Chapter I

Introduction

Land and the people

Habitation

A range of hills – better known as Garo Hills, occupy the westernmost part
of the present Meghalaya state and lie between $25^\circ 9'$ and $26^\circ 1'$ North
latitudes and $89^\circ 49'$ and $91^\circ 2'$ East longitudes. Bounded on the North
West and North by Assam, on the East by West Khasi Hills district and on
the south and South West by Bangladesh, it covers a total area of 8,167
square kilometers.\(^1\) The Garo Hills have been divided into three districts
namely; the East Garo hills, West Garo hills and the South Garo Hills
districts with their respective headquarters at Williamnagar, Tura and
Baghmara.\(^2\) According to the 1991 census, the human population of the
Garo Hills is 1,88,830.\(^3\)

The Garo Hills is topographically, very rough and the greater portion of the
district consists of hills which form the western extremity of the range
dividing the valleys of the Brahmaputra and the Surma valley. In between

\(^1\) Meghalaya District Gazetteer (Garo Hills) 1996, p 1.
these hills there are some natural plains on which the local inhabitants practice wet cultivation and produce paddy for their local consumption. The hills rise sharply from the plain on the south and attain their highest elevation in the Tura and Arbella ranges, that lie parallel to one another east and west near the center of the district. The Nokrek peak, which is the highest peak in Garo Hills (4652 ft) lies towards south east at a distance of 5.64 km from the Tura town. On the north a succession of low hills fall away towards the Brhamaputra. The other important peaks of the district include the Tura peak, Meminram peak, Nengminjok peak, Arbella peak, Balpakram peak etc. The ranges include many steep ridges separated from one another by deep valleys covered with dense forest. The Simsang, the largest river in Garo Hills, rises to the north of the Tura station and falls into the Kangsa river in the Mymensigh district of Bangladesh. Other important rivers which flow towards south include Bhugai, Nitai, Moheskola while Krishnai, Dudhnoi, Ildek and Jinjiram flow towards north to the Brahmaputra.  

The district is rich in mineral resources most of which are associated with the Eocene tertiary and sedimentary formations. These minerals are coal, limestone, lithomargic clay, fireclay, Phosphorite, Gypsum and glass sand.  

The majority of the people living in the Garo hills are the Garos, a section of the Tibeto-Burman race, who live in the hills and in the plains in Garo Hills and in the adjoining areas of the Goalpara and Kamrup districts of Assam. A good number of them are found living in Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Cooch Behar, Bangladesh and in various other districts of Assam and the North Eastern states of India. Besides aboriginal Garos, the Garo Hills is inhabited

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2 Gazetteer of India, Garo Hills District, 1996, pp 11-12.  
3 Gazetteer of Bengal and North East India, Reprinted (1993) p 504.  
by other ethnic tribes whose cultural practices have greatly been one of the factors responsible for the ethno-cultural changes in the life of the Garo society.

Situated at an average altitude of 600 meters, the Garo Hills had the climatic conditions ranging from subtropical to semi temperate at higher altitudes and heavy rainfall is experienced during summer months. Except few drops of rainfall due to the retreat of the North East monsoon the winter months are almost dry. In summer, the rain bearing South West monsoon causes heavy rainfall in the Garo Hills and greatly facilitated the summer cultivation. Variegated crops such as rice, maize, millets, pumpkins, ginger etc. are grown extensively. It is to be noted that the agriculture practiced in the Garo Hills is mainly seasonal as the cultivation has to be depended upon only on summer monsoon. The method of cultivation is also unscientific though an extensive tracts of cultivable lands are available.

The hills are abound with different species of animals of which elephants, tigers, leopards, bears, deer and a species of goat antelope or som (Nemorhaedus bubalinus) are most important. The place is also the homeland of the variegated birds which include peafowl jungle fowl, partridges, snipe, pheasants, hares etc.9

Formed of the gneissic rocks, the greater portion of the districts is overlain by sandstones and conglomerates belonging to the cretaceous system. Layers of sandstones and lime stones belonging to Nummulitic Age are found rested on the top of the gneissic rocks while sandstones of upper tertiary origin form low hills along the Mymensingh border.10

The district has a rich and unique flora and it is believed to be the original home of the citrus. Many explorers have explored the area to study the

9 Gazetteer of Bengal and North East India (1993), p 501.
floral account of the district. Yet there remained an unexplored portions of exceptional interest which need to be studied to get the detail account of the subject. The Garo Hills is covered with green natural vegetations. Sal, teak, bamboo, shrubs, herbs of different species are available in plenty.

Land and the People.

The Garo tribe as a separate tribal entity along with their habitat is not found any description in the early Vedic literature. The tribe is known only as a member group of the so called Kiratas, who were connected with the Cinas or the Chinese, the Bhotas or the Tibetans and other Mongoloid peoples. They were distinguished from the tribes of Austric origin who were known to the Aryans as Nisadas, Sabras, Pulinds, Bhillas and Kollas. However, right from the Epics, the terms Garo and Mande, along with their abode, began to be appeared in some corrupted forms either in different Indian texts or in the European classical literature. In describing the eastern quarters, the Ramayana (Ramayana Kishkindhya, chapter 40, Sloka 41) has the following: “The terrible Lohita sagara (Brahmaputra) is full of red waters, not far from it is the home of the Garudas, king of birds, upon a mountain top on the summit of which dwells a class of monsters called Mandehas. In the Ramayana, the home of the Garuda was also known as Garudachala. It is evident from this passage that the present day Garo Hills was known during the Epic Age as the Garudachala situated on the bank of the river Brahmaputra. Manu Samhita and Kalika Purana, a work of about 10th century A.D, described the homeland of the Mandehas (the Mandes or the Garos) as on the shores of the Lohita Sagar or the Red sea which is also called Purva

