

Dadenggre (Civil) Sub-Division

*People, their Socio-Economic Life
and Culture*



Essay by

Dr. Milton S Sangma

Dadenggre: People, their socio-economic life and culture

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Dadenggre Civil Sub-division has been chiseled out of the West Garo Hills District of Meghalaya as a sub-administrative unit under the same district in 1982 in line with the policy of the Government of Meghalaya to take the administration to the doorsteps of the common people living in the most interior places of the state. Its other purpose is to make administration effective at the grassroots level and to deliver the goods direct to them from close quarters.

The Dadenggre Sub-division is located at the extreme north-western part of the Meghalaya state and borders with Goalpara and Dhubri districts at its north and west respectively and with other parts of West Garo Hills district in the east and south. The sub-division is characterized by two distinct topographical areas namely the hills and the plains and the inhabitants also are composed of two distinct types of people, that is, the Garos who inhabit the hilly regions and the Koches, Hajongs, Rabhas, Boros, Mans, Bengalis, Biharis and the Bengali-speaking Muslims who inhabit the Plain areas. Of late, quite a sizable chunk of Garo and Hajong refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan were settled in the Plain areas. Thus the sub-division is a place for diverse racial characteristics and polyglot population societies.

The A.beng Garos

Of the diverse communities that made up the population of Dadenggre Sub-Division, the A.beng Garos who call themselves A'chik meaning Hill or Hillmen or Mande or Man or A'chik Mande or Hillman form the major population. Culturally and dialectically, the Garos can be divided into eleven sub-divisions, namely, the A'we, Chisak, Matchi, Matabeng or Matangchi, Atong, Gara-Ganching, Ruga, Chibok, Megam, Dual and A.beng. The A.bengs are the most numerous of all the dialectical groups and occupy the whole hills west of Tura hill ranges. The Garos of Dadenggre Sub-division are all A.beng Garos except the rehabilitated Garos of Bangladesh.

There is a legend as to how the present day A.bengs or Am.bengs as they are also called, have come to occupy the hill areas where they are found today and where they began cotton cultivation extensively till few years ago. Legend has it that in time immemorial (B.C. time) when dissensions arose amongst the Garos of Habraghat Kingdom (Habraghat corresponds to

present-day South Goalpara district lying between Brahmaputra and Garo Hills) where Garo king Abra or Habra reigned, a section of them under the leadership of Abong-Noga and his wife Silme Doka meandered up the hills in search of a permanent home and settled at Nokrek the highest peak in Garo Hills where they soon became rich and powerful. Puissant with wealth and power, Abong-Noga ordered his subjects to settle in different professions to them which became hereditary. Thus the Duals were assigned to trap fish, crabs, rear parrots and grow rattan plants. Likewise, the Matchis were ordered to grow millets and raise pigs, Atongs to carve dug-out boats, Chisaks to prepare bamboo-shoots and domesticate cows and the Am.bengs to take up jhumming, plant rice and cotton. Thus in the past, Am.beng Garos of Dadenggre and outside produced the best quality cotton which found profitable markets in Bengal and in the textile factories of Lancashire, Birmingham etc. in the UK.

The Am.beng Garos were considered in the past as the most uncivilized of the Garo dialectical groups. They were looked down upon for their rough behaviour, utter disregard for hygienic living and sudden outbursts of temper, even for a trivial matter. Even their dialect which is one of the dialects of the Garo language represented the most rustic form of expressions. That is why, when a child talks gibberishly and behaves unreasonably, elders used to scold him as “Am.beng”. However, they have other finer qualities. When they drink their Chee or liquor made out of rice or millet, they are merry to the highest pitch. Birth of a child, a marriage, opening of markets, sitting of a council, almost every event served as an occasion for feasting and an excuse for drinking. Wild as these people might appear, their normal temper was not ferocious. They were humane and interesting, grateful for kindness and faithful to their promises. That is why Luit Dalton remarked “They possess that pearl of great price, so rare among Eastern races, a love of truth.”

They have the same clans as other Garos do but they have few sub-clans called Machong which others do not have. Some of the Machongs like Chambugong, Agitok are concentrated in the A.beng areas which are not popularly found in other areas.

The simplest pattern of Am.beng family consists of husband, wife and children. The non-convert Am.bengs have more than one wife but they all form one compact family. The family of the heiress, will, however, have her parents and other brothers and maternal uncles who are still not married.

They build their houses on Piles and mostly on slopes of the hills as is still found in Sadolpara village. One end of the house is founded on the ground and the other end is about 10 ft to 15 ft high. The design of internal arrangement of the house is the same and the roof is covered with thatch. The walls and floor of the house are made out of split bamboos. They have very limited furniture. The bamboo floor serves for almost all purposes. Some have wooden stools hewn by themselves while some make stools of cane or bamboo which are offered to the guests.

