

An Introduction to Garo Peasantry

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It needs to be stated at the outset that the inquiry into the chosen topic demands some clarification of the concept of 'peasantry.' Social philosophers, economists, sociologists and anthropologists have offered certain definitions of the concept. They have thought of 'peasantry' either (a) as constituting a 'class' in association with its 'revolutionary' potential;¹ or (b) in the context of a mode of production characterized by family-labour farm emphasizing on the significance of the family as a unit of both production and consumption, a unit capable of producing a fund of 'rent';² or (c) as a social typology defined by the cultural habits and norms of its members who (supposedly) cling to 'tradition' and have 'narrow vision' that is exclusively their own.³

In the socio-economic and political sense, 'peasantry' is often understood in the context of agricultural societies where there is scope for exploitation of labour in primary and secondary production processes to benefit the ruling, privileged minority. It has even been argued that the peasant existed only to be exploited irrespective of the place or the period in human history.⁴ Conversely, there has been the attempt to highlight the logic of family labour and the allocation of resources to a household according to its needs in certain village communities: this is said to have precluded the notion of 'exploitation' as

understood in the modern sense.⁵ Furthermore, the social category of peasantry is sometimes depicted as part of a wider economic, social and political network at certain stages of development. In fact, while attempting to define 'peasant economies', Marxist scholars in particular have referred to an agglomeration of various social and economic forms cutting across different modes of production ranging from 'antiquity' to 'feudalism' to the modern era of either 'capitalism' or 'communism' or 'socialism'.⁶ As it turns out, the exact definition of 'peasantry' has not been arrived at so far. Nevertheless, the common use of the term would associate the peasant with a rural setting and an overwhelming concern with the practice of agriculture in a vast range of historical and cultural contexts — whether in a class-based/caste-based or in a tribally dominated world — with or without the tag of 'the exploited'.

For our purpose, 'peasantry' connotes, in its broadest sense, a category of people engaged in more sedentary agriculture using pre-modern tools and methods of production, but in any case transcending simple horticulture. In other words, peasantry as a concept corresponds to any human group associated with agriculture that is marked by some advancement on simple horticulture, such as that brought about by the use of iron tools, ploughshare and the drainage technology resulting in more prolonged human settlements. It goes without saying that the people called 'peasants' were also engaged in some amount of trade and exchange with various social elements, and in various crafts (such as basket-making, cane-working, wood-working, weaving, etc.) and other occupational pursuits (such as hunting, fishing, gathering forest products like edible roots, leaves, stems and fruits for cooking, firewood for fuel, grass for thatching the roofs of shelters, herbs for medicinal purposes, fodder for domesticated animals, domestication of certain animals and birds, etc.), as well as rendering a wide range of obligatory, customary and even compulsory services. Such occupational pursuits, activities and services remained primarily at the level of the household or the community, and were subsidiary to agriculture as the mainstay of the economy. Even the pursuit of trade and exchange — which necessarily involved contacts with 'others' — did not bring about the negation of communal life. The term 'peasantry', however, neither carries the connotation of a distinct, homogeneous

class nor does it translate into a utopian existence of the village communities. Indeed, some degree of stratification or internal division into certain strata is inherent within that social category, with a miniscule section in a dominant position, followed by gradations of less dominant, small-time and dependent peasants. This again varies depending on the nature of the particular agrarian systems in relation to those engaged in primary production and the concomitant socio-economic forms thereof.

The study of 'peasantry' therefore requires an understanding of the relationship (a) between people and land; and (b) between people and people in the process of production. My goal in this paper is to try and deal with these matters of economy and society in their historical context, with particular reference to the low-lying areas in modern Garo Hills and the adjoining areas. The study will draw on the evidence of both written documents and oral traditions ascribed to the pre-British, British and post-British period till about the 1950s. The discussion will begin with a short introduction to the geographical background to highlight the fact of variations in the topography of the land occupied by (people who were known to the rest of the world as) the Garos and the resultant variation of agricultural practices among the peoples. It will briefly touch upon the implications of the occupational practices for the social organization of the Garos. The next part of the discussion will deal with the historical background of 'peasantry' among certain Garos in pre-British times: there needs to be a full discussion of the question of 'feudalism', which word had been used by some of the recent authors of Garo history but that will have to be the subject matter of another paper.⁷ The first two parts of the discussion are necessary for the purpose of revealing the elements of the pre-British past bearing on the theme under discussion, and so identifying the trends and the problems in the subsequent period. The final part of the discussion will inquire into issues of socio-economic relevance for Garo peasantry in the context of British rule and its immediate aftermath. The study will be exploratory in nature.

