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The Forfeited Tribes: Residues of Partition on the Garo Hills of North East India

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ABSTRACT

The 1947 Great Divide is the most significant signpost in the evolution of South Asia as a socio-political unit. After having drawn the boundaries of two independent countries vis India and Pakistan, the British had finally withdrawn. If there were causes to rejoice at the end of Colonialism, the celebrations were undoubtedly marred by a tragic partition along religious lines which took an unacceptable toll in human life and suffering. Not only was India redefined; But both the Hindus and Muslims redefined their identities through a process of contestation of vision, contestation of beliefs and contestation of history. However, the division of Indian subcontinent into two independent countries, left its legacy on every aspect of the 'civilized' society, and the North-Eastern frontiers of India are not exceptional. The Partition of 1947 brought un-expectable horrors to the life of the people of the tribal communities on the border areas of India and East Pakistan, irrespective of community, creed, caste, tribes, geography, and identity. The Redcliff line touched the boundaries of North-Eastern frontier on the one side and East-Pakistan on the other, which fundamentally created such problems like dislocation, identity crisis, refugee influx, political unrest, inter-community gulf among the tribal communities like the Garos, Hajongs, Khasis, Jaintias, Mizos, Chakmas etc. of North East India. The present research paper is an attempt to bring conscious efforts to find the fundamental problems created by the 1947 Partition, with special reference to the Garo tribes of Meghalaya, living on the edges of the Garo Hills and Bangladesh border.

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INTRODUCTION

The partition of 1947, India and Pakistan, was not merely a division of land, it was a division of hearts, families, friends, souls, love and most of all 'humanity'. People died either "remembering their loved ones" or "finding their love ones" ..... people died.

National independence, India celebrated with a mixed sense of pride and misgiving. It proclaimed in a number of fora, the grand narratives of anti-colonial struggles and the coming of independence, but the people did not particularly engage with the political and social cataclysm that followed upon the creation of the nation states of India and Pakistan. The memories of partition are fragmented and painful. Yet, Partition and its known and unknown legacies have played, and continue to play, important roles in the constitution of collective identity in India. In many ways, partition remains the unspoken horror.[1]

An enormous problem with such a polarized history is that the 'communities' which Partition forged---both religious and national --- then shape not only the relations between but also within nations. In India rhetoric of secularism has to constantly strain against the legacy of religious differences, a legacy sharpened to murderous point by Partition, which insists on the violent separations of 'Hindus' and 'Muslims'. Once two nations have been founded on the idea of religious difference, even the secular constitutional obligations of Indians or the democratic aspirations of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis (later), are under pressure from the theocratic agendas of *Mullahs* and *Pandits* on both sides of the border. While borders divide, they also are connecting lines. The tragic history of bloodshed and partition gave rise to borders that proved more to be a fault lines of hatred, mistrust and suspicion than of mutual co-operation. The new borders were witnessed to continuous trans-border and internal migration resulting from economic compulsions, ethnic conflicts, religious persecutions and so on.[2] Further, the domestic politics and its consequences allows less and less space for the articulation of minority voices or of divergent cultural and social practices. Feelings of bewilderment, loss, and dislocation, to the horrific experiences to which communities were subjected, to the cultural and economic insecurities and aspirations that motivated socio-political elites and subaltern groups in their search for new homelands.[3]

The impact of 1947 Partition is however traumatic for generations, which are needed to be coincided. The Redcliff line which has been divided India into two different independent nation's viz. India and Pakistan not only reshaped the boundary of Northern India but also reshaped the boundary of North-East India. The newly created boundary lines touched the boundaries of Assam, Tripura, Garo, Khasi- Jaintia hills of Meghalaya, Chittagong Hill Tract and Mizoram North East India created huge migration process in the history of humankind. The boundary lines came as a rap in the own bodies of the people living on the border area, as many people had to shift their homeland from India to East-Pakistan.[4] The 1947 Partition, divided the Garos leaving the majority of the Garo north of the border in the Garo hills in India but isolating a substantial minority in Pakistan. Further, the important political events like the creation of Bangladesh and Meghalaya as a separate state seemed to have affected the Garo ethnicity most. Partition left its legacy on the socio-political, cultural, economic etc. infect every dimension of the life of the Garo community on North east India creating major questions regarding their identity, ethnicity, cultural practices, which are in need of deep study.

