

PATTERN OF ECONOMIC CHANGE IN GARO SOCIETY

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The Garos of Garo Hills in Meghalaya are among those tribes who lived under the traditional formations in the hills until the area was integrated into the British India colonial state, although their economy had already been linked with the markets in the bordering plains and the Mughal feudatories, who controlled these markets, succeeded in gaining powerful influence in regulating the economic life of the Garos. This could happen due to the primitiveness of the agricultural economy dominated by the slash and burn method of shifting cultivation and the egalitarian character of the society that ruled out the possibility of professional specialisation and, consequent, growth of a skilled artisans' class. The British colonial rule accelerated the process of extraneous domination through the markets that had emerged in as the sensitive pressure points in tribal economy. The colonial re-structurisation of the socio-economic institutions in the hills was intended to serve the British interests by ensuring the regular flow of income not only from the Garo Hills but also from the neighbouring areas that had at times been adversely affected by the retaliatory challenges of the Garos to British imperialism. The colonial period stands out as the most crucial phase in the socio-economic transition, and the development in the post-independence era could not be in exclusion of the colonial hang-over as change and continuity co-exist as a historical process.

Precolonial Economy

The Garos had possibly passed through the pre-historic food-gathering and hunting economy long before they figured in historical notices. Descended from the Bodo family of the Tibeto-Burmans in the Tibetan region, they passed through North Bengal and West Assam in course of ancient migration and finally esconded in the Garo Hills.¹ They passed through wet rice cultivation areas, but even in the British period they were found as only shifting cultivators.² Nevertheless, it is certain that they had for a long time taken to cultivation and thus become a food-producing society. They, however, for a long time clung to shifting cultivation. This method of cultivation is not considered as a symptom of advance agricultural economy and is a cause of economic backwardness. But in the Garo case, the ecological influence might have been an important factor in prolongation. Moreover, it came to be considered as a 'way of life'.³ The archaeological evidences like neolithic celts of various shapes and sizes suggest that shifting cultivation was practised in Garo Hills in very early time.⁴ Any method beyond slash and burn was not possible with these tiny implements. The evidence on technological development in the later periods are lacking. It is not impossible that technological backwardness also contributed in the process of stagnation. It is interesting to note that the Garos in the borders lived side by side with the Indo-Aryans and tribes like Koch, Hajong and Rabha, who were all wet rice cultivators, but continued to practise the age-old method of shifting cultivation. The abundant availability of land facilitated the method, and the descendants of the ancient mothers lived in isolated areas, called *a'king*, which in course of time became well defined, as communal holdings of matrilineal clans, called *machong*.⁵ The hunting and raiding continued to play important role in promoting economic interest. Skull attained spiritual values, as they were required for cremation, and the living captives were also sacrificed in some cases.⁶ The raiding and hunting brought in the institution of slavery. The slaves were mostly captives from the plains and were called *nokol*, in contrast to *nokoba* or freeman. The captives were of both sexes and could

be assimilated in the society through marriage.⁷ They contributed to the economic prosperity of the captors, they worked for the masters and brought with them the technologies of the artisans and craftsmen in the plains. The Garo raids brought in a practise in the neighbouring Bengal districts of Rangpur and Mymensing, called *matha-rakha* (head-preserving) whereby the people in the border villages in the plains were required to voluntarily offer the Garos rice; salt, cloth, utensils and other commodities to save their heads from being chopped away.⁸ The society was thus food-producing and food-gathering at the same time. The connection with the plains, on the otherhand, introduced the Garos to markets which, in course of time, became an important institution in their economy.⁹

