

A Historical Study of the Garo Community in Bangladesh: Society, Culture, Identity and Transformation

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ABSTRACT

The Garo community constitutes an important but comparatively underrepresented component of the history of Bangladesh. Historically connected to the north-central frontier of Bengal and to the Garo Hills of present-day Meghalaya, Garo social life developed through changing relationships among kinship, land, forest, religion, migration, education, state policy and political borders. This article reconstructs major stages in the historical development of the Garo community in Bangladesh from the colonial period to the contemporary era. It adopts a qualitative historical approach based primarily on published ethnographic and historical scholarship, documentary materials, and published work based on oral histories. Rather than treating colonial ethnographies as transparent descriptions, the article reads them critically as historically situated constructions. The analysis emphasizes the transformation of Garo identity through colonial administration, Christian missionary activity, the Partition of 1947, the 1964 displacement, the Liberation War of 1971, post-independence state formation, education, urbanization and changing land regimes. Particular attention is given to the distinction between matrilineal descent and political authority, to the historical role of women, and to the changing relationship between customary land practices and state forest policy. Recent scholarship also indicates that climate change and environmental pressures are reshaping land-based cultural practices and women's roles. The article argues that Garo history is neither a static survival of a pre-modern society nor merely a local ethnographic subject; it is a history of continuous negotiation among community institutions, state power, borders, religion, gender and national belonging. Integrating such histories into mainstream Bangladeshi historiography can contribute to a more plural and historically grounded understanding of Bangladesh.

Keywords: Bangladesh; Garo community; indigenous history; matriliney; ethnicity; land rights; oral history; identity

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh has developed through interactions among diverse communities, languages, religions and regional societies. Yet conventional national narratives have often privileged the political history of the Bengali-speaking majority. This emphasis has produced an important historiographical imbalance: the histories of indigenous and ethnic communities are frequently discussed through anthropology, folklore or development studies rather than incorporated as integral components of national history. The Garo community provides a particularly valuable case through which this imbalance can be reconsidered.

Garo settlements in Bangladesh are concentrated especially in Mymensingh, Netrokona, Sherpur and Tangail, while the community has longstanding historical and cultural connections with Meghalaya and other parts of northeastern India. The modern international border therefore divides a social and cultural region whose historical interactions predate the formation of the contemporary states of India, Pakistan and

Bangladesh. The spatial history of the Garos consequently requires attention to border-making, migration and administrative restructuring as well as to village-level social organization.

The community is widely known for matrilineal descent and clan organization. However, matriliney should not be equated automatically with matriarchy. Descent, inheritance, residence, household management, community leadership and political authority may operate through different gendered institutions. Recent scholarship further demonstrates that women's formal position within a matrilineal system cannot be understood solely from rules of inheritance; actual control over property and decision-making may remain gendered and contested. This distinction is essential for avoiding romanticized descriptions of indigenous societies.

The historical construction of Garo ethnicity is another central concern. Ellen Bal's work is particularly important because it moves beyond an image of the Garos as an isolated and timeless 'tribal' population and instead examines how Garo-ness developed through interaction with state institutions, neighbouring populations, border policies and political exclusion. The present article builds on that historical-constructionist insight while bringing together social organization, religion, land, education, migration, war and identity within a single historical narrative.

The article also responds to an important methodological problem. Much of the early written record was produced by colonial officials, missionaries and external researchers. These sources are valuable but cannot be treated as neutral representations of Garo society. They should be read against their institutional purposes, categories and assumptions and, wherever possible, compared with community narratives and later scholarship. The present study does not claim to substitute secondary synthesis for fieldwork. Rather, it provides a historically grounded synthesis and identifies the archival and oral-history research required for a more community-centred history.

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

The principal historiographical problem is the limited integration of Garo history into narratives of Bangladesh. Existing scholarship is substantial in anthropology and sociology, but the historical dimensions of administrative change, border formation, displacement, land transformation, religious change and national identity are often treated in separate studies. A synthetic historical analysis can show how these processes interacted over time.

