

# Ethnic identity and Representation Politics: Interpreting the perception and representation of identity of the Garo (*Mandi*) Community

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**Abstract:** The study tries to highlight the construction process of the Garo community's ethnic identity and the way the people of Garo communities represent themselves in the changing world. It also emphasized the reasons behind their perception and representation, whether their identity persists or changes over time. The study was conducted in the Aronkhola Union of the Modhupur Upazila of Tangail District of Bangladesh. A stratified random sampling technique selected the 75 respondents from the study area. A mixed method approach was followed to complete the study, and semi-structured interviews, KII, IDI, and FGDs were the data collection methods. The significant findings were that the perception of identity and representation of the Garo communities was historically constructed and linked with the historical subjugation, discrimination, and marginalization processes. The construction of ethnogenesis is deeply rooted in the exclusion processes, where dominant culture pushes them to formulate such an identity that helped them to counter the existing prejudices and stereotyped images where Garo was invisible. The Garo communities also emphasized the need for integration and interaction with the larger society to represent themselves in the way they want. As a result, their societal aspects have changed rapidly in the last three decades, shaping their perception and representation of themselves on a larger scale. Today, the Garo communities simultaneously prefer individual identity, which was constructed in recent times through individual efforts, and group identity, which was constructed through ethnic boundaries over history.

**Keywords:** Ethnic identity, Ethnogenesis, Ethnic Boundary, Exclusion, Representation,

## Introduction

In Bangladesh, 27 ethnic groups are officially recognized, and the ethnic population is two million, which constitutes 1.25% of the total population in Bangladesh (IRI, 2020). According to the government census 2022, the ethnic population is 16.50 lakh. However, some activists have claimed that

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the number is much higher than the official number (30 lakh), and the 64 thousand have increased from the previous census report 2011 (Roy & Deshwara, 2023). Hence, the number of ethnic groups and their total population is debatable in Bangladesh. Along with the debate on the number, there is also a controversy on how to recognize them, such as "Adivasi," "Ethnic people/community/Minority," or "Tribal," but officially, they are ethnic minorities. In Bangladesh, ethnic people have been broadly categorized into two groups: one that resides in the plain land, which has been referred to as plain land ethnic groups, and another that lives in hill areas of Bangladesh, specifically in the CHT area (IRI, 2020). The Hill Tracts ethnic people live in the southeastern region of Bangladesh, and plain land ethnic people predominantly live in the northern region of the three Divisions (Rajshahi, Rangpur, and Mymensingh) in Bangladesh (IRI, 2020). In the context of plain land ethnic groups, Garo, Santal, Hajong, and Manipuri Kashi are among them. This research mainly concentrates on the Garo community of the Madhupur Upazila from the Tangile District of Dhaka Division.

According to the BBS, the Garo, Banshi, and Koch are the main ethnic groups in Tangail district (BBS, 2023), and the number of ethnic people in Madhupur Upazila was 13,600 (BBS, 2023). However, Garo is a significant ethnic minority in Madhupur Upazila of the Tangile District. The Garo people are broadly Mongoloid and live in Bangladesh and India, but their ancestors live in the northwestern Chinese province, which is Xinjiang (Jengcham, 1994). Several thousand years ago, they left that place and first moved to Tibet. They finally migrated to the north part of Bangladesh and India's north hill tracts about 4500 years ago (Jengcham, 1994). Compared to other ethnic categories, Garo communities have improved education and careers like doctors, teachers, engineers, etc. Garo-educated persons work in government and non-governmental organizations and business enterprises. Hence, the economically insolvent Garos were involved in wage labouring work to make a living. In Bangladesh, the Garo communities are an utterly powerless and poor indigenous group, still striving for protected status after more than four decades of independence.

In the case of recognition, there was a debate regarding the total number of ethnic communities and their population. Besides, the Government of Bangladesh usually acknowledged them as ethnic communities. However, often, the ethnic people and the activists recognized them as an indigenous community, which indicated a dilemma regarding identity, and the Garo community was not exceptional. Furthermore, they referred to themselves as

Mandi; others, especially Bengalis, used the Garo term to indicate them, and the Garo communities felt that Garo was such a title imposed by outsiders and had a political agenda to exclude them from their fundamental and constitutional rights (Bal, 2007). Historically, people of the Garo community experienced several types of discrimination from the British period to Bangladesh, which led to the construction of their ethnic identity and affected how the Garos interacted with people of other ethnic groups (Bal, 2007). Hence, previous bitter experiences, ethnic discrimination, and the construction of the Uni-cultural and Uni-language nation-state make them insecure and vulnerable and gradually marginalize them, which directly affects their common perception regarding their ethnic identity and the way they represent themselves. The present study tries to highlight the way people of the Garo community constructed their perception of ethnic identity, the reasons for their portrayed perceived identity, and the representation politics accordingly.

