish, shrimps and crabs. They smoked the fish but they also bought dry fish from the markets. Smoked or fresh fish is an indispensable item in the *Agalmaka*<sup>1</sup> ceremony of the *jhum* cycle, which is offered to the goddess Minima Kiri Rokkime and used in the feast. Saka Misi Saljong and Minima Kiri Rokkime are deities who bless the farm; the latter blesses her devotees with paddy and fish, as she comes with the rain-bearing clouds from the sea. To a small degree the Garos made use of a *sim* (salt springs), which the animals frequented. In the recent history there is no reference to extraction of black salt, but linguistic evidence shows that black salt (*karisim*) might have been obtained locally.

Being a farming community they traveled from Tibet with their leaders Jappa Jalimpa, Supa Bonggepa carrying their agriculture tools and implements, along with the yak tails and other valuables, playing musical instrument like tambourine, bells and cymbals.<sup>2</sup> Their legends say that the primary cause of their departure from their ancestral homes in Tibet was the failure of crops.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of their migration was to find new places for farming and as they grew weary of migration over hundreds of years they longed to settle permanently in suitable areas. As they moved from one place to another they carried on *jhum* cultivation, clearing forests and

jungles. They settled permanently in some areas like Habraghat, in Goalpara, Kamrup, Sibsagar districts, in Tripura and East Bengal. But the non-Garos invariably came and occupied the lands they had cleared and cultivated them. This took place in East Bengal and in Assam too.<sup>4</sup>

Till 1822 and after, the plains of Habraghat were not in the control of Zamindars, but belonged to the local people (Garos). Habraghat Perganah, Mechpara, Kalumalupara, Singimari, Karaibari, Putimari, Rohmari lands were under the control of independent Garo Sardars.<sup>5</sup> E.T. Dalton in his book *The Tribal History of Eastern India* (1846) says that the territory between the northern latitudes 250 and 260 belonged to the Garos. They had the Perganahs of Habraghat, Mechpara, Kalumalupara, Karaibari, all of the Goalpara district lying between them and the Brahmaputra; and to the South, Sherpur, Susung, Durgapur, the areas of Nalitbari, Habraghat, Kulmakanda and Shribordi.<sup>6</sup>

There is evidence that the Garos took to wet cultivation long before the British took possession of Assam. In recognition of their settled cultivation the lands of some Garo Sardars were awarded as *Lakraj* lands in Goalpara district. More lands in Rangpur and Mymnesingh were settled as *Lakraj* by Udhan Shuk Bahadur in favour of the Garos in 1825 during the period of Muhamadans with separate maps and documents for each *Lakraj*. These lands included Sherpur Parganas.<sup>7</sup> Francis Hamilton in his *An Account of Assam* compiled between 1807–1814 lists the Garo territories of Kamrup as follows—1. Baraduyar unit the Rajah's residence at Bhogpur and with a market place at Kukuriya to which the independent Garos bring salt that they purchase at Rajhat in Jaintya and at Laur (Laour R) in the district of Srihatta (Sylhet R). The road from Laur passes through the territory of a Garo Chief named Koiram, who borders on Susangga<sup>8</sup> (Susung R). To the west of Koiram is the territory of Ganeshwar Raja (Gonaser R), a nephew of the Raja of Koroyivari (Currybary R). Others are Mairapur, which is between Bhokgram and Baraduyar. Lukiduyar is to the West of Gauhati, bordering on the independent Garos. Pantan and Bongram territories are close to Bengal. Vagaduyar is to the south of Pantan. The Rajah of Bholagram is a Mech, a community with a close racial and linguistic affinity to the Garos. All of these Rajahs paid tribute to Assam only for their low-lands. The chief of

Lukiduyar was of Garo family but converted by the Brahmans and received spiritual instructions from them.