The technological backwardness made the Garos economically dependant, on the markets established by the Zamindars of Susung, Sherpur, Karaibari, Kalumalupara, Mechpara and Habraghat in the plains since mediaeval period.¹⁰ The increasing dependance on the markets in later years was particularly due to the absence of professional social groups of artisan and craftsmen which stood on the way of effective social formation. The discovery of workshop sites of microlithic and neolithic industries¹¹ does not conclusively suggest technological development in any stage. Nothing is known about the use of copper, or bronze, or iron. On the contrary, the records show it very clearly that the Garos resorted to the markets for iron implements, brass-utensils and pottery.¹² The huntsmen from Bengal carried on profitable trade by capturing elephants of Garo Hills by lassoing,¹³ but it is not known whether the Garos took any interest in commercialisation of the elephants or using them for domestic purposes. The Raja of Susung, whose considerable income came from the elephants of the Garo Hills, employed the Hajongs in organising *kheddah* in the hills.¹⁴

The vast natural resources remained untapped, and there could not emerge professionally specialised social groups of artisans and craftsmen who could meet the growing needs of the society. The Garos, as a result, became dependant on the markets in the plains that were established and managed by the Zamindars of the estates that surrounded Garo Hills from three sides. These Zamindars in fact held Mughal fiefs and paid nominal tribute in kind to the imperial government. They

were entrusted with the maintenance of peace in the borders and, therefore, they maintained mercenary forces to repel Garo raids. The major parts of their income were from the Garo Hills, coming through the markets. To begin with, the Garos could perhaps bring down cotton and *agar* timber that grew wild in the hills to exchange for the items of daily consumption. The demand of cotton in the plains might have influenced them to undertake commercial cultivation. They also began to bring down wax, rubber, lac etc. The bringing down of chilly and ginger, in later years, suggested commercialisation of agriculture.¹⁵ The barter system was the prevalent form, although the Garos were gradually introduced to the Koch coins and the currency prevalent in Bengal. The Zamindars, their agents and the traders resorted to exploitation, but the Garos became so used to the markets, as they turned to be consumers of the commodities which they never produced, that they could hardly avoid the markets. The market became an effective instrument in extending control.¹⁶ The control of the Zamindars over the markets, originally at the support of the Mughals and then of the East India Company, enabled them to extend their feudal holds over the neighbouring Garo villages and indirectly over the whole of Garo Hills as even the upland Garos were required to visit the markets and pay some duty in kind to the Zamindars.¹⁷ The lowland Garo villages were gradually integrated into their respective estates by the Zamindars and the villagers were required to pay taxes in some forms.¹⁸ In respect of the upland Garos, the market duty was main source of income of the Zamindars. They also derived profit by advancing money to Garos and thus securing to themselves and additional right of pre-emption to the produces of the hills.¹⁹ The Zamindars also organised annual fairs which were visited by the Garos and the traders from the plains, and both sides paid duty to them.²⁰ The Garos had to live to these situations as their economy was already linked with the plains and the markets were vital to their subsistence.

The years of transition in Bengal under the East India Company's rule were also the years of transition in history and economy of the Garos and the nature of their relations with the Zamindars. The early British policy of retaining the Mughal system had emboldened the Zamindars to increase the

exactions, particularly because the mercantilist capitalism infused by the colonial rule had multiplied the demand for the products of Garo Hills. The British merchants considered the Garo Hills as an additional source of supply to the cloth mills in Manchester. The profitability of the cotton trade inspired the Zamindars to disallow direct trade between the Garos and the merchants and to assume, in the process, the role of intermediaries to gain more profit. They also enhanced their demand over the share of cotton that the Garos brought to the markets for sale. To make matters worse, the general merchants too indulged in deceit and fraud to exploit the Garos. For example, the salt traders adulterated salt by mixing sand and water to increase the weight. The Zamindars endeavoured to force more number of Garo to frequent the markets and to do so, they brought in more and more number of villages under their direct control. The interests of the Zamindars clashed and the conflicts that ensued in the process prolonged for a considerable period. The aggressive attitude of these estate-holders provoked the Garos to retaliate, with the results that the villages in the bordering plains were deserted by the people which caused considerable loss of revenue on the part of the British. The latter also gradually realised that the Garo Hills could be used as raw-material producing area and as market for British goods. The direct control of the hills would also ensure the security of the revenue paying agricultural villages in the plains. The British, therefore, dispensed with the institution of Zamindari and annexed the Garo Hills in instalments. The British intention in annexing the hills was to promote their commercial interest, which was in fact the primary purpose of the British in India. They annexed Garo Hills to control its economy. That they were concerned about the security of the villages in the plains was only to ensure the increased flow of revenue from those areas.²¹ Besides cotton and elephant, the British were also attracted by the minerals in Garo Hills. In fact, the Raja of Susung earned considerable amount by granting lease of lime and coal quarries in the Garo Hills to M/s. Inglis & Co. of Sylhet before annexation.²² It may be interesting to note that the pattern of economic control of the Garo Hills was the same between the Zamindars and the British. Like the Zamindars, the British also used the markets as effective instruments