I

The Garos are known to have occupied extensive pockets of territory spread over areas that now roughly correspond to (a)

at least three northeastern States of the Indian Union [viz., Meghalaya, Assam, Tripura]; and to (b) northern Bengal falling under present-day West Bengal; and (c) the Mymensingh district [in Bangladesh].⁸ From the standpoint of their geographical distribution alone, therefore, their settlement patterns and socio-political organization could not have been always uniform: As among the majority of the population within the Indian sub-continent during historical times, the primary occupation of the Garos was agriculture. But factors of topography, ecology and technology and the corresponding socio-economic implications thereof seem to have conditioned the nature of that most important activity. Apparently the same factors also contributed to the rise and development of the Garos' socio-political institutions commensurate with the variant forms of land-use and social relations among the peoples at different levels and at various historical stages.

A look at the broad 'upland and lowland' dichotomy will perhaps suffice to illustrate the plausibility of the above-mentioned points:

(a) In the uplands, the Garos practised swidden agriculture resorting to the slash-and-burn method, which technique involved the use of simple tools such as the hoe and the celt. As the relevant sources⁹ indicate, such tools were made of stone, presumably in the earliest phase of their adoption of horticulture as a way of life. Over a period of time the stone tools were gradually supplemented/complemented or, in some settlements, even replaced by those of iron.¹⁰ The use of iron tools doubtless enabled the peoples to clear patches of forest land for the purpose of extending the area of cultivation of crops, a practice that hitherto had probably not been possible. Still, the exact role of iron in bringing about social change remains unknown. As of now, archaeology too is not in a position to provide direct evidence to substantiate the fact of food production in terms of the species, quantity or quality of crops that formed the staple of the producers-cum-consumers, despite the finds of artifacts and potsherds at certain sites.¹¹ Hence there is no way of knowing when, where and how the transition from domestication of plants to deliberate production of food crops came about, other than some pointers to the fact of such a transition at certain sites located in the area between the Tura and Arbela ranges.¹² It can only

be surmised that at some point of time the people had taken to cultivation of rice along with millet and Job's tears, all of which were completely dependent on the monsoon rains. But apparently the production of crops did not spell the end of the people's diet of tubers and other edible items that were readily available in nature.

The Westerners¹³ who had first arrived at 'Garrow' habitats in the hills in the course of military expeditions, geological surveys, mapping the land, linguistic surveys and ethnographical studies left behind a sketch of the land and the people as follows:

- (i) The land abounded in flora and fauna and satisfied the peoples' need for food, shelter and clothing.
- (ii) The people were completely dependent on the topsoil and on seasonal rains for the growth of all sorts of vegetation including crops.
- (iii) Wild animals such as tigers, elephants and boars however held potential threats to life and limb, while certain species of birds proved troublesome for the people in maintaining fields of standing grain-crops or whenever the grains were spread out under the sun for drying before removing the husks.
- (iv) The basis of social organization was kinship: This underlay the prevalence of a communal system of production and a relatively insignificant division of labour among the peoples.

Presumably the last feature had developed for the purpose of security, facilitating the cooperative effort of the villagers towards that end, and of ensuring effective exploitation of the land in such a manner that the cycle of swidden cultivation would remain the same for all the households in a village. This type of social organization was deemed conducive to satisfying the peoples' obligations of entering into reciprocal relations with one another, participating in ceremonies, observing the rituals and practices meant to ensure bountiful production and success in whatever the community set out to do, to celebrate life and mourn death as a close knit community. The homestead plots of all the households stood next to one another; the cultivable

land was located adjacent thereto. As per the traditional system of land tenure,¹⁴ every family had the right to clear land for cultivation, but the prerogative for allotment of land that was under the ownership of a lineage (such area of land was known as *a.king*) for the purpose of cultivation to the village households was with the land-owning lineages (*ma.chongs*) each represented by a chief (*a.king nokma* = custodian-manager of the lineage land). Even so the entire village community — irrespective of the lineages (whether land-owning or not) to which the members belonged — had common rights of usage of the land as a matter of custom. By virtue of its exclusive territorial rights, a *ma.chong* also had the prerogative of allotting land even to a migrant family or an individual belonging to another lineage from another village for the purpose of cultivation and setting up a homestead. This was subject to the agreement between the *ma.chong* and the migrant element that the latter would pay the former a nominal fee called *a.wil* or *a.kimil* (sometimes also called *hakimil*, i.e., payment in kind). Once the payment was made the family/individual acquired the same rights as every other household of the village community in its allotted plot: That is to say, every household was entitled to usufructuary rights, but not ownership rights, since the land held by any one individual household was neither transferable nor alienable. This, despite the customary provision for its inheritance in the line of the family/individual occupying the land. In principle, therefore, land was distributed among both old and new residents of the village to guarantee a more or less 'egalitarian' access to the available cultivable and homestead land. Apparently the people had concern for an ideology of biological reproduction. This was manifested in the lineage society that produced the kinship ideology. The lineage society attached greater importance to the control of the "means of human production" [= subsistence and women] than that of the "means of material production" [= land]. The social security requirements were met by means of demographic expansion.