Their principal weapon is a two-edged sword called Milam. Its handle blade is attached with cow tails, though originally it was attached with yak's tails which are said to have been brought from Tibet. Other weapons are shields made out of wood called Sepi and Danil made of cow skin or bear skin. Bows and arrows, spears, choppers of various sizes and shapes are formidable weapons.

The staple cereal food is rice. They also eat millet, maize, Jobs tears and tapioca. In times of scarcity, they take to yams and other jungle roots. They are very liberal in their food habits like any other Garos. They rear cows, goats, pigs, fowl, ducks and relish their meat greatly. Some of them are great hunters and relish the meat of their prey such as deer, bison, wild pigs, and birds. They also eat eggs of lizards, fish, crab, eels but dry fish is their favourite item of curry cooked with potash prepared by burning dried stems of plantains. Their Jhum fields and the forests supplied them with a number of vegetables and roots for their curry but bamboo shoots are esteemed as delicacy.

In their old traditional society, both men and women wore garments covering only the lower part leaving the upper part bare. They wove the clothes themselves in their looms. With the opening of the markets at the foot of the hills in Medieval ages, they depended on the articles sold there. Both men and women also wore turbans with dark blue or white of cloths sold in the weekly markets. They also made ornaments made of brass rings in their ears, bangles, necklaces, waist band of rows of conch shells and head ornaments. They are also fond of dances which have various kinds for various festivals. The greatest varieties of dance forms are found in the Wangala or Post-Harvest Festival. Various kinds of drums and musical instruments were manufactured by them, such as, Dama, Kram, Nagra,

trumpets called Adil and Singga and different flutes, gong metals, cymbals etc.

Nokpante or Bachelor's Dormitory

In the past, every Garo village had at least one Bachelor's house where all the unmarried males slept at night and learnt disciplines, songs, music, dances arts and crafts. They also acted as Village Guards and formed the main body of fighting force in blood-feuds. No girl was allowed to enter into the Nokpante. However, with introduction of schools and Christianity, Nokpante culture was only a thing of the past.

The Ambeng Society

Like any other Garo, the Ambengs also follow the matrilineal system, in which, both inheritance of property and lineage go through the female line. All property is inherited by a woman and her husband becomes a manager of the property only, having no authority to dispose them off without the consent of his wife and her male relations called Chras whether ancestral or self-acquired property.

Engagement

Proposal for marriage must come from the girl's side and never from boy's side. When a girl falls in love with a boy, she informs one of her relations who in turn informs her parents and they, together with their uncles and brothers negotiate with the relations of the boy. If everything goes well, marriage is fixed.

Marriage

Marriage is regulated by two important laws viz. Exogamy and A.kim. Laws of exogamy means that marriage is prohibited within the clan. Thus Sangma cannot marry Sangma, a Marak not a Marak and so on. If such a marriage takes place, it is called Bakdong or marrying one's own relation. These days Bakdong marriage has become common and is allowed by the church and society as well. However marriage within the sub-clan or Ma.chong is not allowed and such a marriage is called Ma.dong or marrying one's own mother. Such a combination is not allowed both by the society and the church. If there is any such case, it is looked down upon by the society.

Divorce

It is permitted on incompatibility of the couple, when one party is guilty of adultery and when one of them proves to be sterile.

Adoption

Adoption is practiced when the couple has no daughter or when the heiress quarrels with her parents and runs away. The adopted children enjoy the same status as the real children.

Whatever had been stated above is mostly the case of the traditional society. Rapid changes are taking place in the Am.beng society due to developmental works, education and Christianity and creation of the Dadenggre Civil Sub-division has accelerated the process of change.

The Plains portions of the sub-division are inhabited by a number of communities, some of who are recognized as Scheduled tribes while some are from the general population.

The Koches

The Koches of Meghalaya are recognized as Scheduled Tribe but not as Rajbanshis. The Koches of West Garo Hills district and of Dadenggiri Sub-division trace their relationship with the great Koch king Nar Narayan (1540-1584) and his brother and Commander-in-Chief Chilarai. In fact, the Koches were spread over mainly in the lower Assam, North Bengal and Bangladesh and as such, the Koches of Dadenggre Sub-division are a part and parcel of the same Koch tribe. It was because the Koches or Rajbanshis of the Brahmaputra Valley and North Bengal are most exposed to outside influences. They are more advanced in Hinduization and education than their counterparts in Garo Hills. The Koches in Garo Hills having lived in the out-of-the-way places at the foot of Garo Hills lagged behind the other Koches / Rajbanshis in education and culture and appear to possess more tribal characteristics.

