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**SOME  
CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC ASPECTS  
OF  
THE GAROS**



**Sri B. N. CHOUDHURY**

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## CHAPTER I

### HABITAT

The Garos of Assam are mainly to be found in the districts of Garo Hills, Kamrup and Goalpara, but the Garo Hills district is regarded as the original home of the the Garo tribe for, the largest number of them live here; they are widely distributed in this hills district. The Garo Hills district is bounded by Goalpara and part of the Mymensing district of East Pakistan on the north and the west, by Mymensing on the south, and by the Khasi and Jaintia Hills district on the east. The district covers an area of 3,160.6 square miles and has a population of 2,42,075 according to the 1951 census; of this population 1,90,702 are Garos while the rest are non-Garos.

#### *Physical features*

The Garo Hills district is a dense, irregular mass of low elevation. It is, however, generally believed by the people of the plains and others that the district is covered entirely by hills but when one tours in the district thoroughly one would see that there are vast and beautiful plain fields in between the hills and these fields sometimes produce paddy more exuberantly than the plains of the Brahmaputra Valley do. Only one central ridge known as the Tura range may be said to traverse the district from the south-east to the north-

west. The highest peak of the hills, Nokrek, is situated in this range and is 4,652 feet high. The district headquarters is at Tura, a small town and situated at an altitude of 1300 feet only on the western end of the main range of the hills.

Of the whole of the district an area of 103 square miles is covered under state forests which produce mainly sal trees of fine qualities. The unclassified state forests are full of bamboos of various kinds. While touring in the Garo Hills district one sometimes simply wonders at the vast expanses of bamboos! Almost all sorts of birds and animals are to be found in this district; elephants, monkeys and pigs are many in its forests and they cause much damage to the standing crops during the year. *Maynā* birds are abundantly available from the forests of the Garo Hills.

The number of rivers and rivulets is not small. The main rivers are the *Jināri*, the *Krisnāi*, the *Dudhnai*, the *Gānol* or *Kālo* river, the *Bhogāi*, the *Nitāi*, the *Someswari*, the *Rongra* and the *Mahādeo*. Of these rivers the first three are called by the Garos the *Didrām*, the *Dāmring* and the *Māridā* respectively. They take their rise in the *Arābellā* range of hills. The *Arābellā* hills which are not earlier mentioned are connected with the main range of the hills. The *Arābellā* hills are noted for their height and natural beauty. The rivers the *Jināri*, the *Krisnāi*, and the *Dudhnai* flow northward and enter into the Goalpara district. The river *Gānol* takes its rise some nine miles from Tura, its beds are rocky; the *Rongkon* is the principal tributary of the *Gānol*. Drinking water is supplied in the town of Turā from a reservoir set up in the *Rongkon*. The *Gānol* flows westward and finally falls into the *Jinjirām* river. The *Bhogāi*, the *Nitāi* and the *Someswari* rivers take their rise near Nokrek and flow southward. Others are small rivers but they have

also their importance to the Garos. The Someswari is also known as the *Simsāng* and is the largest river in the Garo Hills district. The upper reaches of these rivers are rocky and are not sometimes fordable. These rivers have beautiful and deep pools where fishes of the most palatable kinds abound.

River Someswari of transparent water and about a furlong wide in places, flows tortuously between steep hills. The panorama of the banks of this river is really enchanting. A trip by boat in the Someswari from Bāghmārā to Siju during the first showers is worth undertaking. Bāghmārā is situated on the southern border of the district and was a big trade centre before the partition of India ; it is nearly seventy miles from Turā by road. Siju is nearly thirty miles above Bāghmārā and is on the Someswari. Beyond Siju the river is not navigable for, the beds are quite rocky. In places the banks of the Someswari are naturally polished. Some few miles below Siju there is a nice hill, a dome-like round hill, to the east of the river and is known as the Kailās hill. There is no human habitation in this hill. To the west of the river is another hill of much interest. People neither climb this hill nor they collected fuel even from the jungles of it ; they believe that this hill is a permanent abode of the spirits and ghosts. About a mile below Siju is a huge, long cave ; its formation is wonderful but it is natural. This cave is an eternal home of thousands of bats and hence it is called *Dobākol* (cave of bats). It is said that there are some other such caves in different parts of the district. Above two miles or so of Siju is a fine water-falls, approach to the falls is not very easy for the plains people, for the approach is rocky and slippery and at places there are deep pools also but if the lower reaches of the falls can be reached and a few minutes' rest can be taken there one feels quite blissful indeed.

On the river Rongrā some fifteen miles above the Rongrā bazar is a fine hill known as Bālpākrām. It is like a small plateau. There are neither trees nor high grass on it, it is covered with grasses like fine bushes of low growth. A cool breeze is always felt there and in the middle of the plateau is a deep pool from which hot vapours sometimes gush out. People do not generally look down into the pool, for there is a belief amongst them that inhaling of the vapours coming out of the pool make one sleep and sleep sometimes eternally. There is a tradition current in the locality that in the past the pool was very wide and its waters were very pure. Once Sri Rāmchandra of Ayodhyā with his consort Sitā halted at the pool while travelling to some distant destination and Sitā took her bath in the waters of this pool. Bālpākrām is regarded as a sacred place by many persons, Garos as well as others.

Along the southern border of the district from Bāghmārā to the borders of the Khasi hills there are a few places of real interest. Seven miles east of Bāghmārā is a place called *Pāndā*, some sixteen miles east of Pāndā is Māhādeo and eight miles east of Māhādeo is *Maheshkholā*. The names of these places are associated with the names of the great Hindu god Mahādeva, and I heard some people say that Chāndo, the greatest Assamese merchant of the Purānic age roamed about in these places or he had some halting camps in these places while he made his sea voyages. This tradition requires research from Assamese scholars. Between Mahādeo and Maheshkholā is a place called *Chāndor Dingā* where there are some huge boulders lying in close proximity with one another and the shapes of these boulders are like the outer shapes of big boats. A belief prevails amongst the local people that Chāndo once experienced a bad boat disaster in the eastern

seas but then his boats were pushed ashore by the waves of the sea ; these boats are supposed to be turned into boulders in course of time. Before the partition of the country people used to put vermilion marks on these boulders and offer worships to Mahādeva there. Now it is not unlikely that some parts of the Mymensing and Sylhet districts (now within East Pakistan) were under the waters of the eastern seas. The vast paddy and jute fields to the foot of the hills of the Garo Hills and the Khasi Hills spreading for scores of square miles and the big lake to be seen from the hills of Maheshkholā tend to confirm this. That the southwestern parts of Assam were under waters are also known from many treatises.

Of minerals coal is found in Garo Hills. The principal coal field lies on the Someswari valley near a place called *Darrangiri*. At Siju there is a large deposit of limestone of good quality. While serving in the Garo Hills district I heard at a village called *Porākhasiā* and situated on the southern border that there were petroleum also in certain places. Some persons again believe that gold also may be found in parts of the hilly regions of the district but this is a matter for investigation. Climate of the district cannot be said to be generally good. Though the temperature of the higher hills is cool it is quite hot at certain seasons. At Turā, the district headquarters, the really cold months are from November to February, though heavy rainfall during the summer months keeps the temperature cool.