Samudra or the eastern Sea. It says — Mandehas, then living on the shores of this sea.\textsuperscript{13}

In the Yogini Tantra, a work of later part of 16\textsuperscript{th} century A.D. the Garo Hills was known as the ‘Manda Saila’ which was probably named after the word ‘Mandeha’ mentioned in the Ramayana.\textsuperscript{14}

Thus, by this time, the country inhabited by the Garos, was known to the Hindu text writers as Manda Saila, probably derived from the word Mande who lived on the shores of the Lohita Sagara (Brahmaputra). The Garos and their country were known not only to the ancient Hindu scripture writers but also to the Greek and the Roman classical writers and Geographers. A Roman Historian of repute, Pliny, in his ‘Natural History’ published in about 77 A.D, mentioned about the Garo tribe in the following words “The tribe called Calingae are nearest the sea, and higher up are the Mandei, and Malli in whose country is Mount Mallus”.\textsuperscript{15}

The Geography of Ptolemy, a work of about A. D. 150 also mentioned the Garos and their land. He mentioned a group of people called ‘Besata’ which has been identified with Periplus ‘Sesatae’ by James Taylor and therefore, Besatai has been identified with the Garos and other hill tribes of the North East India, and ‘Besadam’ with the present Garo Hills. Ptolemy also mentioned the Zamirai located near ‘Moirandos’ which is identified with the Garo Hills.\textsuperscript{16} The earliest works in which mentioned is made about the habitat of the Garos give an undoubted testimony that the country inhabited by them was known to the ancient people through the ages. This fact also speaks that the country and the people inhabiting on it, are also one of the

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, p 47.
\textsuperscript{14} N.N. Vasu, Social History of Kamarupa, (1922) Vol. 1. p 21.
\textsuperscript{15} R.C. Majumdar, Classical Account of India, pp 341-342.
\textsuperscript{16} P.C. Choudhury, History And Civilization of the People of Assam. pp 33,37 &38
earliest inhabitants on the banks of the Brahmaputra valley that have not escaped out of the records of the ancient text writers.

In early period, the Moghuls extended their power and arms of influence over Assam, but the greater portion of the Garo Hills remained unconquered. In course of time, only the adjacent areas surrounding the Garo Hills, where a large number of Garo population existed, passed under the control of the powerful Moghul Zamindars through illegal encroachments. They held these great estates on payment of a small tribute to the Mohammadan Fouzdar posted at Rangamati.\(^{17}\) The Garo people living in the interior portion of the Garo Hills remained free from any external control and domination and were still completely independent. By the Diwani of 1765, granted to the British by the Moghul Emperor Shah Alam II, the Moghul province in the North Eastern parts of India also passed into the hands of the British administration and the new masters of the province faced the same problems as had been met by the Moghuls. The head hunting excursions coupled with repeated outrages committed by the Garos upon the plain dwellers either to carry off the heads as coveted trophies or to take revenge upon the Zamindars for their encroachments upon what they think as inalienable rights over lands occupied, necessitated the British government to separate the innocent and unsophisticated Garos from the exploitative clutches of the Zamindars. In the years between 1765–1822, the Garo Hills was administered from Rangpur as a part of the North Eastern Rangpur district. When the Regulation X of 1822 was passed on 19th September 1822, Goalpara and Garo Hills portions were taken out of the Rangpur district and formed into a new district with headquarters at Goalpara town.\(^{18}\) By this act, Garo Hills was exempted from the operation of

\(^{17}\) Alexander Mackenzie, *North East Frontier of Bengal*, p 245.

the existing general rule of Bengal and a special system of administration was made. Under the new administrative set up, the Garo Hills administration could witness a steady progress but the Garo raids especially in the Shoosung and Mymensingh side continued unabated. The Garos apparently reiterated their uprisings to show their strong sentiments of protest against the attempts on the part of the Shoosung Raja to levy rents in the hills inhabited by the Garos.\textsuperscript{19} Finding the inapplicability and one sidedness of the Regulation X of 1822, an act known as the Act XXII of 1869, popularly known as "The Garo Hills Act of 1869" was passed\textsuperscript{20} to put an end to the problems arising out of the previous administrative arrangements. The new act repealed the Regulation X of 1822 and the boundaries of the Garo Hills, which have been accepted as the official boundary of the Garo Hills till today, were clearly defined.

The Garos are divided into various geographical division known as jol, and the division is on the basis of their dialect. There are altogether about 15 jols which formed the different sub-tribes of the Garos.\textsuperscript{21} However, Playfair found that there are only 12 such sub-tribes among the Garos.\textsuperscript{22} Dr. J.L.R. Marak also agree with Mr. Playfair and mentioned only 12 Garo sub-tribes.\textsuperscript{23} Each of these divisions occupies a specific area for their own settlement and there is not much difference in their cultural and customary practices except in their dialect. The twelve sub tribes are

(1) The A’we
(2) The Chisak
(3) The Duals

\textsuperscript{19} Alexander Mackenzie, North East Frontier of Bengal, p 261.
\textsuperscript{20} The Garo Hills Act of 1869.
\textsuperscript{21} Gazetteer of Bengal and North East India, p 504.
\textsuperscript{22} Playfair, The Garos, pp 59-62.
\textsuperscript{23} J.L.R. Marak, Garo Cutomary Laws and Practices, p 2-3.
Each of these sub-tribes with their respective places of settlement are briefly described below.