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The History of the Garo Hills at a Glance:

The Garo hills, a land of the hills and valleys is situated in the South Western corner of Assam. It is bounded on the North by the Goalpara district, on the East by the West Khasi hills district and on the West and South by the Bangladesh's districts of Rangpur and Mymensingh. The undivided district of the Garo Hills with a total area of 8084 sq. km. occupies the Western part of the state of Meghalaya between the latitudes 25:9' and 26:1' North and the longitudes between 89:49 and 91:2' East, having a total population of 406615 souls (census of 1971).[5] It has two distinct physical divisions- irregular mass of hills of the interior and the narrow strips of bordering plains. Hill area are almost exclusively occupied by the Garo animists and Christians, whereas the plains are inhabited by the Rabha, Koch, Hajong, Dalu, Banai of Hindu faith besides the Bengali and Assamese, Hindus and Muslims, scattered in the plains of Goalpara, Dhubri, Cooch Behar, jalpaiguri and Mymensingh (now in Bangladesh) Each of the area practices shifting and settled cultivations under community and individual ownership of land respectively.[6]

The villages in the hill areas are very small, many of them comprising less than 10 households. 72.24 % of the total villages of the district have less than 200 peoples, whereas 23.83% of the villages have persons between 200-499, and the rest have 500 souls, according to Census report of 1971.[7] In 1961, corresponding figures for the villages under above population size categories had been 84.89 %, 13.50% and 1.61%. Majority of the villages under the second category and all the villages of the last category have been in the plains, whereas the villages under the first category are with in the hills. On an average, each of such hill villages has about 29 households.[8]

West of the Khasi's are the Garo Hills. Communications with the Garos have been entirely from the sides of Goalpara and Mymensingh and they are the first of the Assam's mountain tribes with whom the British came into contact. Under the Mughals the whole of the North-East parts of Bengal were divided into different estates and the estates of Kurraibari, Kalumalupara, Havraghat, Mechpara, Sherpur, Susung and Bijni lay between the plains of East Bengal and the Khasi Hills were inhabited by various clans of the Garo tribe held for the most part by their original owners, who while paying a small tribute to the Muhammadan *Fauzdar* of Rangamati.[9] They were bond to supply a certain number of elephants, or a small quantity of *Aghur* (a precious wood), to support certain petty garrisons and to contribute to the maintenance of the Decca Artillery Park. Their estates were never subjected to a land revenue assessment. The Fauzdars generally made advances on account of cotton to the Choudhuries, (as these Zamindars were called) and received from them yearly consignments of that article and the transactions were carried on mainly for the benefit of the Fauzdars and the Choudhuries.[10] However, in any case they had little control over the hill people who regularly made incursions into the plains bellow. The villages at the border were often compelled to buy their security by paying a tax known as *Matharakh.* Meanwhile cotton from the hills had become an important article of trade and the emergence of British commercial interest in cotton pressurized the Zamindars to expand strengthen their jurisdiction in the region. This obviously led to much turmoil in the frontier and the Company's Government begun to seriously doubt the expediency of leaving the Garos under the control of the Zamindars. (Goswami: 2012:124)[11]

In 1816, the East India Company assumed administrative responsibility over the tract of land inhabited by the Garos as part of the district of Rangpur and Mr. David Scott was

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deputed by the British Government to visit the frontier. The Garos then divided into three categories, viz.

i) The ***Zamindari*** Garos who lived within the estates of the former Zamindars.

ii) The ***Nazrana*** or tributary Garos who had acknowledged the authority of the government by paying an annual tribute.

iii) The ***Bemulwa*** or independent Garos.

The problem before Mr. Scott was to make arrangements for the bringing to reason the Tributary Garos, who had committed al the late raids. He found that the cause of the raids had been the fact that in spite of the orders of Government repressing all internal duties levied by Zamindars and Sayers of all kinds, the Zamindars on this side had continued to extract their markets from the Garos.[12] Mr. Scott accordingly proposed to separate all these tributary Garos from the Zamindars control compensating the Zamindars if they could show any claim to consideration but bringing the Garo tract under Government management. The frontier markets were also to be brought under Government control (Ibid: p.226) through a Regulation had been framed by Mr. Scott. Accordingly the Bengal Regulation had been passed by the Government. However, David Scott who was the in-charge of the region soon realized that the Bengal regulations were totally unsuitable for the area and recommended the creation of a separate administrative units for the frontier tracts comprising Goalpara, Dhubri and Karaibari, to be named as North-East parts of Rangpoor and placed under the jurisdiction of a civil Commissioner. Therefore, the Bengal Regulation was replaced by the Regulation X of 1822. Scott was given a free hand to implement the Scheme. But before he could take any action he was appointed as the Agent to the Governor General, North-Eastern frontier. Meanwhile the Burmese invasion called for his undivided attention and the Garo problem was sidetracked for the time being.[13]

