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

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Abstract
Garo is 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 affects 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: Garo, culture, land conflict, Sal forests, forest management, Bangladesh

Introduction
At least 350 million (mill) people worldwide are classified as indigenous, and about two mill 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 matrilocal, 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 Garo. In addition, we conducted personal interviews with Garo 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 Garo People
The Name “Garo”

Neither the nomenclature record nor the origin of naming is yet clearly understood for the word ‘Garo’. According to Marak et al. (1982), it was Tolemi who first mentioned the name ‘Garo’ in 200 AD while collecting information from Patliputra. He recorded the Garo hill as ‘Umor puj’ and its inhabitants as ‘Garoini’. A Pioneer scholar of the Garo 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 ‘Garo’. Das & Islam (2005) are of the opinion that there are two basic groups among the Garo, namely, ‘Lamdani’ or ‘plain Garo’ and ‘Achhick’ or ‘hill Garo’. In Bangladesh, they are now known as Garo. But the Garo communities do not want to be identified as ‘Garo’. Most of the Garo believe that the name ‘Garo’ was probably given by the Bengalese (mainstream Bengali speaking community) and Europeans. They feel that the term is disparaging of their ethnic group (Jengcham 1994). Generally, the Garo 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 ‘Garo’ call themselves ‘Mandi’ (Bleie 2005).

Origin

There is very little information about the history and origin of the Garo. The little that exists is mostly from oral tradition and also different explanations. The Garo 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 Garo peoples assume the following:
a. the Garo are an ethnic group of ‘Tibbeti 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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>1,02,000</td>
<td>Gain 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>1,05,000</td>
<td>Sangma 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>1,00,000</td>
<td>Burling 1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>1,20,000</td>
<td>Lewis 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>1,25,000</td>
<td>Joshua project 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>1,30,000</td>
<td>Drong, 2004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 Garo 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 Garo. Table 2 summarizes these theories.

Table 2. The Clan Groups of Garo

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

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 chong². 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 Garo social life. If someone does not have daughter, then Ma chong selects the heiress or Nokma³ for the property. Within Ma chong there are smaller groups locally known as Mahari⁴. 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 Garo, 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'bing, 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 *Akthing Nokma* (Head of Akthing), *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 descent 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 Garo is Christmas. There are also other religious festivals like, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, New Year celebrated by the Christian Garo. Christian Garo 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 Garo 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 Garo social and cultural life. In Garo society, a permanent relationship is established by marriage, not only between a man and a woman, but also between the two Machongs of the husband and wife. According to Islam (2008), marriage is strictly exogamous in Garo 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 Garo 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, Denabilisia, Agalmaka, Miamua, Rongchugalla, Jamegappa and Wangala. However, now-a-days they are not dependent on jhum cultivation (Homrich 1996). Only Wangala and Rongchugala - 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 Nokpanthë6 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

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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 nowadays, 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 Garo 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strength</th>
<th>Weakness</th>
<th>Opportunity</th>
<th>Threat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ Creation of Eco-park with 3 m wall limits access in the forest.</td>
<td>▪ No thinking for forest surrounding Garos.</td>
<td>▪ Safeguard for tree species and wildlife.</td>
<td>Garos lifestyle, livelihood and existence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Environmental preservation.</td>
<td>▪ Afforestation/reforestation with fast growing exotic species.</td>
<td>▪ Financial benefits from foreign donors Fuelwood supply.</td>
<td>Highly detrimental to environment and local inhabitants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Promotion of plantation economy (social forestry)</td>
<td>▪ Ignoring Garos in this benefit sharing program by the foresters.</td>
<td>▪ Corruption in participant’s selection, selecting local elites as the beneficiaries through bribing.</td>
<td>Frequent false cases against local poor especially, against Garos.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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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