in extending their control over the Garos. The blockades that were introduced by the British from time to time produced considerable effects in forcing the Garos to submit to the rule, although several military expeditions in the early years had failed to gain any tangible result.²³

Colonial transformation

The British rule had superseded the traditional political isolation of the Garo Hills and integrated the area in their colonial empire in the sub-continent primarily for the purpose of economic exploitation. They had restructured the socio-economic system and, in turn, integrated it into the world of modern capitalism. In the process of colonial transformation in the country, the Garo Hills could not be an exception. In matter of revenue that was a vital sector for the flow of income for the British, the hills were not very fertile for the simple reason that such actions would be considered by the tribals as interference in their traditions and provoke rebellious upsurge. But the British did not fail to make good such losses from other sectors. After all, the hills were annexed not primarily for the hills but for protection of the more yielding plains that were at times ravaged by the predatory tribal raids. This, however, did not change the basic policy of the British to make the Indians pay for the administration. Moreover, in the hills too they could, as they actually did, exploit the natural resources, extract the raw-materials, and markets their imported goods. Such a policy of the powerful ruling class could not but vitally affect the Garo economy, particularly because the process of social formation was still passing through the rudimentary stages.

To exploit the natural resources of Garo Hills the British aimed at ruling the Garos isolation. The Regulation I of 1876 authorised the local authorities to prevent entry into the district of the non-tribals for trading or other purposes without license. It also prohibited such British subjects who were not natives of Garo Hills from acquiring any interest in land or produce of the land or in animals without the sanction of the Chief Commissioner of Assam.²⁴ The Regulation I of 1882 authorised the Chief Commissioner to prohibit all persons not

being natives of Garo Hills from exploiting forest resources within the district without licence. The prohibition covered cutting wood, hunting animals, and collecting wax, ivory, rubber and other jungle products.²⁵ By 1897, the government reserved 14 forests where rights of the Garos were also extinguished. The Garos protested against the measure, but the government compensated some in terms of money while others were allowed to use the forest products except the reserved variety of timbers.²⁶ In 1882, the areas abounded by elephants were declared as *Elephant Mahal* and the elephant catching was made illegal.²⁷ These prohibitions were, however, intended to derive revenue. The object was to gain licence fee and royalty. They introduced the sale of rights to capture elephants (1882), exploit forest resources (1883) and collect *agar* wood (1913) on payment of royalty and licence fees.²⁸ The British thus first reserved the right to themselves in exclusion of the Garos and then sold it to others.

To consolidate the rule, the British established a net work of roads that connected the district headquarter, Tura, with the adjoining plains and all the markets in the borders. Before the coming of the British there were 24 border markets, 14 on Goalpara side and 10 in Mymensing that the Garos used. Seramphang was perhaps the only notable market in the hills.²⁹ But under the British rule, markets began to develop within the hills. Tura, that was the administrative station, became the most important market in the district. It became the orbit of socio-economic relations with the rural areas. The growth of Tura introduced the element of urbanisation. The villagers were required to visit the station for various purposes, but such visits could be utilised by them to exchange their own products and for buying imported goods that before long changed their habits and standard of living. The development of Tura station attracted traders from other communities, who could secure permission to settle down on payment.³⁰ David Scott, who was responsible for first phase of British annexation of Garo Hills, took interest in agricultural improvement. Scott, unlike most of the colonial officers, was a great humanist and concerned himself with the problem of economic development of the Garos. He considered jhuming as an unproductive method and wanted to introduce alternative technology and better seeds.

