Abstract: This paper presents various aspects of ethnicity, specifically the psycho-social dimensions of ethnic communities. It also investigates the causes on the basis of which identity integration, identity differentiations and identity collaboration etc take place in a society. The characteristics of the Garos living in Bangladesh have been analyzed in the paper in order to understand the process of an ethnic group formation. Identity crisis of the Garos and its effects in the larger society have also been explained here. The paper suggests that synergic pluralism should be practiced in a democratic country to maintain independent identities, equal status and collaborative relationships among the people belonging to different ethnic communities.

Ethnicity and the Garo Community

Since the Garos living in Bangladesh are usually recognized as an ethnic community, therefore we need to define the concept of ethnicity at first, and then we would discuss Garo community. It is also necessary to understand as to why the Garo community is known as an ethnic community. Glazer and Moynihan (1975:5) suggest that ‘the steady expansion of the terms ‘ethnic group’ from minority and marginal subgroups at the edges of society- groups expected to assimilate, to disappear, to continue as survivors, exotic or troublesome- to major elements of a society.” Talcott Parsons (1975) maintains “the organization of plural persons into distinctive groups, ---- and solidity and loyalty of individual members to such groups.” He defines ethnicity as “diffusely solidary collectivity” (Ibid,1975). According to Anthony Giddens (1994:252-53) “ethnicity refers to cultural practices and outlooks that distinguish a given community of people. Members of ethnic groups see themselves as culturally distinct from other groupings in a society, and are seen by those others to be so.” Different language, history or ancestry (real or imagined), religion, caste, and styles of dress or adornment, etc are usually considered as the basic characteristics of an ethnic groups.

There are as many as 30 tribal communities living at the different parts of Bangladesh (Rabidas, 2002). The Garos are one of them. They mostly live in Mymensingh, Netrokona, Taogail, Sylhet and Sunamgonj districts of our country. The Garos are an ethnic group of ‘Tibbeti Borman’, belonging to the Mongolian human race. The original dwelling place of Mongolian is believed to be the adjacent areas of mid-Asia and most of the ethnologists have opined that the same place is also the aboriginal dwelling place of Garo community. Probably the origin of Garos could be found in Sinkiang, a province of China, located in northwestern side of China. Later on, they came to live in the northern side of ‘Tibbet’ and stayed there for many decades. There after, they migrated themselves to the northeastern area of India through Bhutan. Garos were found living at the feet of Garohill in northern area of Bangladesh during 9th century, establishing the empire of Garo at Durgapur from 9th to 13th century (Jengcham, Subash, 1994:1-3). Another study shows that the original home of the Garos was in Assam of India, and the appearance of the Garos indicate that they may be the successors to the Khasis, Nagas and Manipuris of Assam (Sattar, 1971:164).

The very name ‘Garo’ has come into being from Garo Hills. There are two basic groups among the Garos: namely Achhick or Hill Garo and Lamdani or plain Garo. The place where the Hill Garos live is thickly clothed forest, and the plain Garos are found at the base of Garo Hill in the greater Mymensingh. A portion of Garos also lives at the hilly sector of Madhupur in Tangail district (Ibid,1971). We do not know the exact number of Garos living in Bangladesh at present, but ‘Tribal Welfare Association’ of Mymensingh (Sagma, 1998) shows around 1,05,000 Garos were living in our country in 1997.

The Garos have a different socio-cultural tradition in comparison with that of mainstream society of Bangladesh. Their family pattern, marriage, inheritance laws, norms and values, food
habits, dressing, housing structure, language, cultural and religious festivals etc are different from any other tribal community, and of course not consistent with the tradition of mainstream Bangladeshi common people (Milton; 2002). The nature of Garo family is matriarchal and therefore, women are the head of the family, having the ownership of the property too. Children adopt mahari (descent) of their mother instead of their father, and the females usually enjoy highest status in the family as well as in the community (Chakma, 2000:101). Sometimes Garo women play duel role, performing domestic duties along with working outside the family to earn livelihood. But it must be mentioned that there is no reason to believe that the women of Garo community have equal rights with their male counterparts or they are able to participate in the decision making process of the family according to their will (Sarker, 2002). The above discussion makes it clear that the Garo people have a distinct identity in terms of their socio-cultural characteristics, and that is how they are treated as an ethnic group in Bangladesh.

