Journal of Governance and Development

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Assessing the Inter-community Relationship between Bengali and *Mandi* (Garo): Interpreting the Dynamic Interaction in the Twenty-first Century

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Received: November 15th 2023 | Published: December 31st 2023

Abstract

This paper analyzes the inter-community interactions between Bengalis and Mandis (Garo) and their perceptions, ties, and experiences in daily life. The study followed a mixed method approach, and the sampling method was stratified random sampling. About 118 respondents (75 Garos and 43 Bengali) and KII, semi-structured interviews, IDI, and FGDs were data collection methods for this study. The study areas were the Gayra and Jalshatra villages of the Aronkhola Union of Modhupur Upazilla under the Tangail. The study found that the existing ethnic boundaries that constructed the cultural boundary affect the interaction, integration, and collaboration between the two groups. The existing cultural boundaries portray their mutual perception and understanding regarding their socio-cultural lives, complete with prejudices and misconceptions towards Garo communities that shaped their mutual trust. Furthermore, the study also found several associated factors that have continuously shaped the inter-community relationship in recent times. As a result, the intercommunity bond is still fragile, although both community members have started to improve their interaction at both group and individual levels.

Key words: Ethnic Boundary, Ethnic Identity, Exclusion, Inter-community Relationship, Marginalization

1. Introduction

The Garo community, called themselves Mandi, was one of the oldest inhabitants in the Modhupur area, and lived beside the Bengali community for over a century. The Garo and Bengali communities have the richest cultural traditions, heritages, and lifestyles, making

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them unique and different from each other. The culturally created boundaries they have also led them to build their ethnic images and identity, which shaped their level of interaction, integration, and collaboration with each other. The present study highlights the nature of their interaction, integration process, and degree of collaboration in their daily life with examples. The study implies that how dominant culture labels the ethnic minority enormously affects people's lives as a distinct category (Bal, 2007). Garos is the perfect example of how imperial concepts and categories have materialized as a social reality of their everyday lives. It affects how they label themselves and how they act, think, and react. The people of outsiders (Bengali communities) also treat them based on these perceptions, making it possible for the authorities to exclude them easily everywhere if possible. Indeed, these concepts and perceptions towards ethnic communities have added some social and economic challenges that the Garos, like the other ethnic communities, currently face. There was an ongoing debate on the rights of the ethnic minority in Bangladesh and their actual number, which also exited some communal tension between the ethnic minority and majority people in Bangladesh. According to the Bangladesh Minority Report-2016, people of minority communities have lost their land rights, faced several types of violence, and noticed several cases of human violence incidents in Bangladesh (Nagorik Udyog, 2016). The people of plain land ethnic communities are the left-behind people who experience humiliation and repression in their daily lives (Levitas et al., 2007). It is also evidenced that people of plain land ethnic communities, including Garos, have been marginalized and discriminated against through the process of state and socially mechanized exclusion, where they excluded some cases fully or partially in the context of social, cultural, and economic integration with the mainstreaming society (Zaman & Akhter, 2020). Ethnic people are also often mocked for their physical appearances; for example, people of Garo communities are ridiculed for their facial shape as they are easily separated from the Bengali people. In addition to their distinct cultural practices, they are humiliated in public places (IRI, 2020). In the context of socio-economic status, people of Garo communities become landless, even though they are highly dependent on the subsistence economy. The ongoing tension between the forest department and the Garo people regarding land rights and their rightful access to forest areas also created distrust towards state apparatus and mainstreaming society (Muhammad et al., 2011). All these incidents and people's mindset of mainstreaming society towards the ethnic minorities, especially Garo people, indicated the fragile features of inter-community interaction and integration between Garos and Bengalis in Bangladesh. The present study tries to demonstrate the current interaction level of Garos and Bengalis, including their mutual ties and perception towards each other.

2. Aim and Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study was to assess the existing inter-community interactions between Bengalis and Mandis (Garo) and their perceptions, ties, and life experiences.

Specific Objectives were-

a) To know present scenario regarding Inter-community Harmony
b) To identify the inter-community perceptions of each other

c) To understand the mutual trust and ties between them
d) To investigate the associated factors behind their existing interactions

3. Literature Reviews

With the alignment of this research theme, some relevant literatures have been reviewed to overview the existing literature and organize the research framework for this study. Nasreen and Togawa (2002) explained the interaction between the state's development policies and the ethnic minorities in CHT areas. They historically analyzed the development discourses of CHT that worked as cultural discourses where people of ethnic communities were deprived through the development activities initiated by the development agencies. The nature of dealing with ethnic communities has been shifted historically, and development projects affecting them socio-culturally eventually forced them to merge with the mainstreaming society (Nasreen & Togawa, 2002).