His policy was to win over the Garos by extending to them the benefits of 'civilisation' and 'economic advancement'. The school started by him at Singimari under missionary care received patronage of the government, but his scheme of a mission-cum-agricultural station failed to evoke any response. This scheme provided for a self-supporting station at Rangira Hill with a planned agricultural farm, irrigation facilities, fruit plantations, animal husbandry, livestock and a school for instructions in agriculture, animal husbandry and horticulture. Ultimately, in his own modest way, Scott developed a farm to popularise alternative approach to agriculture. He introduced the cultivation of mulberry plants, potatoes and some vegetables. A few Bhutias were brought by him to teach the Garos their method of terracing the hills.³¹ The untimely death of David Scott put an end to the experiment and the later officers took no interest in such schemes. On the contrary, they considered jhuming as a way of life for the Garos and refrained themselves from interference. The result of the policy was that agriculture remained backward and contributed to overall backwardness of the Garo Hills as agriculture was the main stay of the Garo economy. Only in the plains portion of the district, which formerly formed parts of the Zamindari estates and are peopled by the Garos and non-Garos, the plough cultivation was practised. In these areas land was assessed by the government and the *mauzadari* system was introduced there in 1878.³² Otherwise, land was not taxed by the British in the Garo Hills and the Garos were required to pay house tax, in lieu of land revenue, which varied from area to area, @ 4 annas to Rs. 2.³³

The British authorities, nevertheless, endeavoured to augment the colonial interest from resources. Cotton was in any case the staple crop of the Garo Hills which attracted the colonial attention of the British. The volume of trade in cotton was indeed considerable even before annexation. In 1809, for example, in Goalpara (then part of Rangpur district of Bengal) alone 47,000 maunds of cotton were brought by the Garos. They exchanged two maunds of cotton for one maund of rice, but the value of cotton far exceeded the amount of all other goods that they collected and a large balance had to be paid to them in Cooch Bihar coins.³⁴ By 1835, the Garo cotton

brought to Goalpara increased to 60,000 maunds.³⁵ A larger quantity found way to the markets in Mymensing where the British merchants took interest in the trade. It was through the merchants that the Garo cotton moved into Europe and Japan to be used with wool for the manufacture of carpets.³⁶ These merchants, however, gradually withdrew from the trade due to the coarse quality of cotton. In spite of the British policy to encourage increased cultivation and to regulate transaction, the supply of cotton fell in 1870s. In 1873, only 14,000 maund of cotton were brought to Goalpara, and in 1874, it increased to 24,000 maunds. The bulk of cotton was purchased by the inhabitants of Goalpara, Rangpur and Mymensing for local use and the residue was shipped to Narayanganj and Dacca by the Bengalee merchants and distributed over East Bengal. None found way to Calcutta or England. The situation was disturbing for the authorities as they expected the Garo cotton to meet the increasing demand of the commodity in the cloth mill in England. They now endeavoured to publicise Garo cotton in important markets. In 1874, specimen of cotton and fibre from Garo Hills were exhibited in the Economic Museum at Calcutta.³⁷ In an exhibition held in London in 1862 as many as 79 samples of the Garo cotton were displayed.³⁸

The attempts of the government to export cotton to distant markets ultimately failed. The total supply of Garo cotton was exhausted in Bengal. In 1876, about 48,224 maunds of uncleaned cotton were retained for local use and 41,612 maunds were exported to Bengal. About 1,736 maunds of cleaned cotton were brought down to the plains, of which 1,350 maunds were exported to Dacca.³⁹ The authorities endeavoured to increase the outturn of cleaned cotton and to encourage weaving among the Garos. The lowland Garos used Bengal *charka*, but the yield was low and it broke the seeds. The Deputy Commissioner brought 20 *charkas* in the Central Province and distributed these among enterprising farmers. But the Garos favoured Bengal *charka* which they could buy in local markets at three to four annas each. The authorities had, therefore, no alternative but to export raw cotton.⁴⁰ The entire supply was confined to East Bengal, but the Bengalee merchants were gradually replaced by the Marwaris.⁴¹