In swidden agriculture, the same plot could not be used for producing food-grains beyond two years at most because of depletion of the soil's fertility: thereupon it reverted to the land-owning lineage for letting it lie fallow for a certain number of

years until the soil had regenerated enough to be allotted once again for cultivation. The individual household had only the right of occupation and usage; by extension it had the right of possession only as long as it occupied and made use of the land. This left no doubt that *the community had the primacy over the individual in controlling the allocation and use of the 'means of material production', i.e., land.* For all practical purposes, however, the customary law left plenty of scope for the individual or the family within the village community to enhance the level of production and so raise his/its socio-political status through his/its own efforts: This, of course, was possible within the framework of socially approved norms. *The household as a kin-based production unit organized the resources in the allotted land,* i.e. it was free to make use of its own tools and product in any way it wished. For example, an individual in the household could, by exploiting [i.e., regulating and controlling his relationship with] nature, invest surplus product in acquiring articles of daily necessity (such as salt, cloth, iron tools, etc.), luxury (such as ornaments of high value metals, precious and semi-precious stones) and such things regarded as measures of wealth (e.g., heads of animals, either domesticated or semi-domesticated). In this way, an individual in the household could accumulate wealth and on occasions destroy a part of it in ritual ceremonies and feasting, involving the participation of the whole village community, and so on. Such occasions provided avenues for the individual to display his wealth to try and move up the social scale and attain a position of prestige and influence.

From the preceding discussion it appears that the paradox of incipient private dimension in a communally organized social system was inherent, but there is no hard evidence that it had become explicit until the twentieth century, when the use of money ushered in the notion of land as a commodity. Moreover, in many areas occupied by the Garos, where the village was surrounded by large tracts of virgin territory or by land left fallow for several years and therefore fit for cultivation, there was the system of individual families selecting plots for shifting cultivation. In such cases there was no uniformity of the cycle of swidden agriculture among the village households, although reciprocity relations in production and distribution of resources prevailed. The heritable privilege for using the same plots

cultivated earlier tended to assume unilineal descent from the mother in the household to the chosen daughter in the matrilineal Garo community.

(b) In the lowlands, the Garos took to *settled agriculture* as a way of life. This meant their adoption of plough-based agriculture that was characterized by drainage technology in the context of wet rice cultivation. Such practices were facilitated by the abundance of cultivable land on account of the seasonal flooding by rivers/rivulets and the resultant depositing of silt that served to rejuvenate the land's fertility periodically. Logically, therefore, the practice of wet rice cultivation would have had a profound impact on matters of labour-use and labour-value, considering the necessity of field preparation, transplantation of paddy, greater cooperative effort in making and maintaining canals for irrigation and for draining excessive water from the fields, regular weeding, and so on. All these activities, after all, would have required the employment of intensive labour beyond what familial labour could provide. Moreover, as the land that was available for production could be used and reused on a perpetual basis, it would have engendered the emergence of a new attitude to matters of proprietary rights and rights of usage among the people.

It appears that such socio-economic matters as mentioned above were sought to be addressed within the existing relations of production as sanctioned by custom. In principle the community carried on production and customary forms of usage of land and natural resources emphasizing on mutually reciprocal relations; but apparently this was possible only up to a point. In practice the need for intensive labour input in wet rice cultivation seems to have transcended the boundaries of reciprocal obligations/relations among members of the same community only. Added to this development was the need for waging wars to protect the territorial community property and to augment the community's production resources. In a situation where rudimentary surplus was produced through intensive agricultural methods, the cooperation among several work teams covering the entire community in a given territory had to be regularized. This saw the development of political authority commensurate with the rule of a (lineage) chieftain who had to marshal the support of fighting men for protecting the community,

facilitating the hiring of extra-familial labour for appropriating nature and building up defensive structures. Perhaps the prospect of sharing the spoils of war would have been an added incentive. For these reasons he appropriated tributes from the kin-groups through the relationship of distribution of the production resources. The predominantly subsistence economy thus gave rise to a productive economy with a regular surplus product above subsistence for the purpose of tribute. Thus the 'egalitarian' character of the social organization seems to have been undermined. The development of productive forces side by side with the development of economic and social inequality between individuals and groups nonetheless seem to have resulted in the community of wet rice cultivators identifying its interests (ideologically and factually) with certain individuals' interests.

