



A CASE STUDY ON THE GARO ETHNIC PEOPLE OF THE SAL (*Shorea robusta*) FORESTS IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract

*Garos are one of the major indigenous communities in Bangladesh with distinct ethnic identities. An empirical study was conducted on this community living in the Madhupur Sal (*Shorea robusta*) forests of Bangladesh. Our objectives were to analyze the diverse socio-economic and cultural aspects of the Garo people with regards to their livelihoods. We also attempted to understand the underlying causes of prevailing conflicts with the Forest Department, and their adverse effects on the forests and indigenous people of the areas. It was found that this indigenous group has been experiencing countless challenges and their human rights are consistently being abused against, both by the law and its implementation. With multiple claims over the same piece of land and illegal settlements of non-Garo population in the forests, the Garo peoples have become a marginalized ethnic group in their own traditional land. This study determined that if sensitive land tenure issues remain unsettled, sustainability of the forests and lands cannot be ensured, even with on-going participatory social forestry practices in the Sal forests. The Government needs to recognize the Garo population as indigenous people of the area, which would legitimize them as caretakers of the land and forests resulting in the initiation of effective policies for sustainable management. It is recommended that existing national policies and laws that adversely affect their rights and life are reviewed and re-evaluated. The unique culture of the Garo population needs to be preserved through proper documentation and Governmental recognition.*

Keywords: *Garos, culture, land conflict, Sal forests, forest management, Bangladesh*

Introduction

At least 350 million (mill) people worldwide are classified as indigenous, and about two million indigenous people of 45 different distinct ethnic

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communities live in Bangladesh (Costa & Dutta 2007, GOB 2008). These indigenous people of Bangladesh have distinctive social and cultural practices, languages and customs that are commonly referred to within the communities as 'Adivasis'. The existence of these people with their traditional way of life and culture that has been practiced for centuries, has enriched the cultural and social diversity of the region. Among the indigenous people, the *Garo* population is one of the largest indigenous communities in Bangladesh, comprising approximately 0.1 to 0.13 mill people (Islam 2008, Burling 1997, Drong, 2004). They live in the north-eastern part of Bangladesh, with the highest presence in the Gazipur, Mymensingh, Netrokona, Tangail, Sherpur, Jamalpur and Sylhet districts. In India, the *Garo people* live in the Meghalaya region. Generally, most of the *Garo* people are bi-lingual because they speak *Bangla* (the national language of Bangladesh) in addition to *Achchik Katha*, their own indigenous language (Bal 1999). The traditional religion of the *Garo* people is *Sangsharek*; however, due to poverty and vulnerability, most of the *Garos* have been converted to Christianity, and a few of them to Islam (Bal 1999). The *Garos* are one of the distinguished matriarchal communities in the Indian subcontinent (Chowdhury 2007). Their residence pattern is matrilineal, i.e., the husband moves to the wife's house after marriage.

The traditional *Garo* society is changing due to many socio-economic causes. They have absorbed several traits from others communities. These changes are also increasingly transforming their social structure and dynamics. The most important challenge *Garo* peoples face now is the statutory rights to land. They live in and around the central deciduous *Sal* (*Shorea robusta*) forests, which is State forests i.e., legally they are the illegal occupants of the forests. The existing law on Vested Enemy Property Act does not recognize their entitlements to the land or land ownership. They claim that they are the aborigines of the area and as such regard themselves as the traditional and legitimate owners of the land. However, the Government does not want to recognize them as the indigenous peoples of the area. Moreover, they now suffer from the threats of extinction because of the State Forest Department's policies and programs on eco-park establishment (eco-park with concrete wall in its all boundary which will limit the accessibility of the *Garo* people to their dwelling houses inside the forests) and participatory social forestry programs (rural elites and non-*Garo* people become the major beneficiaries of this program excluding most of the *Garo* people).