1. The A'wes, also known as the A'kawes occupy the whole of the northern hills of the Garo Hills and the adjoining plains in the Goalpara district of Assam. Their area of habitation extends right from the Kamrup border in the East to the west of the Jinari river in the east westerly direction and from the plain belt of Goalpara in Assam upto about 20 miles southward.

2. The southern portion of the land inhabited by the A'wes is occupied by the Chisaks and their area of occupation stretches upto the river Simsang in the South. They have some common features similar to those of the A'wes but they greatly differ from them in their dress and customs.

3. Next sub-tribe inhabited to the further south of the Chisaks are the Duals who lived in the villages situated on the banks of the Someswari or Simsang river as it is generally called. The Duals are mostly the plain dwellers and a good number of them settle in the Mymensingh district of Bangladesh.
4. The Matchis, the fierce and hot blooded\textsuperscript{24} are the occupants of the central valley of the Simsang river and spread over in a northerly direction until they attach with the A’wes.

5. The Matjangchis or Matabengs as it is also called lived up the valley of the Simsang river. They also inhabited in the north eastern parts of the valley nearby the Tura and the Arbela ranges.

6. The sub-tribe bordering on Mechpara and Kalumalupara that occupies the high mountainous region, is the Kotchus. Their area of settlements extends from north western hills upto the west of the Jinari river.

7. The A’bens or the Ambengs are the most important division amongst the Garo tribe and they occupy the whole of the western portion of the Hills and the greater part of the country to the South of the central range as far as the Bogai river. They are milder in disposition, manners and appearance.\textsuperscript{25}

8. The Chiboks are the another sub-tribe of the Garos and they live just in the areas east of the Am’bens in the upper valley of the Bogai river stretching as far as the Nitai river.

9. The low lying Hills bordering the Mymensingh district of Bangladesh in the vicinity of Dalu are occupied by the Rugas.

10. The Gara or Gara Ganching live in the country to the south of the main range extending from the Nitai river to the river Simsang.

11. The Atongs dominated the Simsang valley as well as the hills adjacent to it upto Siju.

12. The last important sub-tribe is the Me’gam, who live in the areas bordering the west Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya from Kamrup in the

\textsuperscript{24} William Carey, The Garo Jungle Book, p 172.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, p 172
North to Mymensingh in the south. Playfair argued that they are a hybrid race as they represent a fusion of the Garo and the Khasi. In appearance and customs they closely resemble the Garos.26

Of the divided sub-tribe, the A'wes, the Abengs, the Rugas, the Atongs, the Chiboks and the Chisaks are in large number and most important.27

No one can exactly say about the origin of these division. But as mentioned by Playfair in his monograph such division occurred when the powerful Garo ruler or Chief Abong Noga or Abong Chirepa, a legendary Garo Chief assigned a particular work to his subjects. According to the legend, the Garo Hills once experienced a great famine and Abong Chirepa, the son of Jingbi, the Garo Chief, was living by occupying Mangsang, a place about 12 km to the north east of Rongjeng in the present day Garo Hills. He was also a great and strong warrior. By his power and ability he occupied a place at Mongri Hills under Chemagri A'king or territorial division. By this time a long drought occurred and except Mrik Wari or lake Mrik, all the nearby rivers or lakes were completely dried up. Even the deepest Mrik lake also remained a knee deep. The drought continued for seven long years that no cultivation of any kind could be done by the people. They had to live a very miserable life and to get water also they had to labour hard under Abong Chirepa.

Abong Chirepa distributed the water from the Mrik Lake in exchange of labour rendered to him and over and above his services for water a specific work was allocated to his subjects, which later on, became hereditary from one generation to another. Thus Am'beng were assigned

26 Playfair, The Garos, p 62.
28 Playfair, The Garos, p 64.
29 Do'kua, Bidol III, November—December. 1985, Chapter VI, p 17.
as the pickers of cotton; the Garas to carve out pig troughs; the Kotchus to prepare dried fish; and the Chisaks to collect edible bamboo shoots. The Garos are a short stature people, generally stout, well shaped, hardy with flat nose and oblique eyes. Their complexion is not very dark. The earliest British observers reported the Garos to be honest and independent. They are also an energetic and industrious people.

The average height of a male Garo is 5 ft 1½ inches while that of a female is 4 ft 10 inches. Their faces are round and short. The forehead is not receding, but projects very little beyond the eye, which is small on a level with the face, very dark and obliquely set. Every Garo wears a strip of coloured cloth passed between the legs, the end of which, hanging loose is sometimes ornamented with brass buttons or bells and sometimes with rows of a white stone half an inch long. The chief distinguished himself from others by wearing a silk turban on his head.

The dress of a Garo women is generally reddish cloth strip with blue or white about 16 inches long, which is tied at the upper corners on the left side, leaving the thigh partly exposed. The dark apron of rough cloth is the distinctive dress of all Garo women, the wealthy ones sometimes wearing in addition a white girdle of shells or wampum. Their necks are adorned with strings of wampum beads, 30 or 40 round while in their ears they wear brass rings from 3 to 6 inches diameter. The slit in the lobe of the ear increases with the weight of the rings which is partly supported by a string passed over the head. The black rounded neck

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30 Playfair, The Garos, p 64.
31 Ibid, p 1.
32 Robbins Burling, Rengsanggri, p 19.
34 Playfair, op cit, p 2.
and collarless T-shirt is the favourite shirt for both male and female Garos. Both the male and the females keep hairs on their heads and they put on pugris on their heads.\textsuperscript{38}