### **Literature Review**

Jalil and Oakkas (2012) demonstrated that the traditional cultural practices and family patterns have changed rapidly due to increased interaction with the mainstreaming Bengali communities. The authors also highlighted the influences of mass conversion from ancient religion to Christianity and the impact of the modernization process on every aspect of the sociocultural way of living (Jalil & Oakkas, 2012). Bal (2007) analyzes the historical context that influenced the construction of ethnic identity as a construction of ethnogenesis. Hence, the author also highlighted how the Garo community and their social and cultural way of living have been transformed, reshaping the ethnic identity of the Garo communities (Bal, 2007). Akhter and Rahman (2020) found that the societal aspect of the Mandi communities in Tangail District has shifted gradually, influencing their traditional cultural practices through the interaction with the Bengali communities who lived beside them. The authors also emphasized that nationwide guidelines and legal institutions were needed to ensure constitutional and fundamental human rights (Akhter & Rahman, 2020).

On the other hand, Das, Islam and Hasan (2005) highlighted the social and psychological facets of the Bangladeshi Garos who live chiefly in the north part in Bangladesh. The Authors identified the different types of aspects that shaped the ethnic identity of the Garo community and the way Garo communities interacted, integrated, and collaborated with the Bengali communities that also simultaneously not only constructed the ethnic identity

but also made a marker that differentia them from the non-Garo communities. The authors also demonstrated that there was a trick between individual identity and group identity. In the context of individual identity, people construct interpersonal identity in their daily lives and maintain different types of group identity simultaneously, shaping social relations with other ethnic communities (Das, Islam, & Hasan, 2005).

In 2013, Nayak & Singha conducted a fascinating study that examined the way the youths in Meghalaya were involved in the military and violence, its causes, and the consequences of demanding a separate state as they felt the people of Garo community in India have become deprived of their fundamental rights (Nayak & Singha, 2013). Kubi (2012) also demonstrated how the people of Garo communities were denied access to the forest, which they claimed as their property, as they have been highly dependent on it for generations. The author also identified several factors shaping not only the interaction with the other communities but also negatively affecting the preservation of the Modhupur Sal forest. The research also emphasized a comprehensive government policy that ensures the equal participation of the local community in Sal forest preservation (Kubi, 2012).

Recently, Basid and Sudha (2023) highlighted the way state territorial boundaries between India and East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) affected the overall intracommunity connectivity, socio-economic conditions, and daily lives that shaped their social, cultural, and economic lives, which brought differences between the two Garo communities in this region (Basid & Sudha, 2023). Alam and Rahman (2017) conducted a study on land grabbing impacts on ethnic communities in the Sylhet region, where they covered several ethnic communities, and Garo was one of them. It found that mainstreaming people, business people, and often the government acquire land that makes the people landless and vulnerable, which is also linked with their socio-cultural identity (Alam & Rahman, 2017). Hölzle (2022) inclusively demonstrated the adaptive strategies of small ethnic farmers in Bangladesh, where the author illustrated their way of life and aspirations for the future. As a part of this research, the author covered the dynamic relations of forest dwellers in the Madhupur forest with the Forest Department of Bangladesh through historical processes and tried to identify the chief reasons behind the disputes between the Garo communities and the Forest Department in the Madhupur forest (Hölzle, 2022).

The literature mentioned above reviews sometimes focused on the traditional way of life and century-old sociocultural aspects of the Garo community, and other times focused on the historical processes of the construction of the ethnic identity of the Garos or *Mandi* community who lived in Bangladesh over the century. This research demonstrated the perception of the ethnic identity of the Garos or *Mandis* and how people of this ethnic group of Bangladesh in the study area represent their identity in contemporary times.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study followed the constructionism theory to analyze how the people of the Garo community perceived and how the Garo communities tried to represent themselves in front of the world, linked with the question of ethnicity. There were two types of theories to theorize ethnicity; one was primordial, and the other was constructivist. Primordialism refers to ethnicity as if it is founded on deeply ingrained, long-standing group cohesiveness, with common claims to blood, soil, language, and mythologized past. For them, ethnic groupings have genetically bent individuals, and these types of perceptions have been rejected due to the nature of racial indications. On the other hand, according to constructionism, ethnicity is not the continuation of outdated tribalism. Instead, it is an ensemble identity generated by either a prevailing culture or a community, most often as an exchange of actions of both. This study is positioned with the constructivist perspective, emphasizing that ethnicity is constructed contextually and constantly changed regarding the situation, specifically cultural constructivism and radical historicism perspectives.

