

Colonial Intervention and Agitation of the Garos during the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century

Dr. Satarupa Saha¹

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Abstract

The agitation led by Sonara R. Sangma during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marks an important phase in the history of Garo agitation to colonial intervention in the Garo Hills and adjoining plains of the Goalpara region. The consolidation of the colonial authority brought significant changes in existing systems of landholding, forest use, revenue collection and labour. These changes generated grievances among the Garos, particularly over the loss of revenue demands, forest restrictions, forced labour or *begar* and the claims of zamindars over Garo-Goalpara inhabited areas. This paper examines Sonaram R. Sangma's agitation within the wider context of colonial transformation of land, forest and revenue relations. It argues that his movement contributed significantly to the emergence of Garo political consciousness and collective identity while challenging the erosion of customary autonomy under colonial rule. It elucidates the objectives by analyzing the relevant archival documents, official reports, monographs and relevant secondary sources.

Keywords: The Garos, agitation, British colonial indirect and direct rule, Sonaram R. Sangma, customary autonomy, zamindars.

Introduction

The territory of the Garo Hills was bounded on the north and west by the Goalpara region, on the south by the Bengal district of Mymensingh (presently in Bangladesh), and on the east by the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The region was inhabited by the Garos¹. In order to understand the revenue relations between the Goalpara *zamindars*² and the Garos, the British East India Company Government divided the Garos into four groups on the basis of their geographical location of dwelling and nature of revenue payment to the *zamindars* of Goalpara. Firstly, the Garos who lived in the interior parts of high mountains were known as independent Garos or 'bemalua', and they did not pay any

1 Assistant Professor (Guest), School of Liberal Arts, Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, Dwarka, New Delhi-110078, India

✉ Dr. Satarupa Saha, E-mail: satarupasaha64@gmail.com

tribute to the *zamindars* of the Goalpara plains. It was said that they were frequently involved in raiding practices on the Goalpara plains. Secondly, the Garos who lived in the foothills bordering the estates of Goalpara- Karaibari, Kalumalupara, Mechpara, and Bijni (Habraghat and Khuntaghat *parganahs*) were subjected to paying tribute or *nazar* to the *zamindars* annually in kind (especially in cotton). They were basically tributary Garos or 'Nazrana' Garos. Thirdly, the Garos who lived in the villages of the plains attached to these estates but were not under the control of the *zamindar* were known as 'zamindari' Garos. Lastly, the Garos who lived in the villages of the plains attached to these estates were under the control of the *zamindar*. They were known as 'namdani' Garos.³

Raid and counter-raid practices were a part of local power politics between the hilly mountaineers of Garo Hills and the *zamindars* of Goalpara plains in the pre-colonial and early colonial period. When the balance of supremacy and sovereignty came under attack, these practices became visible.

The *zamindars* of the estates of the Goalpara plains were the feudatories of the Mughal state, used to pay an annual tribute in Garo cotton, along with a number of elephants and *ahgur* (elephants and *ahgur* were collected from the high mountains of Garo Hills and its adjoining forested areas of Goalpara), a precious wood, to the Mughal *fauzdar* at Rangamati and in return they enjoyed a degree of autonomy in their administration of the Goalpara region and over the Garos who were under their control.⁴ However, this tributary system implied the expansion of Mughal imperial control till the foothills of Garo Hills and the imperial organizational reach also covered the natural resources of the region. Similarly, according to the customary practice, the Garo *Nokmas* or headmen used to collect revenue from the non-Garos who resided in the foothills.

On 12th August 1765, by the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II's *Farman*, the Goalpara region came under the supervision of the British East India Company. But the Garo-Goalpara borderland initially remained free from the Company's management. The Company authorities of Fort William replaced the Mughal *Fauzdar* with a *Sezwal* at Rangamatty. Like the Mughal *Fauzdar*, the *Sezwal* also indirectly engaged in gathering a small amount of tribute annually from the *zamindars*, which was actually extracted from the ecological resources of Garo Hills and from the accumulated miscellaneous cesses at Garo-Goalpara borderland. In the initial stage of the Company's rule, the *zamindars* enjoyed the same privilege in relation to the Garos as they had enjoyed in the Mughal state. It was largely by the early nineteenth century, the Company took the opportunity to control the foothills of the Garo-Goalpara borderland zone. However, the mountainous region of Garo Hills remained independent even till the mid nineteenth century. This portion came under British rule only after the annexation of Garo Hills in 1873.