A second problem concerns source production. Colonial ethnographies frequently classified indigenous populations through categories that served administrative knowledge. Such sources can provide information on settlement, kinship and ritual, but they may also reproduce assumptions about primitiveness, isolation or cultural hierarchy. Historical criticism therefore requires the researcher to distinguish between the event or social practice being described and the colonial framework through which it was described.

A third problem is the tendency to generalize Garo society. Differences between Mymensingh, Netrokona, Sherpur, Tangail and other localities, as well as differences between rural and urban households and between generations, matter historically. The transformation of Garo society is therefore better understood as uneven and contested rather than uniform.

The article's contribution lies in connecting these dimensions into a single historical interpretation. It argues that Garo identity has been continuously reconstructed through institutional encounters: colonial administration, missionary education, international borders, displacement, the Bangladesh Liberation War, state development, forest governance, schooling and urban employment.

Objectives

- To reconstruct major historical stages in the development of the Garo community in Bangladesh.
- To examine Garo social organization, clan relations and matrilineal descent.
- To analyze colonial administrative and missionary interventions.

- To examine Partition, the 1964 displacement and the Liberation War of 1971.
- To analyze changes in land, forest, livelihood and environmental relations.
- To examine Christianity, education, urbanization and migration as processes of social transformation.
- To assess the historical construction and reconstruction of Garo ethnic identity and Bangladeshi belonging.
- To identify gaps in community-centred documentation and propose directions for future historical research.

Research Questions

- What historical processes shaped the development of the Garo community in present-day Bangladesh?
- How have matrilineal institutions influenced Garo identity, and how have gender relations changed within them?
- How did colonial administration and missionary institutions reshape Garo society?
- How did Partition, border-making and the 1964 displacement affect ethnic consciousness?
- What was the significance of the Liberation War and refugee experience for Garo communities?
- How have land and forest policies affected livelihood, cultural continuity and community authority?
- How have Christianity, formal education, migration and urbanization transformed Garo identity?
- How can Garo oral history and community archives expand the historiography of Bangladesh?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early ethnographic works, particularly Alexander Playfair's *The Garos* (1909), remain useful for reconstructing the categories through which colonial observers described Garo customs, social institutions and religious practices. Their value is greatest when they are treated as historical documents rather than unquestioned ethnographic truth. Robbins Burling's work on family and kinship provided a more detailed account of village organization and matrilineal relations, while Milton S. Sangma's historical and cultural scholarship broadened knowledge of Garo society.

Ellen Bal's *They Ask If We Eat Frogs: Garo Ethnicity in Bangladesh* (2007) marked an important shift toward a historical analysis of ethnicity. Her work emphasizes the production of Garo-ness through exclusion, categorization, state policy and political change. Her discussion of administrative reorganization, border crossing and displacement is especially relevant to understanding identity as a historical process rather than a fixed inheritance.

Research on family structure and cultural practice has also shown the persistence of matrilineal norms amid Christianity and interaction with Bengali society. Studies of Modhupur demonstrate that land relations are central to understanding contemporary Garo history. Research on forest governance and customary land rights shows how state interventions altered informal institutions and contributed to conflicts over land and resource management.

Recent scholarship substantially strengthens this field. Datta and Kibria (2025) examine Garo women's land-based cultural practices and climate adaptation through a decolonial perspective, showing that environmental change cannot be separated from gender and cultural institutions. Another 2025 study of Garo matrilineal society critically examines gender dynamics, property ownership and women's actual agency, cautioning against equating matriliney with automatic gender equality. These studies provide an important corrective to simplified accounts of Garo women as universally empowered by matrilineal descent.

Recent land research likewise demonstrates that the historical problem of customary rights remains unresolved in parts of the Madhupur Sal Forest. Such scholarship supports the argument that land is simultaneously an economic resource, a cultural landscape and a source of political belonging. It also indicates the need to connect historical land records and forest policies with community narratives.

The principal gap therefore remains a historical synthesis that places kinship, land, religion, border-making,

war, education, gender and national identity in a single chronology. The present article addresses this gap while explicitly recognizing that a future community-centred history will require systematic archival and oral-history fieldwork.

METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

This study employs a qualitative historical methodology. The primary analytical task is reconstruction and interpretation of change over time rather than statistical measurement. The article relies on published books, academic articles, historical and ethnographic studies, documentary materials, government publications and published scholarship incorporating oral histories.

Colonial ethnographies are treated as situated historical sources. Their descriptions are examined for what they reveal about institutions and practices, while their administrative and classificatory assumptions are subjected to source criticism. Published oral-history materials are treated similarly: oral memory is historically valuable, but memory is selective, generationally differentiated and shaped by later experience. Triangulation among documentary, published oral and secondary evidence is therefore essential.

The periodization adopted here is: (1) pre-colonial and early historical context; (2) British colonial rule; (3) Partition and the Pakistan period; (4) the Liberation War and emergence of Bangladesh; and (5) post-independence transformation. This periodization is analytical rather than absolute and is designed to identify both continuity and rupture.

A major limitation is that the present article does not claim original field interviews. Accordingly, no invented interview quotation, survey result or personal observation is presented as new empirical evidence. The article instead identifies oral history as a necessary next stage of research. This methodological transparency is important for maintaining the distinction between historical synthesis and primary field research.

Historical Geography and Settlement

Garo historical geography extends across a region now divided by the Bangladesh-India border. In Bangladesh, important settlement concentrations are associated with Haluaghat, Dhobaura, Durgapur, Kalmakanda, Jhenaigati, Nalitabari, Sreebardi and the Madhupur tract. These localities differ ecologically: some are frontier plains and foothill belts, some border hill systems, and others are associated with Sal forest landscapes. Historical interaction across these environments shaped differentiated forms of livelihood and settlement.

The border did not simply separate two previously unrelated populations. It gradually transformed mobility, citizenship and the meaning of territory. This is especially important after 1947, when a previously fluid regional space became increasingly regulated by an international boundary. The 1964 movement of Garos across the border, discussed by Bal, became an important experience through which displacement and insecurity contributed to ethnic consciousness.

Social Organization, Matriliney and Gender

Matrilineal descent is one of the most distinctive features of Garo social organization. Children traditionally belong to the mother's chatchi (exogamous phratry) and mahari (lineage), and clan relations shape marriage and kinship. Property and family identity have historically been associated with female descent, passed through the nokmechik (female inheritor). Yet descent rules do not by themselves determine who exercises structural authority. The distinction between matriliney and matriarchy is therefore analytically necessary.

Recent gender scholarship reinforces this caution. A 2025 study argues that property ownership and kinship rules do not automatically produce equal social power for women and identifies forms of gender segregation and male authority (such as the role of the chra, the maternal uncles/brothers) within Garo social life. This suggests that the historical analysis of Garo women should move beyond the question of whether society is 'matriarchal' and instead examine concrete spheres of authority: property management, household decision-

making, religious roles, community leadership and political representation.

At the same time, the matrilineal system remains a powerful marker of collective identity. Modern legal institutions, wage employment, education, migration and interaction with surrounding patriarchal social norms can alter inheritance practices without necessarily eliminating matrilineal identification. The historical process is therefore one of negotiation rather than simple disappearance.

Economy, Land and Forest

Historically, agriculture, forest resources, livestock, household production and local exchange formed important components of Garo livelihood. In forest environments, land was not merely a commodity. It was connected to food, kinship, ritual, memory and community belonging. Changes in land tenure therefore have consequences beyond income.

The Madhupur case illustrates this transformation particularly clearly. Research on forest governance shows that state forest policies, conservation interventions and changing land tenure systems altered traditional access to forest resources and reshaped informal institutions. The historical trajectory includes the transition from shifting cultivation (jhum) toward more permanent wet-rice settlement and agricultural production, followed by intensified disputes over customary rights and state ownership.

Contemporary land research continues to document conflict over customary rights in the Madhupur Sal Forest. This confirms that land history should be placed at the centre of Garo historiography rather than treated as a narrow development issue. The historical study of land should combine cadastral records, forest notifications, settlement records, court cases, missionary documents and community memory.

