A relationship between vulnerable adivasi garo community and local actors in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This review paper provides the historical relationship of Adivasi Garo community with local actors. For understanding this relationship, the researcher critically examines three constitutive elements such as actors, knowledge and space which help to know about policy process for Adivasi Garo people. The paper argues that some conflicts exist among rural elite, government and non-government organizations and local Garo peoples due to implementing policies that are not favourable for local Garo peoples. The paper also argues that for successfully implementing any development activities, it is very important to consult with local peoples.

INTRODUCTION

In Bangladesh, there are twenty nine indigenous groups, among them Garo is one of the largest indigenous communities of Bangladesh; comprising approximately 0.1 to 0.13 million people (Islam, 2008). They live in the north-eastern parts of Bangladesh especially in Mymensingh, Gazipur, Netrokona, Sherpur, Tangail and Jamalpur district. Garos are widely known as hilly people but they live both in hilly areas and in the plain land and there exist a lot of differences between the two groups. In fact, in Bangladesh most of the Garos are living in the plain land villages. Hilly Garos prefer to call themselves Achik and plain land Garos prefer to call themselves Mendi. Modhupur is the place where both plain land Garo and forest surrounded raised land Garo lives in (Islam, 2008). There is no exact figure about the total number of Garo population in each village. In some villages the range lies between one thousand to two thousands. The people in most of the villages are facing several problems which have the impact on their livelihood as well as on the forest where they are living. In some villages there are no well roads and infrastructure facilities. Even there is no school or electricity. Population is also increasing day by day due to their ignorance and creates pressure on their family. As they are minority group, they are facing different kinds of threats like human rights, poverty, land ownership etc. Several government bodies and private sectors are working for reducing their poverty as well as for improving their livelihood pattern and also for preserving forest. But sometimes their exist conflicts with the forest department and local Garos people due to misunderstanding among them. The government bodies and other development organization implement some development activities without considering the local people needs or without active participation of local people and ultimately which creates some problems. The indigenous peoples are thinking that their rights are violated by the law and by implementing different programs. Also the government is not giving legal land ownership right which is claimed by many Garos living in the forests. As a result, many development projects have already failed due to conflict relationship between them. Here it has been tried to focus why conflict exist between local actors and Garo community. Due to conflict relationship, sometimes they are forced to migrate to other places or city for maintaining their livelihood pattern. Garos are the good care taker of the forest and they know how to survive in the forest. It is very important to improve their livelihood pattern by considering their needs and by making good relationship between them and actors so that natural resource will not be degraded and sustainable development will be achieved.

Actors- knowledge-space, these three constitutive elements are very important for knowing about policy process. These elements are interlinked and have influence on each other. The relationship between these three elements helps us to understand about policy, how they view themselves (local actors and Garo...
people) and their roles in it, where their knowledge comes from and what spaces they (actors) interact in. Here, some conflicts (space) exist among rural elite, government and non-government organizations and local Garo people (actors) due to implementing some development activities which are not favorable for local Garo people. The government is implementing some policy (knowledge) for protecting the forest and also for changing Garo people’s livelihood pattern. On the other hand, Garo peoples are thinking that their traditional livelihood pattern is destroying and getting less access from forest and outside than before due to implementing government policy (knowledge of Garo people). Moreover, the interaction between these three elements helps us to intervene in policy process and investigating the potential for change. This type of interaction does not take place in a vacuum. It happens through with history, culture, political economy, politics and above all, power relations.

The objective of the present study is to investigate the relationship of Adivasi Garo people with their local actors. This relationship in this study has explained through three elements i.e. actor, knowledge and space that would help the Garos to preserve their traditional cultures and establish their rights. Further, this study would help the policy makers to develop better policy options for Garo community.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper is based on reviewing some articles related to vulnerable Adivasi Garo people. For preparing this paper, at first the researcher selected one title on “Relationship between vulnerable Adivasi Garo community and local actors in Bangladesh” on which review has been conducted. After selecting title, the researcher searched some articles from google scholar which are relevant with specific title and critically implement three constitutive concepts “Actor-Knowledge-Space” in selected articles for making better policy process among Adivasi Garo people.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Origin of the Garo People

The Garo were once a nomadic tribe of the Bodo group of Mongoloids people and are said to have an ancestral relationship with China. According to some anthropologists, hundreds of years ago, the Garos started settling in the inaccessible forest areas of the Garo hills and the tribe permanently got the name Garo, but later many Garos have abandoned their houses there and started to live in forest zones in downhill (plain land) areas (Bal, 1999).