The existing works⁵ on the Garos mainly deal with the Garo kinship ties, social structure, religion, traditional social administration, customary laws and practices and the myth of their origin and migration. Some works⁶ have studied the role and impact of Christianity and Western culture on the Garo traditional society and culture. Other literature⁷ on Garos portrayed the brutal relationship between the *zamindars* and the Garos and denied the sovereign presence of both Garos and *zamindars* in administering their fuzzy territoriality in the local politics. These works also discussed the annexation of the Garo Hills during the second half of the nineteenth century. All these works

mainly tuned in the same way as what the colonial documents on Garos reveal. The present proposed to investigate the strategies of the British government in the occupation of the Garo Hills and the reaction of the Garos in this regard.

Colonial Intervention in the Garo Hills

The British government introduced a system of “indirect rule”⁸ in the Garo-Goalpara borderland to penetrate into the Garo Hills. In 1822, it appointed Mr. David Scott (in 1816, D. Scott acted as Commissioner in Koch Behar and judge-magistrate at Rangpur, and he inquired into the Garo-*zamindar* disputes) as the Special Civil Commissioner of North-Eastern Rangpur of Bengal frontier and given the responsibility of the management of Garo-Goalpara borderland. Subsequently, the Regulation X of 1822 was implemented in this zone. Under this, some plots of rent free lands, known as 'bibhagnama ', were given to the Garo headmen by the *zamindars* of Goalpara. It was framed in such a way to appear that the Company was protecting the Garos from the *zamindari* extortion, but its motive was to establish its sovereign power and turn production from the Garo land into revenue for itself. The Regulation took away the *zamindari* privileges over the borderland, and this tract came under the management of the Company. The Regulation prohibited the *zamindars* from the collection of tribute, *sayer* and other cesses from the Garos of the borderland. For this loss, the *zamindars* were compensated by the Company Government.

The Company indirectly started the civil, criminal, police and revenue administration in this tract.⁹ For this purpose, it appointed the prominent Garo chiefs of this foothill tract as *Lashkar* to collect tribute and they were given the responsibility to maintain peace by acting as an agent of the Company. It also made an agreement with the Garo chiefs that it would secure them from *zamindari* extortion and in return it would collect a nominal tribute from them. Under this condition, from the total income of tribute on this tract, the Company took 12 percent, 13 percent was paid to the *Lashkars* for the collection of tribute and maintenance of peace and the remaining 75 percent was credited to the *zamindars* as compensation. The post of local officer, Garo *Sarbarakar*, was created by the Company at Singimari, who collected the tribute from the *Lashkars* on behalf of the Company.¹⁰ In this way the Garos of borderland came under the protection of the Company and acknowledged its supremacy by giving an annual tribute. This Regulation was successful in resolving the immediate conflict and helped partially to fulfil the Company's hidden motive to collect revenue.

In the second half of the early nineteenth century the independent Garos showed their resentment against the Company's supremacy over the Garos. They understood that their independence was infringed and they did not accept any other's supremacy over them. In July 1836, the independent Garos of Seebkujore tried to stop the collection of tribute from the dependent villages, and the Commissioner of Assam recommended subduing by force every Garo village that showed a turbulent spirit.¹¹ By 1839 the Company even started paying attention to drawing the boundary of this disputed zone on the basis of revenue survey, so that it could demarcate the boundary and establish its authority firmly to generate regular revenue for itself. Between 1849 and 1854 the southern boundary of Goalpara was laid down by revenue surveyor, Mr. John Kelso, and for some years it was accepted as the boundary between Garo Hills and Goalpara. But it did not bring any fruitful result.¹²

In the mid nineteenth century, several Garo-raids took place in the Goalpara plains, the statistics of which is well illustrated in the report of Mackenzie when he said:

“between 1857 and October 1859 nine raids were made by the Garos into Goalpara and 20 heads taken.”¹³ In order to calm the situation, the government abolished the post of *Sarbarakar* and closed the borderland markets. It also established an indirect police state to find the offenders involved in this matter. But these activities remained ineffective in controlling the violent situation and gave input to the Government to change their “indirect rule” into “direct rule”.¹⁴

In 1869, Act XXII was passed, which repealed the Regulation X of 1822. It separated the foothills from Goalpara and included it within the newly created district, Garo Hills. This district came under the management of the Lt. Governor, appointed by the British Government. The Act brought the decision to abolish the claims of *zamindars* over the foothills. However, this decision was objected by the *zamindars* and the civil suits in the courts judged that the Government had to give compensation to the *zamindars*.¹⁵ It also initiated to define the boundary between the Garo Hills and Goalpara plains.

In the mean time, several raids and head-hunting were carried out by the Garos, which indicated their assertion that they did not want to be under British rule. It was an expression of their power and of their political independence. Finally, in 1873 the British made a forceful expedition into the interior and subjugated the whole Garo Hills. After its annexation, a house tax was imposed and in 1887, the government decided to treat it like all other lands and to assess them to full revenue.

