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Ethnographic attributes and archaeological correlates: an investigation among the Garos of West Garo Hills, Meghalaya

*Smita Devi Bora[1], Dr. Dwipen Bezbaruah[2]
[1] *(UGC SRF, Department of Anthropology/ Gauhati University, India)*
[2]*(Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology/ Gauhati University, India*
Corresponding Author: Smita Devi Bora

Abstract: Present day living condition of any society is nothing but the modification and changes in different aspects of the population through the process of adaptation with their environment. The life style of the present day population helps in understanding their past culture to a considerable extend. Garo hills, the western most district of Meghalaya occupies a special place in the prehistoric archaeology of North-East India as more than a dozen of sites have been encountered by scholars in and around Tura, the district headquarter of West Garo Hills district. The rivers along with their tributaries and the hill ranges offer unique situation of physical environment resulting in human settlement during the prehistoric past. In this paper an attempt is being made to study the present subsistence economy, interaction with the environment and contemporary implements which fulfil the day today need of the Garo community in the four villages of West Garo hills. The investigator also tries to outline the cultural and morphological proximity of the recovered artifacts from the prehistoric sites in and around the four villages with contemporary implements and through light on the cultural continuity among the Garo's from prehistoric past till present day.

Keywords: adaptation, analogy, artifact, implement, subsistence.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Meghalaya, a small hilly state popularly known as "abode of the clouds" is a state in the Indian union, which is a member state of the eight sisters state of North-Eastern Region. It came like into existence as an autonomous state on 21st January, 1972. It comprised the erstwhile districts of united Khasi - Jaintia hills and the Garo hills. The total geographical area of the state is approximately 22,429 sq. km and consists of primarily steep hills and deep gorges with very limited areas covering valleys and plain lands. Meghalaya is the homeland of three hill tribal communities- the Khasi, the Jaintia and the Garos with their numerous sub divisions into clans. The Garo hills is the western most district of Meghalaya situated between the geographical region of 25˚9′ and 26˚ N and 87˚47′ and 91˚2′ E latitude and longitude respectively. The Garo hills is surrounded in the north by Goalpara district of Assam, in the east by the Khasi hills, in the south by Bangladesh and in the west by a part of Goalpara district. The Garo hills is composed of three districts that is East Garo hills, West Garo hills and South Garo hills. The principal ranges in the western Meghalaya are the Tura range and the Arbella range. The Tura range passes through the heart of the Garo Hills from southeast to the northwest. It is 50 km long extending towards the central Khasi Hills. In the north of the Tura Range, the Arbella range runs almost parallel to the Tura range along the east-west alignment. It is drained by the rivers *Ganol, Simsang, Krishnai, Nitai, Bhugai,* and their tributaries and sub tributaries. The Garo hills is a tropical humid landscape consists of tree, brushy, shrubby and creepery vegetations, comprises of many different types of animals including various kinds of birds. The mean annual rainfall is 2400-2600 mm. The four prehistoric archaeological sites, discussed in this paper, are encountered in *Rongram - Ganol* valley of West Garo hills district. This district covers an area of about 8080 sq. km. It is located in between 25˚30′ and 25˚45′ N and 90˚15′ and 90˚30′ E latitude and longitude respectively. The district head quarter of West Garo hills is Tura, being the second largest town in the state after Shillong. Nokrek Peak (1411m) situated about 12 km to the east of Tura town is the highest peak in the western Meghalaya. The predominant part of Garo hills range in height from 450 m to 600 m.

The Garo hills is well known in the map of prehistoric archaeology of North-East India for its rich cultural heritage. A number of sites have been recovered by earlier scholars and works from different perspectives like typological, typo-technological, geomorpholoical have also been done here. Mentioned may be made of H.C.Sharma[1], S.N.Rajaguru[2], H.D.Sankalia[3], D.K.Medhi[4], H.C.Mahanta[5], A.A.Ashraf[6] etc. In this paper an attempt is being made to study the present subsistence economy, food habit, interaction with the

environment and contemporary implements which fulfil the day today need of the Garo community in the four villages viz. Mishimagre, Bibragre, Thebrongre and Rongram of West Garo hills. The investigator also tries to outline the cultural and morphological proximity of the recovered artifacts from the prehistoric sites in and around the four villages with contemporary implements and through light on the cultural continuity among the Garo's from prehistoric past till present day.

Present day living condition of any society is nothing but the modification and changes in different aspects of the population through the process of adaptation with their environment. The study of present subsistence economy, food habit, interaction with the environment and contemporary implements which fulfil the day today need of any community can help in reconstructing their past culture. The historical approach evolved from American Anthropologists advocate that modren Indian cultures had long roots in prehistory. Moreover another archaeologist Lord Avebury opined that the stone age cultures can be compared with modern hunter – gatherer people (Avebury[7]). Binford argued that archaeology would be only source of explanations for cultural variation among nonindustrial societies. He thought about the existence of archaeological record as a static phenomenon and its linked to the ever changing human system (Binford[8]).