The British authorities made various attempts to improve or introduce cultivation of commercial crops. Captain Williamson Deputy Commissioner of Garo Hills, had procured seeds of some good variety of cotton and distributed them among the Garos in 1870. Although the plants thrive well, they yielded little cotton. Seeds were sown in an experimental farm at Tura, but without success. The experiment made in Goalpara borders shared the same fate. Ultimately, the government encouraged indigenous cotton. But they experimented other crops. The experimental cultivation of potato proved a failure, because the soil was unsuitable and the climate drier and hotter than that of Khasi Hills. The cultivation also required more attention and constant nursing than the Garos were used to their ordinary crops.⁴² Tea seeds were imported from Assam and Darjeeling but the dry climate, prolonged droughts and hot winds stood on the way of successful plantation. The endeavour that were made to grow coffee met with the same fate. The harvesting of Indian corn in the river valleys and lowlands, however, yielded good results. The cultivation of lac was very successful. In 1875, Williamson established a model farm at Tura and distributed seeds among the Garos to popularise the cultivation. The Garos had initial objection to it, as they believed that cotton and lac could not thrive together. The success of the Deputy Commissioner's farm proved contrary to their prejudices and lac was since then extensively cultivated and became an important item of export.⁴³ The colour material, shellac and sealing-wax could be produced from lac and the merchants from Benaras collected them for toy-making. In 1875, about 1,436 maunds of lac were exported. The traders from Calcutta were attracted by the sample exhibited in the Economic Museum, and in 1876 about 5,000 maunds of lac were exported to Calcutta. By 1895, the export of lac increased to 10,000 maunds annually.⁴⁴ Similarly, orange and peach plants thrive well and fruited well. The plantation of economic variety of timber was also experimented by Williamson. Spanish chestnut seeds were planted, but none germinated. The mango and liches did not thrive at all. Cinchona seeds were procured from Darjeeling but the plantation miserably failed. Jack trees planted in the low lands fruited well. Some eucalyptus and young pines of Khasi Hills variety thrived well only in the

eastern hills. The attempt to grow Guinea grass was unsuccessful.⁴⁵

The Baptist missionaries also encouraged cultivation and plantation. Although mango and liches did not thrive in the Deputy Commissioner's farm, the missionaries successfully planted them in the Mission Compound at Tura. Reverends Mason and Phillips planted mango, guava, pomeloe, pomegranate, tamarind, peach, papaya, plum, liches, pineapple, banana, mulberries, raspberries and some other garden vegetables, and from the seeds of these, plantations were experimented in the villages. They also obtained coffee seeds from Burma, Manila hemp from the Philippines, cotton seeds and potatoes from America and Pineapples from Sri Lanka. The cultivation, however, did not succeed in most cases due to lack of proper soil and attention.⁴⁶

Needless to say that these cultivations and plantations brought some prosperity to the Garos. But no attempt was made to change the shifting cultivation. The government applied imported seeds and manures, but the return was unsatisfactory. The lack of proper soil, climate and attention stood on the way of higher yield, while elephants, monkeys, birds and insects caused frequent ravages. There was no attempt to replace the jhumming by terrace or sedentary cultivation, as the authorities considered it as the way of life of the Garos. The annual rites and festivals of the Garos were linked with the different stages of shifting cultivation and aimed at bumper crops which strengthened the attachment of the people to the jhum fields. Since the introduction of Regulation X of 1822 it was the conscious policy of the British not to interfere with the traditional way of life of the tribes and the Jaintia War of Liberation (1860-64) cautioned them further against injuring religious sentiment. The social constraints thus prevented the British from tempering with the age-old mode of production. But there are misgivings about the colonial plea on agricultural stagnation. The nineteenth century is a century of socio-political transition in Garo Hills. The diehard resistance to imperial expansionism was militarily turned down. The traditional weapons to which the Garos attached spiritual values had to be surrendered. The head-hunting and sorcery were outlawed. The food and dress habits, songs and dances, and the system of