British supremacy in the Khasi hills had exposed another frontier to the plundering raids of the Garos. Repeated raids and the murders of the British subjects in the Garo Hills eventually convinced the authorities that the Garo problem needed urgent attention. Therefore Henry Hopkinson, who succeeded Jenkins as an Agent to the Governor General and Commissioner of Assam in 1860, advocated a radical policy towards the hill tribes and also stressed the necessity of constructing two roads, one from Karaibari to the boundary of Sylhet along the Garo frontier and another right across the Garo hills from Goalpara to Mymensingh.[14] In 1865 B. W. D Morton, Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara proposed the setting up of a police organization for the maintenance of law and order within their respective jurisdictions. Accordingly, Lieutenant Williamson, Assistant Commissioner of Goalpara entered into written engagements with 34 Chiefs who were appointed as Zamindars on a fixed salary.[15] These engagements worked well in the Northern parts of the Garo Hill but in the Southern Part troubles continued. Thus, the only solutions lay in the assertion of British sovereignty over the hills. In 1866 the Hills were made a separate administrative unit. Williamson was appointed as the Assistant Commissioner of the Garo Hills along with headquarters initially at Singimari and later at Tura. In 1869 under Act XXII, the Garo hills became a full-fledged district with Williamson as its Deputy Commissioner. This marked the formal assertion of British authority over the Garo Hills. But there were several hostile villages within the boundary demarcated by the Government. In December 1872, an expedition was sent to coerce them into submission. After initial resistance the villages eventually surrendered in January 1873. Within this the

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subjugation of the Garo Hills was completed and in 1874 the Garo hills brought under the control of the Chief Commissioner of Assam.[16]

Colonial Scenario: The Period Under Subjugation

As the Inner Line Regulation could not be applied successfully in a tract like Garo Hills, surrounded by settled territories, power was taken under Regulation I of 1876 to prevent the entry into Garo Hills for trading purposes of unlicensed persons and to control absolutely the acquisition of land by any outsiders as it was to be governed by the tribal laws and customs. However, Regulation II of 1880 empowered the Chief Commissioner with the previous sanction of the Governor General in Council, to cancel the operation of any law in force in the district. Under its provisions, the operation of enactments relating to civil and criminal procedure, court fees stamps, transfer of property and registration was barred in 1884 and the civil procedure Code was never extended to the Hill districts.[17] A very simple system of civil and criminal administration was introduced under the rules of Section 6 of the Schedule District Act, XIV of 1874. Accordingly, the Chief Commissioner himself was the chief appellate authority and the Deputy Commissioner exercised the combined powers of District and Session judge and Magistrate of the District. The judicial administration in all petty civil and criminal matters was carried on by indigenous tribal agencies as well as by *Laskars*. In the plains belt of Garo Hills, *Gaonburas* (village headmen) took the place of *Laskars* without any cash remuneration.

Police administration was also under the control of Deputy Commissioner. A small detachment was kept at head-quarters and no *thanas* were established in the Hills. Only three outposts were maintained in the plains belt along in the district border. Laskars, Sardars and Nokmas (local officers) were directly held responsible for detection and prevention of crimes in the hills, and Mauzadars, and Mandals aided the district administration in policing and other matters. Revenue, Land and land Revenue matters were handed by the Deputy Commissioner Under the executive orders of the Government. Plain areas were assessed for land revenue whereas house taxes were realized from hill areas. During the period of British rule, no proper road system was there in the Garo hills. Two roads provided the only outlet towards Mymensingh and Goalpara plains. The district authorities did not put much stress on road development except on clearing certain bridal-path or hilly tracts by a system of forced labour which is recalled by the elderly Garos as “British Zoolm”.[18]

The British authority invited the American Baptist Mission to developed education among the Garos. The Mission went on establishing some kind of composite institutions containing within their precinct a school, a church and medical facilities, all centering around the converted Garo teachers trained in Mission schools.[19] However, before the beginning of missionary education, Bengali and Garo were the medium of instruction in all schools and Bengali script was used for teaching the Garo language. Around 1901, Bengali was dropped from the lower primary course of studies and made elective in advance stage. In 1905 the educational system was reviewed by Bampfylde Fuller. Searching observations were also made by Barrow, Inspector of School Assam Valley and Hill districts in 1907, for the up gradation of schools from primary to higher stages. In 1938, about 70 years after the British occupation of the district, the English High School was opened. On the other hand, conversion to Christianity necessitated the denial of most of the time worn customs and traditions of the old society—a change so sudden and weeping that the Christian section possibly adopt itself to the changed order of things perfectly and was found to bear all pangs of transition.[20]