There is very little information about the history and origin of the Garo. Garos were mostly unknown to the outside world before the British colonial period and even at the early period of the British rule. While examining the name and origin of the Garos, pioneer Garo scholar Major Playfair says the ‘Gara’ or ‘Ganching’ sub-tribe first received their appellation of ‘Gara’ and that name was extended to all the inhabitants of the hills and it become corrupted from ‘Gara’ to ‘Garo’ (Playfair, 1909). While talking about the Garo origin Ellen Bal says, despite many differences, which exist between many Garo sub-groups, Garos believe they all have a common origin and always belonged to the same people (Bal, 1999).

According to Garo mythology, thousands of years ago the Garo migrated from Tibet to the Indian sub-continent and set up their inhabitation in the place that we call now Kuchbihar. While in Kuchbihar, Garos food habits consisted of meat, especially human meat, for meat they were very offensive to plain land inhabitants. The Kuchbihar king, having failed to stop them from their habit of taking meat and did not allow Garos to stay in his kingdom and oppressed them. Later, they moved from Kuchbihar to Kamrup, the king of Kamrup proposed to marry a nice Garo girl named ‘Jugi Cilchi’ which the Garo refused. So the army of the king attacked them and then they went and took shelter in Garo hill of Meghalaya. Later on, they scattered to the Bangladesh part (Islam, 2008).

According to Garo legend over the course of time, Garos moved to areas nowadays called Bangladesh and established the Garo Kingdom in Monsing by the Garo chief Monsing and present days Mymensing is only a derivation and corrupted name of Garo Kingdom Monsing. At that time, the Garo people were identified as ‘Ghaura’ by the Zaminder. By the course of time, this ‘Ghaura’ word has taken the position Garo (Bal, 1999).

The Adivasi Garo People, Their Farming Activities and Knowledge about Culture

The term “Adivasi” is referred for those indigenous communities who have distinctive social and cultural practices, language and customs that are commonly separated from Bengali people. The Garos are one of the well-known ethnic communities of the Indian sub-continent. There present population around the world is approximately half a million; most of them are living in northeastern India mainly in Garo hills (Chowdhury, 2007). Nowadays, about one-fifth of the total population of the Garos lives in Bangladesh which constitute less than one percent of the total population of the country. In Bangladesh, the number of Garo population was much higher before than present. Over the course of time and for different reasons and difficulties, many Garos left Bangladesh and migrate to India such as for partition in 1947, communal violence in 1964 and lastly in the liberation war of 1971 and many of them did not come back to Bangladesh (Islam, 2008).

Garo can easily be distinguished from Bengali by their looks and they resemble south-east Asians such as people from Thailand or from Philippines. Almost all the Garos are bi-lingual because they have to speak Bengali in addition to their Garo language (Bal,1999). Their own language is called Achchik Katha. The traditional Garo religion is Sangsharke but now this religion is almost abolished and practiced by few Garo people. Most of the Garos have been converted to Christianity and a few of them into Islam (Bal,1999). Actually, Garos conversion to Christianity started in the early nineteenth century when American Baptists missionaries had established their mission at the Garo hill and then some other missionaries started to work in the Garo communities (Islam, 2008). More than ninety percent of the Garos proudly consider themselves as Christian. Christianity has a significant influence upon the Garos and a part from missionary activities, they established schools, hospitals and under takes many welfare activities. With the influence of Christianity, they shifted from their old beliefs of Sangsharke but they attend mostly their basic traditions and social customs (Bal, 1999). However, the Garos are one of the distinguished matriarchal communities in the Indian sub-continent. This matrilineality shows that every Garo belongs to his or her mother’s lineage and takes the mothers family name. According to the Garo inheritance system, men do not inherit property from the parent’s side; all go to the women (Chowdhury, 2007). Their residence pattern is also matrilocal that implies that husband moves to the wives house after marriage. But the main authority of the family or community is traced through male. Women were involved both in households and in outside activities but recently they are mostly absent in the main income generating activities such as ploughing and carpentry activities. Women contribute to collecting firewood, cleaning up farm, cutting, weaving, plantation etc. (Islam, 2008).

The houses of the villages are clustered in such a way that one
does not need more than five minutes to move from one house to another. Most of the houses of Garos are made of mud and tin roofs but those who are economically solvent have brick built houses. The main livelihood activities of Garos are agricultural practices in the plain land, homestead and in the forest land. About Ninety percent of the Garo people are directly involved with farming. Once they were accustomed to Jhum farming, but now they follow plough cultivation in plain land by transplanting rice. But they managed their homesteads and forest land as agroforestry system namely agrosilvopastoral system and agrisilvicultural system and woodlot plantation respectively.