Against this background a handful of individuals entrusted with safeguarding common interests seems to have emerged as powerful elements that exercised control over organization of resources. Apparently such individuals tended to nurse ambitions of enhanced political authority and economic power exceeding that which was possible within the confines of the customary laws predating the advanced methods of agriculture prevalent in the plains. Some of those ambitious elements actually embarked on the policy of political aggrandizement. The evidence indicates that in order to meet the needs of the new economy, such political aspirants facilitated the emergence and development of servitude among (a) growing numbers of their own kinsfolk; and (b) 'others' who had been shorn of some of their 'traditional' rights or had been dispossessed or recruited as menial workers to broaden the productive base. At certain periods of their history, the locally dominant Garos themselves were tributary to more powerful rulers of regional and sub-regional kingdoms.¹⁵ These lines of development taken together were reflective of social change among the Garos who had taken to settled agriculture in the low-lying areas. The focus of this paper is on the emergence and development of the phenomenon of 'peasantry' among such Garos in the period under study.

II

The extant sources ascribed to the pre-British period indicate that the Garos had occupied some portions of the plains of Assam and portions of North Bengal (within present-day West Bengal) and of erstwhile East Pakistan (the present-day Bangladesh).¹⁶ These lands under their occupation were in addition to their settlements in the flat areas corresponding to the northern, southwestern and southern parts of the erstwhile undivided district of Garo Hills¹⁷ — which were periodically inundated by river floods — such as the tracts (a) alongside the Bugai and Nitai (which flow into Bangladesh in the south), Krishnai, Dudhnai and Ildek (which flow into the Brahmaputra in Assam in the north); and (b) on the foothills adjoining the western and southern flanks of the Hills. An early literary source¹⁸ linked the Garos of those low-lying areas to the landed intermediaries or *zamindars* who were called *chaudhuries*. The *chaudhuries*' political jurisdiction covered the territorial units of Karaibari, Kalumalupara, Mechpara and the Habraghat Parganas¹⁹ (in the eastern part of Rangpur), all within the present-day Goalpara. The same source portrayed the *chaudhuries* as estate-holders subject to the authority of the Mughals who had extended their suzerainty over much of Bengal. The Mughals concluded revenue settlements with the *chaudhuries*: Such settlements assumed the form of periodical tributes assessed on transit and market dues, occasional gifts of elephants and sandalwood (*agar*), and collection and payment of miscellaneous duties. The *chaudhuries* in turn effected the revenue settlements through the intermediacy of the *foujdar*. This functionary realized the bulk of the dues on the trade from the 'frontier' markets (*hats*) located at the foothills, where the most important item of barter for Bengal cloth and salt was the Garo cotton brought down from the hills. Apparently, the Garos grew cotton for commercial purpose, although their women were also engaged in weaving cloth for household consumption. The *chaudhuries* seem to have derived substantial profit from such an arrangement. That the balance of trade was in favour of the intermediaries was not lost on the

Garos, a fact that bred tensions among the latter in relation to the former. Such tensions however seem to have been limited to the level of the transactions, although there were occasional instances of the Garos venting their frustrations by undertaking raids on the settlements of the plains for taking human heads.²⁰ It was perhaps to meet the challenge of such violent conflicts that the *chaudhuries* were charged with the maintenance of armed garrisons, the best known of which was the Dacca Artillery Park.

To dilate on the above-mentioned points, the Mughals promoted their own interests in the area under study through the services of the hierarchy of functionaries who were landholders by virtue of being rulers in their own right or recipients of land assignments from the imperial rulers. Such landholders were the 'Hindu' *zamindars*.²¹ Relations of mutual benefit prevailed. Land *per se* was not important as an object of revenue assessment for either the Mughals or the graded functionaries. What was important was the produce in land; and what mattered for agricultural production was labour and technology. The prerequisite for effective organization of resources was the incorporation of the locally dominant elements into the socio-political organization of the Mughals. The Mughals recognized the leadership of the chiefs/local rulers and protected the latter's interests. This seems to have been aimed at rationalizing the fact of the existing social divisions and the hierarchy of the ruling groups in the Goalpara and adjoining areas, thereby blunting or nullifying the danger of any organized resistance against the Mughal political economy. Furthermore, to keep open the channels of movement, trade and communication in general, the Mughal rulers extended 'protection' along strategic routes of economic exchanges. Clearly, the undercurrent of coercive power based on physical means was aimed at enforcing compliance of the people with the imperial policies of the Mughals. In this way the predominantly agrarian economies in the tribally dominated areas were brought within the sphere of Mughal domination in northern India.