Cultural constructivism highlights the shared symbols and practices that fundamentally establish the group cohesion that is reproduced socially (Lewellen, 2002). Radical historicism emphasized the historical context that ultimately created the ethnic identity through the division of labor, class struggles, and class consciousness over a long period. This approach is mainly a Marxist approach, which highlights the material conditions and mode of production to analyze the ethnicity of any particular group (Lewellen, 2002). This study also followed the relationalism perspective to understand the ethnic identity of Garo communities in the 21st century. This perspective focuses on identity as not a static thing. Instead, it is a dynamic relationship, and defining ethnicity is difficult. Ethnicity originated through inequality between groups and has historical links. It reveals itself in the complexity of daily life, particularly in confrontations between the ethnic community and the nation's dominant authority.

### Research Objective

The main objective of this research was to address how people of the Garo communities have conceptualized the idea of identity and how the Garo communities have represented themselves recently.

The study tries to address the perception of the identity of the Garo communities, the way they represent themselves, the reasons behind their perception and representation, and finally, to know whether their identity and representation are static or changed over time.

### Research Methodology

The study followed a mixed-method (qualitative and quantitative) approach. A stratified random sampling technique was used, and semi-structured KII, IDI, and FGDs were the data collection methods of the study. Two villages (Gayra and Jalchatra) of Aronkhola Union of Modhupur Upazila from the Tangail District were the study area of this research. The total sample size was 75, where 32 were male and the rest were female. Furthermore, several articles, books, and journals were reviewed and used as secondary data for this study. The SPSS software was used to analyze the quantitative part of the data. The qualitative data were analyzed thematically and narratively.

### Study Area

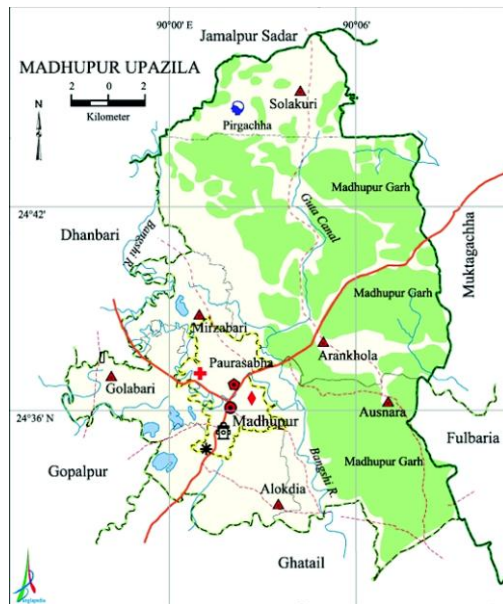


Figure 1: Map of the Study Area

Two villages from the Aronkhola Union from the Modhupur Upazila of the Tangail District were selected for the study area: Gayra and Jalchatra villages. These villages were selected as the study area because both Bengali and Garo communities lived in these villages for generations. As a result, the socio-cultural patterns of the Garo communities are changed, shaping the perception and representation of the ethnic identity accordingly.

**Findings of the Study**

**Socio-demographic Status of the Respondents**

The sample size of this study was 75, where 32 (43%) were male, the rest (43 out of 75 or 57%) were female, about 97% were Christian, and only 3% were Hindu. About 40% of respondents (30 out of 75) were 41-60 years old age group, 36% of them were 26-40 years old, and 17% were 15-25 years old, but only 3% were above 75 years old (Ahmed, F. & Papul, S., 2023).

Table1: Socio-demographic information of the Respondents:

Variables	Categories	Frequencies	Percentages (%)
Sex	Male	32	43%
	Female	43	57%
Religion	Christian	73	97%
	Hindus	2	3%
Age Group	15-25 Years Old	13	17%
	26-40 Years Old	27	36%
	41-60 Years Old	30	40%
	60-75 Years Old	3	4%
	Above 75 Years Old	2	3%
Education	No Institutional Education	16	21%
	Primary	21	28%
	Secondary School	29	39%
	Higher Secondary	5	7%
	Graduate	1	1%
	Masters/Degree	3	4%
Occupation	Business	4	5%
	Farmer	25	33%
	Housewife	31	41%
	Govt. Official	4	5%