The Garos irrespective of their places of birth and habitation, speak the Garo language which they themselves known as the "A'chik Ku’sik" or the language of the Garo. Sir George Grierson classified the Garo language with the Bodo speech family,\textsuperscript{39} in which includes Bodo–Kachari, Dimasa, Mech, Lalung, Koch, Riang and Tripuri languages. The Bodo language is one of the most important sections of the Tibet–Burman speech family and the same is being spoken from Tibet in the North to Burma in the South and from Baltistan in the West to Chinese Provinces of Szechuan and Yunnan in the East.\textsuperscript{40} The Garo language is spoken by the Garo people living in the Garo Hills and the Garo people living in the entire North Eastern states, and West Bengal including Bangladesh.\textsuperscript{41} The Garo language has a number of dialects evolved as a result of their long isolated life from one group or section to another in the course of their settlement on the Brahmaputra valleys in the early years. William Carey found that there are 13 different dialects among the Garos, which are generally differ from one another.\textsuperscript{42} It was because of the reasons stated that the various dialectically divided groups came into existence. The A’we, Chisak, Dual, Matchi, Matjangchi, Ambeng, Chibok, Ruga, Gara Ganching, Atong, Me’gam emerged with a little differences in their way of speaking and in terminologies. Despite this fact, the differences are being avoided due to the publication of the Garo books in the A’we

\textsuperscript{38} B.N. Choudhury, Some Cultural And Linguistic Aspects of the Garos, p 10.
\textsuperscript{41} Sir, A. Grierson, Linguistic Survey of India, Vol. I, p 64.
\textsuperscript{42} William Carey, A Garo Jungle Book, p 251.
dialect. The A’we dialect is thus gaining good grounds in assimilating the other dialects of the Garo sub-tribes.

The Garos are a matrilineal tribe in which lineage of a family is traced from the mother’s side. Under this system all property belongs to the women and the youngest female or daughter is the heiress of the property of her parents. Whatever may be the position of a man in the family, he has no share to the property of his parents. Matriliney, though in tracing the lineage, yet it is the father in a family who is the head and custodian of the family and, the entire supervisory activities rest upon him. Despite this fact, he practically wields no power in cases of disputes in the family. What is generally known as the Chra Mongting Wa’ge Jating, or the nearest maternal uncles or the brothers of the mother in disputed family, however, are the most powerful and persons in reverence in deciding the dispute. Their intervention in solving the problems is absolutely essential in the clan based Garo society.

Agriculture is the main economy of the Garos. Those living on the hill practice jhum while those of the Garos living on the plains practice wet cultivation. But traditionally they stick to the slash and burn agriculture. Usually right month of January -February, the Garos start clearing the thick jungle and leave it to dry till March. Before the rain starts the dried jungles which they cut down and dried, are burnt after which sowing and planting of variegated crops is started. The crops that are grown include dry rice supplemented by millet and to a lesser extent maize, manioc, squash, large pod beans, bananas, papaya and gourds. Due to rugged terrain of the land the method of scientific cultivation cannot be practiced or adopted and hence the Garos can not produce their
own food requirements. The Garos carried down their hill products to the hats and bartered to Bengali traders for rice, cattle, pigs, goats, salt, cotton cloth, ornaments, brass wares, weapons, dried fish etc. The Garos believed in an infinite number of gods and goddesses who are collectively known as mitdes or spirits and they are supposed to exist either in the airy spaces or on Earth or in Heaven. The life of a Garo cannot be thought of without performing a worship or sacrificial offerings to their deities to appease them. There is a strong conception among the Garos that each and every substances living or non-living have a god or its creator and it is taken very essential that one should ask upon them before anything is meted out to them. For example before jhum cultivation they at first look for a suitable spot on which he or she is expected to cultivate. Soon after choosing a particular spot, he would reserve it by making some mark on it either by cutting a small portion of the jungle reserved or by making some mark made out of bamboo to let the other people known that the spot has been occupied. This process is known as A'a O'pata. After this some two or three days will be awaited during which he would invoke the spirit who is expected to tell whether that particular spot reserved by him is allowed by the spirit or the keeper of the hills known as Apetpa Rangapa, to carry on cultivation there. During this period of interval, when no ominous signs are seen in the dream it is taken as an indication that Abetpa favours him in his work; but if some ominous signs depicting evils are forecasted in the dream, it is taken as an indication that Abetpa disfavours him in his mission.

43 Francis Hamilton, An Account of Assam, p 87.
According to Garos, the entire cycle of their life is governed by the actions of their gods and goddesses. No journey can be taken unless the fates are propitious, no war engaged in without impaling a monkey or a goat, no marriage solemnized, or birth celebrated or sickness tended, no experience of the coming of death to take away its victim, without the shedding of blood.\textsuperscript{46}

In appeasing their gods and goddesses, different animals are offered in accordance with the needs or demands of an individual deity. Usually a sucking pig is offered to \textit{Susime}, the wealth giver and a fowl to \textit{Saljong}, the god of fertility, the supreme spirit.\textsuperscript{47} In the case of the human sufferings and sicknesses, the Garos believed that these are nothing but the devil’s wrath that befell upon them. If a person is inflicted with a particular kind of disease, it is meant that the disease is being caused by a particular \textit{mitde} or deity and that in order to get rid of the disease that a man has been suffering for, needs the blood sacrifice of a particular animal to appease him (\textit{mitde}) for the subsequent healing of the sick. Normally, the spirit, actually responsible for causing the disease in the man is invoked through the services of a \textit{Kamal} or priest who is well versed on the subject and a sacrifice is offered by him to god, who was supposed to have satisfied with the ritualistic ceremony and sacrifices, abandon the disease inflicted upon the person, resulting thereby to the normalcy of the health of the sick person.