Das and Islam (2005) conducted a study on Garo ethnicity where they focused on the factors associated with identity formation, interaction, classification, and integration with the larger society. It also indicated that the Garo community has a crisis over their ethnic identity that eventually affects their interaction with the mainstream community in Bangladesh (Das and Islam, 2005). Bal founded the state policies regarding ethnic identity from the British period to Pakistan, establishing the colonial discourse on ethnicity. Lately, Bangladesh has directly affected the Garo community as these policies constructed the otherness of the Bengali community of Garo, which led them to formulate their own identity based on their cultural heritages (Bal, 2008). Another masterpiece work by Bal on the ethnic boundaries of Garo communities and how existing prejudices affect the relationship with the majority population of Bangladesh. In this research, the author tries to illustrate the unequal and uneasy relationship related to their constructed perception. That was constructed consciously and unconsciously through the otherness politics that also define their interaction and relationship with the non-Garo communities in Bangladesh (Bal, 2007).

Hossain (2015) researched the group's integration between the Bengali settlement and minorities of CHT of Bangladesh. The author tries to demonstrate the dynamic and socio-political context of group integration in CHT areas, where state-sponsored Bengali resettlement programs adversely affect group integration between Bengalis and ethnic minorities. The withdrawal from their ancestral land, penetration of armed forces, and continuous marginalization through state apparatus create hostility and heat between the inter-community relationships (Hossain, 2015). Uddin (2020) experimented with the value orientation and inter-ethnic relations in Bangladesh, where the study found that the value orientation of minority and majority populations in Bangladesh has affected their inter-community relationship. The religious, cultural, social, and moral values and knowledge systems are significantly different from the mainstream Bengali people, which shaped how people of ethnic communities of the northern region interact with the mainstream Bengali people in Bangladesh (Uddin, 2020).

The abovementioned literature found that a few pieces that align with inter-community perception or interaction between ethnic communities and Bengalis in Bangladesh have been

published. Besides, the published literature on inter-community interaction or perception has focused on the CHT areas rather than the plain land scenario. Neither of these research studies focused on the dynamic relationship of the Garo community with the other non-Garo communities in the Bangladesh context. The present literature fills the gap in this area, which chiefly focuses on the existing pattern of inter-community interaction between the Garos and Bengalis in Bangladesh.

3. Theoretical Framework

Firstly, the author followed Fedrick Barth's coined ethnic boundary concept and Max Gluckman's theory of fluidity of cultural boundaries (Lewellen, 2002) to explain the inter-community relationship and the mutual interaction between the Garos and Bengalis. According to Barth, cultural boundaries define the ethnicity of a particular ethnic group (1970). This theory analyzes the historical process of cultural boundaries that Garo communities have constructed over the century. The flexibility of cultural boundaries (Coined by Max Gluckman) is also used to understand the contemporary changes due to the dynamic inter-community interaction at different levels. The constructivism theory, or political and cultural constructivism theory, has been followed to understand how dominant ideologies, aesthetic materials, and language are constructed so that ethnicities are constructed through marginalization and exclusion. Besides, cultural constructions are made by shared signs, symbols, and practices, which create a sense of meaning and common belonging (Lewellen, 2002). The constructionism theory has been followed to illustrate the way people of Garo communities constructed their own boundaries and sense of belonging that shaped their mutual interaction with the other communities. Besides, assimilation or acculturation theories were used to demonstrate the current inter-community interactions and mutual ties between Garos and Bengalis in the study area. Gordon explains elaborately the process of acculturation or assimilation of different groups of people in the new place. According to the theory of assimilation, people remain isolated due to the lack of interaction, whereas total assimilation depends on the level of acceptance of the mainstream society. Finally, their distinct culture is demolished if they are assimilated into mainstream society (Alba & Nee, 2006). The assimilation theory explains the level of assimilation or acculturation between the two communities who lived together over the century and how such an assimilation process affects their group perception, eventually affecting their mutual ties. The theory of ethnic boundary, assimilation theory, and constructionism theory have been followed to analyze the inter-community interaction between the Garo and Bengali communities and the existing scenario in the study area accordingly.

4. Materials and Methods

The study followed an integrating approach (combining both qualitative and quantitative methods) for collecting and analyzing the data to gain a holistic view of the inter-community interaction between Garos and Bengalis in the study area. The intensive fieldwork has been conducted using semi-structured interviews, key informant interviews, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions as a part of the empirical study. The study areas of this research were the Gayra and Jalshata villages of the Aronkhola Union of Modhupur Upazila under

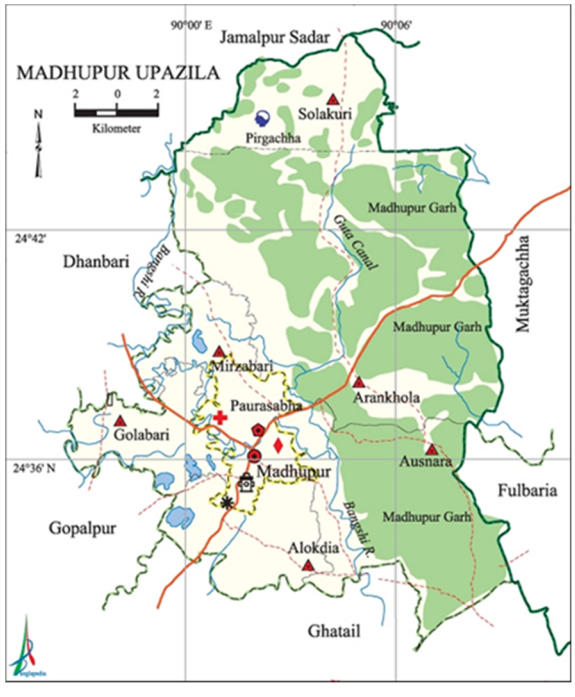
the Tangail District. The sampling method of this study was stratified random sampling, and the sample size was 118, of which 75 were Garos and 43 were Bengali respondents. The SPSS software was used to analyze the quantitative data, but before the analysis, the entire data was cross-checked to ensure validity and reliability.