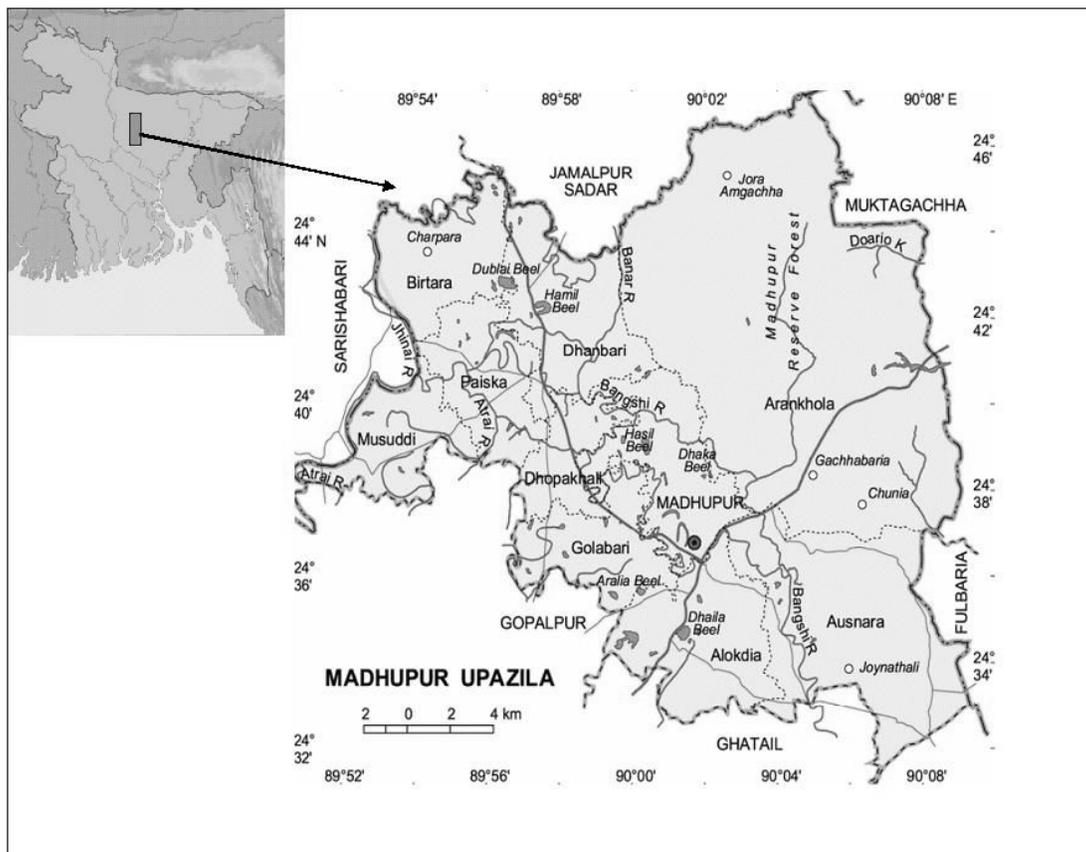
Methodology

Study Area

Survey data was collected from the *Garo* community living in and around the *Sal* (*Shorea robusta*) forests of the Madhupur areas in Mymensingh district of Bangladesh (Fig.1). *Sal* (*Shorea robusta*) forests cover an area of 0.12 mill ha

scattered over the relatively drier central and north-western parts of Bangladesh including the Dhaka, Mymensingh, Tangail, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Rajshahi and Comilla districts (Muhammed, Koike & Sajjaduzzaman 2005). Sal forests fall in the silvicultural category of tropical moist deciduous forests. The dominant species (about 80-100%) of this forest is Sal (*Shorea robusta*) (GOB 2003). The forest is demarcated by the Banar River in Mymensingh and the Banshi River in Tangail, and is located 80 kilometers north-east of Dhaka. The forests extend between 23°50' - 24°50'N and 89°54' - 90°50'E (Nishat *et al.* 2002) which are interspersed with habitation and agricultural land. There are four Forest Ranges, namely, Madhupur, Aronkhola, Dokhola and Madhupur National Park Sadar in Madhupur *Sal* (*Shorea robusta*) forests (Haque 2007).