Psychological Formation of the Garos

Ethnicity could be understood through three major psychological processes: namely integration, differentiation and collaboration. Integration helps to consolidate the identity of a particular group, and the differentiation is a kind of feeling which presents the image and stereotypes, identity, boundaries, and a distinction between in-group and out group. On the other hand, collaboration helps us to realize intergroup conflicts and also intergroup collaborative relationship (Pareek, 1989). The Garos are a very small ethnic community, and they are well integrated among themselves. This integration has even become stronger due to the negligent attitude of the mainstream society towards the Garos. Therefore, the Garos often think that they are not a part of the mainstream society of Bangladesh since they do not belong to the religious majority community. This feeling makes the Garos frustrated, helpless and very often than not alienated. Most of the Garos express their dissatisfaction for not being given due human dignity by the Bangalees, and this is of course one of the main reasons as to why the Garos feel for each other and are always united to fight any evil design conspired by any group of miscreants belonging to mainstream society.

It is not that there is no division found among the Garos living at different parts of our country. Garos are divided firstly along the line of religion. Though most of the Garos are Christian, a significant portion of their community still believes in their traditional religion called Sangsarek. During British rule in India, Christian missionaries preached Christianity among the Garos in the Garo hill area of Mymensingh. Initially, the missionaries were not successful in preaching Christianity, rather they faced stiff opposition, but gradually in course of time most of the Garos got converted to Christianity. Along with preaching Christianity the missionaries also tried to extend education and health care facilities among the Garos. Christian Garos are found to be advanced with regard to education, health care, economic condition and progressive attitude. On the other hand, the Garos belonging to Sangsarek religion are backward with regard to the same indicators. The Christian Garos usually think that Sangsarek Garos should give up practicing traditional religion, worshiping ancestor, natural forces and deities. But the Sangsarek Garos denounce the Christian Garos for getting diverted from the right path of their original religion, asking them to be respectful towards those Garos who are spiritists or animists. But surprisingly Garos of both religions do not have any problem to mix with each other and in fact, they have been living together peacefully for many years, interacting with each other frequently.

As it is mentioned that collaborative relationship among the Garos is very much existing. The Garos are also eager to maintain a harmonious relationship with the mainstream society of Bangladesh. They usually live peacefully along with the members of religious majority community and hardly found any violent clash between the two communities reported anywhere in the country. It is also significant that many Garos invite the members of mainstream society to attend their traditional festivals, and the Bangalees also invite the Garos in the same manner. Interestingly, both the
members of different community usually attend and celebrate the festivals of each other (Sattar; 1971, Jalil, 2002).

**Identity of the Garos**

Identity is an important component for each and every individual as well as for a particular group. It is being shaped through the process of a long-term development. According to Udai Pareek (1989), identity provides both uniqueness to the group and a sense of pride to the individuals who belong to that group. Isaacs (1975) opines that the basic group identity has got two important ingredients: a sense of person’s belonging and self-esteem he deserves to have. Allport (1954) suggests that identity is ‘condensed’ based on symbols or cues. There is a series of dimensions contributing to the formation of identity. Isaacs (1975) mentions the body, name, history and origin of the group, nationality, language, religion, value system, geography or topography etc are instrumental in the formation of basic group identity.

The Garos have a separate identity which has already been discussed in the paper to some extent. The Garo community does not want to be identified as ‘Garo’. Most of the Garos believe that the name ‘Garo’ has probably been given by the Bengalees and Europeans. They feel this name as humiliating for them (Jengcham, 1994). They expect to be identified as Achhe (mountaineer) or A chick mandi (Hill tribe) (Playfair; 1975). The Garos have different religion and do have their own language. Their language had a written form earlier, but these days no Garo alphabet has been found. They usually speak in Garo language among themselves, but they know Bangla too. Therefore, the Garos could be described as bilingual. Whenever they interact with Bangalees, they speak Bangla only, facing no problem in establishing a smooth relationship with the Bangalees (Sangma, 1998).

Matriarchal family pattern is usually seen among the Garos, and that is why kinship bond is dominated along the line of female descent. The Garo children take the surname of their mother and the descent of mother is much more important to the children than that of father. A greater kin-group called Chatchi based on matrilineal relationship is utmost kin-relations in Garo society. There are five types of Chatchi, namely Sangma, Marak, Momin, Sira and Abetty. Each of these kin-groups has got different tradition, cultural traits, food habits, values and norms. Most of Garos living in Bangladesh belong to three Chatchi like Sangma, Marak and Momin.

A chatchi has got different sub-groups, and each of them is known as Machong. Interestingly a particular member of a Machong does not marry another member belonging to the same Machong. A Machong is also divided into different small clans and each of these clans is called Mahari. This Mahari is relatively a smaller group and the members of a Mahari are related to each other through blood. It is to be noted that each group of Garos practices matrilineal family system (Jengcham, 1994-11).