Besides the quantitative analysis, the study also followed the thematic analysis to interpret the numeric data, gain the supplement, and understand the why and how questions besides the numeric data, which enrich the interpretation of this study. Therefore, several books, journals, and articles were reviewed to analyze the secondary information based on the theme. In the period of intensive fieldwork, special attention has been given to collecting the data by ensuring neutrality and considering not violating ethical principles during the fieldwork.

4.1 Study Area

As previously mentioned, the study areas of this research were the Gayra and Jalshatra villages of the Aronkhola Union of Modhupur Upazilla under the Tangail. These two villages were selected as the study area because Bengali and Garo community people have lived for generations. According to the population census in 2011, the total number of Indigenous people of Modhupur Upazila was 13,600 out of 2,97,629 populations (BBS, 2011).

Figure 1: Map of the Study Area



Source: Banglapedia

5. Findings of the Study

5.1 Socio-Demographic Information of the Respondents

Table (01) illustrates the socio-demographic information of the respondents from both Bengali and Garo communities. Regarding Bengali respondents, about 74% are male, and the rest are female, while 93% are Muslim and the rest are Hindu. About 30% of respondents had no institutional education, 28% completed the primary level, and only 14% graduated. Regarding occupational status, 44% were involved in business and farming, and only 5% were government officials. Besides, about 40% were 41–60 years old, and only 16% were 15–25 years old. In terms of marital status, about 86% of the respondents were married, and the rest of them were unmarried.

Table.1: Socio-demographic status of the respondents

Variables	**Category**	**Bengali Community**		**Mandi (Garo) Community**	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Male	32	74	32	43
	Female	11	26	43	57
Religion	Muslim	40	93		
	Christian			73	97
	Hindu	3	7	2	3
Educational Status	No Ins. Education	13	30	16	21
	Primary	12	28	21	28
	Secondary	8	19	29	39
	Higher Secondary	4	9	5	7
	Graduated	6	14	1	1
	Masters			3	4
Occupational Status	Business & Farmer	19	44		
	Businessman			4	5
	Farmer	9	21	25	33
	Housewife	7	16	31	41
	Govt. Official	2	5	4	5
	Service Holder	3	7	2	3
	Student	3	7	7	9
Age Group	Politician			1	1
	15-25 Years	7	16	13	17
	26-40 years	18	42	27	36
	41-60 years	17	40	30	40
	61-75 year			3	4
	Above 75 years	1	2	2	3
Marital Status	Married	37	86	56	75
	Unmarried	6	14	17	23
	Widow			2	3

On the other hand, in the context of Garo respondents, about 57% were male, 43% were female, 97% were Christian, and the rest were Hindu. In addition, 39% of Garo respondents competed at the secondary level, 28% passed their primary education, and only 4% completed their master's degree. Regarding occupational status, about 41% of them were housewives, 33% were farmers, and only 3% were service holders. About 40% of Garo respondents were 41–60 years old, 36% were 26–40 years old, 75% were married, 23% were unmarried, and only 3% were widows.

5.2 Present scenario regarding Inter-community Harmony

Interpreting the present scenario of an inter-community relationship regarding harmony was challenging. In the context of the inter-community relationship between the Bengali and Garo communities, both communities have some unsolved issues that eventually shape the nature of the inter-community harmony between them. Despite the unsolved issues and their inactive participation in daily life, both communities try to maintain a working relationship between the group members, as seen in business dealings in the study area. The local authorities and communities initiated several initiatives that increased the mutual interaction between the group members and reduced the uneasiness and misconceptions towards the Garo communities. In addition, educational institutions also play a significant role in ensuring that younger generations in both communities receive the required education that helps them develop a mutual understanding of their socio-cultural differences, gradually increasing mutual respect in communities. As a result, in the context of the current conditions of the Garo community, about 24% of Bengali respondents mentioned that Garos are trying to develop themselves; 28% of them also felt that Garo is doing great in the education sector; and 30 of the Bengali respondents also mentioned that Garo has also achieved great success in the job sector. In terms of recommendations, about 16% of Bengalis felt it was essential to help the Garo develop themselves; 30% of them felt that the Garo's land problem should be solved; 23% of them emphasized the eradication of ethnic discrimination; and 30% of Bengali respondents also felt that quota facilities should be reintroduced as they are still an underdeveloped community compared to the Bengalis.