Most of the tributary Rajas on the southern side of the Brahmaputra were of Garo origin. The Ahom kings contented themselves with a moderate tribute and conciliated the friendships of the independent mountaineers by a free commercial intercourse. Hamilton is of the opinion that in the west and south the case must be similar during the Government of the Koch and the Moguls. Hamilton studied the causes of the deprivation of the Garos of their territories and of the head hunting expeditions of the independent mountaineers to the plains; and their deep-seated indignation. No sooner, however, could be the Bengalese Zamindars call to their assistance the terror of the British arms, than they seem to have made violent encroachments on the poor Garos, whose only arms are bows, swords and spears, all of a very imperfect kind... the terror of their name, exploited by the people (Zamindars), considered as officers of the Company was sufficient. The most exorbitant exactions have been made on every Garo, who comes to the Company's territories to exchange his commodities; and the chiefs, who possessed lands that were accessible, have been either driven entirely from there, as from the large space between the mountains on one side, and Kalamalupara and Mechpara on the other; or they have been rendered not only tributary, but mere ciphers, as in Hawaraghat. It is even alleged that by far the best villages and largest portion of that district are recent *violent usurpations* from a Garo Chief.<sup>9</sup>

The cause of the deep-seated indignation resulting in frequent violence at the borders was stated by Hamilton: "on several occasions of gross violence they had therefore recourse to arms, and have frequently alarmed the kites by whom they have injured.....a late imprudent attempt of the Zamindar of the former place to increase the exactions taken at the markets also produced an invasion and several assassinations, the terror of which has depopulated the best part of his lands". He believed that Vijn Raja, against whom the complaints were so strong, might have been attacked, had it not been for detachment of sepoy's at Yogighopa. The Garos, independent as they were, and unwilling to submit to any authority, never approached the British against the Zamindars, which was the sole authority to which they could

with propriety complain.<sup>10</sup> Although Hamilton wrote that "the whole of the conduct of the Zamindars towards the Garos seems, therefore, to require serious investigation".<sup>11</sup> The circumstances, which followed, showed that no impartial inquiry and justices were done to the Garos.

With the active support of the English East India Company, the Bijni Zamindar encroached upon the land and extended his boundaries to Dilma, Konchikol, Resu, Rohamari systematically at the end of the century. Sonaram R. Sangma wrote in his diary in 1905 how his family, once prosperous with many tenants and servants under it, was reduced to poverty by systematic deprivation and loss of the paddy lands. From 1900 to 1911 Sonaram R. Sangma, the first national leader of the Garos moved the British Government against Bijni Zamindar for the restoration of the territories that belonged to the Garos, especially Nazaranah Mahals and Lakhranj lands, but the British Raj denied justice to the Garos.<sup>12</sup> The loss of the vast agricultural lands was an unmitigated blow to the economy of the Garos.

## Markets

It was the Garo women called Nengre Mechik and Dire Tira, of E. ring Raja and Dising Gitel, who took the initiative to establish markets, when their economic condition improved, at Sengkadik Wakmetom and Matia Panchia at Kamrup District.<sup>13</sup> In the hills the Garos established a well-known market, called Dimrim Bri Palwang A. ding in the folklore. There is a legend that a wealthy chief Munpa Sanepa founded a market at Samegaru and Chekjongbra.<sup>14</sup> According to the story, it was at this market that a trader showed him *rangs* (gongs). The *rangskal-rangjogi* with supernatural powers caused dizziness and illness to Munepa. Only when sacrificial offerings were made with a rooster the chief recovered.<sup>15</sup> Various types of *rangs* made of brass and bell metal are greatly valued by the Garos as by Khasis, their neighbours. Playfair notes their "attachment of sentimental value"<sup>16</sup> to the gongs. Possession of *rangs* is one of the yardsticks by which wealth of a man is measured; it determines his status in the society. The dead body of a chief is laid in the bed of gongs, a custom which has become extremely rare now. Gongs were also the medium exchange, and till the recent decades, they were used as items if

mortgage against loans in certain areas. During the age of the barter system vows and gongs were the media of exchange. This is found in one episodes of the Garo epic poetry 'Kata doka' where 12 kine and 12 gongs were offered to purchase the hero Dikki when he was sold as a slave.<sup>17</sup> Francis Hamilton wrote that the Nuniya (or Dugol) and Kochinasindiya sections of the Garo tribe who live on the borders of Assam and progressed further in their society. He said "Some among them are merchants and trade in slaves, salt and silver, while others are artists and work in iron, brass and precious metals. In contrast the Achik and Abeng sections are all cultivars who practice some rude arts; they have no other commerce except exchanging the produce of their farms for consumer articles".<sup>18</sup> In the more recent period Narayan rupee minted by the Cooch Behar kings was used. In 1847 when the coins issued by the Company were introduced in the markets, it gives rise to suspicious and conflicts between the Garos and the traders.

