



Tradition to Transition: Livelihood Shifts Among the Garo Community

Dr. Shyam B. Choudhury, Assistant Professor
Programme of Sociology, Humanities and Social sciences
Assam down Town University, Panikhiti, Guwahati, Assam

Abstract

This abstract delves into the livelihood shifts observed within the Garo community residing in RI-Bhoi, Meghalaya, navigating the transition from traditional practices to contemporary adaptations. Through a comprehensive study, this research explores the multifaceted dynamics influencing the community's livelihood patterns. By employing a combination of ethnographic methods and socio-economic analysis, it investigates the factors propelling the transition, including environmental changes, economic globalization, and socio-cultural transformations. The study reveals how traditional occupations like agriculture, weaving, and animal husbandry are gradually giving way to alternative livelihood options such as wage labor, entrepreneurship, and migration to urban centers. Additionally, it examines the impacts of these shifts on the socio-cultural fabric of the community, including changes in social roles, gender dynamics, and intergenerational transmission of knowledge. By shedding light on the nuances of this transition, the research aims to inform policymakers, development practitioners, and community stakeholders about the challenges and opportunities inherent in preserving cultural heritage while embracing economic change. Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of livelihood dynamics among indigenous communities facing similar transitions globally.

Key words -Livelihood, Garo, Tradition, change



Introduction

The Garo community, an indigenous ethnic group primarily residing in the RI-Bhoi district of Meghalaya, epitomizes the rich tapestry of cultural diversity within the country. Historically, the Garos have thrived in harmony with nature, relying on traditional livelihood practices deeply rooted in their cultural heritage. However, like many indigenous communities around the world, the Garo people are facing a profound transition as they navigate the complexities of modernity, globalization, and socio-economic change. This transition is marked by a gradual shift away from traditional livelihoods towards new, often unfamiliar, modes of economic sustenance. The livelihood patterns of the Garo community have undergone significant transformation over the years, reflecting broader shifts in the socio-economic landscape of Bangladesh. Traditionally, the Garos have been predominantly agrarian, practicing subsistence farming supplemented by activities such as weaving, hunting, and gathering. Their close relationship with the land and forests has shaped their identity and way of life, fostering a deep sense of connection to their ancestral territories. However, with the advent of modernization and the encroachment of external forces, the traditional livelihoods of the Garo people are increasingly under pressure.

This study seeks to unravel the intricate dynamics of livelihood shifts among the Garo community of Tangail, shedding light on the factors driving this transition and its implications for the community's socio-cultural fabric. By examining the interplay of environmental, economic, and socio-cultural factors, we aim to elucidate the complex processes underlying the transformation of traditional livelihoods and the emergence of new economic opportunities. At the heart of this inquiry lies the tension between tradition and transition, as the Garo community grapples with the dual imperatives of preserving its cultural heritage and adapting to the changing realities of the modern world. In exploring this tension, we delve into the various dimensions of Garo livelihoods, from agriculture and handicrafts to wage labor and migration, tracing the trajectories of change across different generations and social groups within the community. This study is situated within the broader context of indigenous rights, sustainable



development, and cultural preservation, highlighting the importance of understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by marginalized communities like the Garos. By engaging with issues of livelihood, identity, and agency, we seek to contribute to ongoing efforts to promote inclusive and equitable development that respects and empowers indigenous peoples. Through a combination of qualitative research methods, including ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and participatory observations, we endeavor to capture the voices and experiences of the Garo community firsthand. Burling (1997) provides a comprehensive examination of the Garo community, particularly noting their distinct matrilineal social organization. In this system, lineage and inheritance are traced through the female line, which significantly influences the social and economic roles within the community. Traditional practices have evolved due to sustained contact with neighboring Bengali populations, leading to notable changes in various aspects of daily life. Historically reliant on jhum (shifting cultivation), the Garo people have increasingly adopted settled agriculture and cash crop cultivation. This shift is documented by researchers such as Roy (2012) and Singh (2015), who emphasize the economic pressures and policy initiatives driving these changes. The introduction of new agricultural practices has brought both opportunities and challenges, affecting household incomes and economic stability. Burling (1997) notes the profound impact of daily contact with Bengali neighbors, leading to changes in the Garo's eating, dressing, singing, language, and behavior patterns. These cultural exchanges have resulted in a blend of traditions, where the little material items of everyday life are no longer distinguishable from those of their Bengali counterparts. Ahmed (2018) emphasizes the health challenges faced by the Garo community, including malnutrition, maternal and child health issues, and the impact of environmental changes on health. Efforts to integrate traditional health practices with modern healthcare are seen as vital for improving overall health status. By centering their perspectives and lived realities, we aim to provide a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of change unfolding within the community, as well as the resilience and adaptability that characterize their responses to these challenges. We embark on a journey of discovery, traversing the landscapes of tradition and transition, as we seek to unravel the complexities of Garo livelihoods in Tangail. By



illuminating the paths taken and the obstacles encountered along the way, we hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of the processes of change shaping the lives of indigenous peoples in Meghalaya and beyond.