On the other hand, 85% of Garo respondents mentioned that the Bengali community has positively changed their approaches towards them, and they mentioned the younger generation, who interact more with them. The misconceptions regarding Garo culture and food habits are also slowly decreasing as their social interaction increases. In the context of ethnic community conflict, about 97% of Garo respondents mentioned that they had not experienced such conflict with the Bengali community in the last decade, which indicated the diminishing of ethnic community-based disputes between them. They think both communities have managed to coexist without significant conflicts related to identity misunderstandings. Lastly, both communities still have misunderstandings regarding their way of life that unconsciously shape the nature and level of inter-community interaction. However, they gradually develop mutual understanding despite the differences. Both communities increased their daily interactions, which minimized their tension regarding disputes and ultimately led to the development of an inclusive society.

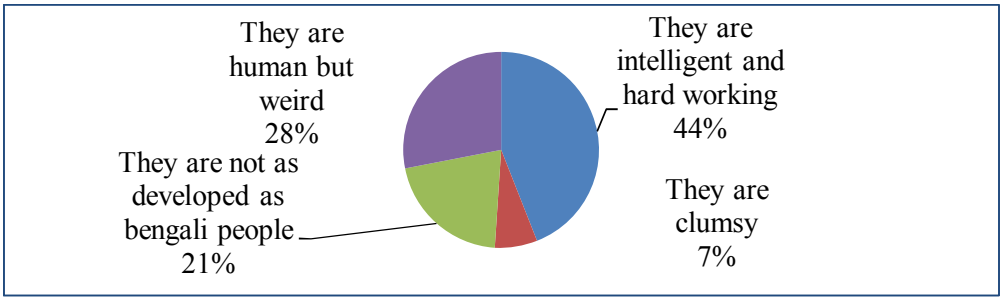
5.3 The Inter-Community perception of Bengali and Garo (*Mandi*)

It is necessary to understand the inter-community perception towards each other to understand the inter-community relationship.

5.3.1 The common perception of Bengali Communities towards Garo Communities

The 43 participants expressed diverse viewpoints who took part in this research in response to the inquiry.

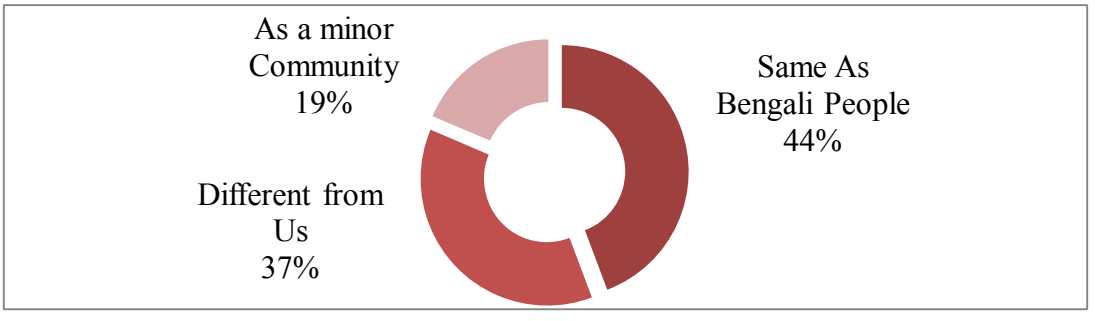
Figure 2: Common perception of Bengalis towards Garo Communities



About 44% of Bengali participants perceived Garo as intelligent and diligent. This favorable perception indicates recognition of their diligent effort and cognitive prowess. About 7% of the Garo communities considered themselves "clumsy." This perception is potentially detrimental and could suggest an assumption regarding their inadequate physical powerlessness or coordination. Besides, 21% of the respondents believed that this community needs more sophistication of Bengalis. This reply proposes a correlation between the community under consideration and another, potentially the Bengali community, concerning their degree of progress. The perception of this community as comprising "They are human but different than us" is held by a considerable proportion, 28%. This reply indicates that they acknowledged them as their neighbor, but they emphasized that they are not the same, which means they are not equal, which expresses a negative attitude towards their Garo Neighbors.

5.3.2 The way Bengali evaluate Garo Communities

Figure 3: The way Bengali Evaluate Garo Communities



Most participants (44%) perceive this community as "identical to Bengali." It implies an awareness of shared cultural or social characteristics and a feeling of affinity. In contrast to most respondents (37% out of 100), this community is perceived as "different from us." This reply suggests an awareness of distinctions or unique qualities between the individuals providing the response and the community being analyzed. 19% of the respondents classify this locality as a "minor community." This perception might indicate the community's magnitude or sway relative to other communities. The data presents a wide range of perspectives and assessments concerning this particular community. Diverse perspectives are expressed by the respondents, with some attributing importance to similarities, others to distinctions, and still others to the minority status of the community. These assessments may influence interactions, relationships, and attitudes toward the community.

5.3.3 Reasons behind their (Bengali) particular way of evaluation towards Garo

Table 2: Reasons behind their particular way of evaluation towards Garo

Reasons behind their particular way of evaluation		
	Frequency	Percentage
Every human being has the same rights	20	46
They are minor to us	9	21
Bengali and Garo people are not comparable	14	33
Total	43	100

The assertion that "Every human being has the same rights" provides a foundation for assessing a considerable proportion of participants (46%). It implies a commitment to human rights and equality principles, underscoring the notion that irrespective of cultural or communal variances, every person ought to be treated impartially and with dignity. An estimated 21% of the participants indicated that they hold this opinion because "they are minor to us." This response highlighted the minority status attributed to the particular community in comparison to the community of the respondents. A considerable proportion of participants (33%) agreed that "Bengali and Garo people are not comparable." This statement acknowledged the cultural and social differences but indicated that they are not equal, which expressed the prejudices towards Garos.