II. ETHNOARCHAEOLOGY AND ITS IMPLICATION

Ethnoarchaeology is a sub discipline of archaeology, which help in interpreting the past and present ethnographic problem emerged in 1956 through a paper entitled "Action Archaeology : The Archaeological Inventory of a Living Commnity" by Maxiane Kleindienst and Patty Jo Watson (David and Kramer[9]). Different scholar defines ethnoarchaeology in different ways. For instances Edward Staski and Livingston Sutro[10] defines it as the 'study of ethnographic or historical situations, either through firsthand observation or documentary research, to extract information useful for understanding the relationship between patterns of human behaviour and material culture in all times and places'. According to Carol Kramer[11] it is an 'ethnographic field work carried out with the express purpose of enhancing archaeological research by documenting aspects of sociocultural behaviour likely to leave identifiable residues in archaeological record.' The essence of ethnoarchaeological study lies in the examination of material culture of the past and present and their systematic and purposeful appraisal. In the process of examination of the material culture one may find that a number of archaeological elements still survive in analogous form. Roy[12] has observed this phenomenon in studying the antiquity of the subsistence pattern of Garo hills, Meghalaya. Similarly anthropologist Richard Lee studied the remains of long abandoned campsites and compare them to modern settlement of the Kung San of the Kalahari Desert by taking the expert help of a prehistorian (Lee and De Vore[13]). Lewis Binford worked among the Nunamiut Eskimos and the Navajo on variability in adaptation system, seeking viable analogies between living cultures and archaeological materials and trying to develop workable models of culture as rigorous yardsticks for studying variability (Binford[14]). Thus against the background of the contemporary cultural system one can understand the archaeological past.

In West Garo Hills near the five archaeological sites the investigator encountered four Garo villages namely Mishimagre, Bibragre, Rongram and Thebrongre. The four villages are situated on hill top (Thebrongre), hill slopes (Mishimagre and Bibragre) and sub-mountainous area near streams and rivers (Rongram). Table 1 gives preliminary information of the demographic aspect of the villages.

The villages are sparsely populated and the density of the population in these four villages are not very thick except Rongram. Rongram being a market and moffusil centre the population density comes near to that of the state of Meghalaya which is 132 according to the census of Govt. of India, 2011. The population density of the other three villages with prehistoric significance are much less indicating a large area under forest and hills, aboundoned tracts and terrain and jhum and intermontane wetland. Three to four houses of close kin generally live in close proximity and built their houses in cluster. They use the water of the streams or rivers by pipe it to some convenient place through bamboo tube to fulfil their day to day need.

III. SUBSISTENCE STRATEGY AND ITS CULTURAL PROXIMITY

They practice slash and burn cultivation known as shifting cultivation or jhum on inaccessible land on the hill slopes and it is the primary source of their subsistence today. They use two types of hatchet (*dao)* for felling plants of the jhum fields, a digging stick (*matham)* for planting the seeds and a hoe (*gitchi*) for weeding the paddy. Out of the two hatchets, the *athe* which has a long concavo – convex iron blade and the *athe – mangren* has a short heavy convex blade, and both of them are hafted to bamboo handles by their tangs. The former is a multipurpose tool used for clearing jungles, in making bamboo and cane stripes required in house construction, in basketry works and in butchering animals. The later variety is used to chop big trees and split them for firewoods. A digging stick is made from a suitable branch of tree dressing one of its end pointed. A recent variety of digging stick used by the hill people has a pointed iron tip and the wood is replaced by bamboo. The hoe of the Garo's is a smaller one compared to the hoe used in the plains of Northeast India. In shape and size the blade of the hoe is nothing but a replica of the ground stone celt found in Garo Hills (Medhi[15]).