Sacrificing of animals and birds along with the consumption of rice beer following the ceremonial observance are the social characteristic features of the Garo religion. All these are done by them by them to satisfy their gods and goddesses in the strong hope of protecting their

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, pp 186-187.
lives from various deadly diseases and to get the blessings for and protection of their crops.
The Garos take boiled rice with curry. They do not like to take or use oil and spices in their curry. They boiled vegetables along with chilly and salt and eat. For the preparation of curry, the Garos obtain by themselves a kind of alkalion by burning the dried pieces of plaintain stems and the ashes thereby obtained, are collected and mixed with water and filtered in a specially designed basket, known as Dengreng. The liquid thus obtained is known as Kalchi which is used as “Soda”. Curry prepared by mixing chili, kalchi and salt along with either meat or fish is their favorite vegetable item and such cooking is known by them as “Kapa” or “Songkapa“.

ORIGIN
Till today, the origin of the Garo word or its derivation has been a matter of controversy and no proper research has been done as a result no one could give satisfactory answer to it. Various arguments have been put forwarded by different scholars to trace the origin of the word, some of which are discussed below.
According to Playfair the word Garo is a derivation from the word “Gara” a name of a Garo sub-tribe inhabiting the place bordering the Mymensingh district now in Bangladesh. The Europeans or Bengalis first came into contact with this group of people from the Mymensingh side, whom they knew as Gara or Gara Ganching. He was of view that Garo might be a probable word to have been derived from the word Gara or
Gara Ganching in some corrupted forms. One version in tracing the origin of the word is that at the time of their migration from their original land Tibet, there was a Garo leader whose name was Garu and it was after his name that the followers came to be known as the Garos. In the former days Tura was known as 'Dhura' derived from the 'Durama hill'. The 'Garo' word is supposed to be a derivative form from the word 'Dhura' which was later on applied to the similar group of people residing in the hilly regions to the South of the Goalpara district. The Garos never used to call themselves 'Garo'. Instead they preferred the word 'Achik Mande'. The word 'Mande' is equivalent to a 'Man'. It is suggested that the name 'Mande' implies two things 'Man-ni' (of the Man tribe or caste), the word applied to the Burmese by the people of Assam and 'De', the equivalent Garo word to 'a child'. Hence 'Manni De' or the son of Man tribe or the Burmese. This expression can be thought of in another way: mande has been formed of two words - Ma (mother) ni (of the mother), and 'De' (son). Hence, the son of a mother.

Shri P.C. Nath agreed that the bird Garuda which tried to rescue Sita from Ravana was a Garo and that the name Garo has been originated from the 'Garuda'. In the History, by Ferishta, Shankal or Shankaldip was mentioned as the great king of Gaur, who founded the Gaur kingdom and built Gaur, the capital city, which remained as capital of Bengal for over 2000 years. Concerted Muslims attack under Mohamad Bakhtiar in 1195 A.D, wrote a finish chapter to the Gaur kingdom in Bengal.

49 Playfair, The Garos, p 7.
51 Playfair, op cit, p 8.
52 Reproduced article of Shri P.C. Nath at "Balpakram" by Helsingh Marak, p 31, which was originally published by the author under the caption "The Eagle man of Assam" the Yojana; May 1965)
the ancient name of the Garo. Gaur literally means Bison or wild bull (Golur Bilbos Golturus), which was the national symbol of the once mighty Gour Raj. It is supposed that Gours were once Garos. The above view is supported by the fact that "the fertile and beautiful plains of the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) were once recognized as "Garo country" by the British. They were later on forcibly merged into the East Pakistan.

There is a legend existed among the Garos that one of their ancestors was named Noro-Mande with which they formerly called themselves. Later on they discarded the word Noro and only called themselves "Mande" which means "man". In the Ramayana, a race of cannibals was called Mandeha which is found to have inhabited the mountainous region on the shores of the Lohita Sagara or the Brahmaputra river. This same group of people were also described as 'Mandai' or the Garuda and their residence as Garudachala which is identified as the Garo Hills. In the Yogini Tantra, their abode was described as 'Manda Saila' probably after the word 'Mandehas'.

Some scholars are of the view that the word 'Garo' is a name given by the Bengali and Assamese plain dwellers. The Garos themselves have different name for the people of each different tribe. D. S. Rongmuthu says that the term 'A'chik' is meant a 'hill dweller' and by naming so, he shows himself as 'Hillman'. If a person belonging to the A'chik

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54 Helsingh Marak, Balpakram, p 32.
56 N. N. Vasu, Social History of Kamarupa, p 47.
58 S.K. Bhuyan (ed), An Account of Assam, (2nd Imp), p 89.
community became either a Hindu or a Muslim through prosletyzing himself or herself, the other A'chiks called him or her that he or she has become Rori (a name to speak either the Bengali or Muslim people) and no more 'Mande' (man). The so calling of their community as such is to meant that they were the earliest man belonging to the A'chik community, sticking strictly to the customs and traditions of their original ancestors. He further argued that it is meant in order to show or differentiate themselves\textsuperscript{60} that they were not either Rori, mitde (evil spirit), me'mang (ghost) or matburing (animal) but mande (man). It is so called so as to ridicule or look down upon the plainsmen that they are helpless to do against the Garos.\textsuperscript{61} S. M. Dubey says that the term 'Garo' was given to them by the non-tribal plains people.\textsuperscript{62} Mr. Ramke W. Momin, one of the earliest Garo writers also wrote that the word 'Garo' has been derived from the word 'Gaur' and the term 'A'chik' means 'a hillock'. Hence A'chik implies hill dwellers.\textsuperscript{63} While sharing his views, Mr. Surosen G. Momin, former President of the Garo Sahitya Sabha, says that the word "Garo" is actually not an A'chik word. The Garos lived mainly on jhum cultivation which is known to the Assamese as 'Gari' and 'A'bri' or hill as 'pahar'. Hence 'A'ba cha'ram a'bri' or 'the hill' where the jhum cultivation is done. The English later on called it as 'Garo Hills' deriving the word 'Garo' from 'Gari' in corrupted form.\textsuperscript{64}