Figure 1. Map of Bangladesh Indicating Study Areas



Survey Tools and Techniques

Empirical field investigations in three *Garo* villages within the Tangail district of Bangladesh, namely Magontinagar, Thanarbaid and Dighipara of Madhupur Upazila, were conducted during March 2010. The whole study was carried out through a comprehensive review process involving random interviews and focus group discussion (FGD) with relevant stakeholders. A

primary semi-structured questionnaire was randomly used in the study areas after pre-testing and necessary adjustments. Thirty-three respondents from each of the three villages mentioned above were randomly interviewed, which gave us a total of 99 respondents. We conducted FGD in common areas, where local people usually gather to pass time and socialize. A total of five FGDs were held with the elder people of the villages during field investigations. This approach helped us to avoid personal perspectives and better represent the common perspective of the *Garos*. In addition, we conducted personal interviews with *Garos* community heads called as *Nokma*. The elders and *Nokma* were consulted with, and local liaisons were sought, prior to visiting individual families in each of the villages. Lastly, available references (books and journal papers) were collected for review and analysis in order to synthesize the existing knowledge and information.

The *Garos* People

The Name "Garos"

Neither the nomenclature record nor the origin of naming is yet clearly understood for the word '*Garos*'. According to Marak *et al.* (1982), it was Tolemi who first mentioned the name '*Garos*' in 200 AD while collecting information from *Patliputra*. He recorded the *Garos* hill as '*Umor puj*' and its inhabitants as '*Garoini*'. A Pioneer scholar of the *Garos* peoples, Playfair (1998), mentioned that the '*Gara*' or '*Ganching*' sub-tribe first received their appellation of '*Gara*' and that name was extended to all the inhabitants of the hills and was finally it changed from '*Gara*' to '*Garos*'. Das & Islam (2005) are of the opinion that there are two basic groups among the *Garos*, namely, '*Lamdani*' or '*plain Garos*' and '*Achhick*' or '*hill Garos*'. In Bangladesh, they are now known as *Garos*. But the *Garos* communities do not want to be identified as '*Garos*'. Most of the *Garos* believe that the name '*Garos*' was probably given by the Bengalese (main stream Bengali speaking community) and Europeans. They feel that the term is disparaging of their ethnic group (Jengcham 1994). Generally, the *Garos* peoples of Bangladesh and India want to be identified as '*Achie*' (Mountaineer) or '*Achick mandi*' (Hill tribe) or simply as '*Achik*' (Playfair 1998). In Bangladesh, the '*Garos*' call themselves '*Mandi*' (Bleie 2005).

Origin

There is very little information about the history and origin of the *Garos*. The little that exists is mostly from oral tradition and also different explanations. The *Garos* peoples can easily be distinguished from the mainstream Bengali peoples by their looks. In general, they resemble physically the people of Thailand or the Philippines. Some of the major theories offered by ethnologists and archeologists about the origin of the *Garos* peoples assume the following:

- a. the *Garo* are an ethnic group of ‘Tibbete Borman’, of Mongolian origin, and descendant from the northeast bank of the Koknar Lake of the northwestern Chinese province of Chinghai about 3-5 thousand years ago (Das & Islam 2005).
- b. it is argued that that the original home of the Bangladeshi *Garos* was in Assam of India, and the facial appearances of the *Garos* indicate that they may be the descendants of the *Khasis*, *Nagas* and *Manipuris* of Assam (Sattar 1971).
- c. the *Garo* of Bangladesh think that they came to this region from the *Garo* hills of the Meghalaya State in India (Gain 2005).

Despite different anthropologic assumptions/theories, *Garo* people in the recent years have claimed to be ‘aborigine’. This is perhaps an effort to establish their statutory rights to the lands of the area, as they have been asking the Government to recognize them as indigenous people. However, the Forest Department does not want to recognize them as aborigines or indigenous people. They view them as nomadic people, which have resulted in a long-standing antagonistic relationship between the *Garos* and the Forest Department.