They cultivate rice, maize, millet, tapioca, yam, pumpkin, chilly and a verity of other edible items in their field. They cultivate for their own consumption as well as for selling purpose. They also keep some amount for future consumption by adopting traditional methods of preservation. Woman use bottle gourd pitcher known as *rau* for fetching and storing water for domestic use and bamboo tube serve the purpose of cooking vessel. This substitutes make pottery less effective in their society for its vulnerability to breakage and heavy weight than gourds and bamboos. This may be one of the reason of less distribution of pottery in Garo Hills. At Spirit Cave bamboo tubes were used for cooking food stuff (Gorman[16]). Similar tradition is also found among the Garo's as mentioned ealier. They prefer boil food with very less oil, instead of oil they prefer alkali to prepare curry now a days also. The practice of shifting cultivation is accepted as an early stage of the agricultural evolution. As this practice dates back to the earliest times, it is thus regarded as primitive and archaic and thereby it is said to have 'survived longest' (Rolwey-Conlwy[17]). Geertz summarised the distinctive features of shifting cultivation as i) it is practised on a very poor soils, ii) it represents an elementary agricultural technique which utilises no tool except the axe and the hoe. iii) it is marked by a low density of population. and, iv) It involves a low level of consumption (Geertz[18]). This type of cultivation is thus associated with traditional societies of low population density in regions of low soil fertility, such as the Amazon rainforest. Though recent theories have suggested that the system of shifting agriculture combined with hunting and gathering strategies may in fact, permit much greater population densities and a greater degree of sedentarism and varying degree of intensification of labour input than was previously believed (Found[19], Keesing & Slrathem[20]).

Bellwood[21] studied the indigenous major food plants, the cultivation system and its development in Southeast Asia and Oceania. According to him the food plants like yam, taro, breadfruit, banana, sweet potato and cereals like millet and rice were found both in their wild as well as domesticated varieties. He opined that the prehistoric cultivation system of Southeast Asia and Oceania ranged from simple swidden or shifting cultivation to intensive monocropping of irrigated field. Many societies practice both shifting and irrigation system of cultivation in combination at present day also. Moreover use of canoe, a single block of wood scooped out from inside and use for navigation is another element observed in South-east Asia, Oceania and by the present Garo population. Another instance in this regard is dry fish locally termed as *Nakham* inspite of the scarcity of fish in hilly region is a popular food item for the Garos which is also a dominating food item among various ethnic groups of Southeast Asian coastal region. From this study it is evident that there is significant similarity in the food plants, cultivation strategies and mode of navigation between the mentioned area with the Garo Hills and thus there strong arguments favouring cultural linkage of the Garo Hills with Southeast Asia. In this context the argument put forward by Bezbaruah[22] that more studies on the ethnological aspects of Garo Hills and other Northeast Indian sites keeping in comparison the Southeast Asian societies would open up new angle of vision as far as the prehistoric study of Garo Hills is concerned.

IV. IMPLEMENTS AND THEIR ETHNOARCHAEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The metal implements used by the Garo people at present to serve their daily needs including agricultural activity show characteristic affinities in their shapes, mode of use, way of hafting and nature of handling with the stone tools recovered from the five sites. To understand this similarity a brief description of the major agricultural implements are given below –

4.1. Hatchet or chopper consists of two types-

4.1.1 *Athe*: composed of two parts – blade and shaft. The blade is made of iron and shaft is of either wood or bamboo. The pointed tang of the blade is inserted into the compact end of the shaft. It has a multiple use such as felling of trees, lopping the branches of trees and sometimes weeding also (Fig1.a).

4.1.2 *Athe – mangren*: This is heavy duty tool made of iron blade and wooden or bamboo shaft (Fig1.c).

4.2. Digging stick (*matham*): It measures approximately 100 c.m. to 125 c.m. in length and 5-6 c.m. in diameter. It is made of a straight branch of wood and is very simple in construction. Both the ends are pointed and sometimes charred is used to harden these. The ends are kept pointed by frequent rubbing against exposed rocks when they become blunt from use.

4.3. Hoe (*gitchi)*: It consist of two parts – iron blade and bamboo shaft. The measurement of the blade is (20 – 23) cm, (6 - 7.5) cm and (0.2 – 0.4) cm as length, breadth and thickness respectively. The bamboo shaft is having internodes at short intervals. The length of the shaft is about (44 – 48) cm and diameter varies from (5 – 7) cm. The compact and slightly bent portion of the shaft at one end is selected for insertion of the blade. The shaft and the blade form an angle varying from 40˚ to 50˚(Fig 1.e.).

4.4. Axe (*rua*): this implement is not directly associated with shifting cultivation but the initial preparation of the plot is done by cutting the branches of big trees with this tool. It has also two parts- iron blade and bamboo

shaft. The blade is about (7 – 9) cm in length, (5- 7) cm in breadth and (1-2) cm in thickness. Length of the shaft is varies from about (44 – 48) cm. According to Roy (1980), *rua* are of different types, in eastern Garo villages it serves as carpentry tool (Fig 1.g). The *rua* of eastern part of Garo Hills and central as well as western part of Garo hills have considerable differences. The blade of eastern carpentry *rua* is elongated in size and shape, remains slightly inclined towards the shaft and the pointed part is inserted into the wooden shaft. In central and western Garo Hills *rua* stands for socketed axe of the plains. The shape and size of the chipped stone axe recovered from western Garo Hills correspond to the blade of *rua* of the eastern part of the Garo Hills. The technological proximity of the tool kit used in shiftng cultivation by the Garos of present day with that of prehistoric artifacts can be understood from the following illustration (Fig 1) -