The Koches of Garo Hills have seven endogamous groups, namely, Wanang, Harigaiya, Satpari, Chapra or Dasgaiya, Tintikiya, Banai and Sankar Koch. These seven clans and groups settled in different areas of the Plains Mauzas

of Garo Hills. The Wanang settled on the northern-most of the Koch settlements between Phulbari and Garobadha in Mauza No. 6 and 7; Harigaiya and Satpari in the southern part of Mauza No 7 and western part of Mauza No 10, Chapra in further south between Garobadha and Dalu; Tintiki and Banai on the southern borders including Mymensingh of Bangladesh and Sankar Koch in the east and west of Garobadha only. Under every endogamous group, there exists some exogamous Septs called Nikini. The Nikinis are numerous and new ones seem to be still emerging from the original 18 nikinis.

The spatial groups of the Koches are matrilineal and strictly exogamous. They cannot marry within the Sept of their mother's side. The Nikinis or Septs have various functions, such as, regulation of marriages, responsibility for looking after the poor members of the clan, orphans, widows etc.

Marriage

There are two types of Koch marriage viz. Bia and Hadidabaiya. Bia is the Sanskrit origin which means marriage while Hadidabaiya means breaking of matrilineal offence. According to Koch custom, there cannot be any relationship between a boy and girl unless they are married. If anybody violates this custom, he commits an offence and is liable for ostracism. But, in order to save themselves from ignominy, the parents of the girl summon the villagers and take their approval for Hadidabaiya marriage and as such kind of marriages are more common among Koches of Garo Hills.

Though the Koches are matrilineal and matriarchal, there is no hard and fast rule that the boy should go to his in-laws' house after marriage. Re-marriage is allowed among the widows and widowers.

Inheritance

The Koches of Garo Hills are matriarchal as it is the daughters who inherit. However, the Hindu Succession Act 1956 greatly influenced the inheritance pattern of the Koches and now the sons also inherit the self-acquired property of his father but not the ancestral property.

Religion

The Koch religion centres around spirit worship which is generally called Animism. Their great god is Rishi and his consort is Jago. They also worship Mahadeva. The worship of Hindu deities such as Kali, Durga, Saraswati is of comparatively recent origin among the Koches but Kamakhya Puja seems to be quite old. They also worship other deities and have their own priests to conduct the pujas.

The Hajongs

The Hajongs are one of the tribal communities who inhabit the Plains areas of Dadengre Sub-division. They claim to have come from Hajo area of present Nalbari district of Assam and have migrated to Borohazari and other areas of Garo Hills. They are a branch of the Bodo group of people.

Hajong House

They live in a cluster of houses called Para (village). Their houses are made of wood, bamboo, reeds and thatch. But these days well-off people live in Assam type and RCC buildings.

Occupation

About 80 % of the Hajongs are still farmers, while some of them have taken up white collar jobs. They take to plough cultivation and not shifting cultivation. They mainly cultivate rice which is their staple food.

Social life

The Hajongs follow the patrilineal system of kinship and inheritance. Family is the smallest unit of society and the senior most male member is the head of the family. The system of Gotra (paternal relation) is adopted during the process Hinduization. Prior to the adoption of the Gotra, they had matrilineal clan system known as Niknis. Marriages within Niknis were prohibited. There were several Niknis among them. However it is no longer in use today. Similarly earlier they were divided into several endogamous groups which are no longer observed these days.

Adoption

Adoption is legal in their society. The adopted son or daughter has the same rights and privileges as the real children but they have to perform all the rituals.

Religion

All the Hajongs are Hindu by religion except very few who have embraced Christianity. But social relations are cut off with those Christian converts. They became Hindus in the distant past and have been following Hindu rights and rituals with great fervour. It may however be presumed that they were tribals and tribal culture, customs and beliefs were observed by them in ancient time.

Marriage

Hajong are endogamous in their practice of marriage. Marriage with the neighbouring non-Hinduized people are not welcome. They recognize marriages within the Hindu caste hierarchy.

Marriage is usually negotiated by the parents through a mediator known as Jahu. Marriage is prohibited between close maternal and paternal kins. Polyandry is rarely practiced but polygamy is allowed. Widows are allowed to re-marry.

Dialect

The Hajong dialect is badly distorted and presently it is an admixture of Bengali and Assamese languages called 'Jharua' dialect. Earlier the dialect had no written word but now active work is on to revive the language by publishing periodicals, books of poems, short stories etc. by the Hajong Language Publication Committee and the Hajong Sahitya Sabha.

The Rabhas

The Rabhas are one of the major tribes inhabiting the Plain belts of Dadenggre Sub-division who have been recognized as a Scheduled Tribe. There are four sections of the Rabhas who inhabit Garo Hills viz. Pati,

Dahori, Rangdani and Maitori Rabhas. Paham, the largest Rabha village in West Garo Hills is inhabited by the Maitori section of the Rabhas.