Demography

Population and Distribution

In Bangladesh, the *Garo* are generally found in the north-eastern border area of the greater Mymensingh region especially, in Tangail, Mymensingh, Netrokona, Jamalpur, Sherpur and in Sunamganj and Moulavibazar of greater Sylhet (Sangma 2010). There is no precise information on *Garo* population in Bangladesh (Ball 1999). The following table provides a summary of *Garo* population in Bangladesh.

Table 1. An Overview of *Garo* Population in Bangladesh

Year	Population	References
1991	68,210	Population Census 1991 (BBS 1991)
1993	1,02,000	Gain 2005
1997	1,05,000	Sangma 2010
1997	1,00,000	Burling 1997
2005	1,20,000	Lewis 2009
2010	1,25,000	Joshua project 2011
2010	1,30,000	Drong, 2004

Kinship Organizations

A Matrilineal family structure is usually observed among the *Garo* (Burling 1997). Joint family residence pattern exists in *Garo* society. But today,

this pattern is changing to nuclear family pattern due to migration to the cities in search of better living conditions and because of education. Generally, a *Garó* community is divided into three *Chatchi* (i.e., groups); namely, *Sangma*, *Marak* and *Momin*. It is thought that the *Momin* group was created as a result of mixed marriage (Sangma 2010). There are different theories about the division in groups and sub-groups of the *Garó*. Table 2 summarizes these theories.

Table 2. The Clan Groups of *Garó*

Assumptions/theories	Reference
Main groups of <i>Garos</i> are; <i>Akawe</i> , <i>Dual</i> , <i>Machi</i> , <i>Mathabeng</i> , <i>Kochi</i> , <i>Atiagarar</i> , <i>Abeng</i> , <i>Chibak</i> , <i>Ruga Ganching</i> and <i>Atong</i> .	Playfair 1998
Two more groups viz., <i>Areng</i> and <i>Shira</i> have been assumed in addition to groups cited by Playfair (1998).	Chowdhury 2007
It has been argued that the majority of the <i>Garos</i> belong to two clan groups, viz., <i>Sangma</i> and <i>Marak</i> .	Khaleque 1983
Latest studies indicate that there are five types of groups exist in <i>Garó</i> communities namely, <i>Sangma</i> , <i>Marak</i> , <i>Momin</i> , <i>Sira</i> and <i>Abetty</i> .	Das & Islam 2005

Every group is sub-divided into numerous smaller exogamous kinship groups such as *Chisim*, *Rema*, *Toju* and *Nokrek*. Another exogamous social grouping or sub-clan is known as *Ma chong*². The name of *Ma chong* is drawn from mother lineage and means that a child belongs to the mother. *Ma chong* plays the most important role in *Garó* social life. If someone does not have daughter, then *Ma chong* selects the heiress or *Nokma*³ for the property. Within *Ma chong* there are smaller groups locally known as *Mahari*⁴. *Mahari* includes only the most closely related people within the same *Ma chong* where closeness and sense of collective group is higher (Khaleque 1983). *Mahari* is exogamous. Being exogamous and having a preference for cross-cousin marriage, as a result all the *Mahari* are related to each other (Islam 2008). Till today, intermarriage within these groups and sub-groups is socially unacceptable for the most part.

² A group of people descending from one common mother means Mother's lineage.

³ Within *Garó*, property is inherited only by female; traditionally it is inherited by the youngest daughter who is called *Nokma*.

⁴ Number of kin under the same *Machong* is called *Mahari*.

Garo Culture

Language and Education

The *Garo* in Bangladesh refer to their language as ‘*Mandi khusik*’ (Sangma 1998). They do not have their own script and use the Roman alphabet. There are many dialects spoken, including: *A'beng*, *Achick*, *A'we*, *Chisak*, *Dacca*, *Ganching*, *Kamrup* and *Matchi*. The *Achik* dialect predominates among other dialects (Burling 1997). The *Abeng* dialect in Bangladesh is closest to *Koch*—another indigenous group. According to Burling (1997), there is a strong influence of Bengali language in *Mandi*, reflected in the use of Bengali words and sentence pattern. The literacy rate among *Garo* peoples is much higher than the national average. Sangma (2010) reported that the literacy rate among the *Garo* is about 90%. Notwithstanding, the number of highly educated (Bachelor or Masters) individuals is very low. The higher literacy rate among the *Garo* peoples is the result of missionary schools and development non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Social Framework and Traditional Judgments