5.3.4 The way Bengalis used title (term) for Garo Communities

Table 3: The way Bengalis call them (Garo Communities)

The way Bengali called them (Garo Community)		
	Frequency	Percentage
As Garo	9	21
As a minor Ethnic community	9	21
As Tribal People	25	58
Total	43	100

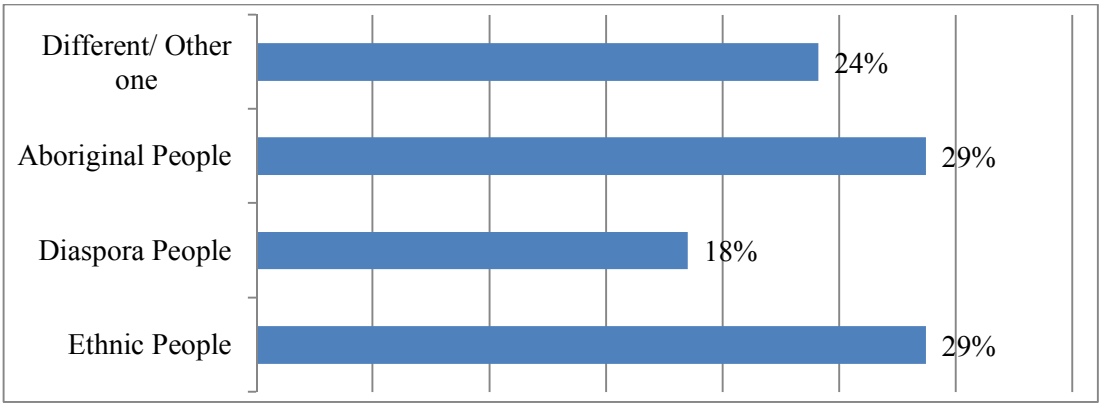
About 21% of the respondents mainly identified Mandi as "Garo." This answer implies that these individuals perceive Garo's identity as an independent and distinct element of community self-identity. The Garo people are considered a "minor ethnic community," equivalent to 21% of the respondents. This answer may suggest recognition of the magnitude and influence of the Garo community compared to other races or communities. 58% of Bengali respondents perceived the Garo as "tribal people." This answer highlights the unique features of the Garo community and demonstrates an understanding of their tribal and cultural heritage.

That is, the respondents hold different views about the identity of the Mandi people. Although the Garo (Mandi) are predominantly considered "tribal people," a significant section of the population recognizes the significance of the Garo identity as a distinct element. Furthermore, some participants underscored the classification of the Garo community as a "minor ethnic community." Many factors, such as regional dynamics, historical context, and cultural sensitivities, can influence the existence of these diverse perspectives. It is essential to acknowledge the complexity of identity and show respect for how members of the Mandi community choose to present themselves.

5.3.5 The Perspective of Garos' regarding Bengali perception towards them

Informants from the Garo (*Mandi*) minority ethnic group who participated in this study offered different ideas about their identity to other communities.

Figure 4: Perspective of Garos' regarding Bengali perception towards them

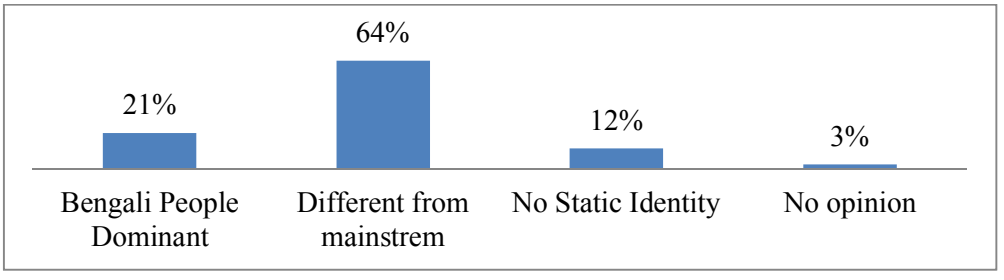


A significant proportion (29%) perceived the Garo community as "Ethnic People." They said that the community is primarily seen as an ethnic group by other communities. Another portion, at 18%, viewed the community as "Diaspora People." An equal percentage, also at 29%, identified the community as "Aboriginal People." That is, 29% of the informants thought that the community is recognized for its indigenous or native status by other communities. A significant segment, making up 24%, perceived the community as a "Different/Other One." This category implies that the Bengali community is treated Garo (*Mandi*) as a distinct and separate entity.

5.3.6 Reasons behind this perception

The informants gave various comments as to the reasons behind the perception of minority ethnic groups as separated by the Bengali population.

Figure 5: Reasons behind these perceptions



About 21% of respondents attributed the perception of the community to the dominance of "Bengali People." It implies that the dominance or influence of the Bengali culture or population plays a role in how the community is perceived. The largest group of informants, making up 64%, pointed to the community's perception of Garos being "different from mainstream culture." They think the community's distinct cultural characteristics contribute significantly to how outsiders perceive it. A notable percentage of informants, at 12%, attributed the perception to the community's "No static identity." It implies that the community's identity may be fluid or flexible, leading to varying perceptions by outsiders.

