

# THE GAROS IN TRANSITION

P. C. KAR



This book deals with the socio-economic changes in the life of the Garos, a matrilineal tribe of Eastern India, from the point of view of Economic Anthropology.

Discussing initially the importance of Economic Anthropology in the study of primitive people in transition and making a systematic study of the traditional Garo society and economy the author explains how at the growing crisis of shifting cultivation and shortage of land, i.e., of the traditional sources of livelihood, the Garos have been endeavouring to develop different alternatives for living and have thereby promoted a gradual monetisation of not only the livelihood activities but also of their socio-cultural activities taking advantage of the continuous inter actions of a host of exogenous and endogenous forces.

With profuse illustrations the author analyses how the traditional barter economy of the Garos, based on the integrative role of reciprocity relations, clan dispositions, communal ownership and shifting cultivations, has moved towards a modern money economy, and how afferant economic interests, private and absentee ownership, inequality of income and opportunities and other salient features of structural changes of the society have emerged in such a transition. The process through which this bilaterally structured matrilineal society, earlier spread over different tribal polities, has now been a part and parcel of the specialised political institutions of the country.

An integrated account of the features of societal change has been built up on historical perspective, and is based on rare written records, oral traditions the author's personal surveys of the land and people of Garo Hills for over a decade.

The earlier studies on the Garos being primarily either ethnographic or politico-historical in nature have been conspicuously inattentive to the mutual interactions of economic and non-economic forces responding to and resulting in societal changes. The present study has filled in such a gap.

### About the Author

Shri P. C. Kar (b.1935) passed his M. Com. and M. A. examinations from the University of Calcutta and Banaras Hindu University respectively, and obtained Ph. D. from the Gauhati University. He worked for about two years as a Research Assistant under Dr. S. N. Sen of Calcutta University and then joined Tura College as a lecturer in 1958. He served as a commissioned officer in the Senior Division of the National Cadet Corps from 1964 to 1977. He was a Teacher Fellow of the U. G. C. in the Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University for completing his project on the Garos that preceded this book. As a journalist and news correspondent he was associated with a number of periodicals of Calcutta, Gauhati and Shillong. He contributed a number of books on the Garos. These include 'British Annexation of Garo Hills' (Calcutta, 1970), 'Achik aro Achik Asong' (Tura, 1972), 'Glimpses of the Garos' (Tura, 1982), Major Playfair's The Garos (reprint, Gauhati, 1975), Fr. Costa's Garo Code of Law (Tura, 1975).

# Garos in Transition



BY

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BUSY HOURS AHEAD!

## PREFACE

The present book makes a modest attempt at analysing the socio-economic changes in the life of the Garos, a matrilineal tribe of Meghalaya, India, from the point of view of Economic Anthropology. The earlier studies made on the changes of these people, being primarily either ethnographic or politico-historical in nature, have been relatively inattentive to the mutual interactions of economic and non-economic forces responding to and resulting in societal changes. The full import of such interactions can hardly escape the attention of the deliberations on societal changes. Hence the present study.

Aspects other than exchange and markets of the primitive societies have so far received a relatively less attention in the treatises of Economic Anthropology. Even this kind of attention is much less in India where that specialisation is a nascent one.

The tradition of monographic studies on the tribal societies had continued among the Indian authors till the mid-fifties when a diversion in the form of village-based studies of different groups and ecologies appeared (Dube : 1955, 1958; Marriot : 1955; Bailey : 1959; Srinivas : 1960; Chauhan ; 1967; Mukherjee : 1971). These village studies in contrast with the earlier tribal studies are to a great extent influenced by a popular view of a trichotomous Indian society (tribal, non-tribal ruralites, urbanites). This view has been formed in the light of Redfield's concept of folk-urban continuum.

Gradually, the idea of the tribes being in the process of transition (Majumdar : 1937) gained momentum. Sinha (1965) spoke of tribe-caste and tribe-peasant continuum through a progression towards ethnic heterogeneity in social interaction and stratification, role specialisation and diversification in the relation-networks with the advanced centres. Bailey believes that both caste and tribe are becoming rapidly transformed and 'merged into a different system which is neither one nor the other' (1961 :18), and Bateille asserts a tribe-in-transition

to be 'an agrarian system whose base consists of a heterogeneous body of peasants cut up into various ethno-linguistic categories' (1974 : 74).

In India, many of the tribes have been settled agriculturists for several generations under less irregular external contacts (e.g. Santal, Munda, Bhil, Gond, Banari, Baiga, Rabha, Hajong, and others). They have developed various tenurial rights on land, increasing degrees of ethnic heterogeneity and social stratification in village community and sophisticated involvement in money economy which are the common characteristics of peasant communities (Roy : 1915; Majumdar : 1937; Haimendorf . 1948; Bose : 1949; Sinha : 1965; Beteille : 1974).