In the Brahmananda Purana (69:184), the Bhauma line is found to have been called by the name of "Manda". N.N.Vasu surmised that the term

\textsuperscript{60} D.S.Rongmuthu, A’chik Ku’rang. (The page number and the year of Publication have been disappeared)

\textsuperscript{61} D.N. Sangma, Nambate Janggi Tanganina Skie Ra’anirang, pp 1-2.


\textsuperscript{63} A’chikni Ripeng, 1912, p 5.

\textsuperscript{64} “Sahitya” an article by Mr. Surosen G. Momin, published on “Ku’silchi”, A Garo Annual Magazine published by Garo Sahitya Sabha. p 24.
“Manda” might mean “Mande” a term the Garo people used for themselves.65 There is still a “plain tribe” living in the district of Malda in West Bengal, who called themselves Gaur. Their residences are at the hilly places of Cooch Behar. Mr. Mihir N. Sangma, noted Garo writer, opined that these group of tribals might be a branch of the Garos, who lived in Cooch Behar for about 400 years. From this context Mr. Sangma concludes that the “Garo” might be a distorted form of the word “Gaur.”66

Some Garo people mentioned that during early days when the Garos were being ignorant with no education at all, they were often called with a word of contempt “Gadha goru”. It is by mistake that the English people began to called this people as “Guru” and later on “Garo”.67 Mr. Jobang D. Marak, on the origin of the word “Garo” said that there is a place beyond the Himalayas in which located the so called Garu Pradesh, whose inhabitants were called “Garu Mandai”. It is inferred that from that place the Garos came to India in the ancient days, through mountain passes. He further argued that some places in Tibet like Taling, Keling, Saling, Maling, Samling, Songnam, Kuling, Sara, Koje, Rangrik, Kuo, Kurik etc, are similar in their names as we have in the Garo Hills: that there is a strong linguistic affinity between the Garos and the Tibetans which undoubtedly testified that the Garos originally belonged to Tibet. According to him, the words might have its origin from Tibet.68 Mr. Mihir N. Sangma, on being unable to trace the appropriate meaning of the word “Garo” said that the word on analysis and simplification carries no meaning at all. He said that every living beings were given names by the

66 Do’kua, Bidol HI, July-August, 1985, Chapter III, p 2.
67 Ibid.
Garos either by way of derivation from the characteristic features of the concerned animal or from the action that a particular animal or being does. Mongma, for example, derived from the two words “Mong” from “Mongsonggipa” (the most important) and “Ma” from the word “matburing” meaning “animal”. When these words were joined together it becomes “Mongma” (elephant) meaning “the most important animal” or the “biggest animal”. Similarly, “matcha” comes from the word “Mat” and “cha”, mat from matburing (animal), and cha from “chabingbangaigipa” meaning running here and there indiscriminately to bite its prey. Hence “matcha” or the tiger.69

Following these arguments as put forwarded by Mr. Mihir N. Sangma, Dr (Rev) Gilbert Marak opined that the Garo word has been derived from the two word “Gaa” and “Roro”. Gaa means invade, “Roro” means continuous. Hence Garo or the “continuous invaders”.70 The Garos during their long itinerary period are found to have entered into the Kingdoms and lands of different Kings or people. They moved on from one place to another in search of permanent settlements until they came to the plain Brahmaputra valleys, where they found their permanent habitation. If the above method in tracing the origin of the word is taken into account, the definition is found to be valid and the Garos themselves can be supposed to have coined the term. But we know that the Garos never used to call themselves “Garos”. They called themselves “A’chik” and their country “A’chik A’song” which the non-Garos used to called “Garo” and “Garo Hills” respectively. Besides, we have earlier been made to know that the word “Garo“ is a word supposed to have been given by either the Bengali or the Assamese communities. The preparedness to call

themselves "A'chik" instead of "Garo" gives an ample prove that they never coin this word and term coined by some non-Garo communities. Mr. K. R. Marak, a Christian Garo, writes "The name Garo was perhaps given by the British Government, but its root or origin was quite unknown" He however, is of the opinion that the name Garo is derived from the name of a village called Gaur in Bengal. Another word for Garo is Mande. There is a place in Tibet with the same name which might be the Garo's original home. Professor Milton Sangma is of the view that the Garos settled for a long time in Garwal from which they came to be known as Garos.*

From the foregoing different views and opinions it can be inferred that almost all the theories on the origin of the word Garo are mere suppositions except the one word Garuda found mentioned in the earliest Vedic texts. There is no doubt that the word indicated the Garo tribe and their habitation, the Garudachala and the Manda Saila, referred to the present Garo settlements, the Garo Hills and its adjoining areas mostly dominated by the Garo people since time immemorial.