5.3.7 Nature of Mutual Trust and Ties

Regarding the types of relationships between them, both communities (95% Bengali respondents and (73% Garo respondents) have mentioned that they have a good relationship with them right now, and the rest of them indicated that their relationship was not good at all. This positive perception indicates that the respondents maintain favorable interactions, understanding, and a sense of harmony with this community. This response suggests that a few respondents face challenges or tensions in their interactions with this particular community.

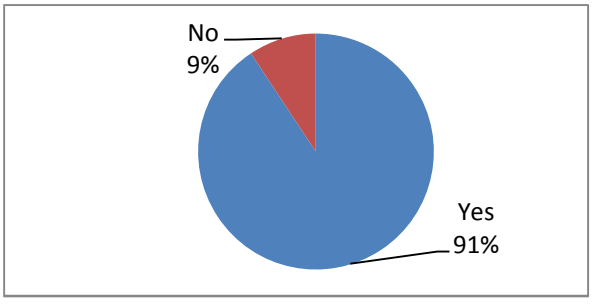
Regarding business deals, about 67% of Bengali respondents claimed that they have had some business deal in their lifetime with Garos, and most have no such issues. In addition, 44% of Garo respondents mentioned that they conducted business with Bengali nowadays. It is also interesting to mention that male respondents conducted more of these deals than female ones. Regarding visiting each other's areas (para), about 91% of Bengali and 78% of Garo respondents have mentioned they visited each other's areas if required. Besides, about 79% of Bengali respondents had Garo Friends, and 65% of Garo respondents claimed that they have Bengali friends. It also indicated that many respondents have established personal connections and friendships with individuals from the Garo community.

The data underscores the significance of personal relationships and friendships in building bridges between different communities. Having business deals and friendships and

visiting each other's areas can provide individuals with unique insights into the opposite community's culture, traditions, and perspectives. Personal friendships and professional business deals across communities are instrumental in promoting cultural understanding, fostering empathy, and challenging stereotypes and biases. They contribute to a more interconnected and harmonious society where diversity is celebrated and appreciated. This research explores their ties by asking whether they felt comfortable eating with other community members.

5.3.8 Perceptions of Discomfort in Eating

Figure 6: Whether Bengali felt discomfort in eating with Garo communities



These responses offer insights into how respondents perceive the community and their comfort level regarding shared meals. A substantial majority of respondents, 91% of Bengali respondents, reported discomfort when eating with the community. Hence, about 9% of Bengali respondents indicated they do not feel discomfort when sharing meals with other community members. Therefore, the respondents of Garo communities have mentioned that they did not feel any discomfort while eating with other community members. They also mentioned that previously, there were no tea shops or local hotels (restaurants) in their communities, and they often experienced discrimination while eating in the tea shops or hotels, which led them to open their tea shop and hotels in their locality for their community people. The data implies that many respondents experience unease or discomfort when dining with the community in question. The reasons for this discomfort can vary, such as cultural differences in food habits, unfamiliarity with certain dishes, or other factors. Cultural and social factors can influence the discomfort with shared meals, and addressing this discomfort may involve fostering cultural understanding, open dialogue, and a willingness to explore and appreciate diverse culinary traditions.

A significant proportion of Bengali participants, precisely 58%, recognized that individuals of Bengali descent experience unease when engaging with community members. This reply demonstrates an understanding of the fact that a portion of the Bengali populace is experiencing unease. A mere 42% of the participants believed that fellow Bengalis do not encounter distress. This finding indicates a variation in perspectives, as some participants took discomfort into account while others did not. On the other hand, a minority portion, precisely 33% of Garo participants, recognized that their fellow Garo people might be uncomfortable with the Bengali community, which indicated that they also have some sense

of uneasiness regarding inter-community engagement. About 67% of Garo respondents said they did not feel unease. At the same time, they communicated with the Bengali communities because Garos felt that if the people of Garo communities felt discomfort interacting with the mainstreaming Bengali people, they could not eradicate the existing stereotyped images towards them.

5.4 Associated factors behind the inter-community relationship

Several factors play a significant role in shaping the existing inter-community relationship between Bengali and Garo communities.

5.4.1 Prejudices and Stereotyped images towards Garo communities

The study implies that there were some prejudices and stereotypes about the Garo community, such as that 28% of Bengali respondents felt that Garo communities were weird to compare to, 21% of Bengali respondents also claimed that Garo is not as sophisticated as Bengalis are, and 7% of them also thought that Garo people are clumsy. These perceptions towards the Garo community, which is also a minority in number, affect the inter-community relationship. There were also other perceptions of Garo communities, such as not feeling discomfort with Garo; about 9% of respondents thought that Garo did not maintain hygiene; and 8% of Bengalis (what do you think about Garo) responded that they have no religions, which also indicated the existing prejudices and stereotyped images towards Garo communities, which unconsciously impact the inter-community relationship.