From the ancient time Garo tribe in Bangladesh used homestead agroforestry system. They follow agrosilvipastoral system in their homesteads. Seed, seedling and vegetative propagules are used generally to generate the plant in their homestead. They broadcast or put the seeds in a certain place and watering. After germination watering continued and keeps it free from goat and other cattle. Sometimes they throw the seeds after consuming the fruits. Some trees are grown from vegetative propagules for budding grafting and cutting. Sometimes they collect vegetative propagules which produced from root such as Teak (Tectona grandis), Kachu (Colacasia esculenta) and Kola (Musa spp.) etc. (Rahman & Fardusi, 2012).

As they are agriculture based, there are many festivals among the Garos which are connected with various phases of cultivation and harvesting. Most of the festivals are involved with sacrifice. In the earlier days, they had some cruel beliefs and practices such as human head hunting and others which have now stopped (Chowdhury, 2007). For protecting them against spirits, Garos performs religious rituals in the form of festivals under different names while sowing seeds and harvesting crops. Wangala, famous festival for them comes when most of the harvest is well finished; at the end of the rain and before the beginning of the cold season. On the occasion of the Wangala many people buy new clothes and repair or decorate their houses. For the meat of the feast, people must buy a cow from the village market usually several households cooperate in buying a cow. On the beginning day of the Wangala people slaughter the cows and pigs, and in the evening people from all walks gather in a place mostly in Banepani Nokpanthe to enjoy the food. In this Wangala feast, usually young people are involved in serving beer, rice and meat curry and following the feast there are festivals of dances. At the end of festival, they burn some special things and hope that the following years harvest will be fine (Islam, 2008).

In the past, Garos used to put on the barns of trees. The common dress of modern day Garo males is Jana or Nengti, although the Garo people of a relatively higher status wear short skirts woven by them. The women cover their breast by knotting a piece of short cloth on their backs. The male also wear gamcha or dhuti and many women put on sharis, skirts and trousers. Along with dress, they use different types of ornaments. During festivals, both men and women wear bangles, jewellery and head dresses which are designed with beads stuck on features on hornbill. They ate all animals except cat which is their totem. But now their food habits have changed a little bit. Their favorite dish is dried fish, rice, pork, rabbits, beef, chicken which they produce themselves. Chu (rice beer) is their most favorite food items. Without drinking chu any kind of functions remain incomplete (Muhammed et. al., 2009).

Few years ago, Garos were used to plough for cultivation and grew wet rice in their field like other Bengali neighbours. But now many Garos are using modern cultivation methods with machinery plough. The forest surrounded raised land Garo, some decades ago, were accustomed with shifting cultivation but due to government pressure for not using Jhbm cultivation, they now also switched to plough cultivation and it has reduced the women activities in the household and domestic areas. The reason is that in Jhum cultivation, women were directly involved and associated with farming. When the Garos were practicing Jhum cultivation, the land was owned and controlled communally. The transfer of wet rice cultivation led to privatization. In both high and plain land villages, wet rice cultivation is practiced now but more recently pineapple has become a very popular crop. In some villages, farmers are using power tiller also (Islam, 2008).

Factors Influencing on Changing Garo Culture

Garos overall lifestyle and culture are changing with the influence of some internal and external forces. While the Garo society is changing then they are discarding many things from their old culture and adapting new cultures from other cultures. It is evident that there are many factors responsible for Garos cultural changes such as Christianity, formal education, government policy, integration with the modernized system and economy, modern agricultural equipment, occupational diversification, Bengali settlement, changes in livelihood, economic insecurity, migration to city for work and income, infrastructural development such as roads and highways, influence of national culture, influence of the media, radio, TV, film, etc (Islam, 2008).

The traditional way of life and cultural practices that has been practiced by the indigenous people for centuries, has enriched the cultural and social diversity of the region. But now the traditional Garo society is changing due to the influence of Bengali communities and other socioeconomic causes. The most important challenge that is facing by the Garo people is the statutory rights to land. They live in and around the central deciduous Sal forest which is state forest. It implies that they are the illegal occupants of the forest. The existing law on Vested Enemy Property Act does not recognize their entitlements to the land or land ownership. They claim that they are the aborigines of the area and regard themselves as the traditional or legitimate owners of that forest land. Moreover, now they are suffering from several threats from the side of State Forest Department policies and programs on eco-park establishment (eco-park with concrete wall in its all boundary which will limit the accessibility of the Garo people to their dwelling houses inside the forest). They are also facing threats from participatory social forestry programs because rural elite and non Garo people become the major beneficiaries of this program (Muhammed et. al., 2011).