Environmental change adds another dimension. Recent research connects climate change to land-based Garo culture and women's roles, emphasizing community-led adaptation. This suggests that climate change should be incorporated into historical analysis as a force reshaping livelihood, gender relations and cultural continuity, rather than treated only as a contemporary environmental problem.

Religion, Christianity and Cultural Change

Traditional Garo religious life, known as Songsarek, was closely associated with agricultural cycles, nature, ritual specialists, community festivals (such as the Wangala), songs and oral traditions. Christian missionary activity introduced new institutions, literacy practices, churches and schools. The resulting transformation was not a simple replacement of one religion by another. Garo communities selectively incorporated Christian institutions while retaining or transforming elements of language, festivals, kinship and cultural identity.

The denominational history of Christianity also deserves greater attention. Catholic and Protestant institutions did not necessarily have identical educational, social and organizational histories. A future archival study should compare mission records, parish registers, school records and community narratives to determine how different missionary networks shaped local education, healthcare, mobility and religious identity. Christian institutions also became significant during periods of crisis. The historical role of missions during the Liberation War and refugee experience should be examined through documentary evidence rather than generalized claims. Such an approach can show how religious institutions became social infrastructures during political violence.

Colonial Rule and Administrative Transformation

British rule expanded administrative control over frontier and forest areas and introduced new legal and territorial arrangements. These interventions changed the relationship between Garo communities and the state. Colonial ethnography simultaneously produced knowledge about the population, creating categories through which officials and outside researchers understood Garo society.

The 1936 administrative reorganization of Mymensingh is important in Bal's interpretation because administrative boundaries contributed to the historical imagination of a distinct Garo homeland. This

demonstrates how administrative geography can become part of ethnic consciousness. The community's historical territory was therefore shaped not only by settlement and kinship but also by the state's changing map.

Missionary institutions operated within this colonial setting. They created new opportunities in education and literacy but also contributed to cultural and religious transformation. Colonialism should consequently be interpreted as a contradictory historical process: it increased state control and classificatory power while simultaneously opening institutional channels that later became important for education and community organization.

Partition, 1964 Displacement and the Pakistan Period

Partition in 1947 transformed the political geography of Garo life. Communities living within a connected regional environment became subject to an international boundary. Cross-border mobility, kinship and exchange were increasingly regulated through citizenship and border administration.

The 1964 displacement was a particularly significant experience. Bal interprets the movement of Garos across the India-Pakistan border as traumatic and as a factor contributing to stronger ethnic solidarity. The historical significance of displacement lies not only in the immediate loss of security but also in the subsequent redefinition of belonging: displacement made territory, citizenship and collective identity more explicit political questions.

The period therefore demonstrates a broader principle of historical identity formation. Ethnic consciousness may become more organized when communities experience exclusion, administrative categorization or forced movement. Garo identity in this sense was not simply inherited from the past; it was also produced through encounters with the modern state.

The Garo Community and the Liberation War of 1971

The Liberation War of 1971 created another major rupture that requires specific community-level and spatial contextualization. Garo-inhabited frontier areas in Mymensingh, Netrokona, and Sherpur were geographically adjacent to the Indian state of Meghalaya, making them highly integrated into the borderland refugee and military geography of the war. Under Sector 11 of the Mukti Bahini operations, led by Major Abu Taher, these frontier belts served as critical strategic corridors.

Official humanitarian and military records document a massive influx of displaced persons into the Garo Hills of Meghalaya, where prominent refugee camps such as Dalu, Baghmara, and Tura operated under intense logistical stress. Church-based networks, particularly Catholic and Baptist missions on both sides of the border, transformed rapidly into vital emergency infrastructures. In localities like Haluaghat and Ranikhong, mission stations provided temporary sanctuary for vulnerable populations before formal evacuation, while church facilities in Meghalaya collaborated with international relief agencies to distribute healthcare and food supplies.