In 1873-74 Mr. Beckett, officer-in-charge of boundary, sketched the boundary of northern Garo Hills adjoining Goalpara on the basis of revenue survey. With this boundary, the Government finally incorporated the foothill tract with Garo Hills District and extinguished the *zamindari* claims over it with the payment of compensation.¹⁶ Similarly, the *zamindari* claims over the lowlands adjoining Garo Hills were appended to the *zamindari* estates and revenue collection was made by the *zamindars* as per the rule of Permanent Settlement. The gross revenue collection from the Garo-Goalpara borderland was divided into three parts: *zamindars* received 75 percent and the Government received 15 percent as revenue and rest 10 percent was also taken by the Government for the management of border security from the Garo attack on the *zamindars*' estates.¹⁷ However, the *Nokmas* used to collect rent from the lowlands fit for cultivation were entirely overlooked. This arrangement of the colonial government incited the Garos to agitation.

The colonial penetration even touched the forest lands after the annexation of Garo Hills. The government introduced the Reserved Forest system and also put restrictions on the Garo traditional rights to fuel, grazing, foraging and cultivation in the forest areas. During the period between 1883 and 1895, a forest area of 139 sq miles was declared as reserved. It also declared forest land as the property of the government and imposed tax on the users and dwellers of the forest. The houses of the Garos in the reserve forests were demolished, and also compensated for the removal of houses. It made *jhum* or shifting cultivation illegal in the hills. Similarly, the practice of collecting axe money from wood cutters was prohibited, and the Garos were asked to obtain trade permits in minor forest produce by paying a fee. The British government also compelled the Garo labour to work in construction without remuneration under the quasi-criminal proceedings.¹⁸

Agitation of the Garos under the Leadership of Sonaram R. Sangma

Sonaram R. Sangma is a man of importance among the Garos and also can rightly be regarded as the first Garo National leader. The exact date of birth of Sonaram R. Sangma is not known, but as recorded in the Register of Marriage, his age was 22 years, that is, on 7th June 1889. He was born at Rongrokgre. His father was Klang G. Momin, and his mother was Chamre Rongrokgre Sangma. He started his education quite late as there was no school in his village. He went to Nishangram village to study in the Lower Primary School. He completed his Graduation from the American Baptist Mission School at Tura. After the completion of his education, he joined as a Road Supervisor in the Public Works Department. He constructed a road from Tura to Rongrenggiri along the bank of the Simsang River via Rombaggiri, Chokagiri, Rangmslgiri and Dolwarigiri. This road was known as “Sonaram Sarak” or “Sonaram Road”. He also constructed a road to Damra from Tura via Gondenggiri, Thongbolgiri, Megagiri, Samin and Cheran villages. While in the service, Sonaram R. Sangma became aware of the injustice and humiliations inflicted on the Garos by the British government. He resigned from the government service in 1899 and started a small business, which enabled him to visit many places like Calcutta, Dhubri, Gauhati, etc to consult some eminent lawyers. He collected ample sources related to the sufferings of the Garos and scrutinized them. He organized a conference during winter in 1900 at Dalgoma in Goalpara district to transform the claims and grievances of the Garos into four major demands.¹⁹ These demands were

- 1) The Garo claims on Nazrana and Bighanama lands
- 2) The Garo claim on Habraghat
- 3) The question of forest reservation and
- 4) Abolition of forced labour and full payment for any service rendered to the British government.

In 1902, Sonaram R. Sangma and his followers, such as Bosin Rirder, Solaman, *Nokmas*, *Lashkars* and many others, made a claim on Nazrana, Bighanama and Habraghat lands. They stated that about 100 years ago, Nazrana and Bighanama lands were under Garo possession. According to Garo oral tradition, Habraghat was under the control of ‘Garo Raj’ ruled by a Garo *Nokma* named Habrasen. The Garo *Nokmas* used to collect rent from the cultivators of these lands. In the same year, in December, Sonaram marched with a following of some 700 Garos from the hills from Habraghat to Dalgoma Ghat, where they constructed an encampment of huts and posted notices forbidding cultivators to pay rent to the *zamindar*. In reaction, the British government arrested Sonaram R. Sangma and sentenced him to jail for a year. During this period, in order to split the agitation, the government offered a compromise policy to the Garo *Nokmas*. Under it 14 *Nokmas* agreed to accept 25 percent of the ordinary land revenue from the *nazrana* lands. However, it was rejected by the *Nokmas* who were in support of Sonaram R. Sangma. Immediately after Sangma’s release in April 1904, the agitation was renewed. On 9th February 1906, Sangma signed a memorial and submitted it to the government regarding their claims on the Reserve Forests and also demanded a complete abolition of forced labour. Though they submitted a series of memorials to the government, their agitation did not bring any fruitful result.²⁰