treatment underwent radical transformation. The christianisation began in a large scale and even the non-christians accepted many of the modern values. In spite of initial opposition the parents were persuaded to send their children to the missionary schools. The Bengali education and scripts were replaced by English and Roman character overruling to opposition. The Nokmas, who were traditionally the custodian and supervisor of the clan land and whose temporal authority depended on their priestly functions, were elevated to the status of chiefs and through these agencies the British banner was carried to the people. In course of time, the priestly function of the chiefs moved to the church in case of the converts and the communal land holding became a myth of the past. In their anxiety to isolate and exploit the natural resources, the authorities introduced several regulations securing to themselves the proprietary rights over the forests and wild animals ignoring the prescriptive rights of the people. The British could overcome the objections to these changes, but considered jhumming as an unalterable way of Garo life, religious factors involved in jhumming prevailed upon them to follow a policy of non-intervention, no matter religion itself began to change at official patronage. The net result of the policy was agricultural backwardness of the district. The Garo Hills continued to be a food deficit area. The production was inadequate to meet the demand of the growing number of consumers.

The colonial rule made no effort to industrialise the area. As a result Garos remained economically backward. The people looked to the supply from outside and the market continued to dominate the economy. The house-building materials consisted mainly of bamboo, thatch, and cane, and there was very little wood-work.⁴⁷ The cotton was abundant, but the cloths of all descriptions the Garos bought in the market.⁴⁸ The costume of the lowlanders was similar to those in the plains,⁴⁹ while the Garos in the upland had very scanty dress.⁵⁰ That weaving could not develop even as a house-hold industry is suggested by the fact that the low-land Garos used Bengal *charka* that was introduced among them by the Zamindars for cleansing cotton, while the uplanders brought down only raw-cotton.⁵¹ The attempts that were made to popularise more sophisticated tools failed to evoke response.⁵² In 1870s, Hunter

found that the women could weave "coerce cloth for the scant garments of themselves and the men".⁵³ The bark of the tree for "making a rough kind of cloth" was still in use.⁵⁴ Hunter's observation that the "loom used is like the ordinary Bengal apparatus, but smaller; the method of weaving is similar to that practised in Bengal"⁵⁵ is suggestive of the fact that the weaving industry could not develop in an indigenous way. The Garos were fond of ornaments made of brass, bronze, copper, silver etc., but Playfair even in the beginning of the present century believed "them to be of foreign importation."⁵⁶ The necklaces worn by men and women were, according to him "purchased from Bengali traders at the various markets."⁵⁷ The beads that were used for ornamentation of the garments were also imported from the plains.⁵⁸ The swords, shields and spears that were so essential for offence and defence considering the condition that they lived in were purchased either from the Khasi Hills or from the plains.⁵⁹ Playfair found a few blacksmiths and carpenters, but to quote him, "only infinite-simally small proportion of the tribe does anything except till the soil and reap the produce thereof."⁶⁰ Earlier in 1870s. Hunter observed, "As a rule, all metal implements were obtained from the markets in the plains, but a rough iron work is sometimes attempted. Only the very rudest pottery is manufactured. In a few villages a rough cooking earthenware pot, something similar to the *patil* of the plains, is made."⁶¹ Salt was, of course, an item they could get only from the markets, but they had to buy rice as well.⁶² The animal husbandry also remained considerably unattended. The Garos bought cow, pig, goat, fowl etc. from the markets.⁶³ What they brought to the markets were monkeys and birds.⁶⁴ They also brought honey in limited quantity.⁶⁵ In 1815, they were seen to exchange cotton, rubber, timber, chilly, ginger for salt, cattle, hog, goat, dog, cat, fowl, duck, fish (dry and fresh), tortoise, rice, extract of sugar-cane, tobacco, betel-nut, hoe, spinning wheel, brass ware, ornaments, and silk erendi and cotton cloths.⁶⁶ The items remained the same by the end of the century with the exception that monkeys and birds were added in the export list and they needed more rice and cloth's of various descriptions.⁶⁷