The exigencies of meeting the demand of the Mughal rulers for tribute and that of markets for certain commodities located in the land of the Garos through the *chaudhuries* entailed the adoption of certain strategies on the part of the intermediaries. This was because of the need for — (a) establishing a type of organizational reach [i.e., a network of power] over

predominantly agricultural groups spread across a wide territory so as to facilitate some degree of stable cooperation in the northeast region; (b) extending the horizon of exchange relations; and (c) forging new relations of production [i.e., relations concerned with how surplus labour was to be appropriated and how certain social groups were to produce and reproduce their social existence]. As the relevant data indicates, surplus product was appropriated by means of 'extra-economic' coercion [i.e., the remunerative or utilitarian power based on the material means provided by certain rewards which (i) the members of the ruling groups desired; (ii) the Mughals conferred on those members; and (iii) the locally dominant elements actually controlled]. The surplus product was primarily for the consumption of the ruling groups. But the nature of appropriation showed that the economy was essentially localized with rudimentary commodity circulation, e.g., cotton tribute from the residents of a few outlying villages around Mechpara and the hills bordering Kalumalupara; tribute in cash and kind from the inhabitants of the foothills bordering the Habraghat Parganas; and tolls and trade tax from those who availed of the weekly markets (*hats*) located in the *zamindar's* estate, for the purpose of buying and selling. Even the Garos occupying the interior of the uplands do not seem to have been spared from this organizational reach, perhaps if only on occasions of elephant-catching or locating valuable forest products (such as *agar*).

Moreover, irrespective of the level of development of the various societies, some amount of contact and trade linked different areas with different resources and specialized products to one another, thereby facilitating reciprocal transfer of commodities outside individual communities. Such items of exchange were salt, cloth, ornaments for personal use, ceremonially important items (such as brass plates and gongs, cock's tails, yak tail, etc.), clay and metal pots, arrow heads, and iron tools for use in the household or the fields. The exchanges sometimes covered long distances and were effected through various intermediary groups.²² Thus the economies could not all or necessarily have been at a subsistence level. In fact the reproduction of the social relations underlay the exchanges. Nor could the various societies escape the influences of the imperial system or contain the formation of autonomous confederacies. In this

respect, it was the Garo *ryots* (small-time peasants) of the plains and foothills, along with the *ryots* of other social backgrounds who seem to have borne the brunt of taxes on their social product.²³ Their labour also seems to have been appropriated from time to time to meet the rulers' various needs: for their material comfort, for undertaking structural activities, and even rendering military service as and when required. So far no literary source ascribed to the Mughal period is forthcoming on the actual nature of the agricultural practices, or the pattern of land tenure, or the condition of the peasantry in the Goalpara area.

Within the *zamindaries* themselves, there were certain locally dominant individual Garos who attained membership of the ruling group, as may be inferred from their designation *rāja*. There were Garo *rājas* who seem to have built up their economic standing — and corresponding political authority — in the area around the Habraghat Pargana. This point finds some substantiation in the evidence of the oral traditions and folk stories among the Garos of the plains. According to oral tradition,²⁴ the Garo *rājas* followed the policy of conflict and conciliation with various social elements including their kinsfolk — who seem to have been reduced to the status of ordinary (small-time) peasants (*ryots*) — and helped maintain law and order in the areas within their jurisdiction. They also kept open the channel of commercial relations with the Garos of the hills. Although concrete evidence is lacking, the *rājas* presumably managed to assert themselves because of their ability to adapt to the needs of the agrarian economy typical of the low-lying areas. Simultaneously their role in providing military leadership to those whom they ruled over seems to have grown significantly. The sources described the *rājas* as adept in the art of fighting, which skill included the knowledge of the use of the horse and the elephant and the art of close combat as well as guerilla tactics.²⁵ Perhaps the *rājas* created an effective mechanism whereby the ordinary kinsfolk were gradually reduced to a subordinate position, while simultaneously they retained the myth of common origins based on kinship to marshal the support of their kinsmen. Such a myth could have been invoked on occasions that called for collective action to safeguard common interests. The assistance they rendered Mirza Nathan during his campaign in the first

quarter of the 17th century²⁶ and their collaboration with the Ahoms and the *Rāja* of Rani²⁷ to expel the Mughal forces from the Brahmaputra valley can be cited as cases in point. In that sense the principle of mutual cooperation among members of certain lineage groups seems to have persisted into the Mughal period. The actual operational aspect however remains unknown in the absence of sources.

In any case, the picture that emerges from the evidence of the sources ascribed to the Mughal period is that of a highly structured socio-political organization in the area under study. The social differentiations were most noticeable between the receivers of tribute and other dues, on the one hand, and the actual producers, on the other. Alienation of land does not seem to have been felt, given the fact that labour was scarce in relation to the area of the available cultivable land.²⁸ But the Mughal period saw the beginnings of alienation of labour from the process of production. This was because the primary producers themselves had to contend with the erosion of their control over organization of resources in favour of the hierarchical socio-political order that had to be maintained by the surplus product of their labour.