Objectives

1. To identify the traditional livelihood practices of the Garo community.
2. To examine the factors driving the transition away from traditional livelihoods towards alternative economic strategies among the Garo people.
3. To assess the socio-cultural implications of livelihood shifts within the Garo community.

Methods

This study is an outcome of short field work that has been conducted on Maikhuli village under RI-Bhoi district. Participatory observation and case study were our basic techniques and intensive field work. Five people including farmer, day labourer, housewife and students were selected using purposeful sampling to collect data. An integration of case study and in-depth interview with the respondents has been followed. Thus, participatory observation and case study were the basic methods used for building rapport.

Findings

Traditional Livelihood Practices

The Garo community in Tangail has a rich tradition of agrarian livelihoods, including rice cultivation, vegetable farming, and fruit orchards. Agriculture remains a central pillar of the community's economy, reflecting their intimate connection to the land and natural environment. In addition to agriculture, traditional artisanal practices such as weaving, pottery, and bamboo crafts play a significant role in the livelihoods of many Garo households. These artisanal skills



are often passed down through generations and contribute to the cultural heritage of the community. Rapid changes in the economic landscape, including declining agricultural productivity, limited market access, and fluctuating commodity prices, have compelled many Garo households to seek alternative sources of income beyond traditional livelihoods. Increasing exposure to external influences, such as urbanization, globalization, and development interventions, has facilitated the adoption of new livelihood strategies among the Garo community. Factors such as improved infrastructure, access to education, and technological advancements have opened up opportunities for diversification and innovation. Environmental degradation, deforestation, and climate variability pose significant challenges to traditional livelihoods reliant on natural resources. The Garo community is grappling with the impacts of climate change, including erratic rainfall patterns, soil erosion, and water scarcity, which threaten agricultural productivity and livelihood security. Many Garo individuals, particularly youth and working-age adults, are increasingly engaging in wage labor opportunities outside the community, including agricultural labor, construction work, and service sector employment. Migration to urban centers and industrial zones has become a common strategy for supplementing household incomes and diversifying livelihood options.

A growing number of Garo entrepreneurs are venturing into small-scale businesses and micro-enterprises, including retail shops, handicraft production, and agro-processing activities. These initiatives reflect efforts to capitalize on local resources, market demand, and entrepreneurial skills to generate income and create employment opportunities within the community. Social networks and kinship ties play a crucial role in facilitating livelihood transitions within the Garo community. Informal support systems, cooperative networks, and community-based organizations provide avenues for resource sharing, knowledge exchange, and collective action, strengthening resilience and adaptive capacity in the face of change.



Socio-cultural Implications

Livelihood transitions are reshaping traditional gender roles and responsibilities within the Garo community. While men continue to dominate in agricultural and wage labor sectors, women are increasingly participating in non-traditional activities such as entrepreneurship, education, and community leadership, challenging existing norms and power structures. The transmission of traditional knowledge and cultural practices within the Garo community is evolving in response to changing livelihood dynamics. While elders play a vital role in preserving cultural heritage and indigenous wisdom, younger generations are also embracing new skills, technologies, and aspirations shaped by contemporary influences and opportunities.

Challenges and Opportunities

Livelihood diversification presents both opportunities and challenges for the Garo community. While it offers the potential to enhance household incomes, improve livelihood resilience, and foster economic empowerment, it also entails risks such as market volatility, social dislocation, and loss of cultural identity. Balancing the imperatives of economic development with the preservation of cultural heritage and environmental sustainability is a critical challenge facing the Garo community. Promoting sustainable livelihood strategies that harness local resources, traditional knowledge, and community strengths while fostering inclusive growth and social equity is essential for ensuring the well-being and resilience of the Garo people in the face of ongoing transitions.

Conclusion

The journey from tradition to transition among the Garo community of Tangail reflects a complex interplay of economic, environmental, and socio-cultural factors shaping livelihood dynamics in indigenous societies. Through this study, we have gained valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities confronting the Garo people as they navigate the process of change



and adaptation in a rapidly evolving world. One of the key findings of this research is the resilience and adaptability of the Garo community in responding to external pressures and internal dynamics. Despite facing numerous challenges, including environmental degradation, economic marginalization, and cultural erosion, the Garo people have demonstrated remarkable ingenuity and resourcefulness in diversifying their livelihood strategies and leveraging new opportunities for sustainable development. However, alongside these adaptive responses, it is also evident that livelihood transitions are not without their risks and complexities. The erosion of traditional knowledge, the loss of cultural heritage, and the widening of socio-economic disparities pose significant threats to the well-being and identity of the Garo community. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that integrates economic development with cultural preservation, environmental sustainability, and social justice. Furthermore, the findings of this study underscore the importance of empowering indigenous communities like the Garo to actively participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives and livelihoods. By recognizing and respecting their rights, knowledge systems, and aspirations, policymakers, development practitioners, and civil society actors can support the Garo people in charting a path towards inclusive and sustainable development that honors their heritage and values. The transition from tradition to transition among the Garo community of Tangail is a multifaceted and ongoing process that requires careful attention, collaboration, and dialogue. By embracing the complexities of change and harnessing the strengths of both tradition and innovation, the Garo people can build a future that honors their past while embracing the opportunities of the present and the promise of the future.

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