The significant changes, however, occurred in the field of

occupation and by the monetisation of the economy. The traditional barter system was gradually replaced by money. In the early years of British contact the trade was mainly in the form of exchange, although the Garos began to accept Cooch Behar coins and the Bengal (Mughal) currency, but by the turn of the century under colonial rule money became the only medium of exchange. This was due to the flow of currency. The supply of cotton far exceeded in value the items the Garos bought and the balance they carried home in cash. In the early years of British, they accepted only Cooch Behar and former Bengal coins, but gradually they accepted the Company's currency also. Ultimately, the latter became the only currency as Cooch Bihar and Bengal coins became extinct.⁶⁸ The British initially collected tributes from the villages in kind, then replaced it by house-tax per house. The revenues were collected through Laskars, Sardars and Mouzdaras who were remunerated in cash. The rights to capture elephants, collect timber and exploit forest resources were sold on payment of fees. The government also compensated various Garo clans in lump sum for creation of reserved forests. The construction of roads and building required labour force and introduced the elements of contracted and sub-contracted labour. The Garos "came in contact with the imported workers and imbibed the habit of wage-labour in search of money."⁶⁹ In 1880s, the Garos were seen visiting Tura in search of work.⁷⁰ Many worked as porters. Some became permanent shop-keepers in the growing markets, while others began to buy goods from the border markets and sale them in Tura or other markets in the hills.⁷¹ In addition to Tura, many more markets came up in the hills under official sponsorship. Garobadha, for example, developed as a prosperous market after the destruction of Pootimari, a frontier market, by the earthquake of 1897.⁷² The imported goods began to change the taste and standard of living.⁷³ The progress of education, before long, created a salaried class of white collar-ed job-holders.

The feudal Zamindari and British colonial control in succession generated impact that spontaneously influenced the socio-economic structure of the traditionally egalitarian Garo society. The emergence of private property and the introduction of

money economy ushered in considerable changes. The Zamindars controlled the *nokmas* (with support, first of the Mughals and then of the British) in plains and their deudal state-structure had some impact on the Garó society in the hills as well. A number of powerful *nokmas* could impose their authority over the neighbouring *nokmas*, and even a commoner by virtue of his wealth and influence could usurp the authority of a *nokma*. Rengta, for example, in 1780s, was the 'chief' of a group of Garó villages in the southern hills and was about to accept the Zamindari of the area under the British.⁷⁴ It is not known whether Rengta was a *nokma* himself or gained his position by virtue of personal quality. He was actually a trader and led the southern Garós to markets.⁷⁵ It is possible that he became a wealthy person and thus commanded influence. Rengta's son, Agund, inherited the authority of his father and exercised control over a large number of clans. He was virtually a subordinate Zamindar under the Raja of Karaibari. The Raja presented him a palanquin (which was a symbol of feudal distinction even in the plains). Agund used to move in the hills in the palanquin to be carried by his 'slaves'.⁷⁶ Similarly, one Mankual became the *nokma* of Rangtupara by usurping the authority of the lawful *nokma* who was alive. Reynolds visited the village in 1847 and found that Mankual exercised 'astonishing' power over his people and "his will was the law."⁷⁷ Such a situation was unthinkable in matrilineal Garó society where the *nokma* was customarily the resident son-in-law of the former *nokma* and the actual authority was exercised by clan councils. That the elements of feudalism had infiltrated into the system is discernable from certain social behaviours. The possession of skulls in head-hunting days came to be recognised as a symbol of individual distinction to the possessor. The possession of slaves is unquestionably an element of feudalism. The slave and skull became so relevant to the system that these became commercially profitable when their collection was prevented by rigorous guarding of the borders by the British.⁷⁸ The cash earned from trade was utilised by some for purchasing slaves.⁶⁹ The *nokmas* began to distinguish themselves from the commoners by an ornament, called *Jaksil*, that consisted of "a heavy ring, usually of iron, but sometimes of brass or silver, that is worn just below the elbow."⁸⁰ The social status could