There were markets on the southern borders where John Eliot, the Joint Magistrate of Mymeising who was sent on a mission of inspection of the frontiers by Lord Cornwallis, first made his acquaintances in the markets in the cold season of 1788–1789. The Garos brought to the markets cotton, lac, maynas and parrots, plantains or bananas, maize, melon, chilies, grains and rubber, aromatic herbs, all which would fetch fat prices in the markets of Bengal and Assam. Captured elephants, falcons, agar and *tezpatta* were also obtained from them. In turn, he Garos purchased earrings, pottery, umbrellas, bread, cloth, sugar, bulls, cocks, or capons.<sup>19</sup> William Carey notes the growing popularity of articles from the market, or rather the dependence of the Garos on those readily available articles in the markets in place of those made locally, like pottery and clothes.

The British as well as the Zamindars were more interested in cotton than in any other item. Pemberton writes that the intercourse with Cossyas and Garos has always been intimate and friendly. They frequented all the fairs both on the Sylhet and Assam side of the hills, and the revenue from the taxes levied upon them was very considerable. Describing the trade through Goalpara, he listed among the reports of Assam the items which must have come to Garo Hills, at least a part of it — cotton (with seed), 7000 maunds worth Rs. 35,000 and stick-lac 10,000 maunds worth Rs. 35,000.<sup>20</sup> Their cotton, white as snow, and carried down to the markets in

huge *jengges*<sup>21</sup> along paths of the difficult contitry for 4 or 5 days, were in great demand for textile manufacture and quilts:

In the neighbouring district, Million of ryot made their clothing, thread and quilts from the cotton grown on the Garo Hills and Bengali, merchants were as eager to buy as the Garos were to barter for their needs. The Chaudris levied duties from both parties and reaped a lucrative harvest.<sup>22</sup> The Chaudris, practically independent, became powerful zamindars with great estates during the mughals period. "They established markets for the Garo cotton, by which their revenue was still further swelled, and kept the passes with an armed force, as much in their own interest as in fulfillment of their contract with the imperial power."<sup>23</sup>

The origin of cotton cultivation in Garo Hills is told by a folklore, which narrates the felling of an ancient gigantic cotton tree by Gonga on the bank of the river Ildek. It is said that the branches of the tree fell on the A. beng area; therefore it is the A. bengs who produce more cotton. Gonga taught people how to spin and make clothes, to make ropes and nets to catch fish.<sup>24</sup>

In the hills the Garos continued to obtain enough grains, vegetables and fruits as to be self-sufficient as long as the land was fertile and the gap in the *jhum* cycle was prolonged. They developed many varieties of paddy, like *sarang* (early variety), *changing* (late variety) and *mima gorim*, the best variety. Different varieties of millet and maize, arums and beans including soyabean, tapioca, mendu (arhar dal), sesame, ginger, chilies, brinjal, pumpkin, varieties of gourd, ladies fingers, *mejak* (a vegetable of the mustard family) and types of sorrel, were cultivated in the *jhum* field. Jackfruit, mangoes, tamarind, *angkil* (a kind if plum), pomela, varieties of citrus fruits like *chinara*, *te.matchi*, *chambil*, *kampil*, *atoll*, *sokmil* were some of the fruits trees to be found in their villages. Out of the rice, millet and a few other grains beer was brewed. For seasoning they used ginger, chilies, and *karchi* (alkali) obtained from plantain trunks. With the staple diet of grains, they ate a lot of animal food, like beef, pork, venison, fish, shrimps, tortoise, crabs, chickens. To a limited extent they hunted deer, barking deer, wild fowl and hogs etc. for food. In fact, the hills produced so much food that Wangala festivities lasted a week or more in a single village, where much *chu* (rice beer) was consumed, and cooked with meat was distributed to the whole congregation. As a part of the ceremony, cooked steaming rice