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The spread of literacy, a new religious faith and outlook released certain new forces to cause further changes in the Garo society. Organizing public opinion for opening English High schools, prayer for modification of the educational system and organizing district wise support for the Garos interests under the leadership of the late Soharam Sangma, were some of the instances which accounted for the growing consciousness for a new identity among the literate Garos. This growing awareness as well as acceptance of higher symbols drove them to be united under British administration and a new religious bond, to move towards a phase of sub-nationalism before the dawn of independence of the country.[21] (Op.cit, p.7)

The hill areas of Assam under the 1935 Act were classed as "excluded" or "partially excluded" area, in order to keep them isolated from the plain's areas of Assam or India. The inner Line Regulation promulgated in 1876 had long separated the hill people from their brethren in the plains. These people had therefore developed a different political consciousness and started the process of unification of diverse tribes. The Khasi-Jaintiya Hills which, which housed Shillong, the capital of Assam Since 1874, was the first among the hill areas to develop a new Political consciousness. With the founding of the Naga Club by the local government officials and the local village headmen in 1918, to discuss social and administrative problems, the Nagas developed a new sense of political consciousness.[22]

As yet, there was no political party in the Garo hills but few educated Garos in Tura used to have meetings about forming a political party and used to have discussion on the great Indian National Movement for Independence but they were strictly watched both by the American Beptist Missionaries and the Government. However, in 1942 Quite India Movement, Phukan Sangma started the movement in Garo Hills for which he was jailed.

In 1946, Garo National Council, the first political party was born with Mody Marak and Emon Singh Sangma as its President and General Secretary respectively. When the Eastern India Tribal Union was formed in 1954, the Garo National Council became one of its constituent units. Side by side, the Indian National Congress was also organized in the Garo hills and Phukan Sangma became its first President. Thus, gradually the people in the Garo hills, the Lushai (Mizo) hills and some other areas had no such organizations through which they could express their wishes politically.[23]

Redefining Borders: Partition through the Garo Hills



(*Description of the photo: This picture has been captured by the author during her field work in West Garo Hill Districts of Mrghalaya, that shows the fencing of West Garo hills and Bangladesh*)

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At the end of the Second World War (1939-45), the British politicians realized that the colonial rule in India could no longer be sustained. The Indian nationalists were dead against its continuation, and international opinion was also in favor of decolonization. The perspective in which the Indian question had so far been articulated had thus radically changed. Illustrative of their commitment is the announcement on 20th February 1947, where Atllee, the British Premier, declared that 'His Majesty's Government wish to take it clear that it is their definite intension to take necessary steps to effect the transference of power to responsible Indian hands by a date not later than June, 1948'. Accordingly, on June 3rd 1947 announcement of His Majesty's government announced that, "In accordance to the provisions of Para 5 to 8 of the statement of HMG dated 3rd June 1947 it has been decided that the provinces of Bengal and Punjab shall be partitioned.[24] There should be two Boundary commissions. These were instructed to demarcate the boundaries of the two parts of Bengal on the basis of ascertaining the contiguous majority areas of Muslims and non-Muslims. In the event of the referendum in the Sylhet, which was an Assam district but were inhabited by Bengalis a majority of whom were Muslims. In case the referendum resulted in favor of amalgamation with eastern Bengal, the boundary commission would also demarcate the Muslim majority areas of Sylhet district and the contiguous Muslim majority areas of adjoining districts of Assam. The members of the Boundary Commission for Bengal were Justice Bijan Kumar Mukherjea, Justice C C Biswas, Justice Abu Saleh Mohammed Akram and Justice S A Rahman." [25]

Cyrill Redcliff was appointed as Chairman of both the Boundary Commissions to decide the frontiers in just seven weeks. Neither an officer of the Indian administration nor a person with prior experience in adjudicating disputes of this type, Redcliff was an unknown entity, whose credentials as an eminent British jurist were 'invoked to compensate for his lack of knowledge and experience of the sub-continent. On his arrival in Delhi on 8 July 1947, he finalized the terms of reference for the task in consultation with Mountbatten and Claude Auchinleck (the Commander in Chief), the Congress and the Muslim League leaders.[26]

The task before the Commission was 'to demarcate the boundaries of the two parts on the basis of ascertaining contiguous majority areas of Muslims and non-Muslims' while taking into account, both the Hindu and Muslim representatives, while presenting their cases before the Commission, defended their claims for territories that could not be justified on the ground of 'contiguous majority areas.[27] The Bengal Boundary Commission held its first meeting on 16 July 1947, at the Belvedere Palace, Calcutta. In order to complete the task within the stipulated deadline, the first step the Commission undertook was to invite memorandum and representations from the leading parties stating their views on the demarcation of boundaries. With regards to the district of Sylhet, the Commission had deliberations in Calcutta and a referendum was scheduled to be held on 6-7 July 1947.[28]