be assumed by the wealthy and influential persons when they were allowed by the headman to wear *tar* (iron ring) on payment of money.⁸¹ The wealth came mainly from trade. Several villages assumed the role of buffer community, particularly when British imposed economic blockade on some villages.⁸² The fact that the skulls of victims of head-hunting fetched from Rs. 10 to 1,000 in 1815 is an indicator of the role of money.⁸³ The women in wealthy families began to use necklaces made of coins, and the *dai* (fine or compensation) came to be determined in terms of cash.⁸⁴ The kinship relations was a check on feudalism, but the capitalist penetration during the colonial rule accelerated the process of feudal pattern of landholding by infusion of private ownership and bureaucratisation of the traditional institutions through recognition of the *nokmas* as 'chiefs'.⁸⁵ The emergence of a powerful wealthy class which divided the people between those wealthy and others, was a specific colonial reorientation of the Garo society.

The Post-Colonial Trends

Since independence, various schemes have been adopted by the central and local governments for economic development. The district council was created under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India to preserve the traditional way of life of the people, to protect them from exploitation by others, and to make them the leaders of their own progress. The tribal development blocks came into existence to ensure speedy development. Incentives provided for cash crops and efforts made to popularise terrace cultivation have yielded some results.⁸⁶ The communication bottle-neck, soil erosion and loss of fertility are, however, among the problems retarding prosperous economic growth. The terrace cultivation is becoming increasingly popular.⁸⁷ There is also an increased dependance on horticulture, which has caused a race for bringing more and more land under individual possession. "Gradually, a class of interest is being formed in an otherwise egalitarian society."⁸⁸ The house-hold cash income in an average is on increase,⁸⁹ but the endemic corruption, particularly bribery,⁹⁰ and the spiralling price rise keep the rural folk below the poverty line.

The occupational mobility is a noticeable phenomenon. The

literacy rate is on increase and the educated gentry is involved in professions other than traditional agriculture. Many are employed outside Garo Hills. Some are wealthy farmers, taking advantage of the official schemes. The multi-tier democratic political system has converted many into whole-timers in politics. The contractors constitute the wealthy class. The tradition of contract and sub-contract works has been partially sponsored by the State and District Council administration. They grant certain concessions to the tribal contractors with regard to exemption of income tax and margin of competitive tender rates. Non-tribal contractors carry on trade and business in the name of Garos and take them sometimes as active partners."⁹¹ The growth of population and markets inspired many to set themselves up in business. There is an increased tendency towards cash-income. Some try luck in butchery, others in brewary, or selling forest products, are commercial handicrafts. Some earn profit by buying cotton and jute in the villages and selling these in the markets.⁹² Poultry and diary farming and bee-keeping are also practised. The differentiation between rich and poor inducted in by exogenous feudal-colonial influences is being widened. The land alienation process in the rural areas is creating a landless labourer class. The money lending⁹³ and rural indebtedness⁹⁴ are noticed. There are wage labourers in the villages and in towns. One may come across Garos serving as domestic servants even outside the district. But in Garo Hills, the labour service is being gainfully used by other Garos. Some forms of arrangements have been developed for the purpose. The concepts of *ajak* and *dena* are relevant in the context. "*Ajak* is an advance booking of the borrower's labour in exchange of certain quantity of paddy of the lender. Likewise, *duna* (loan of paddy to be repaid in double of the principal) and *dena* or *dadon* (periodic loan of paddy to be repaid with or without additional amount as interest) are also occasionally paid in terms of mutually agreed labour-values. A motive of gain underwrites such an advance provision of labour. This motive of gain likewise underwrites similar advance-provision of labour for the days of scarcities or for profit-earnings out of loan investments. Both are generally out in kind, mostly in paddy as the Garo's source of staple

food.”⁹⁵ As Kar wrote, “. . . a plethora of development project in different parts of the district in the context of deteriorating jhum economy pulled them out of their traditional sectors of subsistence and participate in the sale of labour either on contract or for wage earnings.”⁹⁶

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