Traditionally the *Garo* social structure is village oriented. The head of the village is known as *Nokma* (Chakma 1985). *Garo* society's *Akhing Nokma* (Head of *Akhing*), *Songni Nokma* (Head of Village), *Chra-panthe* (male relatives of women) and honorable persons of the village would generally deal with simple problems. The *Songni Nokma* would act as the judge, along with all villagers, for domestic problems such as marriage issues, arguments within and between families, property disputes, etc. (Sangma 2010). The matrilineal framework of the *Garo* customs means that inheritances go to the women and the *Garo* children take their surname of their mother as the decent of the mother is much more important to the children than that of father. However, in contrast to this, the women are not generally treated as more powerful than men in a social context.

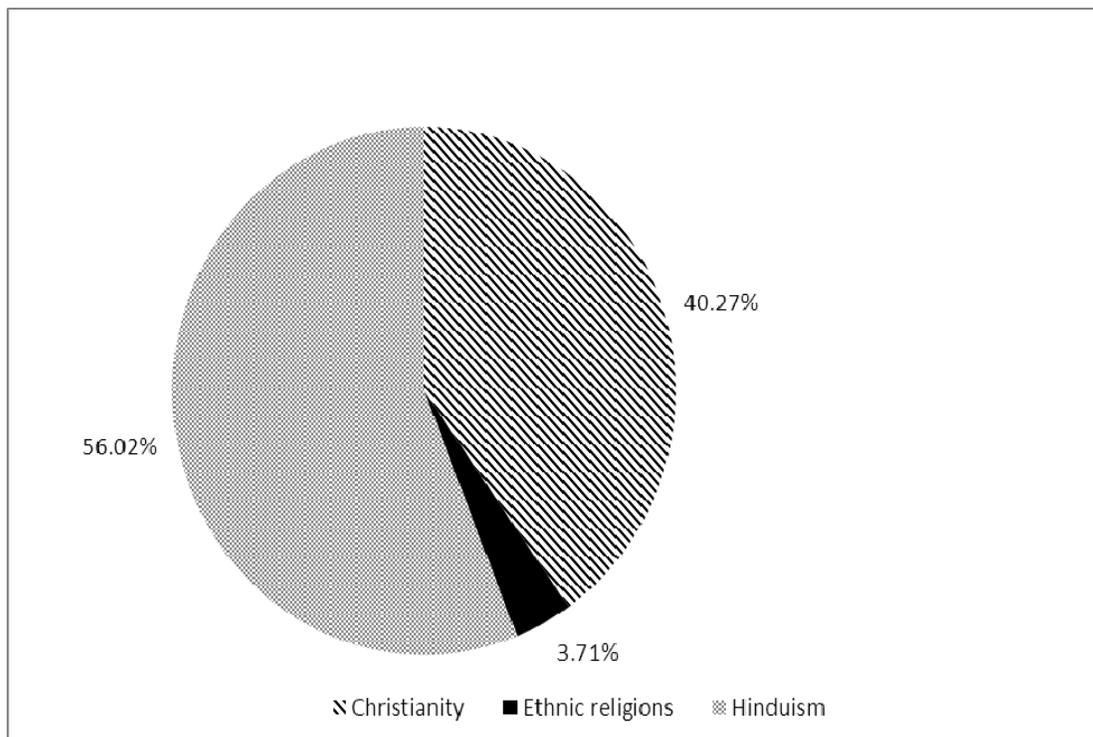
At present *Songni Nokma* does not appear to exist in *Garo* villages. Small social and family related problems are resolved by the respected persons of the villages. In some cases, priests and *chra-fanthe* (male relatives) play an important role in distributing the family property and in problem solving. However, in recent years *Garos* have begun relying on civil courts to handle their justice issues.