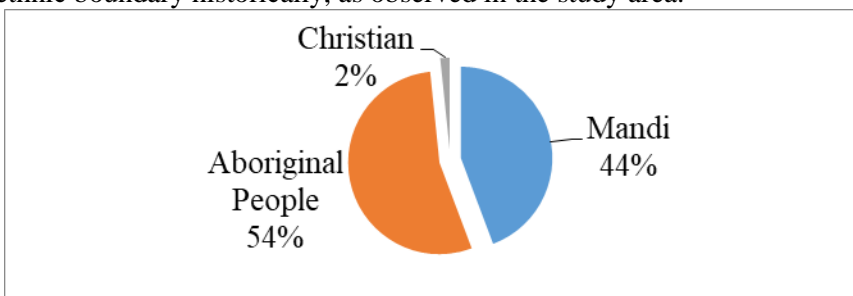
	Politician	1	1%
	Student	7	9%
	Job holder	2	3%
	Teacher	1	1%
Marital Status	Married	56	75%
	Unmarried	17	23%
	Widow	2	3%

*Note.* From “Assessing the Inter-community Relationship between Bengali and Mandi (Garo): Interpreting the Dynamic Interaction in the Twenty-first Century,” by Ahmed, F. & Papul, S., 2023, Journal of Governance and Development, Vol-1, Issue-3, ISSN 2710-1207, 191-208. Copyright 2023 by the Journal of Governance and Development, JKKNIU.

Regarding educational status, 39% (29 out of 75) completed their secondary certificate exam, 28% were primarily passed, and 21% had no institutional education. Only 1% graduated, and 4% completed their masters/degree. A significant portion of respondents, which was 41%, were homemakers, as a large number of the respondents were female. About 33% of the respondents were farmers and entirely male, followed by students, who were only 9%. Regarding marital status, predominantly (75%) of them are married, followed by unmarried 23%, and only 3% of respondents were widows, respectively (Ahmed, F. & Papul, S., 2023).

### The Concept of Identity

All the respondents indicated that identity was how they differentiated themselves from others and what other communities preferred to call them. The concept of identity is also attributed to their culture that constructed the ethnic boundary historically, as observed in the study area.

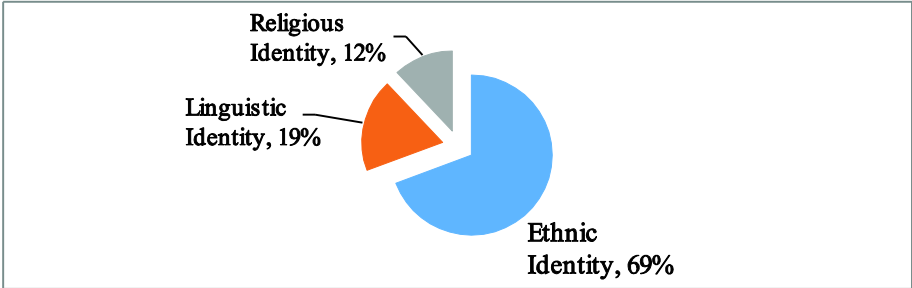


**Figure 2:** Perceived Identity

About 54% of respondents perceived them as aboriginal people, 44% of them mentioned that they are *Mandi*, and only 2% acknowledged themselves as Christian, which indicated that still now, a large number of Garo (*Mandi*) people consider themselves as aboriginal people, followed by *Mandi* respectively.

**Preferring Identity of the Garo Community**

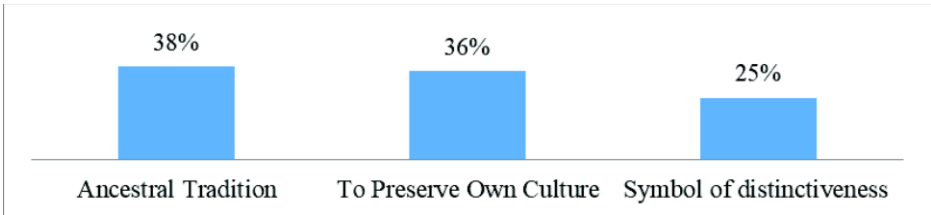
Most of the informants from the Garo community who participated in this study identified themselves as *Mandi*.



**Figure 3:** Preferring Identity

Data analysis of this figure shows that the data illustrates the diversity of identity preferences within the community, including ethnic, linguistic, and religious dimensions. These preferences can profoundly impact individuals' values, cultural practices, and interactions with other community members. About 69% of respondents preferred them as *Mandi* (ethnic identity), and 19% also preferred their linguistic identity, which was also interlinked with their ethnic identity. Only 12% of the respondents mentioned that they preferred religious identity when someone asked them accordingly. "We prefer to identify as ethnic. We feel honored because we have our language and culture" (FGD-1).