During the last two decades a good many socio-economic studies of Indian villages or of communities have been carried out (village monographs of the Census of India and of different Agro-Economic Research Centres and other Institutes). Majority of these studies have a reference either to the traditional confines of Social Anthropology and ethnography in respect of Indian tribes or to the measuring of certain economic categories concerning castes and communities of Indian plains. Relevant authors have been conscious more of the types rather than (economic) aspects of the society. These studies have, however, come to be gradually associated with concepts like 'peasants', 'peasant cultures', and the use of economic variables has also been on the increase. Consequently, a shift of focus from social correlates of economic institutions to economic correlates of social forces has been visible (Nag : 1958; Hozelitz : 1964; Sinha : 1965, 1973; Ganguly: 1969; Patel : 1969, 1972; Bose : 1971; Beteille : 1974; Misra : 1976). A happy blend of these two trends for studying the socio-economic changes of these communities might have reflected the realities of situations better.

No comprehensive study of any of the hill tribes of North-East India in the light of the above has so far been made. The Garos of Meghalaya are not an exception. Besides Major Playfair's monograph (1909), Robbins Burling (1963) and Chie Nakani (1958, 1968) dealt with marriage, family and kinship of the Garos and with the institutionalised pattern of

continued relationship between two lineage groups for sustenance of the societal organisation. Goswami and Majumdar (1972) carried out in-depth studies of the different social institutions of the Garos. The present author dealt with the Garo-British relations of a selected period. No systematic study has, however, been made of the socio-economic changes of the Garos till today.

It has, therefore, been an humble endeavour of the author to delineate the trends of change with particular emphasis on how the combined effects of certain exogenous and endogenous forces have brought the Garos to a stage where attention towards cash crops and occupational diversification in relation to urban market centres has come to be linked with the shortage of land which had been their traditional source of subsistence, and led the Garos to develop atomistic tendencies in the society. A number of economic factors coupled with the non-economic ones have led to the break up of the traditional socio-cultural and economic set up of the Garo Society.

Methodologically, this study has been an unorthodox one. A diachronic study is supposed to bring to a sharp relief the features of a societal change within a fixed period. But change is a continuous process though at times imperceptible as a reaction of earlier complex of forces. Study of the resultant modification and/or negation of earlier socio-political and economic institutions thus defies the fixity of two time references.

On the other hand, a synchronic study which is to deal with functional inter-relationships between various institutions can hardly express the dynamics of changing variables unless placed in historical perspective (not necessarily diachronic).

This approach apart, one has to think also of a model of study. But no uniform model can be followed indiscriminately in the study of all the rural communities of our country. A village of the Indian plains is caste-ridden and ethnically heterogeneous, follows settled agriculture and private and/or absentee ownerships and is well drawn into country's money economy, while a village of a 'tribal' community of the North-Eastern Hills is casteless and ethnically homogeneous, follows shifting cultivation and community ownership and faces a gradual dilution of its isolation into country's economy. This

brings us to a question whether a micro study of socio-economic changes (at village level) can reflect the macro level features of societal change. This question could be answered by referring to a Garo village of Garo Hills.

In the hill areas of Garo Hills, it is observed that the inhabitants of all the villages belong to the same Garo matrilineal tribe, share common traditions, dialect, family and kinship structure, and have developed similar household mode of production by practising shifting cultivation on lands under community ownership and within similar ecology and environment. Robbins Burling (1963), and Goswami and Majumdar (1972) asserted this overall uniformity of Garo culture. A Garo village is thus typical of the whole Garo area of the Hills. In such a situation-frame there seems to be hardly any compelling necessity for studying a cluster of villages or making a comparative study of different villages of a homogeneous culture-zone for discerning the general features of societal change. Constructions of the gross aggregates of socio-political and economic microcosms may not always provide an analytical frame of such situation unless the heterogeneous reality of these microcosms are studied in depth, and their changing structural-functional relationships are brought to sharp relief.

This could be realised if a representative village upholding an objectively suitable sample-coverage of that cultural zone is studied after ascertaining its suitability for the study of the defined problem by a pilot enquiry.

The next stage to be considered relates to the methods of collecting the data and arranging them in an historical perspective. Study of a small society like that of the Garos can attain a reasonable degree of perfection through holistic approach. This has been ensured by coordinating the methods like participant-observation, structured interviews and unstructured group gossips in local tongue preceded by pilot enquiries in several villages and supplemented by library works.

The undivided district of Garo Hills with a total area of 8084 sq. km. occupies the western part of the state of Meghalaya between the latitudes 25.9' and 26.1' North and the longitudes between 89:49' and 91:2' East, having a total population of 406615 souls (Census of 1971). It has two

distinct physical divisions—irregular mass of Hills of the interior and the narrow strips of bordering plains. Hill areas are almost exclusively occupied by the Garo animists and Christians, whereas the plains are inhabited by the Rabha, Koch, Hajong, Dalu, Banai of Hindu faith besides the Bengali and Assamese Hindus and Muslims. Each of the areas practises shifting and settled cultivations under community and individual ownership of land respectively.

The villages in the hill areas are very small, many of them comprising less than 10 households. 72.24% of the total villages of the district have less than 200 souls, whereas 23.83% of the villages have souls between 200 and 499, and the rest have more than 500 souls (Census of 1971). In 1961, corresponding figures for the villages under above population-size categories had been 84.89%, 13.50% and 1.61%. Majority of the villages under the second category and all the villages of the last category have been in the plains, whereas the villages under the first category are within the Hills. On an average, each of such hill-villages has about 29 households (District Statistical Abstract, Garo Hills : 1973).