Congress presented a separate memorandum. Apart from the Burdhwan division, the Congress insisted on including the whole of Presidency division, six districts in the Rajshahi division, and two districts in the Decca division. It also insisted on the inclusion of the area like Gournadi, Najipur, Sarupkati and Jhlakati police stations in the district of Bakerganj and the police stations of Rajair. Since these areas were largely Hindu dominated, the Congress defense appears to be consistent accept in regard to Najipur, where the non-Muslims constituted minority. Justifying the inclusion of Calcutta in West Bengal in view of its Hindu Majority, the Congress memorandum challenged the authenticity of the 1941 Census. They demanded for the inclusion of an area of 40,137 square miles with a total population of 2803200—which constituted 45% of the total population of Bengal in 1947.[29]

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Unlike the Congress, which presented three separate memorandums to the commission, the All-India Muslim League, organized several meetings in Calcutta, in which the demand for the inclusion of Calcutta in the proposed Pakistan was made. However, Calcutta was essentially a Hindu majority area and Muslims are undoubtedly a minority. Like the congress, Muslim League drew upon three criteria—contiguity of area, demographic composition, and unity of economic life—to make a case for separate Muslim state.[30] The proposed province was to include the whole of the Chittagong, Dhaka, Rajshahi divisions and almost the entire the presidency division. Moreover, the task of the Commission made easier by the presence of the river Hoogly, drawing a natural boundary between Muslims and non-Muslims majority areas. The League also emphasized that the Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling and Chitagong Hill Tracts, identified as non-Muslim majority areas were actually mere pockets in the Muslim contiguous majority areas 'having no contiguity to non-Muslim area. The other powerful group like Hindu Mahasabha, presented a memorandum to the Commission defending the inclusion of Calcutta in West Bengal.[31]

The "Fragmented" Soil, the "Shattered" Economy and the "Muted" Identity:

The 1947 Partition, divided the Garos leaving the majority of the Garo North of the border in the Garo hills in India but isolating a substantial minority in Pakistan. The traditional trade and trade routes that exist historically which were the life line of the Garos had been destroyed. They were completely dependent on the plains of Bengal for their economic sustenance. The trade was regulated by the Mughal feudatories, whom the Mughals referred to as *choudhrie*s and not *zamindar*s.[32] These feudatories were originally owners of large areas of land at the north eastern frontier of Bengal. The estates of these *choudries* were located on the northern, north-western and southern boundary of Garo Hills. These estates were those of Kurribari (Karaibari), Kaloomaloopara (Kalumalupara), Measpara (Mechpara), Habraghat, situated in that part of Rungpore, known as Goalpara, situated in the western part of the present state of Assam. In the southern frontier of the hills of the Garos, there were the estates of Susang and Sherpur in the Mymensingh district (presently in Bangladesh) and Siddli and Bijni in the Eastern Duars (erstwhile Goalpara district of Assam.) The estates of Karaibari, Kalumalupara, Mechpara and Habraghat were separated from Rangpur in the early years of the nineteenth century and eventually included in the Goalpara district of Assam.[33] It was the commercial interest of the *choudrie*s of these estates surrounding Garo Hills which prompted them to procure the produces from the hills and sell them to different parts of Bengal and thus accrue enormous profit. The most important item that the *choudrie*s coveted to procure was the Garo cotton which was in great demand in the plains of Bengal. Garo cotton was also the most important agricultural crop that was produced in surplus in the *jhum* field. The Garo cotton plants grown in the hills, though shorter in size, yielded a richer produce than those in the plains. During the mid-nineteenth century, out of the total 11,901,411 acres of cultivable areas, cotton was grown abundantly in about 9,719 acres of land.[34] The largest cotton growing areas of the hills were in the north, the west and in the area to the south of the Tura range as far east as the Nitai or the Darrang river. In order to procure the items of the hills the *choudrie*s of the various estates had set up weekly markets commonly known as *hat*s all along the principal hill passes at the foothills so that the Garos brought down to these markets their surplus items obtained either from the agricultural field or naturally available in the hills and exchanged them for their much-required items.[35] Thus, these markets were located on the northern, northwestern and southern frontiers of the hills. Damra, Jeera, Nibari and Lakhimpur were the principal markets pitched along the northern borders of the hills of the Garos. The markets held along

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the western border within the Goalpara district close to the Garo border not far from the Brahmaputra were Thikrikilla, Bangal Khata, Phulbari, Rajaballa, Singimari, Mankachar and Putimari. On the southern border of the hills, Mahendraganj, Pora Khasia, Dalu, Baghmara, Haluaghat, Nalitabari, Ghosegaon and Durgapur and Nazirpur in Mymensingh were the principal and noted *hat*s set up during the pre-colonial period.[36]