Religious Beliefs

Despite having their own religion, most of the *Garos* have converted to Christianity (Fig. 2). Although a significant portion of their community still believes in their traditional religion, *Sangsarek*, Christianity is of great importance to the Bangladeshi *Garo* community for several socio-economic reasons (Bal 2000, Sattar & Jalil 2002). According to Joshua project (2011),

56.02% *Garos* proudly consider themselves Christian. The main religious festival of Christian *Garos* is Christmas. There are also other religious festivals like, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, New Year celebrated by the Christian *Garos*. Christian *Garos* also enjoys higher education due to education and awareness training received from different missionary NGOs. The shift from traditional religion to Christianity is also changing the *Garos* society.

Figure 2. Percentage Distribution of the Religion among the *Garos* of Bangladesh



Marriage Rituals

Like other communities in the world, marriage is a significant event in *Garos* social and cultural life. In *Garos* society, a permanent relationship is established by marriage, not only between a man and a woman, but also between the two *Ma chongs* of the husband and wife. According to Islam (2008), marriage is strictly exogamous in *Garos* community. Marriage within the same clan is not allowed, which means the husband and wife must belong to different clans or *Mahari*. Thus, a *Marak* cannot marry a *Marak*, and breaking this rule would be considered a punishable sin if committed (Banglapedia 2006, Playfair 1998).

Marriage systems within the *Garos* community have changed a lot with the passage of time. The old forms of marriage have mostly been disappeared; they have adopted some new forms of marriage. After conversion to

Christianity, *Garo* people mostly practice the Christian rituals for their marriage. According to the nature of the inheritance, two types of marriage are observed among the *Garos*. One is called *Nokma* marriage and the other is called *Agati* marriage.⁵

Socio-Cultural Festivals

The general and customary festivities of *Garo* community are linked to farming practices. According to Sangma (2010), *Garo* celebrate seven main festivals from the beginning to the end of *Jhum* cultivation (which is known as shifting cultivation). These are *Aaofata*, *Denabilsia*, *Agalmaka*, *Miamua*, *Rongchugalla*, *Jamegappa* and *Wangala*. However, now-a-days they are not dependent on *Jhum* cultivation (Homrich 1996). Only *Wangala* and *Rongchugalla* - these two festivals are still celebrated by the Bangladeshi *Garos*.

Wangala is the biggest and the most colorful traditional festival of the *Garos*. This is a festivity of thanks giving after harvesting (Banglapedia 2006). This festival is celebrated with playing flute and drums. Men and women dance to the tune of tribal songs. On the evening of the first day of the *Wangala*, people from all households gather in a place mostly in *Banepani Nokpanthe*⁶ to enjoy the food. In this feast, usually young people are involved in serving beer, rice and meat curry followed by a traditional cultural performance. However, the celebration of *Wangala* was stopped for long time after their conversion to Christianity until recently the Church has allowed the celebration and provided some money for arranging such festival (Zaman 2004). Like *Wangala*, the celebration of Christmas has become an important festival for the *Garos* and is widely celebrated, where churches and other organizations arrange cultural shows and invite people for meals and festivities.

Folk-Culture and Traditions

The *Garo* are easily differentiated from other communities by their unique culture and traditions. Clothes play an important role in reflecting their culture and tradition. The names of their traditional dress are *Gando*, *Katib*, *Salchak*, *Marang*, *Unpon*, *Riking* etc. (Sattar 1975). Among the *Garo*, men living in the village wear a turban along with other clothes. Women wear a cloth around their waist and a blouse. They use different types of ornaments to complete their dress-up. During festivals, both men and women wear bangles, jewelry and head-dresses which are designed with beads stuck on feathers of hornbill (Playfair 1998). According to Burling (1997), traditionally *Garo* men

⁵ The marriage of a non-heiress daughter.