Conclusion

Thus, it can be concluded that the colonial government termed the Garo agitation as an erroneous expression, as it considered the Garo traditional knowledge and customs to be backward, so it should be defunct. Though the Garos, after a prolonged fight, did

not achieve any success, it left a great impression in the history of Garo Hills and became a legacy of the contemporary Garo movements. Sonaram R. Sangma played a crucial role in transforming the scattered grievances into an organized political movement. His reliance on petitions, collective representations and negotiations with colonial authorities demonstrates an important shift from earlier forms of direct and armed resistance towards constitutional forms of political mobilisation. By bringing together the concerns of Garo communities in both the hills and plains, his agitation helped to create a wider sense of collective interest and political identity.

References & Endnotes

- ¹ There were several speculations about the origin of the name 'Garo'. The Garos called themselves *Achik-Mande* or hill-men. But the outsiders called them Garos. They were the descendants of Bodo family who came from Tibet or Mongolia and entered this region from the northeastern side, and spread all over the Brahmaputra valley and also reached the hills of Tripura. They were first documented in the colonial record by John Eliot in 1788. For details see. John Eliot, 'Observations on the Inhabitants of the Garrow Hills' in *Asiatic Researchers*, vol. 3, Cosmo Publications, New Delhi, 1979, pp. 17-37; Francis (Buchanan) Hamilton, *An Account of Assam with Some Notices Concerning the Neighbouring Territories*, written in 1808-1809, DHAS, Guwahati, First Published 1840, Third Impression 1987, pp. 93-94 & Arthur Playfair, *The Garos*, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, First Reprint 1975, Second Reprint 1998, p. 8.
- ² The *zamindari* estates of Goalpara plains bordering the Garo Hills were Kalumalupara, Mechpara, Karaibari and Habraghat and Khuntaghat *parganah* of Bijni. The *zamindars* took the title of Choudhuri or Raja. There were several mythical stories of superior genealogies attached to the origin of the estates having the logic of conferring necessary legitimacy on the power of *zamindars* and their kin groups. For example, the estate of Mechpara traced their genealogy from Bhagadatta, the important king of Kamrup. Later interpretation revealed that their origin to the Rabha tribe. The estate of Kalumalupara was said to have been first occupied by the Chondals, an impure fisherman of Goalpara region. Later they were defeated and their area occupied by the descendants of one Vishwanath Choudhuri. The estates of Karaibari traced their genealogy from Svadhu of Pala Dynasty of Bengal and they made marriage relationship with the Bodo tribes. Similarly, the founder of Bijni Raj, Chandra Narayan, was a descendent of Biswa Singha who established the Koch kingdom. For details see. Sanghamitra Misra, *Becoming Borderland: The Politics of Space and Identity in Colonial Northeastern India*, Routledge, New Delhi, 2011, p. 37 & Santa Barman, *Zamindari System in Assam during British Rule: A Case Study of Goalpara District*, Spectrum Publications, Delhi, 1994, p. 59.
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⁸ The idea of 'direct and indirect rule' has been borrowed from Michael H. Fisher, *Indirect Rule in India: Residents and the Residency System 1764-1858*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1991.

⁹ A. Mackenzie, *ibid.*, p. 251-253.

¹⁰ P. Ch. Kar, *ibid.*, p. vii.

¹¹ A. Mackenzie, *ibid.*, p. 255.

¹² B. C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers: The Khasi and Jaintia Hills, The Garo Hills and The Lushai Hills*, Vol. X, Part II, 1906, p. 50.

¹³ A. Mackenzie, *ibid.*, p. 258.

¹⁴ A. Mackenzie, *ibid.*, pp. 258-259.

¹⁵ B. C. Allen, *ibid.*, 1906, p. 51.

¹⁶ B. C. Allen, *ibid.*, 1906, p. 51 & Major F. C. Hirst and Mr. A. B. smart, *A Brief History of the Surveys of the Goalpara District*, Assam Secretariat Press, Shillong, 1917, p. 98.

¹⁷ Garo-Goalpara Boundary: Final Settlement of the Compromises with the Goalpara Zamindars, General Department, File No. 63J, Serials 35-45, 1878, Meghalaya State Archives, Shillong.

¹⁸ Sanjeeva Kumar, "State 'Simplification': Garo Protest in Late 19th and Early 20th Century Assam", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 40, No. 27, Jul. 2-8, 2005, p. 2944.

¹⁹ Mihir N. Sangma, *Unpublished Documents on Garo Affairs*, Scholar Publishing House, New Delhi, 1993, Reprint 1993, pp. 27-29.

²⁰ Mihir N. Sangma, *ibid.*, p. 34-37.