Several other weekly markets were also occasionally held along the frontiers according to the needs of the people. The *nokma*s of the respective villages often accompanied their villagers to the market at the frontier where they too perhaps exchanged the surplus produces of their agricultural fields through their attendants or other members of their families. Thus, indirectly they too participated in the trade. Market sites came up in Rangapani, Garobadha in west Garo Hills, and one at Tura itself. Dalu in south Garo Hills was an important market site since early times and under the colonial rule it became a principal supplier of rice to the station at Tura as the people from Tura depended entirely on the Mymensingh district for the supply of the food grains. To meet the increasing demand of rice and other commodities to the station at Tura, a new *hat* was also developed at Selbal around 1873, a place on the banks of the Bogai river near Remrangpara, and was connected by the Bogai river to Nalitabari, a large grain market in the plains of Bengal, at present situated in Bangladesh. Selbal was just 20 miles from the plains of Mymensingh. Baghmara, Dalu, Sarrampang, Shakamala-Durga or Baklarhat were some important market places within the hills. All these hats and markets either fell in the other side of the border or rendered redundant without participation of the plains people who were cut off to the other side. Partition thus played havoc with the lives of the Garos. The boundary line partitioning the Garo habitat passed through Batlaban, Kanai, Chenggni, Gulpani, Rongara, Dambuk appal, panda and Gasupara areas of Garo hills.[37]

Not only this while demarcating the boundary, there were attempts by the majority community of bordering Mymensingh district to include as much of the tribal land as possible into the Pakistan territory by manipulating the demarcation and border officials. Garos were thus stranded between India and Pakistan though they belonged to neither Muslim nor Hindu community.[38] In a revealing presentation Malini Sur showed how the conversion of agricultural land into provincial and national territories, and religious and political mobilizations that defined affiliations and citizenship, altered prior conceptions of locality and belonging. The entangled histories of two peasant and border communities who may be broadly described as Muslim cultivators of Bengali origin and the mostly Christian Garos tells the story of rice wars along the edges of colonial Assam and eastern Bengal. These provincial margins were fought over, redrawn and mapped to form the post-colonial borders of Northeast India and East Pakistan (1930-1970). As intersecting projects surrounding land came to mark borders, evicted and displaced peasants not only lost but also acquired each other's land and rice harvests.[39]

The traditional inter-community linkages in the area were so strong that these hill tribes "for ages depended on their trade with the plains…" Centuries old border-trade based economy was shattered by closing the borders and erection of check-posts. In the pre-partition scenario, the plains of the hills used to be the main market for the produce of the tribal people living on foothills of the Garo, Khasi, and Jaintia lands. As a result of the partition, The boundary of the new state of East Pakistan partitioned the lands inhabited by the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo as boundary came to be demarcated "from boundary pillar no 1071 located at the tri-junction of Rangpur district of Bangladesh, west Garo Hills district of Meghalaya and Goalpara district of Assam and ends at the boundary pillar no 1338 at the tri-junction of Sylhet district of Bangladesh, Jaintia Hills district and Cachar district of Assam."[40] Partition and the

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amalgamation of Sylhet with East Pakistan caused "a virtual economic blockade of the Khasi hills." The movement of goods were initially discouraged and subsequently stopped from moving between Khasi-Jaintia hills and East Pakistan. While the Khasi- Jaintia people of the hills found themselves cut away from their kinsmen in the plains they were also reduced to penury without a market for their agricultural produce and mineral resources. Trade which amounted to more than three crores of rupees annually in the pre-partition days came to a standstill which resulted in the tribal communities residing at the borders between Khasi Hills and Sylhet being brought to the brink of starvation. The affected in the Khasi Hills district amounted to about 80,000 people and about 16,000 households. This resulted in large scale migration of people from these border areas to new settlements selected for their relocation in the Ri-Bhoi region of present-day Meghalaya.[41]

There has also appeared a growing economic gap between the greater mass of the illiterate hill men and a very small middle class of the literate hill men in the post-independence period. The benefits of development expenditure go largely to the later. In a comparatively free political atmosphere under the national administration mostly manned by non-hill men and traders by virtue of their ability and wealth have been able to control the economic benefits. A majority of the tribal population still in abject poverty, practicing Jhoom cultivation and maintaining a bare subsistence level of living.[42]