5.4.2 Debate on the ethnic identity

The debate on Garo's identity was another factor that shaped their active participation in the larger society. A significant portion of Garo respondents (54%) mentioned that they perceived them as aboriginal, and 44% of them perceived them as Mandi, but 58% of Bengali respondents mentioned that they treat Garo as tribal, which indicated that there was an ongoing debate on Garo identity. Besides, Garo respondents did not like the term, as in most cases, it used to indicate them because they thought it was a falsification of their true identity, which the British Administration imposed, and mostly Bengali people called them Garo. The government of Bangladesh also did not recognize them as indigenous, which also disconnected them from their ancestral land. The ongoing debates regarding Garo's identity were another factor that also discouraged them from developing a normal relationship that would require trust and mutual respect.

5.4.3 Creation of Otherness

The notion of otherness was another key obstacle that prevented the inter-community harmony between Bengali and Garo people. Both communities perceived that they had a different cultural heritage that they owned over generations, and one of these groups became the majority, leading to the other group being a minority. The concept of otherness was created unconsciously through the different ways such as Bengali perceived that Garo was the ethnic minority and weird to compare the Bengali People, the concept of clumsiness and notion of tribal make it clear that Garo become the other self of the Bengali community who

are not sophisticated, innovative, logical and intelligent instead Garo are emotional, traditional, underdeveloped one. The perception of otherness was not today's construction; instead, through the historical process, they became the other people who also made hesitation that prevented the Garo community from interacting with the Bengali people warm-heartedly. Indeed, in creating otherness, mostly Bengalis perceived Garo as anti-nationalists, whereas Bengalis were nationalists. The types of images portrayed by the Bengalis eventually create a very uneasy relationship between both communities.

5.4.4 Cultural difference

Both communities have very different cultural traditions regarding language, social institutions, cultural norms and values, political organization, religion, food culture, clothing, etc. They both acknowledged their difference, but these types of cultural differences often also constructed misconceptions towards each other. For example, Bengali people did not like the way Garo women wore their clothes, and their food habits, like eating pigs and consuming liquor, also made them unhappy, leading to the neglect perception of Garo communities. The study also found some misconceptions regarding Garo communities, such as eating rats, fog, and other animals, which Bengali people did not appreciate. The lack of understanding and lack of knowledge of the Garo community, most of the time, Bengali people harass them, laugh at them, and spread wrong information about ethnic people and their way of life.

5.4.5 Misconception regarding Socio-economic Development and Assistance

Regarding socio-economic conditions, there was also some misconception about Garo communities. For example, 63% of Bengali respondents felt that the Garo community got more socio-economic facilities from the government and other organizations, 34% also claimed that missionaries help them a lot, and 32% of Bengalis also mentioned that NGOs help them a lot. However, they needed more economic assistance from the government and missionaries or NGOs. Hence, these perceptions of the socio-economic conditions of Garo communities created a skeptical perspective towards all Garo communities and those who provide several types of assistance accordingly. However, about 51% of Bengali respondents considered that Garo are underdeveloped communities and they (21%) claimed that attribute of underdevelopment was due to the denial of fundamental rights, and (9%) a portion of them also indicated the partialities of Bengali communities as the key reasons for the underdevelopment of Garo communities.

5.4.6 History of Discrimination

The Garo communities historically discriminated against in terms of identity politics, land rights, and displacement, which also created a barrier to peaceful cohabitation. In 1872, Garo Hills was officially incorporated into the colonial British Administration (Bal, 2007), and it was converted into a district in 1936, which changed the entire world as it habituated from generation to generation. After the partition in 1947, the Garo communities faced bitter experiences, which created insecurity because they confronted that they were the tiny minority of their country where the majority was Muslim (Bal,2007). In 1964, the Bengalis

were influxed from Assam and started to live in Garo localities, which indirectly forced them to leave their country in the same year. After returning to their localities, they noticed that their fellow citizens also did not welcome them. Bengalis occupied their land and properties, which came to their localities from different districts and by Bengali refugees from Assam. In 1971, they once again crossed the border, and when they returned from India (after liberation) and reached their formal villages, they noticed far more destruction of their properties compared to 1964 (Bal, 2007). Soon, they also realized they were not considered ideal citizens of the newly Independent country (Bal, 2007). While the state policymakers focused on creating a uni-cultural and uni-linguistic nation-state, the Garos gradually developed a counter-discourse about their self-identity. They started to hold 'Garo' as their ethnic identity, representing a distinct community title that makes them different from Bengali ethnic groups but is rooted deeply in their mother country, Bangladesh. Thus, the historical discrimination and politics of identity make them skeptical of any good initiative for their development.

5.4.7 Inaccessibility of Land Rights

Previously, Garo were hunter-gatherers, and through the historical process, they became agricultural communities. However, they depend on the forest to collect food and other means. They treat the forest as their own, and their spiritual beliefs also connect with the forest, but all their rights have been denied by the government, creating a narrative where they have no place. They started their fight for access to the accessibility in the forest but could not do properly. Furthermore, the forest department developed eco-tourism in the forest area, restricting their entry, which was once their only food source. About 49% of Garo respondents highlighted that land rights (including the accessibility rights to forests) were the substantial and pervasive challenges for them in the twenty-first century, which indicates that land-related issues remain a critical concern for the community, impacting their identity, well-being and their position in the larger society.