Role of Actors in Changing Garo Culture

Actors are all those people located up and down the vertical slice in government or outside of it and play an important role in making policy. Here the influence of government and non-government organizations, pressure group, local level Garo people and others have impact on changing Garos livelihood pattern either positively or negatively. Each actor has their own interests and opinions and power, embedded in institutional and political cultures. Each belongs to one or more networks which cut across different spaces in the policy process. In 1982, the Bangladesh government announced that a national park would be built on 40 square miles of the Modhupur forest. This would remove thousands of indigenous people from their homestead but due to successful opposition, the project was stopped (Islam, 2008). Later, in 2003, the forest department began construction of a 3 meter high wall around 1,215ha of the Modhupur forest. The wall of eco-park was to be constructed in a way that would block the Garos main access routes to areas within the eco-park. It is thought by the forestry professionals and other experts that forest department did it intentionally because some Garos people contribute to forest destruction. The Garo people strongly
protested against the eco-park construction and as a consequence the forest department halted the construction.

In 1980, a participatory forestry program started in the Sal forests with the main objectives of involving grass root level local landless people under a benefit of sharing arrangement (Muhammed et al., 2011). This program can be considered a financial success as a strategy for plantation development. But it seriously failed because beneficiary selection and gender equity has not been followed correctly. The true landless and poor people especially the Garo people are not selected. Instead, local elite and groups with strong political support are selecting as beneficiary group of the program. As a result, social forestry in the Sal forest has failed to bring any positive change to the Garo community.

Most of the government did very little to preserve Garos rights and interests but during the Pakistan period, the government policy was very harsh. At that time, lots of indigenous land was acquired by the Pakistan government for some government project without compensating and negotiating with them. In another way, it has continued at the beginning of the independence of Bangladesh. During post-independence, there was not given much attention to indigenous people’s right, although many of them participated in liberation war in 1971 (Islam, 2008). In the past, about 90 to 95% of the Garo people had their own land. But now only 10 to 12% of families have some form of land ownership, others 90% of the Garo are landless, even though they are still indirectly involved in agriculture (sharecroppers or day labour) (Muhammed et al., 2011). For this reason they are forced to change their profession and migrate to urban areas in order to get a more secured life.

At present there are many NGOs are working in the Garos areas of Modhipur for changing the present situation of the people such as Gramene Bank, BRAC, ASA, NSDP, CCDB and others. Christian NGOs such as Caritas, World Vision, YMCA, WCA are active in the Garo villages of Modhipur. These NGOs run a number of awareness building and development programs for the villagers. There activities not only providing jobs for many Garos, instead of this they provide scholarship for the students and others. Besides, in Modhipur, NGOs have launched many programs such as micro credit schemes, adult literacy, family planning, sanitation, immunization, crop diversification and income generating training and programs (Islam, 2008). All these activities contributing a lot for the changing Garos traditional lifestyle and improve their present situation. Continuous contact with the modern society and majority culture, the traditional culture of the Garos is changing and they are adopting many new traits from other culture.

**Evaluation of Government Policy**

Garo have different ethnic origin and they are citizens of Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, every upazilla has different government departments for supporting the citizens, such as in education, health, agriculture, police, livestock, sanitation, social welfare, youth development, women affairs, rural development and cooperatives, Anser-VDP (village defence police), engineering etc. Every upazilla is divided into unions and union with wards which is composed of two or three villages. All of these government departments are mobilizing various development activities in each and every village. But as they are minority group to the government of Bangladesh, Garo culture is inferior and less important. Without recognizing Garos ethnic origin, the government implemented all the activities for changing Garos livelihood pattern and it has some positive or negative impact on Garos livelihood pattern (Islam, 2008).

Land entitlement is one of the major problems regarding the Sal forests and the Garo people living in the area. Land tenure issues have a big history starting from the Mughal period (16th-18th centuries) to present today. In order to help mitigate this conflict, the Bengal Private Forest Act was enacted in 1945 (Muhammed et al., 2011). The aim of the act was to abolish permanent settlements and contractually join tenants with the government so that all types of payments and interests were acquired by the state. But with this act, the owners of the private forests became even less trusting of the government and they began to cut down trees and clear the forest even more extensively. The government had spent a lot of time bringing this law into action, so the zamindars (feudal land lords) took advantage of this time and continued felling trees and allowing individuals to settle on their forest lands. To accelerate the land acquisition process, the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act, 1950 was introduced to abolish private ownership and sub-letting of land. After the declaration of the act, most of the owners of the private forest and the zamindars started to offer settlement of land within and outside their forest using back-dated papers. After the independence of Bangladesh, the government acquired the Sal forest and declared them as protected forest. This multiple ownership existed for the same piece of land with this illegal settlement and ownership; Garo people became a marginalized ethnic minority on their own land (Muhammed et al., 2011). From the government side they acquired Sal forests only for preserving some tree species and for protecting forest because according their opinion some Garos people destroying forest every day. If the forest is under the control of the government, it is not easy to destroy forest by local peoples.