Displacement of peoples from their inhabited places causes a huge loss of property as the people displaced to go safer places. They build huts or temporary refugees by occupying grazing reserves of vacant places besides railroads, embankments and highways. These peoples became the main sources of cheap labors.[43] A newspaper report reveals that owing to the subsequent displacement of their inhabitants, a wage earner found it intensely difficult to earn even Rs. 2 a day during 1970. In urban areas the daily wage was no less than Rs. 10. What might appear more important under such situation was not the meagerness of wage, but the non-availability of work. Getting work considered oneself lucky, because in that labor abandon situation, the buyers were few with sellers being many. Relief, whether from the government or from any other source was almost non-existent.[44]

Ethnicity as a concept is derived from the Greek word "ethos", which means nation, people, caste, tribe, and such others. "Ethnic" relates to the gentiles of nations not converted to Christianity; community of physical and mental traits possessed by the members of a group as a product of their common heredity and cultural tradition, or indicates the racial, linguistic and cultural ties of peoples with specific group or exotic primitive culture[45] Ethnicity therefore stands for the ethnic quality or affiliation of a group bearing different meanings in varied situational contexts. Thus race/sub race, tribe/sub tribe, caste/sub-caste, class/sub-class, language/dialects, religion/faith, sect/ sub-sect, territoriality/nationality, techno-cultural efficiency has all been used sometimes singularly or in various combinations to delineate ethnicity. More often identity of individuals or a group change in various socio-political or cultural context, creates numerous problems in their socio-political life.[46] The Partition of 1947 is one such political incident which also left tremendous impact on the socio-cultural life of the people of the Garo hills of North East, creating major questions on their ethnic identity.

The word 'ethnicity' has been found to be closely related to state and development. The process of development on closer scrutiny is found to be more growth oriented than distributive, and more state-centred than emerging from the people's needs. Most such upsurges, crave for a better control over local resources or better redistributive justice

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incidentally, the ethnic phenomenon itself is often made a scapegoat for lack of development or blocking it and therefore consider it as anti-development. Efforts to reconcile these two apparently conflicting concepts are found in the coinage of concepts like "ethno-nationalism" and "ethno-development" but ethnicity is more acceptably seen as a consequence of the failure of developmental efforts.[47]

The important political events like the partition of India, the creation of Bangladesh, and the creation of Meghalaya as a separate state seemed to have affected the Garo ethnicity most. The first incident divided them into two countries, the second made their area as a battlefield, and the third incident completely peripheralized them geographically as well economically, their very survival as a community was at stake just after independence. Their ethnic identity has not only been crippled by the conflict of cultural ideologies within themselves but also constrained by their overall backwardness. The borderline not only brought distinction between religious beliefs and practices but also marked by, apart from economic differentiation and marital restrictions outside the groups.[48]

However, the Garo identity has been gradually revived, mainly in the initiatives of the non-Vashnavites. Their emphases are on their language, dress, festivals, rituals etc. but all these are in a state of flux. Many of them claim that they can speak their own language but often speak sometime in the Bengali language, and feel more esteemed to do so. Their dress, festivals, rituals, sometime are same as those of the Bengali but they often come out with examples of their cultures such as '*Bastu' Pooja* or propitiation of the village deity and '*habbissanna'*, a morning ritual practised by them. However, for a small community without any strong economic and educational foundation it is indeed very difficult to expect its culture to be entirely different. It is partly due to absence of exclusive cultural markers and partly due to their insignificant demographic size that the Garos were often seen ambivalent about their identity. The ideological support, which is much needed for sustaining such a culture and giving it a clear identity, often missing due to their poor literacy, economic condition and other such conditions of dependency and the Garos are not exceptional than this. The need for development is so compulsive for them that many are ready to redefine their identity in order to make it congenial for development.[49]

The Garos were basically shifting hill cultivators and that exemplifies somewhat crude techno operational perspective. They practised settled cultivation both wet and dry by transplantation method which involves a series of agricultural operation. Undoubtedly, it is quite unusual and surprising phenomenon to the than Garo who had traditional expertise in slash and burn cultivation. More or less they dependent on paddy mostly '*Ahu'* and '*Sali*' cultivation in the plains, while prefer to do *Jhooming* on the hill areas. Generally, two varieties of plants they used for such purpose—locally known as *Putuli* and *Charaipeta. The* first one cultivated I the plain areas where the second one planted on surrounding hills.[50]

Instead of economic backwardness and variegated constraints, most of the Garo people prefer cultivation as they are basically land loving people and they have developed the system of agriculture, through trans-generational process. The 1947 partition came as a blunder to their long trans-generational agrarian settlement. As the borderline cut the plains from the hills in between two countries, the traditional cultivation process was breaking down all of a sudden which created economic constrains for the Garos. Gradually they turn into landless people or left with a scanty land, who now had to depend on other source of living. As they were left with small area of cultivated lands, they have realized that the absolute dependence on