⁶ Almost every *Garo* village has a big decorated house at its centre which is called *Nokpanthe* (bachelor house). This is mostly used for residence and recreation of the young man of the village. However, girls are not allowed to enter in this house.

wear *Ningty* (a narrow piece of cloth) but now they put on *Lungi* (the commonly used skirt like cloth used by all Bangladeshi people). Women put on *Sari* (common dress for women in Indian subcontinent) and *Kamiz* (common dress for women in Indian subcontinent) instead of their traditional skirts. The educated *Garos* in the urban areas wear modern clothes and now-a-days, there is almost no difference between Bengali and *Garo* dress.

Socio-Economic Status

Agriculture is used to be the main occupation of the *Garos*. About 90% of the *Garo* people are directly involved with farming, and land is their primary livelihood. It was found that 90 to 95% of the *Garo* families had their own land in the past. But now only 10 to 12% of families have some form of land ownership. According to available literature and the results of our FGDs, the *Garos* lost their lands and properties due to illiteracy, unfavorable environmental conditions, political ignorance, carelessness, lack of awareness of good land management practices, ignorance about the Land Act, poor settlement surveys, etc.

The *Garos* still depend on subsistence economies, despite technological advancements. About 90% of the *Garos* are now landless, even though they are still indirectly involved in agriculture (day labor, sharecroppers, etc.). As a result, they are being forced to change their professions to earn sufficient wages. Now the *Garos* are moving away from the forests to seek urban jobs with Government and private offices, garment stores, beauty parlors, tea gardens, factories, police and military services.

Sal Forests, the *Garo* peoples and their Struggle

From a historical analysis of the *Garos*, it is evident that they have a very long history of residing in the forests of the Madhupur region. Their livelihood and cultural traditions are well integrated with the forests (Sangma 2010). But today the *Garos'* forest-centered lifestyle and culture are threatened (Drong 2004). This threat first began in 1984 when the Government designated most of the Madhupur region as Government Forest Land, and publicized this through a gazette notification. The whole procedure was completed without consultation with the *Garo* people (Gain 1998). Then, in 2003, the Forest Department began construction of a 3 meter (m) high wall around 1,215 ha of Madhupur forests in order to create an eco-park to protect tree species and wildlife diversity. The wall of the eco-park was to be constructed in a way that would block the *Garo's* main access routes to areas within the eco-park. It is thought that the Forest Department did this intentionally as the forestry professionals believe that *Garo* people contribute to forest destruction. The *Garo* people strongly protested against the eco-park wall construction, and as a consequence, two *Garo* youths were killed during

the protests and twenty-two others including women and children were seriously injured (Gain 2005). When this incident was made public at a national level, and pressure increased from international bodies, the Forest Department halted the construction. However, some provisions and policies of the 1992 National Environment Policy were still against the *Garo* communities living within the study areas.

Social Forestry, a people oriented participatory forestry program, started in the early 1980s in the *Sal* forests with the main objective of involving grass-root level local landless people under a benefit sharing arrangement. Overall this program can be considered a financial success as a strategy for plantation development. But it seriously failed to follow the original concept or model, as outlined in the project document; especially with regards to criteria like, (i) beneficiary selection and, (ii) gender equity (Muhammed *et al.* 2008). From the respondents' interviews it was found that the beneficiary selection criterion has not been followed correctly, i.e., true landless and poor people, especially the *Garo* people, are not being selected. Instead, the local elite and groups with political support are dominating the beneficiary groups of the program. Therefore, social forestry in the *Sal* forests has failed to bring any positive change to the *Garo* community. According to the convener of the Committee for Indigenous People's Land Rights and Environmental Preservation in Bangladesh, the whole Government project is not only destroying the *Garo* culture but also threatening their livelihoods (Sangma 2010). According to the focus group discussion, land tenure matters are still remain unsettled and under prevailing circumstances, sustainability practices, including participatory social forestry, may be ineffective in the long run.