was thrown in all directions in the Nokma's house and outside in imitation of hailstones. The stalled bulls for slaughtering in the Wangala were kept at the *agrang* in the *nokkra* (porch). Most of the sacrificial offerings and *amua* ceremonies to heal the sick demanded the sacrifice of goats, pigs or fowl; in the funerals, all the bulls brought by relatives in honour of the dead were killed; in the case of a well known Nokma who died a few years ago in Garo Hills, the number killed was about fifty. These practices, wasteful and uneconomic in our present point of view, took root in the distant past when the society knew no want. There are legends about Bonepa Janepa and Abing Noga, two chiefs who became very wealthy when they made *jhum* farms in the central highlands of Garo Hills. Abing or Abong was so prosperous and powerful that he began to enslave his own people settled all over the present Garo Hills. His servants, in revolt, buried one of his daughters in a mountain of paddy, and he himself was killed by his acquaintances in an act of treachery.<sup>25</sup> It is said that the Garos were not interested in the river valleys for paddy land, because the traditional *jhum* in the hills produced a surplus. On account of this much of the valleys, especially in west Garo Hills, are occupied by Koches.

Fibre was also obtained from *kilkra* tree (*Celtis orientalis*), which was used to make strings and ropes. A kind of warm blanket was made from the bark of *pakkram* tree (*Grewia lilioe folia*). Yarn for weaving was spun from the locally produced cotton, and dyed with the locally prepared vegetable dyes. The vegetable dyes too were used to paint wood-carvings in the *Nikpante* (bachelors' dormitory), in the Nokma's house, and the *kima* (memorial post erected for the dead). All the building materials were obtained from the forest; the timber of *bolsal* (*sal*), *boldak* (*Schima walichii*), *bolong* (*Cyathocalyx martabanicas*), *chagro* and other trees made the posts and beams; flattened lengths of bamboos like *wa*, *nok*, *wa.sim*, *wa.bok* and *wa.ge* were woven into a raised floor, walls, racks, etc. The houses normally consisted of bedrooms, kitchen, living room, porch, three verandahs, storeroom, and *kaldik* (toilet for use at night only). There were sheds for pigs, cows, fowls, goats, etc. during the farming season, a family normally lived in the *jamadal*, a house constructed in the *jhum* field itself, complete with an enclosure for garbage, called *kalbong*, *Bor.ang*, a watch house on a tall, sturdy tree away from animals and birds as well as for

sheltering the farmers. A device known as *wa.kap* fixed at the edge of the field was attached with long canes or ropes to the *bo.rang* to frighten of the predators. Thatching grass was available in plenty for the roof; in fact the people were so attached to it that in recent years, the introduction of C.I. Sheet for roofing was resisted in certain villages. Granaries of a village were constructed at one selected place, a little distance away from residential houses, so that, in case of fire, the grains would be safe. *Wage*, sacred to the gods, and *gambare* were ordinarily spared from use for construction and firewood; the former because it was used for making sacrificial altars, and the latter was hewn into ceremonial drums. In the construction there was no need for any metal nails or wires, as strips of bamboo called *du.a* or *wading* made fast the component parts. For *dosadeka* and *dokaku* (wood carving) *gambare* was found to be the best. Musical instruments were made of wood, bamboo, cane, buffalo, horn and skins of animals.

Percussion, wind and stringed instruments were made of *gambare*, *wasim*, *wage* or *wa.nok*; *sepi* (shield) was carved out of timber, or woven with bamboo and cane *kangsari* (shield) was made of skin. Two sources of metal tools and implements are mentioned in the folktales—in the east are the Dikil blacksmiths, and in the west, Singimari. In East Garo Hills there are Garo blacksmiths to this day. A type of clay known as *a chi* was used for making earthen jar and cooking pots before the Garos became dependent on metal utensils available in markets. This art survives to this day at Siju and interior villages in South Garo Hills. Both women and men were engaged in this occupation. *Reking* and *gando* were locally woven and decorated with rows of beads made of bones. *Ba.ra marang* of scarlet colour was used for ceremonial purposes. They made their own *mil.am sword*, *sel.u (axe)*, bows and arrows according to individual needs. They developed three types of guns, known as *chandal*, *manggot*, *chandal chkorak* and *chandal mekop* had a hole to light the gunpowder. These guns were used at the Arbela plateau, Rombagre, Gondenggre, Chiwakgre and Na.regre village. One of these types of gun is in the collection of the District Museum in Tura. Baskets of all kinds, winnowing fans and furniture were mostly made of cane and bamboo. For mortar and pestle, *gambare* and *kimde* respectively were preferred.