III

By 1765, the East India Company received from Shah Alam II the Diwani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, with the right to superintend all the lands, and to collect all the revenues therein. The authorities of Fort William replaced the *foujdar* by a *sezawal* who was appointed for an annual duration only. Charged with revenue collection, and contracted to pay the district revenues to the government, the *sezawal* arranged for collecting the revenues from the substantial peasants who were designated as *rājas*. Such *rājas* included certain individuals among the Garos. They drew on the authority of their position as lineage chieftains having the custody of and the managerial role in the *ma.chong aking* lands. Till 1787–88 they continued to receive revenue payment in the form of tribute in cotton similar to that of the preceding period. But post-1788 the levy of miscellaneous dues was declared illegal, and it became mandatory for all *zamindars*

to make cash payments to the British rulers. This was in consonance with the needs of the capitalist economy. Thereafter, the Permanent Settlement was introduced in 1793.

Like the Mughals, the British rulers recognized the importance of the politically dominant individuals and groups in establishing administrative control over the vast majority of the tribal population including the Garos. The erstwhile *zamindars* and other functionaries under the Mughals were given the right to rule as before, subject to the payment of a fixed tribute depending on the fertility, commercial viability and the size of the land under their jurisdiction. In fact, the *zamindars*' position was strengthened once the British accorded them ownership of the estates. The direct producers, many of whom happened to be Garos, thereafter became tenants-at-will in their own lands, to be exploited by the landlords thanks to the latter's right to juridical, political and economic control over the subjects. As a result, the Garo peasants seem to have become pauperized and no longer able to reproduce themselves.

The British also initiated indirect rule over the Garos through the traditional leadership of *nokmas*, local dignitaries and influential individuals, who were made *de facto* owners of the communal lands. Through them, the Garos' natural right to possess land for cultivation and homestead was usurped, whereas the *nokmas*' rights and genealogical tables as officially recorded in black and white entailed British authority to assume the role of the supreme dispenser of rights in land. In that capacity, it imposed house-tax and hoe-tax in the hills,²⁹ plough tax in the plains and other levies,³⁰ undertook cadastral surveys to assess revenues on land and produce,³¹ fixed the boundaries of the *a.king* lands,³² carved out forest reserves from communally held territory in the hills, created *zamindars* and *mahari-lakhiraj* at the foothills, as well as *mohok* [i.e., periodically saleable right of exploiting natural resources like *agar*, elephants, etc.].³³

British documents of the second half of the nineteenth century mentioned several Garo villages in the areas now falling in South Garo Hills and adjoining areas further south, as well as on the foothills of West Garo Hills extending to portions of the plains of lower Assam and parts of Bangladesh. These included, among others, Damalgiri, Chipragiri, Dekranggiri, Anangpara, Shemshengiri, Dullungiri, Rupagiri, Bomapara, Daloo, and

Tholungpara (all Anglicised spellings). They were placed within recognized administrative units subsumed under the nomenclatures *mauza*, *ilaka*, etc., doubtless for increasing the efficiency of revenue administration. Towards that end the British authority appointed officials called *Lushkars*, each charged with assessing the amount of revenue accruing from different methods of cultivation followed in different Garo villages, and the quantity and quality of rice grown. There is evidence that the authorities caused measures to be taken to increase the output of rice production, such as introduction of manure and the practice of terrace cultivation on the slopes of some of the hills, especially in the 1930s. They maintained systematic cataloguing of land use based on information on the tenures and taxation through cadastral surveys and thus categorized the areas under permanent and non-permanent settlements. It was from 1918 onwards that British officials maintained records of the area for which cadastral survey was undertaken. The officials prepared records of land rights under the heading 'Report on the Land Revenue Administration of Assam' for different sets of years (1929–30; 1933–34, etc.).

What emerges from the documents is that the area of permanently settled area pertaining to the Garos was negligible when compared with that of other peoples of the contemporaneous period, whereas that of not permanently settled area was gradually expanding. More importantly, the number of *pattas* issued by regular procedure or even summary procedure by and large indicated only periodic *khiraj*; the largest number of transfers was solely by succession, and seldom by private gift or contract, whereas cases of sale or usufructuary mortgage were conspicuous by their absence. It would perhaps be pertinent to suggest that the factor of kinship continued to play a significant role in the management and use of land during the colonial period, although there were definite signs of undermining of the communal rights, a fact borne out by litigations attributed to certain individual Garos against the Bengali *zamindars* on account of the latter's direct threats to the Garos' use and management of their own land and resources.³⁴

In the aftermath of British rule, the Garo peasantry witnessed no change in matters of land and revenue administration until 1952. In that year the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council came into being. The District Council initiated the

programme of progressive regeneration of all unclassified forest land and replanted valuable species in such lands that were deemed to be reserved and protected. This, and the Council's prerogative to issue ownership rights on individually acquired land further alienated lands from communal ownership.