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cultivation keeps them moving round a one-year agricultural cycle with full of uncertainty. Moreover, the amount of paddy they produced in a micro crop area was not sufficient at all in many cases to maintain a family throughout the year. Naturally in general surplus production became a myth for them. Structural balance became so acute that in case of a crop failure for a particular year, a marginal farmer will turn into a landless labourer.[51]

The greatest impact of Partition was clearly migration of population from one region to another, both within a country and across newly created international borders and resulting demographic transformation. Partition changed the way politics came to be perceived not only in Assam but entire North Eastern India. While inter-provincial borders of colonial era became international boundaries, perceptions about population migration also underwent a change. All of Northeast India's main rivers were partitioned, with India controlling their upper reaches and Bangladesh and Burma their lower ones. Bank of the Kaladan linking Mizoram with Burma, the Karnaphuli links Mizoram-Bangladesh, the Meghna links Tripura-Bangladesh, the Barak links Cachar-Bangladesh, the Brahmaputra links Assam-Bangladesh and the Tista links Sikkim North Bengal and Bangladesh. All of these are old and important trade and travel routes. These routes were truncated in 1947, and most of the trades had to find new avenues.[52] The economic, social and cultural effects on towns, villages and markets along their banks and on the hinter-lands dependent on river trade - both in Northeast India and downstream - were enormous. What happened to rivers happened to railways and roads as well. Partition entirely transformed the hill-valley relations in Northeast India. Demands for administrative separation from Assam, which controlled the valley, soon materialized and (outlawed) river trade and mobility across the partition border persisted. Verticality was central to this process: the state of Assam gradually lost all its hills regions and was reduced to the Brahmaputra valley.[53] Assam and the Brahmaputra valley thus became almost synonymous for the new power Centre of post-independence Northeast India and the surrounding hill societies were converted into satellites. Even Assam's other river valley, the Barak valley to the South, had to reorient itself towards the Brahmaputra valley, across hill country, rather than to the Bengal region which it is a natural extension. This process of assimilation was especially galling for those hill societies that had previously also, primarily linked to other valley regions like Bengal, Arakan and the Irrawaddy. Assimilation in post-Independence Northeast India is far from unique and could usefully be compared with post- 1947 Bengalisation in the Chittagong Hill tracts of Bangladesh and post-1948, Burmanisation in the Chin and Arakan Hills of Burma. The word 'Bengalisation' is also pronounced in a region that has never been administratively allocated to Northeast India, although it forms the geographical and social link between the non-contiguous parts, such as Sikkim to the West, Assam and other states to the East. This region is the Northern outlier of the state of West-Bengal and shares many features with 'Northeast India', notably ethnic complexity and verticality. [54]

CONCLUSION

Since self-preservation, aggression and a sense of one's turf are basic human traits, all migrations, irrespective of their cause, nature and scale have caused bloody conflicts. Therefore, the Partition of India in 1947, is also triggered off one of the biggest migrations in human history. It uprooted nearly 12 million people from the land of their birth and caused physical and mental scars that remain even after 70 years. Looking at the life, literature and politics of the two countries, one feels that neither India nor Pakistan, had recovered entirely from the memories and aftermath of the great holocaust.(S. Setter&I.B.Gupta:2002:119) Further, the important political events like the creation of Bangladesh, and the creation of

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Meghalaya as a separate state seemed to have affected the Garo ethnicity the most On the other hand, the events from 1947-1971 were traumatic chapters in the history of Bangladeshi Garos as well. People saw friends and kinsmen die of disease and violence. They lost land and possessions. Worst of all, perhaps the years of unrest and uncertainty undermined the people's confidence in their future. They began to feel like unwelcomed foreigners in their own land. In the back of their mind was the thought that if the situation were again to become tense, they could always flee again to India. The thought that flight might be possible or necessary, may have contributed to a sense of instability in the Garo population of Bangladesh.

In the half century since independence of the Garos in what is now Bangladesh has been profoundly different from the experience of Garos on the Indian side of the border. The terrain is different and so is the resulting agriculture, land tenure, distribution of land, culture and wealth as well. Even more important have been the administrative and political differences that the border has imposed. Both ecological and administrative pressures have pulled the Bangladeshi Garos away from their ancestors north of the border, but the continuities of the Garo culture are as impressive as the changes. The Garos in Bangladesh remain stubbornly distinct from their Bengali Muslim neighbors. Nevertheless, their survival thus far does not ensure their survival in the future. The pressures they faced can only grow more intense. However, the period of unrest also developed a consciousness among the Bangladeshi Garos regarding themselves as a group, not only distinct from the Bengalis, certainly but also distinct from their Garo ancestors North of the border. A greater sense of unity now united them.

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