Though the Garos are socio-culturally different than that of mainstream society, their cemetic separate identity as a strong and recognized ethnic community seems to be losing its ground gradually due to multiple factors. Frustration, alienation and lack of recognition as normal human being from the mainstream society have made the Garos distressed and hopeless, because of which they are trying to come out of their own cultural boundaries, making a bridge with their mainstream counterpart, getting involved in the larger social system of Bangladeshi society. This tendency of the Garos may not be described as an effort made by the community to have assimilation, amalgamation or incorporation with the greater cultural traits of the majority community, rather it could be analysed as a struggle to earn honour as human being, which is only evaluated in the larger social system of our country.

**The Role of the State Towards Garo Community**

Frankly speaking, the role that is being played by the state towards the tribal living in this country could definitely be described as stepmotherly. After independence, each successive Government and most of the political parties of Bangladesh have more or less frequently tried to pretend as if the indigenous people do not face any kind of problems here. Even, there is a kind of consensus among the ruling elite for not paying due attention to the legitimate human
rights of the tribals they deserve. Our state constitution, which was for the first time introduced in 1972 after the liberation, mentioned that citizens of Bangladesh would be known as Bangalees. Manabendra Narayan Larma, a Chakma tribal leader who was also a member of the Constituent Assembly, vehemently opposed it saying that tribals were living in Bangladesh for generations, learned Bangla, and of course considered themselves as the citizens of Bangladesh, but they never thought of themselves as Bangalees. Mr Larma expressed his fear that if the Constitution designated the tribals as Bangalees, the separate identity of different ethnic groups would gradually be non-existent. But unfortunately his urge was denounced and went unheard.

The situation became worse when military took over the power after the killing of Seikh Mujib in 1975. General Zia subsequently came to power, amended the Constitution, erasing secularism from the list of fundamental principles of state policy of the Constitution made in 1972. General Ershad, the successor of Zia, amended the Constitution further, making the religion of majority institutionalized. These events put all minorities, including the tribals like Garo, Chakma, Monipuri, Khasis, Santals etc on the defensive, and all of them became marginalized, reducing the total number of different ethnic minority community substantially. Unlike other tribals and minority community, the Garos have occasionally protested against atrocities like landgrabbing, human rights violation etc under the leadership of Catholic and Protestant priests. Therefore, General Ershad in August 1990 announced that the Garos would get back the properties illegally taken away from them. In fact, measures were also undertaken initially according to the commitment given by Ershad. But the actions designed for the said purpose were stopped with the collapse of the Ershad regime in December 1990. Thereafter, we do not have any concrete information about the actions that have been undertaken by the successive BNP and Awami League Government in order to ensure security for the Garo community. But as far as we know that no Government has so far come forward to patronize Garo culture and also no strategy has yet been adopted to develop the socio-economic condition of the Garos.

It is also very difficult to mention the exact number of Garos since they are not enumerated separately during the population Census. But the annual growth of the Garo population is very low, as it is shown in a few articles. A rubber plantation project sponsored by the Asian Development Bank was designed in the early 1980s in the Garo habitat, which evicted a large number of Garos from their homestead. This is true that the Garos did not disappear totally from Bangladesh, but definitely they have been languishing (Roy, 1996).

Maintenance of Identity
Identity of various ethnic groups must be allowed and encouraged to flourish in a true democratic country, and may, therefore, be necessary to train people in their own cultures so that people belonging to a particular culture should not feel rootless. Any attempt to remove the identity of a group is clearly antidemocratic which goes against not only the synergic pluralistic model, but also against the beauty of diversity of an enriched social life in the society. The state is expected to support various ethnic groups to have their own identities and this is particularly true in relation to linguistic groups, and other sub-cultural groups, who usually speak dialects which are not developed as full-blown languages. But unfortunately the Garos have been struggling for long to maintain their own identity since synergic pluralistic model of society has not been in practice in our country. We should not forget that separate identities always help different ethnic groups to feel proud of their own cultural traits and place.

Conclusion
Though Bangladesh may not be described as a multi—ethnic society, ethnic consciousness among different ethnic groups including the Garos is increasing due to our long—cherished state policy. This ethnic consciousness must be accommodated within the larger cultural system of our society through giving proper respect and recognition to each and every ethnic group. Like other ethnic groups, the Garos and their culture are ignored, humiliated, insulted and they are very often treated as less human being.
Needless to say, this is a wrong policy adopted in a democratic country, and we must not forget that collective action is very much necessary on the part of different ethnic groups to ensure equality in a society. We are, in fact, late. Let us be united to establish the identity of each group, including the Garos on the basis of synergic pluralistic model and thereby making our society truly democratic and humanitarian.

References


Jengcham, Subhash, 1994, Bangladesher Garo Sampradai, Bangla Academy, Dhaka.