Furthermore, as exchange developed further and market economy became diffused, kinship lost its actuality as the chief expression of the peasant social organization. The use of money served to transform land into a commodity and facilitate the supercession of kin dependents in plough lands by wage-earners.

END NOTES

1. An example that readily comes to mind is the 'peasant revolution' in modern Chinese history within Maoism: This is evident in Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Works*, Volume I (London, 1954). The class analysis of peasantry made a clear distinction between the 'proletariat', at one end of the conceptual spectrum, and the rich peasants/landlords, on the other. The 'middle peasants' were identified as the driving force of the peasant movements of the twentieth century. Thereafter, Eric R. Wolf [in his works, *Peasants* (Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1966); and *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (London, 1971)], provided further insights into 'peasant movements' and 'peasant rebellions' in Mexico, Russia, China, Algeria and Vietnam. Cf. Hamza Alavi who dealt with the rural aspects of the Russian revolution, the Chinese revolution, and the Indian peasant movements of 1920-1950. See Alavi's paper, "Peasants and Revolution", in K. Gough and H.P. Sharma (eds.), *Imperialism and Revolution in South Asia* (New York, 1973).
2. See Eric R. Wolf, *Peasants* (loc. cit), p. 10: "It is ... production of a fund of rent which critically distinguishes the peasant from the primitive cultivator." Cf. David Ricardo's concept of rent as given in his work, *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* that glossed over the matter of ownership of landed property underlying 'rent.' For a critical discussion on modern economic writings on the theory of rent, see Utsa Patnaik (ed.), *The Agrarian Question in Marx and his Successors, Volume I* (Delhi, 2007), especially pp. 131-183.
3. Maurice Godelier [in his work, *Perspectives in Marxist Anthropology*, tr. Robert Brain (Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 176] attributed such cultural characteristics to the "*low* [italics in the original] stage of development of the productive power of labour...".
4. F. Engels had made a declaration to this effect in his letter (dated 9th August 1882) to Bernstein: Quoted from *Ibid.*, p. 232, 48n.
5. This was the main concern of the 'micro theory' advocated by A.V. Chayanov [see D. Thorner, B. Kerblay and R.E.F. Smith (eds.), *A.V.*

- Chayanov, *on the Theory of Peasant Economy* (Homewood, Illinois, 1966)]. Chayanov's take on the 'peasant economy' ran contrary to the Marxist notion of 'class differentiation' in the peasantry. Cf. Theodore Shanin, *Peasants and Peasant Societies* (London, 1971).
6. For elaboration on this point, see, for instance, Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London, 1975); R.H. Hilton (ed.), *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London, 1976).
 7. See J.B. Bhattacharjee, *The Garos and the English* (New Delhi, 1978); cf. idem, "Social Formations in Precolonial Garo Society", in S.K. Chattopadhyay (ed.), *Tribal Institutions of Meghalaya* (Guwahati, 1985), pp. 237-256; M.S. Sangma, *History and Culture of the Garos* (New Delhi, 1981), p. 5; cf. idem, "Land Revenue Systems in Garo Hills: A Historical Note", in B.B. Dutta and M.N. Karna (eds.), *Land Relations in North East India* (People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1987), pp. 149-156.
 8. The geographical spread of the Garos in the low-lying areas of northeast India and the adjoining areas corresponding to those under present-day Bangladesh and West Bengal has been recorded by early Western writers. See Francis Hamilton, *An Account of Assam* (London, 1814; reprint 1963, Gauhati), pp. 80, 86-90; E.T. Dalton, *The Tribal History of Eastern India* (London, 1846; reprint 1978, Delhi), p. 58. For more details, see Mihir N. Sangma, *Unpublished Documents on Garo Affairs Sonaram Rongrokgre Sangma Versus King Emperor* (New Delhi, 1993), *passim*.
 9. The phase of food production, called Neolithic, has been attested for at a number of sites in northeast India. Garo Hills featured as an important area of research in this regard. But till today the pace of investigation remains extremely slow. There are very few studies on the Neolithic tools recovered from 'Garo Hills Zone'. See, among other works, those of A.H. Dani, *Prehistory and Protohistory of Eastern India* (Calcutta, 1960), pp. 70-74; Bridget and Raymond Allchin, *The Birth of Indian Civilization* (Pelican, 1968), p. 172f.
 10. Documents attributed to the early Western writers (administrators, missionaries, *et al.*) recorded the prevalent use of iron tools among the Garos, and the Garos' dependence on non-Garos (such as the Bengalis and Khasis) for the supply of iron tools: See Arthur Playfair, *The Garos* (1st published 1909, London; 1st reprint 1975, Gauhati); William Carrey, *The Garo Jungle Book* (1st edn. 1919, Philadelphia; revised edn. 1966 by Reverend J.M. Wood, Gauhati).
 11. The finds are confined to certain sites located in the low-lying areas by the river Ganol and along the Simsang-Nongal across central Garo Hills extending to the southeast portion bordering Bangladesh. For references in this regard, see Mignonette Momin, "History, Ethnography, Archaeology and the Cultural Sequence in Garo Hills", in Mignonette Momin (ed.), *Readings in History and Culture of the Garos* (New Delhi, 2003), particularly, pp. 38-40.
 12. For a preliminary note on the historical significance of the archaeological finds from Garo Hills, which note is based on the earlier writers' pioneering observations on such finds, see *Ibid.*, especially pp. 41-44.
 13. John Eliot, "Observations on the Inhabitants of Garrow Hills made during a Public Deputation in the Years 1788 and 1789", in *Asiatic Researches*,