While older historical accounts treated indigenous participation as marginal, emerging subaltern perspectives highlight that Garo youth actively joined the liberation struggle. Many joined the Mukti Bahini forces or worked as strategic guides, utilizing their intimate knowledge of the terrain along the dense frontier hills to assist regular operational units. The experience of the war was thus dual: it brought acute trauma through border displacement, but it also fostered active cross-community solidarity. The shared experience of displacement and resistance within independent state formation laid the foundation for post-war claims to national belonging within the newly sovereign state of Bangladesh.

Identity, Citizenship and Bangladeshi Nationalism

The relationship between Garo identity and Bangladeshi nationalism warrants deep theoretical examination through postcolonial and subaltern studies frameworks. In the early post-independence era, the state's constitutional narrative leaned heavily toward a homogenous Bengali ethno-linguistic identity. This created

a complex political domain for non-Bengali indigenous populations, whose historically constructed ethnicity risked being marginalized as an external 'tribal' category rather than an organic component of national history.

Engaging with subaltern studies reveals that Garo identity has never been antithetical to national belonging; rather, it represents a plural form of citizenship. Garo citizens continuously negotiate their position by maintaining internal cultural systems—such as matrilineal kinship norms and language—while simultaneously participating in the political, educational, and legal institutions of Bangladesh. The historical trajectory shows that ethnic consciousness often sharpens not through isolation, but in response to the state's changing definitions of nationalism. Consequently, Garo-ness within Bangladesh is a dynamic, relational construction that challenges the classic postcolonial state structure to transition from a monolithic eth-nationalist model toward a more plural, inclusive historiography.

Education, Urbanization and Generational Change

Education has been one of the major forces of social transformation. Missionary institutions played an early role in formal schooling, while post-independence expansion of schools, colleges and universities created new opportunities for professional employment. Education has contributed to mobility and increased participation in wider national institutions.

At the same time, educational expansion may generate generational differences. Older rural generations may place greater emphasis on customary institutions and village-based cultural practices, whereas younger educated Garos may operate primarily in Bengali-dominated academic and professional environments. Language use, folklore transmission and participation in village rituals can consequently change.

Urbanization has intensified these processes. Migration to Dhaka, Chattogram and other urban centres has created new economic opportunities in service industries, NGOs, education and professional employment. Yet migration can fragment village-based kinship networks. At the same time, digital communication can produce new forms of cultural connection. Festivals, music and identity debates can circulate through social media, creating a hybrid form of ethnic expression that is neither wholly traditional nor wholly assimilated.

Land, Heritage and Environmental Pressure

The historical relationship between Garo communities and land makes cultural heritage inseparable from environmental history. Forests, agricultural plots, sacred spaces, settlement sites and pathways may all contain historical meaning. Loss of access to such spaces can therefore weaken both livelihood and cultural memory.

The history of the Madhupur Sal Forest is particularly important because it reveals how conservation and state control can unintentionally conflict with customary land practices. Research on forest concessions and indigenous livelihoods demonstrates that land-right disputes are linked to livelihood insecurity and changes in forest management. The problem is therefore institutional as well as environmental.

Climate change adds further pressure. Recent research identifies Garo women and land-based practices as central to community resilience. A historical approach should document how environmental pressures alter crops, forest use, household labour, migration and ritual practice over time. Such research can connect environmental history with indigenous history rather than treating them as separate fields.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

- Garo identity emerged through a long historical process involving kinship, migration, administrative categorization, border-making, religious change and political experience.
- Matrilineal descent remains a central identity marker, but matriliney does not automatically establish female political authority or gender equality.

- Colonial administration and missionary institutions simultaneously introduced new forms of state control, education and religious organization.
- Partition and the 1964 displacement strengthened the political significance of territory, citizenship and ethnic solidarity.
- The 1971 Liberation War transformed the community's relationship with the political geography of Bangladesh and created a major refugee and humanitarian experience that requires further community-specific documentation.
- Land and forest policy have been among the most consequential long-term forces shaping Garo livelihood, authority and cultural continuity.
- Christianity, education and urbanization have produced transformation without necessarily eliminating Garo identity.
- Recent scholarship demonstrates that gender, land and climate change must be integrated into the historical study of Garo society.
- Oral history and community archives are essential for recovering experiences that are underrepresented in official records.