**History of Migration**

No authentic ancient sources regarding the migration and settlements of the Garos are available by which we can build up their past history dating back from the earliest times. To fill up the great gap of the pre-historic periods of the eventful human history, we have to depend solely upon their folk stories, traditional songs and incantations handed down from generation to generations through oral traditions. Even then, we face difficulties as the old narratives told by our own forefathers and

ancestors are in archaic form and very difficult to understand to the people of the modern generation. The history of the Garo migration can be heard or known either in the prose or in verse forms. In all the narrations, Tibet is mentioned as the central place from which they were said to have migrated to the present day settlements. According to their history, the Garos came from a place called “Torua” in Tibet when their lands became barren and unsuitable for jhum cultivation. In one of the verses it is said:

A’ba cha’na a’namjana,
Mina dango minamjana,
Kilgrom puo kilgojana,
Songdongna a’song gitalko am’na,
Chiringna chiga dingtangko nina.71

(Finding that the land they lived in is unsuitable for jhum cultivation, rice and cotton do not grow well; to search for a new land and to look for a new stream to drink new water)

For reasons stated, the Garos were said to have crossed the great Himalaya, which they called “Chuma A’bri” or the high mountain, and settled down in Cooch Behar in the kingdom of a Behar king. When did this migration actually took place could not be said as no mention is made about the year of their movement from their ancestral place to the plains of Bengal. In the year before 1000 B.C, a series of the movements of the so called Kiratas or early Mongoloid people, were recorded to have taken place across the Himalayas from the central Asia72 to the plains of the North East India. It is conjectured by the Indologists, anthropologists and the ancient historians that the migrated group

72 S. K. Chatterji, Kirata Jana Kriti, p 36.
included the Garo tribe, which belong to a stock of race known collectively as Kiratas for the people of the Mongoloid origin. Eight Garo ancestress — Hima, Dolma, Bisoma, Sikme, Donse, Ullonga and Ullonggi along with their great chiefs Jappa, Jallimpa, Sukpa, Bongipa, Toginpa, Damjengpa, Ejingpa, Kusapa, Dasingpa, Asanpa, Chupanpa, Kumapa, Rejepa, Kukrengpa, Nenggilpa, Nagonpa, Chongdapa, Panangpa, Rekinpa, Dopapa, Gesim, Kalsin, Raji and Do’pa were found mentioned to have led the Garo people from Tibet to the plains of Bengal.\textsuperscript{73} They made mention of Rangamati in Cooch Behar as their first place of settlement in India, which was once under the district of Rangpur.\textsuperscript{74} It is said that the Garos had settled down in Cooch Behar for over 400 years and while they were there, they became rich and prosperous. So, they were pleased with the land they lived in and named it with various names such as Silchi Ringringram, Gitol Tingtotram, Do’katchi Nangroram, Rikgitok Nangsatram, Matma Ongrururam, Kitma Balgororam, Mongma Dongtoram, Matchu Auram, Udare Jakbri, Migongma Kolatchi etc.\textsuperscript{75} The Garos as was the usual practice, began eating any kinds of domestic animals such as cow, dog, pig etc. while living within the kingdom of the Behar king\textsuperscript{76} which he strictly prohibited not to take such animals. Besides, they always posed a constant threat to the king by breaking the laws of the land and not having paid heed to it. On the pretext of “Sua Sti Nangana, Jat Manijana” (not obeying the social taboos) he did no longer allow them to settle down in his kingdom.\textsuperscript{77} They thereupon, ready with their bag and baggage to set out their journey to unknown destinations. A division

\textsuperscript{73} Jobjang Marak, The Garo History, p 2.
\textsuperscript{74} Playfair, The Garos, p 9.
\textsuperscript{75} Dewansing Rongmuthu, Apason Agana, p 196.
\textsuperscript{76} Interview with Gongjing Marak, Village Damash, East Garo Hills, dated 18.02.1999.
\textsuperscript{77} Dewansing Rongmuthu, Apason Agana, p 195.
into different group is said to have cropped up before they set out their movement. One group reluctant to move any further, stayed back in the same place obeying the king’s rules and orders, the other group heading towards further south went as far as Mymensingh, now under Bangladesh. The third group, the largest move on towards east reaching Dhubri into the kingdom of king Thobani. Playfair presumed that the name Thobani might possibly be a confusion on the part of the Garos with the name Dhubini or Neta Dhubini, the washerman of gods, who was said to have resided in Dhubri.78 The king of Dhubri received them warmly at first but being afraid of them, did not allow them to settle there permanently. So, the Garos move on up the right bank of the Brahmaputra until they reach its affluent the Manas river.

Songdu chisamjoljol doange,
Manasako ga’bate,
Chondiniko niwate
Raja Dum patalo,
Rori Ohom Bangalo
Songdongeaha79.

The place at first known to the Garos as “Raja Dum Patal, Rori Ohom Bangal”. Here they also met the Bhutias whom they knew as “Longgi Longga”. While they were staying in this place, the king of the place was fascinated by the beauty of a Garo maiden named Juge Silche, the daughter of Kangre Jingre and looked for an opportunity to carry off her by force. Knowing the evil design of the king, the Garos hid her in a rock cave to save

79 Dewansing Rongmuthu, Apasong Agana, p 197.
her from the hands of the king. According to Garo tradition, the place has been named “Jogigopa” to mark the incident they met here. (Juge- the name of the Garo girl who had been hide and gopa - meaning bury or hide). Hence the name Jugegopa or later Jogighopa. It is also said that Jogighopa derives its name from some caves cut out of the rock near the river bank of Brahmaputra which were once occupied by ascetics.