- Vol. III*, 1792; Walter Hamilton, *Geographical, Statistical and Historical Descriptions of Hindoostan, Vol. I* (Calcutta, 1820); Francis Hamilton, *An Account of Assam (1808–09)* (Calcutta, 1840).
14. On the customary law of the Garos, see Fr. G. Costa, "The Garo Code of Law," in *Anthropos*, Vol. 49, 1949 [reprint 1975 Tura (in the form of a booklet)]; Jobang Marak, *The Garo Law* (Gauhati, 1952).
 15. *Infra*, Section II.
 16. *Supra*, 8n. See also Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes on the North-East Frontier of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1884; reprint 1994 New Delhi, under a new title: *The North-East Frontier of India*).
 17. i.e. under the state of Assam till 1972, whence it came under the state of Meghalaya.
 18. *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi, Vols. I–II* [tr. M.I. Borah (Reprint 1992, Guwahati)], *passim*.
 19. *Ibid.* See also B.C. Allen, *The Assam District Gazetteer*, Volume X.
 20. See David Scott's report [in Nirote K. Baruah, *David Scott in North-East India 1802–1831 A Study in British Paternalism* (Delhi, 1970)] on the 'donation' called *mata-raksha* (= "preservation of the head") that the peasants of the plains of Bengal made in favour of the Garo headhunters.
 21. B.C. Allen, *op. cit.*
 22. Oral traditions provide plenty of pointers to the nature of social organization, land-use and land tenure among the Garos as well as matters of trade and communications. See D.S. Rongmuthu, *Apasong Agana* (Gauhati, 1970; reprint), pp. 183–186. Cf. E.T. Dalton, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
 23. *Supra*, 20n, for the reference.
 24. D.S. Rongmuthu, *op. cit.*
 25. *Ibid.*
 26. M.S. Sangma, *op. cit.*, Chapter I.
 27. *Ibid.*
 28. For underlining the point of labour scarcity in northeast India during the pre-British period, see Mignonette Momin's papers in Mignonette Momin and Cecile A. Mawlong (eds.), *Society and Economy in North East India, Vol. 1*; and in F.A. Qadri (ed.), *Society and Economy in North East India, Vol. 2* (New Delhi, 2004 and 2006 respectively). On the same point with reference to the whole of Assam in the first quarter of the 20th century, see E.A. Gait, *History of Assam* (London, 1905; revised edn. 1926), pp. 360–362.
 29. Records of the 1870–1930s under Land Revenue Administration of Assam were mostly in the nature of assessing the amount of revenue accruing from different methods of cultivation, listed as hoe tax, gradually replaced by the house tax (that could have included households engaged in plough cultivation, although not specified in any of the records) from different Garo villages after taking into consideration the estimate provided by the *Lushkars* (Anglicised spelling of *Laskars*).
 30. *Ibid.*
 31. The cadastral surveys providing information on the tenures and taxation were undertaken from 1918 onwards. The officials prepared records of land rights under the heading 'Report on the Land Revenue Administration of Assam' for different sets of years (1929–30; 1933–34, etc.).

32. By 1934, a regular *Aking* Register was kept — 173 entries for 1935–36. Boundaries were drawn up, cases of disputes disposed of [misc. cases and cases tried by Lashkars upto 1932 were destroyed in 1936; along with some general and revenue papers of the area classified as Permanently Settled including “Revenue — Free Land” (as mentioned in Inspection Note on the Tura Revenue Office recorded by PRT Gurdon, Commissioner, supplementary pages attached thereto by the DC’s Office, 1936).
33. *The Assam Land Revenue Manual, Vol. I*, 1931.
34. The most well known case pertains to Sonaram R. Sangma. See Mihir N. Sangma, *op. cit.*