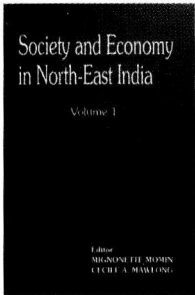
## Conclusion

This account, though very incomplete, attempts to give an idea of the social and economic life of the Garos roughly till the 19th c. in retrospect, it may be seen that the chequered history of the Garos show their strengths and weaknesses as a community. Economically they became increasingly dependent on outside materials during the period prior to the British occupation, and as education and conversion advanced, which exposed them to other cultures more than any other factors. Much of the local industry suffered on account of the market economy and easy availability of consumer goods from outside. The tribe and its chiefs showed little awareness of the need for unity against common enemy for their survival as a community. Illiteracy cost them dear; much of the usurpation of their lands and murder of their chiefs can be traced to their lack of literacy and learning. The awareness of nationhood and feeling of oneness was for the first time brought by Sonaram R. Sangma, who gleaned support from his community of the whole District in his movement for the restoration of the lands, which formerly belonged to them, especially the Nazarana Mahals. Lack of political awakening and organization was also responsible for the loss of their lands. There was no organized effort at national level to resist the encroachments, as also to oppose the British occupation. The unifying process followed in the wake of the freedom of their national identity. Even at this stage, more than a hundred years after the introduction of schools and exposure to learning, the Garos of Meghalaya have made no effort to know the rest of their community outside their state, though on their own other groups are making progress, as in Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh.

## END NOTES

1. Agalmaka — a sacrificial ceremony performed early in the morning after burning of the jhum.
2. J.D. Marak, *Garó History*, Tura, Reprint, 1982, p. 3.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 2., Rongmuthu, D.S. *Apasong Agana*, Tura, Reprint, 1997, p. 200.
4. Rongmuthu, D.S. *Apasong Agana*, pp. 184, 185; Tura 1998; M.N. Sangma. *Unpublished Document on Garo Affairs*, p. 16.
5. M.N. Sangma. *Unpublished Document on Garo Affairs*, pp. 24, 25.
6. E.T. Dalton, *Tribal History of Eastern India*, Delhi, Reprint, 1978, p. 58.

7. M.N. Sangma. op. cit., p. 33.
8. Francis Hamilton, *An account of Asam*, Guwahati, Reprint 1963, p. 30.
9. Ibid., p. 86.
10. Ibid., p. 87.
11. Ibid., p. 87.
12. M.N. Sangma. pp. 29, 43.
13. J.D. Marak, p. 10.
14. Ibid., pp. 30, 31.
15. Ibid., p. 32.
16. A. Playfair, *The Garos*, New Delhi, Reprint 1978, p. 86.
17. Marak, L.R. Dikki I, p. 11.
18. F. Francis Hamilton, p. 90.
19. William Carey, *Garo Jungle Book*, Reprint, New Delhi, 1977, pp. 30-35.
20. R.B. Pemberton. *The Eastern Frontier of British, India*, Reprint, Guwahati, 1963, pp. 79-80.
21. Jengge-baskets made of bamboo strips about 8ft. long.
22. William Carey, p. 29.
23. Ibid., p. 28.
24. D.S. Rongmuthu, p. 152.
25. Ibid., p. 192.

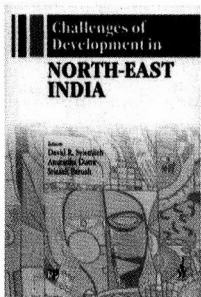


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