V. FIGURES AND TABLE

Fig.1 Present implements used by the Garos and their morphological proximity with the recovered artifacts

Fig.1.a. Chopper or *Athe*

Fig. 1.b. Recovered Stone knife tool

Fig.1.c.Chopper or *athe – mangren*

Fig. 1.d. knife

Fig.1.e. Hoe or *gitchi*

Fig. 1.f. Axe

Fig.1.g. Axe or *rua*

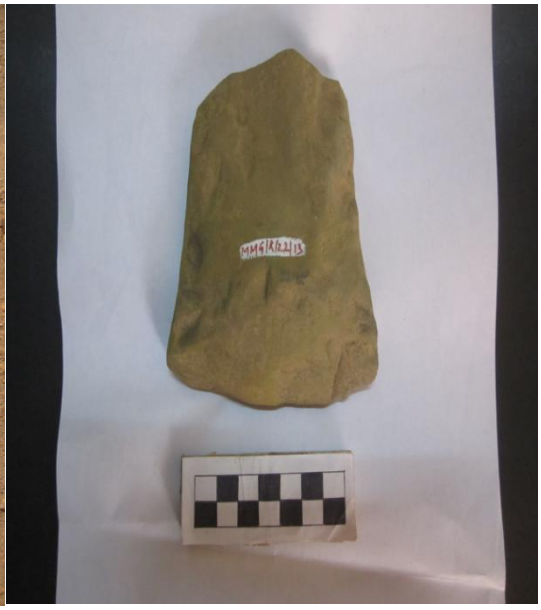

Fig. 1.h.Broad Axe

Fig.1. i. A few implements used by the Garos in shifting cultivation

Table 1: Population data of four site villages

Village	Year	Population	Household	Male	Female	Area of village	Density of population
Bibragre	2013	189	39	92	97	6 sq. km.	32.5/ sq km
	2014	229	44	121	108		39.6/ sq km
	2015	247	52	119	128		41.1/ sq km
Rongram	2013	290	44	153	137	4 sq. km.	72.5/ sq km
	2014	330	53	171	159		82.5/sq km
	2015	342	61	164	178		85.5/ sq km
Mishimagre	2013	280	37	145	135	10 sq. km.	28 /sq. km
	2014	317	46	163	154		31.8 /sq km
	2015	338	54	173	165		33.8 / sq km
Thebrongre	2013	654	109	320	334	28 sq. km.	23.3/sq km
	2014	987	120	529	458		35.2/ sq km
	2015	1182	135	593	589		42.2/ sq km

Source: Rongram Development Block, West Garo Hills.

VI. CONCLUSION

The present technology of shifting cultivation has enough evidence to confirm continuation from that of the past neolithic culture. The similarity between the metallic hoe blades used in the *jhum* operation today and the stone hoes of the past support this. The homogeneity in size and shape of the archaeological evidence in the form of lithic collection from the Garo Hills (Sharma and Roy 1980; Lal1969:8), with the iron tools of later or present population also suggest the same (Goswami 1972).

Functional relationship of artifacts from Garo Hills, specially adzes to agricultural activities during neolithic past and their indication about the economic structure of the population living during that period was studied by Roy (1981). This comparative study of the agricultural implements of neolithic period from the recovered sites of Garo hills and the ethnographic context reveals a homogeneity in function. Recipocity and cooperation is the main feature of the traditional society.

A past assemblege of material culture is nothing but an archaeological 'black box' (Ashraf 2004) that codified the activities of the people concerned (Ashraf and Roy 2012). According to him despite the more or less similar geo - cultural plane in entire Northeast India, it witness variation and continuity in cultural elements. In Garo Hills hunting played insignificant role than the other parts of Northeast India in the past and the present Garo population have also not an expertised in hunting. Ashraf opined that the various cultural bands operating at different prehistoric period (mesolithic and neolithic) were more biased towards foraging and food producing than hunting. The tool kit recovered in this study from West Garo Hills also support the opinion.

From the above discussion it is evident that the Garos of Garo Hills specially in the interior villages are still living a life very close to the nature. They adopt simple technique and tradtional method to adopt with their environment as in the past. Their present day life also not very much differ from that of their ancestors. By studying their subsistence method, settelment pattern along with their present day implements one can have an idea about the way of utilization of the prehistoric tools for differnt purposes by the makers. Because the modern implements are nothing but a replica of the past cultural elements with slight modification in their raw matrial, shape or size. Roy (1981) commented that the culture of Garo Hills is chronologically modern but economically in prehistoric stage.

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