5.4.8 Others Associated Factors

Several other factors also influenced the ongoing inter-community relationship between Bengali and Garo communities in the study areas, such as different religious beliefs, government-provided extra facilities for Garo communities (quota system in education, job sector), the dominant nature of Bengali people's behavior towards minorities, and inter-community conflict.

Regarding religious differences, Bengali people who live in the study area are mainly Muslim, as 93% of Bengali respondents are Muslim, but about 97% of Garo respondents are Christian. In rural areas, religion is one of the key influential factors that brings friendship or makes enemies. As Christina, Garo has no such restriction on consuming alcohol or pig meat, which Islam strictly prohibited, which led to Bengali community people eating with the Garo community people in one place. Besides, it was one of many reasons they were previously not allowed to eat, sit, or drink anything in the local tea shop or hotel.

Furthermore, the Government of Bangladesh facilitated a quota system for the marginalized community, and Garo enjoys such special facilities in the context of education and job sectors. The Bengali community takes it negatively as if they (Garo) will suppress them socio-economically in the way they educated themselves and received government jobs and other facilities. That type of mindset of the Bengali community offended the Garo community, which also influenced their inter-community relationship. Hence, about 21% of Garo respondents felt that the behavior patterns of Bengali people are dominant, and they always wanted more facilities compared to other communities, as well as that their issues should be a priority in every situation, which also disheartens the Garo community. The way Bengali people talked, walked, and even approached other community members created an unhealthy competition at the societal level that also affected the inter-community relationship.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The constructed cultural boundary formulated by the historical processes shapes the inter-community relationship. The cultural boundaries of both communities are portrayed by their mutual perception of each other, such as the perception of weirdness, clumsiness, otherness, or differences from the Bengali culture. It means the Bengali community perceived itself as a mainstream society with a sophisticated, modern, and rational culture. As a result, there were such prejudices where the Garo treated Bengali as the dominant culture, and they were marginal; the people of the dominant culture felt discomfort eating with the Garo people because their food cultures and religions were different. These perceptions towards the Garo community unconsciously build their images where they construct the cultural boundary that defines their ethnic identity. Hence, by constructing cultural boundaries, they become other parts of the Bengali community, indicating the exclusion of Garo people from the larger society. As Garo became marginal and excluded people, they faced discrimination based on their ethnic identity, which also demotivated them to increase their interaction with the broader society; instead, they became more rigid. On the other hand, as they have had bitter experiences in history and the people of the dominant group did not treat them properly, the Garo community could not trust them wholeheartedly. As the days passed, due to practical reasons, both groups started to interact with each other, but still, a gap constantly affected their interaction. As a result, people of both communities developed interpersonal relationships in public spaces, but their mutual trust did not grow enough to build good ties between them. Therefore, some loopholes affected the entire integration process at the group and individual levels. The study also found several factors that shaped their inter-community relationships, such as prejudices and stereotyped images of the Garo community, ongoing debates on ethnic identity, construction of otherness that excluded Garo from the broader society, history of discrimination, the misconception of socio-cultural conditions, the differences in socio-cultural aspect and rights on land are of them. These factors consciously and unconsciously shaped and sometimes affected the level of interaction, integration, and mutual collaboration between both communities. At present, they realized the need for mutual interaction, integration, and collaboration, which pushed them to increase their interaction at different levels. As a result, their mutual interaction increased, which pushed

them to take the initiative and collaborate. However, they still needed to fully integrate with the larger society and the Bengali community, as most people in the study area could lead towards the Garo (Mandi) community with an interactive approach.

Recommendations

In the basis of respondent's opinions, the following recommendations are given-

The government needs to introduce a new comprehensive program for improving the livelihood of the ethnic minority people that boosts their way of living and other areas that guarantee 'leave no one behind.'

Besides, to reduce inter-community tension and hostility and enhance mutual trust and bonding, the government and development practitioners should address the existing tension, discrimination, and socio-political problems before implementing any initiative that might change the landscape.

Moreover, to ensure the showcasing of diverse cultural traditions by utilizing the existing platforms at both the local and national levels through implementing different public-awareness initiatives such as cultural shows and performing on cable networks, radio, and other media to reduce cultural boundaries.

Additionally, a mixed group of youth platforms should be formed, where both the Garos and Bengalis youth generations equally participate in enhancing the mutual understanding and stereotypes and perceptions towards ethnic minorities.

Correspondingly, the national and local stakeholders also need to take initiatives that reduce the domination of mainstreaming culture and politics over the ethnic minority by ensuring the people participation approaches, which should be bottom-up and reflect the local demands by respecting cultural diversity.

Finally, social scientists, for example, Sociologists and Anthropologists, can be cultural brokers who help create cultural consciousness, build rapport, and develop unity at the inter-community level.

Acknowledgement

First, I am giving my sincere gratitude to the Research and Extension Center of Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University for funding this research project. The author is thankful to all the respondents, people and organizations of the Madhupur Upazila of Tangil District for their assistance and support in completing this study.

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