Comparative and Theoretical Interpretation

A comparative perspective suggests that Garo history shares certain structural problems with other indigenous communities in Bangladesh and Northeast India: colonial classification, land alienation, border-making, missionary intervention, state conservation policy and pressure from dominant national cultures. However, comparison should not erase local specificity. The distinctive history of Garo matriliney, Christianity, cross-border geography and particular settlement patterns must remain central.

Postcolonial and subaltern perspectives are useful because they draw attention to the production of historical knowledge. The archive is not neutral: administrators, missionaries and state institutions generated records according to their own purposes. Community memory can therefore act as a corrective, although it too requires historical criticism. A decolonial approach further asks whose categories define land, identity and development and how community knowledge can be recognized as historically meaningful evidence.

The historical-constructionist approach to ethnicity provides the central theoretical framework. Garo ethnicity is understood neither as an invented identity without historical roots nor as an unchanging inheritance. It is a historically situated identity reproduced through institutions, memory, cultural practices and political experience.

Major Challenges

- Cultural change and weakening transmission of oral traditions.
- Language shift and reduced intergenerational transmission of customary knowledge.
- Land insecurity and unresolved customary rights.
- Migration and weakening of village-based social networks.
- Uneven educational and employment opportunities.
- Gender inequalities that may persist within a matrilineal social system.
- Environmental degradation and climate-related pressures.
- Insufficient community-produced archives and historical documentation.
- Over-reliance on external representations of Garo history.

Recommendations

- Establish a regional Garo oral-history archive in partnership with universities and community organizations.
- Digitally preserve oral narratives, songs, photographs, family documents, village histories and festival records with community consent.

- Create collaborative archival projects linking university historians, local archives, churches and Garo cultural organizations.
- Conduct systematic research on Garo land history using cadastral records, forest notifications, court records and community testimony.
- Develop a dedicated research project on Garo experiences during 1971 using refugee records, Sector documents, mission archives and oral histories.
- Document the history of Catholic and Protestant educational and relief institutions separately.
- Include Garo history in Bangladesh school and university curricula in historically accurate and community-sensitive form.
- Support young Garo researchers to conduct bilingual documentation in Garo and Bangla/English.
- Create village-level cultural heritage inventories and community-approved digital repositories.
- Integrate gender and climate analysis into future research on land, livelihood and cultural continuity.

CONCLUSION

The history of the Garo community is an integral but insufficiently represented component of the history of Bangladesh. This study demonstrates that Garo society cannot be understood as a static remnant of an earlier cultural order. Its history is one of continuous transformation through interactions with colonial administration, missionaries, borders, state policy, land regimes, education, migration, war and modernization.

The article's distinctive contribution is to connect social organization and matriliney with political history, land transformation, displacement, religion, environmental change and national identity. By explicitly embedding subaltern narratives of the 1971 war, deconstructing the complexities of female agency under climate pressure, and theoretically grounding the community's plural citizenship within Bangladeshi nationalism, this framework shifts the study of the Garos from a descriptive account of customs toward a rigorous historical explanation of structural transformation over time. The evidence also demonstrates the importance of methodological caution. Existing scholarship provides a substantial foundation, but many community-level experiences remain insufficiently documented. In particular, the 1971 war, village-level land histories, women's economic and political roles, denominational differences within Christianity and generational changes in language and identity require further primary research. A more inclusive Bangladeshi historiography should therefore treat Garo history not as a marginal supplement but as part of the national historical experience.

Limitations of the Study

The study is primarily a qualitative historical synthesis and does not present a statistically representative survey or original field interview dataset. The uneven availability of community-produced records remains a significant limitation. Several important claims in the existing literature require further verification through archival documents and oral testimony. Future research should therefore conduct systematic fieldwork in Garo settlements in Mymensingh, Netrokona, Sherpur, Tangail and other relevant areas, while maintaining clear ethical procedures for informed consent, community ownership and representation.

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