On being refused to hand over Juge Silche, a fierce battle took place between the king and the Garos at Jogighopa and the Garos had compelled to cross the river Brahmaputra, which they called Ama Wari (the mother river) the largest river they ever crossed during the whole of their migration, they sold one Garo maiden named Dimri, the daughter of a Garo man named Me’gam Nongal to Rori Sadepa Nokma Chigatpa for 300 plaintain stems. With these plaintain stems, they crossed the Brahmaputra river in a raft and reached Garomari, a place on the north bank of the Barahmaputra river. It was while having their midday meal here that their enemies followed them and a decisive battle took place in which number of Garos were killed. But ultimately defeated their enemies. Since that event the place was named as “Garo Mari” meaning the Garos defeated their enemies. They continued to settle down in the same place for some days mourning over the death of their people in the fight. By this time, one of their queens, possibly the wife of a certain Garo Chief died. Her name was Rongse Mikse. A memorial stone post was said to have erected in her name in this place.

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81 Dewansing Rongmuthu, Apasong Agana, p 197.
84 Dewansing Rongmuthu, op cit, p 199.
From Garomari, the Garos marched eastwards up the left bank of the Brahmaputra and reached

A’song Kamakya,
Chiga chirongi;
Gantini ringringram a’song,
Chironggini jingjingram Chiga.85

Better known as the present day Kamakhya which was at that time under the Assamese raja Lilasingh.86 A fresh batch of the Garos led by Auk Raja Asilik Gitel was said to have reached the place and joined them here.87 They stayed there for a number of years amidst much persecution at the hands of Lilasingh. A large sections of the Garos, however left the place while an insignificant numbers, who were employed by the Assamese king Lilasingh for looking after the sacred religious places and who showed much loyalty to the king, remained there. A group of the Garo people still residing on the foot hills to the southern vicinity of the Kamakhya hills, claimed to have descended from their earliest Garo ancestors who once inhabited the place.88

The larger group then took up their residence at Baghmelapahar, a small hillock about 5 Km south east of Boko. The place was however infested with Machamaru or tigermen who offered constant threat to them.89 They always had to struggle with them while living there and it is stated that they killed a large number of those tigermen.90

85 Dewansing Rongmuthu, op. cit. 204.
87 Dewansing Rongmuthu, op cit, p 204.
88 Interview with Mr. Morang Marak (89 years) and Mr. Anoram Orang (84 years). Village A’dinggye, Guwahati, dated 30.01.2000; Dr. J.N.Das, Director, Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Panbazar, Guwahati, Dated 24.01.2000.
89 Playfair, op cit, p 10.
They did not remain there for long and moved over to a place known as “Sangkati Wakmetom Matia Panchia” situated at a distance of about 5 or 6 Km to the east of Dupdhara, on the Guwahati Goalpara road. The place has continued to be named by retaining the above first word while the rest three words have been discarded already and it has presently been inhabited by the Rabha and some other tribal communities. Tradition tell us that the Garos had settled down in this place for over 129 years and the place has been historic for the Garos for two reasons. First, it was here that they set up their own market for the first time. Secondly, that within the circumference of this locality, a big meeting or conference to decide the matrilineal system of inheritance which has still been in practice till today among the Garos, took place.\(^9\) The decision to adopt the matrilineal lineage system among the Garos can be thought of with certainty since the tribe, wherever they are, they strongly stick to their custom of matriliny. This view also strongly supports the wanderings of the Garos on the plains of Brahmaputra before they finally entered into the present day Garo Hills. If no such general meeting with unanimous adoption of the system among this tribe was made then there is every possibility of breaking it or digression from the established custom.

From this place also the Garos began to sprang up once again, keeping in mind the decisions that had been adopted in the meeting. They set out in groups to their unknown destinations. A group led by the four Garo chiefs—Sau Basanpa, Raja Sirampa, Ringga Dajepa and Kotta Nangrepa, settled down at Rongmikseram Tangka Datram, a place where one Garo queen Rongse Mikse mentioned earlier died. Muga Dingsepa, along with his people took up his residence at

\(^9\) Jobang Marak, op. cit. p 10.
Another group of Garo people led by Jappa Jalimpa, Sukpa Bonggipa marched further west and stayed at Sambol Medikuo Amak bonda turamo, Deka malga roramo, Jajong mikkimitramo, Chiga Bineng Bindengo. 

It is of general opinion among the Garos that they became rich and prosperous while they were in this neighbourhood and a Garo kingdom with Abrasen or Habra Usingpa, as its first reigning Garo king was established. Abrasen made his capital at Sambol A’ding in the Habraghat Pargana, now under Goalpara district. The name Habraghat has also been supposed to have been derived from the name Habrasen or Abrasen. The Garo king Abrasen was stated to have killed by the Muslims, who originally belong to Cooch Behar, then settling down at Habraghat. After him five or six Garo kings were mentioned to have reigned over the kingdom. About this time dissension appears to have cropped up among the Garos because of which they were again segregated among themselves. One party under Abong

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92 Johang Marak, op. cit. p 11.
93 Ibid.
94 Playfair, op cit, 10.
95 Dewansing Rongmuthu, op cit, p 223.
96 Ibid, p 223.
97 Playfair, op cit, p 11.
Noga and his wife Silme Do'ka moved over to the Garo Hills and settled down at Nokrek, the highest peak of Tura range.98 Since then, the place became the permanent abode of the Garo people with Tura as their main stronghold. The other members of the stock spread to different parts of Assam and to the other north eastern states of India retaining with them their aged old traditions and customs.

98 Playfair, op cit, p 10.