

**THEY ASK IF WE  
EAT FROGS**

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# THEY ASK IF WE EAT FROGS

## Garo Ethnicity in Bangladesh

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*They Ask if We Eat Frogs* is a revised and updated version of my Ph.D. thesis which I defended in June 2000 at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam and which appeared under the title “‘They Ask if We Eat Frogs’: Social Boundaries, Ethnic Categorization, and the Garo People of Bangladesh”. Although I opted for a new subtitle to the book, I chose to keep the main title the same. To anyone familiar to South Asia, the question whether one eats frogs needs no further explanation. It symbolizes a whole world of prejudices and hierarchical relations between South Asia’s ‘majority populations’ and so-called tribal minorities. ‘Frog eaters’ supposedly stand for the most primitive of South Asians, those who have not learnt ‘civilized’ behaviour. To ask if one eats frogs goes beyond ‘objective’ curiosity. No matter how naive the inquirer, notions of inequality and simplicity underlie the question, and result, at the least, in feelings of embarrassment and uneasiness of the person addressed. In other words, ‘they ask if we eat frogs’ is the briefest possible summary of unequal and uneasy relations that have for decades marked Garo images and self-perceptions, and their relations to many others, non-Garos.

For this project I carried out research between 1993 and 2000 and visited Bangladesh more or less on a yearly basis. Between March 1994 and March 1995, I spent a full year in the field. In that year I established most of my contacts with Garos and others, formed a number of valuable friendships, and experienced a heartwarming hospitality and willingness of Garos to welcome me into their lives and share their thoughts with me.

During the past thirteen years I met numerous people who contributed in all sorts of ways to this outcome. Without their help and support this book would not exist. Hereafter I shall mention a number of them without even the smallest suggestion that the list includes all. My gratitude first goes out to the Garos in Bangladesh who opened their houses and hearts to me; who willingly spoke up and shared their life stories with me; far too many to be mentioned by name. Without their generosity, curiosity, enthusiasm and hospitality this research would not have been possible. I would especially like to thank the villagers of Bibalgree who time and again welcomed me and the

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# GLOSSARY

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The following is a glossary of Bengali, Garo, and English terms as they are used in the text. Most of the terms are Bengali. The Garo terms are indicated with a (G)

Abeng	Division of Garos and language spoken by Garos in the lowlands of Bangladesh (G)
Achik	Lit. hill, or hill man; also name of a division of Garos; language spoken by Garos in the hills (G)
Achu	Grandfather, also used for elderly men, or forefathers (G)
Adivasi	Lit. original inhabitant; commonly used as a synonym for the communities known as tribes
Ajong	Mother's elder sister (in Abeng language) (G)
Ambi	Grandmother, also used for elderly women or foremothers (G)
Asong	Country (G)
Atong	Division of Garos living in Bangladesh; also name of their language (G)
Bangal	Derogatory naming of Bengali (used by Garos)
Bazaar	Marketplace
Borkondazes	Armed retainers
Bormon	Caste title of many Hindu minorities in East Bengal
Chatchi	Kin group; also relative or guest (G)
Choudrie	Landlord; revenue officer
Chu	Rice beer (G)
Dakari.ka	Culture (G)
Desh	Country
Dol	Group (in Bengali language). Here it is also used to refer to particular Garo groups or divisions
Fakir	Muslim mendicant or missionary
Fouzdar	Mughal tax collector

Gari	Car, cart
Ghor jamai	Son-in-law of the house. Husband moves in with his in-laws
Gotro	Clan or tribe
Hartal	General strike
Hat	Market
Hookah	Water pipe
Jat	Most commonly translated as caste; other meanings are endogamous community, religious, social or ethnic group
Jati	See: jat
Jhum	System of cultivation by which jungle on the hills is cut down, generally in the cold season (December–February). The remains of the trees are left until March when they are burned
Jumma	Collective name of the inhabitants of the Chittagong Hill Tracts
Kaka	Paternal uncle
Kushuk	Language or dialect (G)
Lungi	Male circular, ankle-length, skirt-like garment worn by men; it is also worn by Garo women who fasten it differently from men
Ma'chong	Matrilineal kin group (G)
Madong	Lit. married to mother; refers to forbidden marriages within exogamous kinship group (G)
Mahajan	Moneylender
Mahari	See: ma'chong
Mama	Maternal uncle
Mandi	Lit. man, human being; Garos of Bangladesh call themselves Mandi (G)
Mani	Maternal aunt
Marak	Garos are primarily divided into three exogamous groups: Sangma, Marak, and Momin (G)
Midi amua	Sangsarek ritual in which supernatural beings are worshipped (including Gods and lesser spirits) (G)
Mimang kam	Ritual ceremony (G)
Mimang	Spirit (G)
Moghul	Islamic Empire in India from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century
Momin	See: Marak (G)

Mujibite	Follower of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman
Naib	Lit. a deputy, landlord's agent and rent collector
NGO	Non-governmental organization
Nokma	Chief of a clan (G)
Nokna	Garó heiress (G)
Pagol	Mad, lunatic
Pahari	Hill people; also indication of one particular minority
Pan	Betel-nut
Pandit	Hindu priest
Para	Village neighbourhood, hamlet
Pargana	(or <i>pergunnah</i> ) Revenue division; an estate
Partition	Creation in 1947 of two independent states – India, with a Hindu majority, and Pakistan, with a Muslim majority – out of the territory formerly ruled by the British
Pi'sa	Child (G)
Puja	Worship, adoration
Purdah	Lit. seclusion of women, custom of segregating the sexes
Raja	King; sometimes an estate-holder, or a landlord, or a chief
Razakaar	Collaborator with the Pakistan army
Ruri	Garó way to refer to Bengalis, irrespective of their religion
Ryot ( <i>raiyat</i> )	Tenant
Sangma	See: Marak
Sangsarek	Religion of the Garos; believer in the Sangsarek religion
Sannyasi	Hindu mendicant or missionary
Sanskriti/ <i>kriti</i>	Culture
Sarkar	Government
Scheduled Tribes	Tribes listed by the Indian Government after Independence
Shongho	Organization, association
Shomaj	Community
Sthaniyo	Bengali for local (also <i>tanio</i> , <i>taina</i> )
Swaraj	Self-rule
Swarajist	Supporter of self-rule
Taka	Bangladesh currency
Tanka	System of cropsharing whereby a tenant had to pay a fixed quantity of crop to the landlord

Tebhaga	Lit. three shares; movement by sharecroppers for two-thirds of crops from landholders
Thana	Administrative unit in rural Bengal; a police station
Upojati	Lower order of the nation; sub-nation
Wana krita	ceremony in which sacrifice to spirits is made (G)
Wangala	Garo harvest festival (G)
Zamindar	In Bengal, holder of a large estate, usually one farmed by sharecroppers or sub-tenants; created by the British administration as part of a feudal system of revenue collection
Zenana	Seclusion of women; separate quarters for women which men cannot enter (except for close relatives)