

The Garo Language : Its Origin and Dialects

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The Garo Language is the mother-tongue of all the members of the Garo tribe that inhabit not only Meghalaya, but also different parts of North-East India, North and West Bengal and Bangladesh. Different dialects have evolved out of the same language as a result of separation by geographical distances, life of isolation and due to environmental influences, though the basic root of the language is the same and is understood by all.

Sir George Grierson has classified the Garo language with the Bodo linguistic group.¹ The generic name "Bodo" was first applied by Brian Hodgson to the group of languages comprising Barakachari, Garo, Dimasa, Rabha, Mech, Hajong, Tiwa (Lalung), Koch, Rieng and Kokborok (Tripuri). The Bodos spread over the whole of the Brahmaputra valley, Tripura and Bengal including Bangladesh, forming a solid block in North-East India and formed the main basis of the present day population of these areas. Linguistic evidences show that the Bodos first appear to have settled over the entire Brahmaputra valley and extended west into North Bengal. They may have pushed into North Bihar also, and the Indo-Mongoloids who penetrated into North Bihar might equally have been either Bodos or Himalayan tribes allied to the Newars. They skirted the bend of the Brahmaputra and occupied Garo Hills, whereas Garos, they formed a block of Bodo speech. South of Garo Hills, the Garos as well as the Hajongs, spread over northern Mymensing and parts of Sylhet. To the north of Garo Hills, the Garos spread all over Assam including Karbi Anglong and north Cachar, and then further extended to the south of Tripura where they inhabited the region as Tripurians who founded the Tripura state. From Tripura, they spread to Comilla and Noakhali Districts of Bangladesh and thus occupied the mouth of the Ganges by the eastern sea. With the exception of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya, Nagaland and Manipur, the whole of the north-east India was inhabited by the Bodo people.²

Bodo is one of the most important sections of the Tibeto-Burman speech family. This family comprises of a series of languages and dialects spoken from Tibet in the north to Myanmar in the south, and from Baltistan in the west to Chinese provinces of Szechuan and Yunnan in the east.³

The Tibeto-Burman speech family is one of the two main branches of the Tibeto-Chinese speech family. The area of the characterization of the primitive Tibeto-Chinese speech appears to have been north-western China, between the head waters of the Hoangho and the Yang-Tse-Kiang rivers.⁴ Therefore, the Tibeto-Burman group appears to have formed an area of dispersion in some tract to the east of Tibet, that is, the present-day Chinese province of Sikiang from where they began to spread east and south. It seems quite probable that long before 1000 B. C. some of these early Tibeto-Burmans penetrated within the frontiers of India, either along the southern slopes of Himalaya through Assam or by way of going up the Brahmaputra and then crossing the Himalayas into Nepal and Garhwal-Kumaon region.⁵

Thus the Garo language which forms a section of the Bodo group of languages, in turn, is a branch of the Tibeto-Burman group of languages of the Tibeto-Chinese speech family. It had its area of characterization and formation somewhere in the north-western China between the upper waters of Hoangho and Yang-Tse-Kiang rivers.

According to their own tradition, the Garos originally came from Tibet and after wandering through the Himalayan slopes and Bengal, they came to the Brahmaputra valley of lower Assam and finally to Garo Hills of Meghalaya. They also spread over Assam, Arunachal, Nagaland, Tripura and Bengal including Bangladesh.

The Garos call their language *Mande Kusik* or the language of men and also, *Achik Kusik* or the language of hill-men. The Garos living in the plains, specially, in Bangladesh, call themselves *Mande* to distinguish themselves from the cleverer and more cunning plains people and so their language is called *Mande Kusik* whereas the hill-dwellers called themselves *Achik* or hill-dwellers and their language *Achik Kusik* or the language of hill-men.⁶

Dialects : Garo language has a number of dialects which bear strong resemblance to each other as they had evolved out of a common mother language. However, these differences also exhibit different cultural traits, though many of these small dialects and cultural differences are disappearing already due to the adoption of *Awe*, the dialect spoken in the plains to the north of Garo Hills along the border of Goalpara and Kamrup Districts as the medium of instruction in schools and as the standard written language for all Garo literature.

The Garos have a tradition that these varied dialects and cultural traits had evolved as a result of the assignment of different tasks to different groups of their community. According to this legend, one Garo leader named Abong Noga and his wife Silme Do-ka left the plains of Assam along with their followers and settled at the Nokrek hill, the highest peak in Garo Hills where they became powerful and rich. However, at times, drought and famine struck them and so he sent away his subjects to different parts of Garo Hills with specific jobs to do for him, out of which sprang different dialectical and cultural groups. Thus, he assigned the Chisaks the task of cultivating millets, raising cows and doing dairy work, the Matchis to feed his swine and to cultivate maize and job's tears; the Abengs to grow cotton, the Gara-Ganchings, to carve troughs for pigs and make stools out of cane and bamboo; the Kotchus to prepare smoked fish and the Awes to collect edible bamboo shoots and provide fodder to feed his cattle, etc.⁷

Awe Dialect : This dialect is spoken in the northern and north-eastern hills and the plains of Assam. The first Garo Church was established at Rajasimila village of this region by the American Baptist Mission, which chose and developed this dialect as the medium of instruction in schools, for writing Garo literature and for translation of the Bible. As a result, this dialect has become the standard language and the lingua franca of the Garos, due to which other dialects are fast disappearing today.