Material Culture

In material culture, the Rabhas do not show much difference from their Hindu and Muslim neighbours. Their villages are situated in high ground near their wet paddy fields. In the villages, houses are huddled together in a disorderly manner. However, in some Rongdani Rabha villages most of the houses are built around a common courtyard, similar to the traditional Garo villages. A lean shade is constructed alongside the house where the women weave in looms.

Their main item of food is rice with a curry of vegetables. Fresh fish are caught and eaten. Pork, mutton, venison, eggs, dry fish, milk etc supplement their diet. They also prepare varieties of liquor for different occasions.

Occupation

Majority of them are agriculturists, though a few of the educated group have taken up white-collar jobs.

Social life

The Rabha family consists of the parents, unmarried and married children. They marry when they consider themselves fit for independent management of households. The male member is the head of the family and they are patriarchal. But some of the Rongdani, Maitori and Dahori Rabhas have matrilineal clans. Widow remarriage is common but divorce is rare. Polygamy is allowed but polyandry is not allowed. Though inheritance is usually in the female line, it is often found that daughters are also given some share in the property.

Religion

Though earlier they were animists, almost all of them have been hinduized and are now in different degrees of Hinduization. A few of them have embraced Christian religion.

The Mans

The Mans occupy the Plain belt areas of Dadenggre Sub-division with a population of about one thousand people. In Assamese, the word “Man” means “Burmese migrants” and it is believed that they came along with the Burmese invading army into Assam in the beginning of the 19th century and were later recruited by David Scott as sepoys to fight the Am.beng Garos who now and then raided the plain villages in the second decade of the 19th century. After the Garos had been subjugated and Garo Hills annexed, their services were no longer required and so these Burmese sepoys who are called as Mans have settled down in different places of the present plains of Dadenggre Sub-division by inter-marrying with the local women like the Rabhas, Boros, Koch, Hajong, Garo etc. Their main village is Shyamnagar and in Phulbari areas extending as far as Singimari.

Culture

Their language is a broken Assamese language and they consider themselves more akin to the Assamese. Their religion is Buddhist and is supposed to have its own place of worship. However, Mans who are married to Hindu women are gravitating towards the Hindu culture, whereas those who are married to the Garo women are bending towards Christianity.

Originally they were known to be great fighters and as great hunters but later reduced to being mere agriculturists and live like any other tribe.

The Bengalis

Most of the Hindu Bengalis found in the plain areas of Dadenggre Sub-division hail from Sylhet and Mymensingh of present Bangladesh. During the Moghul period some of them were in contact with the Garos of the border areas through trade of essential commodities like salt, rice, kerosene, garments etc. They were then employed by the Zamindars of Bijni, Mechpara and Gauripur to cultivate the marshy lands and re-settled some of them. When the British came, more of them were brought as labourers and traders in the weekly markets. Culturally and linguistically, these Bengalis are no different from Bengalis of other places.

The Muslims

The Muslims are who found in the plain portions of Dadenggre administrative unit were mainly from the present Bangladesh where Dhaka was the eastern-most outpost of the Moghul Empire. The successive invasions of the Muslims against the Ahoms left behind a sprinkling of Muslim population at the Plain foothills of Garo Hills. Later on, they were also drawn into these areas as they found that there were lots of virgin soil while some of them came as petty traders and labourers.

In culture and language, the Muslims of these places are not much different from those Muslims of Bangladesh and Assam.

The Nepalis

The Nepalis came to Garo Hills along with the British Indian Army and in police force. They were employed as sepoy of Assam Rifles and Gorkha Regiment. After retirement, some of them settled down in Tura and some other semi-urbanized areas and have taken up several occupations for their livelihood. In course of centuries, many of them came to Garo Hills and maintained Bathans and supplied milk and ghee. However, their Bathans were stopped by the people as they destroyed the jhums and other forest products and only a sprinkling of Nepalis are found in Garo Hills today.

In language and culture, they try to maintain their link with that of their motherland Nepal though many of them have become Indian citizens.

The Biharis

The Biharis living in Garo Hills are a heterogeneous group consisting of various castes and communities of Bihar. Few of them came during the British rule as sepoy, labourers while others came after independence as traders, businessmen, cobblers and as labourers. The Biharis in Garo Hills belong to both Hindu and Muslim religions. While only a few of them have settled down in Garo Hills, rest are here only for their business and earning and thereby maintain their close link with Bihar.

This short description of the peoples and culture of Dadenggre Sub-division shows that it is an administrative unit of many peoples and tongues, with diverse cultures living mostly in an atmosphere of peace and co-existence.