**Actors, Knowledge and Space in Making Policy**

Different actors have occupied different knowledge. The local Garo people, they have their own practical knowledge and experience about their culture and about how to survive in the forest by considering forests. On the other hand, experts and other development organizations are implementing their development activities by using their past observations (knowledge) without consultation with the local Garo people. Moreover, there exists some knowledge gap between actors and local level Garo people and it creates conflict relationships among them. The participatory forestry program has failed to select actual beneficiaries from the Garo people. It will be successful if actors can intervene in that spaces by selecting actual beneficiaries from root level Garo people and create new opportunities and relationships among Garo people. Space is very important tool for exploring the role of the local people by involving themselves in changing their livelihood pattern and in making policy.

On the other hand, considering the Modhipur forest as state forest and establishment of eco-park by the forest department creates conflict relationship between government organization and Garo people. From government opinion, they have seen through their past experience that if the forest is under the control of private ownership, some private owners will cut forest trees only for their own purposes and it has negative impact on sustainability. But local Garo peoples opinion, as they have no land ownership and less access to benefit from forest, they are forced to migrate to other places or city for secured life. Actually, due to lack of co-constructed knowledge by the Garo people and forest department, there exist conflict. Civil society and others (social actors) can intervene in that space so that both will be benefited in future and natural forest will be preserved.

Recently inside the forest also appearing large scale banana plantation by the rural powerful group and it reduced the size of the forest and destroy the traditional life of Garo people. There is the possibility to intervene by the local people or other organization so that banana plantation inside the forest can be controlled and Garo people will be benefited. The local Garo people, they are accepting many development activities for changing their livelihood pattern but some development activities have failed only due to lack of active participation by
the local people while making policy and implementing that policy.

CONCLUSION

Garos are one of the most vulnerable indigenous groups in Bangladesh who are still trying to get constitutional recognition after more than four decades of independence of Bangladesh. For preserving their unique culture and traditions, they are facing a lot of socio-political and economic challenges. The ban on shifting cultivation in the 1950, establishment of national park, improper implementation of participatory social forestry, large scale banana plantation within the Sal forests by the rural elite reduced the size of the forest and have uprooted the traditional life of the Garo people. In other words, non-supportive actions of government have not only depleted the Modhupur Sal forest, but also severely affected the life of the Garos and other neighboring peoples whose livelihood depend on the forest. There are many Garo people who only depend on the forest for meeting their family needs and play an important role for protecting forest. Not only Garos but also other Bengali neighbor using Sal forest as their income source.

There are many government and non-government organization who are trying to change the livelihood pattern of Garo people and provide benefits and supports to them. But some development programs have already failed due to lack of active participation of Garo people or without any consultation with the local people. On the other hand, non-supportive government policy about their legal land rights, also one of the major threats of Garo people. Like other indigenous groups in Bangladesh, they face constant struggle to establish their identity and land rights.

It is very important for the government to initiate policies and programs to improve the rights of Garos in Bangladesh. With this, it is also very important for the government to review and revise national forest policies and laws that adversely affect the rights and lives of the Garo people e.g, eco-park, land ownership etc. Civil society, mass media, international human rights organizations, researchers and development activists need to come forward and inform policy makers and the government about the adverse situation of the Garo people.

Several research programs should be conducted to preserve Garos traditional culture which will be helpful to protect forest also. Civil society can play an important role against discrimination and injustice so that the Garo people can gain the respect and rights they deserve as a recognized indigenous population of the Sal forests. Before implementing any development activity it is also very important to consult with local people.

Indigenous people historically have an inherently synergistic relationship with nature. They know more how to survive in forest and how to protect forest because they have practical experience. There are many developed countries that protect forest by considering the local people needs. The application of traditional knowledge by the indigenous forest inhabitants with new tools and technique can be helpful to implement successful management practices. Societies should work with and empower them in an effort to learn better ways to manage forest.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of this paper.

REFERENCES