Chisak : This dialect is spoken in the northern hills of East Garo Hills District touching the Awes in the north, to the area a few

kilometres of the Simsang river in the south, and West Khasi Hills in the east, to about 20 kilometres westwards. A we and Chisak dialects are very similar.

Dual: This group inhabits the area south of the Chisaks; they have their villages on the banks of the Simsang, the biggest river in Garo Hills and in the hills to the south bank of the same river where it turns towards the plains. Many of the Duals went down to Mymensing as a result of inter-clan warfare and settled in the plains.

Matchi: As the name suggests, which means 'middle', they occupy the central parts of Garo Hills centering round the present Williamnagar town formerly called Simsanggre, the headquarters of East Garo Hills District. They touch the A wes at some points to the north, and extend upto the northern slopes of the Tura central range.

Matchangchi: They are called Matabeng and are found between the Matchis and the Abengs. This may be taken as a separate dialect although it is a mingling of A beng and Matchi dialects.

A beng or Am beng: This dialect is spoken by the largest group in the tribe. It is spoken in the whole of the Western hills which includes the Tura Town area and a greater part of the hills to the south of the central range, as far as the Bugi river. A small colony of Am benges also inhabits the south-eastern hills almost touching West Khasi Hills District.

Kotchu: Kotchus live in 7 (seven) villages in the north-eastern hills. They are not Koches but Garos and very similar with A wes in dialect and customs.

Chibok: They occupy the areas immediately to the East of the Ambengs in the upper valley of the Bugi river extending eastwards almost to the Dareng river. Their dresses, ornaments and songs are distinct from other groups; their dialect is almost unintelligible to other Garos. However, their dialect and culture are almost extinct today, due to education, conversion to Christianity and modern developmental works.

Ruga: Rugas live to the south of the Chiboks along the Bugi river. Chiboks and Rugas are numerically small dialectical groups whose myths, culture, dresses and ornaments show considerable variation

from those of other Garos. However, their culture is almost extinct today and only a handful of people can speak the dialect.

Gara or Ganrbing: The areas south of the central range between the Dareng and the Simsang rivers are inhabited by this group of Garos. Their dialect is almost the same as the standard Garo language except in intonation and a certain manner of speaking.

Atong: They occupy the valley of the Simsang river and the surrounding hills in the South Garo Hills district and beyond. They form one of the main linguistic groups of that district. Their dialect is unintelligible to other Garos, but their incantations during sacrifices and funeral ceremonies are chanted in the common Garo language. Their clan system, customs and traditions are also similar to those of other Garos.

Me gam: They are all found along the borders of Garo Hills and West Khasi Hills. The Khasis call them 'Lynngams'. They represent a fusion of the Garos and the Khasis, and may be regarded as a hybrid race. In appearance and custom, they resemble the Garos but their language has been classified by Grierson as Khasi.⁸

Atiagras: They are another small group of the Garos. They live to the south of the Kotchus and have strong resemblance with the Ambengs.

Garos of Bangladesh: According to the census of 1991, the Garos in Bangladesh numbered 68,210, which is considered very low.⁹ According to Ellen Bal, their number should not be less than one lakh.¹⁰ They occupy Mymensing District and Sylhet, but many of them live as far as Dacca. Among the Garos of Bangladesh are to be found most of the dialectical groups that occur in Garo Hills—the Abeng, Chisaks, Duals, Garas, Atongs, etc. Besides these there are other groups which are not found in Garo Hills, such as the Braka, Jariadongs, Somons, Galnes and Malongs. Most of their dialects and cultures are fast vanishing under the weight of the influences of the majority population of Bangladesh.¹¹

Thus the Garos were ridden with many dialects and variant cultural traits, many of which could not survive, while some of them are on the road to extinction due to western education, Christianity and modernization.

References:

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2. -----Ibid., Vol. I, Part I, pp 61-62, Vide also, Chatterjee S. K., *Kirata Jana Kriti*, p 27.
3. ----Ibid, Vol. III, Part I p1.
4. ----Ibid, Vol. 1, Part I, Introduction, p 40. Vide also, Chatterjee S. K., *Kirata Jana Kriti*.
5. ----Ibid, p 42.
6. Sangma M. S., *History of Garo Literature*, p 5.
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