Analysis of Government Policies in Madhupur Forests

Land entitlement is one of the major problems regarding the *Sal* forests and the *Garos* living in the study areas. Land tenure issues have a long history starting from the *Mughal* (emperor of undivided Bengal) era (16th-18th centuries), through the British period (1757-1947) and Pakistani regime (1947-1971), to present day. In order to help mitigate this conflict, the Bengal Private Forest Act was enacted in 1945. This Act aimed to abolish permanent settlements and contractually join tenants with the Government so that all types of payments and interests were acquired by the State. But with this Act the owners of the private forests became even less trusting of the Government, and they began to cut down trees and clear the forests even more extensively. The Government had spent a lot of time bringing this law into action, so the Zamindars (feudal land lords) took advantage of this time and continued felling trees and allowing individuals to settle on their forest lands. To accelerate the land acquisition process, the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act 1950 (SATA) was introduced to abolish private ownership and

sub-letting of land. After the declaration of the Act most of the owners of the private forests and the Zamindars started to offer settlement of land within and outside their forests using back-dated papers. After the independence of Bangladesh, the Government acquired the *Sal* (*Shorea robusta*) forests and declared them as protected forests. Thus multiple ownerships existed for the same piece of land, although officially they belonged to the Government. With this illegal settlement and ownership declarations, the *Garos* people became a marginalized ethnic minority on their own land. The issue of land tenure is still unsettled and over time it has become a very sensitive and controversial issue.

Table 3. SWOT Analysis of Government Policies on *Sal* Forests

Strength	Weakness	Opportunity	Threat
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Creation of Eco-park with 3 m wall limits access in the forest. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No thinking for forest surrounding <i>Garos</i>. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Safeguard for tree species and wildlife. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Garos</i> lifestyle, livelihood and existence.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Environmental preservation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Afforestation/reforestation with fast growing exotic species. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Financial benefits from foreign donors ▪ Fuelwood supply. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Highly detrimental to environment and local inhabitants.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Promotion of plantation economy (social forestry). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ignoring <i>Garos</i> in this benefit sharing program by the foresters. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Corruption in participant's selection, selecting local elites as the beneficiaries through bribing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Frequent false cases against local poor especially, against <i>Garos</i>.

From the SWOT analysis (Table 3) it was found that the non-supportive actions of the Government have not only depleted the Madhupur *Sal* forests but have also severely affected the life of the *Garos* and other neighboring people who's livelihoods depend on the forest. A number of factors including the ban on shifting cultivation in the 1950s, establishment of national parks, improper implementation of participatory social forestry, large-scale banana plantations within the *Sal* forests by the rural elites, and illegal encroachments

have above all, reduced the size of the forests significantly and have uprooted the traditional life of the *Garo* people. The destruction of the Madhupur Sal forest has escalated to an uncontrollable level. There are many examples from around the world where the indigenous forest inhabitants applied traditional knowledge with new tools and techniques to implement successful forest management practices. Over the past two decades, the importance of farmers' Indigenous Knowledge (IK) in managing natural resources and the environment has gained increasing recognition (Teklehaimanot et al. 2001). However, the *Garo* and their IKs are neglected by the policy and implementation authorities.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that the *Garos* are one of the most vulnerable indigenous groups in Bangladesh who are still trying to get constitutional recognition after more than four decades of independence of Bangladesh (i.e. since 1971). They face lot of socio-political and economic challenges in order to continue with their unique culture and traditions. Government initiatives to provide benefits and preserve their legal rights proved to be insufficient. The *Garos* have become gradually marginalized and ignored in national development planning and policy decisions. Like other indigenous groups in Bangladesh, they face constant struggle to establish their rights. They should be recognized as indigenous people with legitimate rights to the land.

Indigenous people historically have an inherently synergistic relationship with nature. Societies should work with and empower them in an effort to learn better ways to manage the forests. It is important for the Government to initiate policies and programs to improve the rights of the *Garos* in Bangladesh. It is also necessary for the Government to review and revise national forest policies and laws that adversely affect the rights and lives of the *Garo* people e.g., eco-park, land ownership, etc. Civil society, mass media, International human rights organizations, researchers and development activists need to come forward and inform policy makers and the Government about the adverse situation of the *Garo* people. Steps should be taken to preserve the rich *Garo* culture through research and documentation. Civil society can play an important role against discrimination and injustice so that the *Garo* peoples can gain the respect and rights they deserve as a recognized indigenous population of the *Sal* forests.

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