Tura happens to be the only recognised urban area of the district since the Census of 1961, and is the seat of the autonomous District Council administration. Earlier, it served for about 80 years (1866-1947) as the centre of British administration, and till 1976 as the headquarters of Garo Hills. This district was then divided into East and West Garo Hills district (hereafter referred to as Garo Hills) with Tura and Williamnagar as their respective headquarters. Even though a number of urbanised areas have developed in course of time throughout these two districts, Tura still holds a premier position in Garo Hills as the predominating centre of political and socio-economic activities of the people of Garo Hills.

Following a pilot survey for a large representative village from amongst those in the Hills, the village of Darengri was selected by the author for an intensive study. It is located in the Hills, and compared to rest of the villages, it has 53 households with 332 souls drawn from as many as 20 exogamous matri-clans. It possesses all the features of the traditional Garo society and economy, but differs from other Garo villages in respect of its proximity to Tura as the ever expanding.

cultural and commercial centre of Garo Hills, and in respect of the extension of Christianity and western education into that village.

The author has been associated with Garo society since 1958 when he joined the Government College at Tura, and learnt the local tongue in course of his intimate association with the Garos. He stayed in that sample village during different working seasons of 1975 and 1976 observing the seasonal activities and often participating in jhuming, plantation and other economic and socio-cultural activities along with the villagers. Besides this participant-observant method, the interview method on the basis of prepared questionnaire was employed for collecting data covering the households of the entire village. Group discussions were undertaken after church services and prayer meetings and also on Sundays when villagers would gather in any household for gossips. Unstructured but purposive interviews and group discussions were also conducted by the author in a few other villages around Tura and elsewhere in Garo Hills for ensuring cross-verification of his Darengri-based data. On all these occasions the author used the native tongue. Library works have lent him further insight into various features of the changing Garo society.

In the field of socio-economic researches, an investigator fails to achieve his objective if he does not make his tools effective by promoting his informant's confidence in him. This gaining of confidence of the people lies at the very root of success of all sociological investigations, more particularly in dealing with the hill people. With some initial difficulties gradually overcome, the author could get himself well received by the villagers even to the extent of being taken in as a member of their Bolwari clan, and his wife as a member of the Agitok Koksep. It was only after such a psychological involvement of the author in their 'central social institution' called *A'kim*, that he could get a free sail in his investigations. Gradually it has been realised by him that this central institution so precious to the traditionalists has become an object of onslaught by a host of socio-economic forces.

It is the people of Garo Hills to whom I owe the greatest debt for the ungrudging help and co-operation that they extended to me during the course of my investigations. I am to

remember in particular the people of Darengri who hosted me, and specially, Jefferson Raksam Marak, Archibald Agitok Sangma, Chryston Rangsa Marak, Sunonsing Agitok Sangma, Poljonsing Agitok Sangma, Dinesh Nengminza Sangma, to name a few, for their constant and spontaneous responses to my needs.

Professor Madhav Chandra Goswami, former Head of the Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University, guided me with abiding affection through the research that preceded this book. Dr. Dharendra Narayan Majumdar, Dr. Jogendra Nath Phukan, Professor Bijan Behari De of the same University read the preliminary draft of the book and offered me valuable suggestions which were accepted. My colleague, Nirendra Sangma prepared the maps and diagrams, and Ahmed Hussain of Karuz photography, Shillong, contributed other illustrations of the book. I am grateful to all of them. I also owe much to the encouragement and stimulations of Dr. Sankar Kumar Ray, Naresh Chandra Gupta, Sudhansu De of Gauhati, Rev. Fr. George Stadlar of the Catholic Mission, Khirod Mark, secretary of the Garo Hills District Council, Advocate Jugal Kishore Sharma of Tura, Dr. Basudev Datta Ray of North-East India Council for Social Science Research, Shillong, Nanigopal Ganguly and my younger brother, Pranesh Kar. They assisted me in various ways for completing my present venture. Pranesh helped me with explanations of Garo words and terms. For the sake of my academic pursuits, my wife, Ramala, had to bear the major share of the sacrifices, yet she broods on them with a pleasant pride.

The University Grants Commission granted me a Teacher-Fellowship in 1976-77 for completing the present project. I am grateful to the authorities of the Commission for such a kind assistance.

My thanks are also due to Shri Subodh Kapoor of the Cosmo Publications, New Delhi, for publishing the book and to Remesh Sharma for secretarial help.

In fine I crave for the indulgence of the readers. A number of Garo words and terms have been very frequently used throughout the book, and these are italicised only when used for the first time. It is hoped that they would not feel disturbed while going through the text. There have also been repetitions

of one or two facts. But this has been done to explain certain points of view in different contexts. I should have dealt with the growth of political parties among the Garos and their political process of living since independence of the country. I refrain from the attempt since these are covered by another of my forthcoming publications.

Tura, West Garo Hills,  
Meghalaya  
February 1982

Parimal Chandra Kar