**Reason for Preferred Identity**



**Figure 4:** Reason for preferred Identity

Most respondents, making up 38%, cited "Ancestral Tradition" as their reason for providing a particular identity. It suggests that a connection to historical and ancestral practices and traditions influences their choice of identification. A substantial proportion, at 36%, expressed a desire to "Preserve Own Culture" as the reason for their chosen identity. It implies a commitment to maintaining and safeguarding their cultural heritage. A noteworthy percentage, at 25%, indicated "Symbol of distinctiveness" as their reason for providing a particular identity, which suggests that a significant portion of them consciously prefer how to identify themselves. It also indicates that people of Garo communities have a sense of being ethnic, which led them to develop the idea of ethnogenesis accordingly.

### **Perceptions of the Chosen Identity Representation**

The data highlights diverse perceptions within the community regarding their chosen identity representation. While some members feel that it falsifies or misrepresents their identity, others believe it affects their access to facilities. Additionally, a smaller group suspects political motivations behind the representation. Understanding these perceptions is vital for addressing community concerns, ensuring that identity representation accurately reflects the community's values and beliefs, and addressing potential issues related to access to resources. The data provides insights into how the community perceived the chosen representation of their identity.



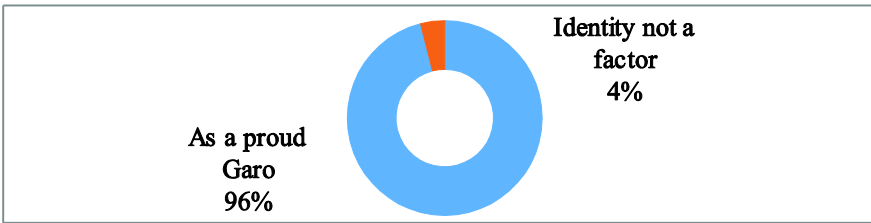
**Figure 5:** Perceptions of the Chosen Identity Representation

A notable portion, representing 28% of responses, believed the chosen identity representation falsifies their real identity. It indicates that a significant group within the community feels that their current representation distorts or misrepresents their true identity. A slightly more significant proportion, at 38%, perceived that the chosen representation did not align with their real identity. It suggests that many community members view their current representation as incongruent with their genuine identity.

A substantial segment, comprising 21% of responses, felt that the chosen identity representation leads to removing facilities they should receive. It indicates that some community members believe their representation negatively affects access to essential resources or services. A minority, at 13%, suspects that political motives drive the chosen identity representation, which implies that a limited number of respondents believe that political agendas may be associated with the representation of their identity.

**Representation of Garo Identity**

The data highlights a strong sense of pride and identification with the Garo identity among most community members. This pride reflects the cultural and ethnic significance of the Garo identity within the community. Understanding how the community represents its identity is valuable for promoting and preserving cultural heritage, fostering a sense of belonging, and celebrating diversity within the community.



**Figure 6:** Representation of Garo Identity

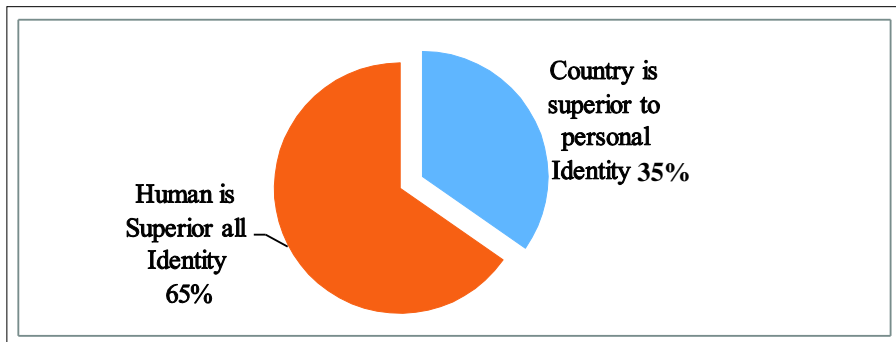
A significant and overwhelming majority, comprising 96% of responses, viewed their Garo identity with pride. It indicates a strong and positive connection to their ethnic and cultural identity. It suggests that most

community members have a deep sense of pride and identity linked to their Garo heritage. It is essential to highlight that the respondents used the Garo or Mandi title interchangeably, and they meant the Mandi identity but used Garo as Bengali people are habituated to this terminology.

A tiny minority, at 4%, considered that ethnic or cultural factors do not influence their identity as people. A limited number of respondents may prioritize other aspects of their identity or perceive identity as less relevant to their self-representation. This data underscores the community's deep pride and identification with the Garo identity. While a minority views identity as less influential, the overwhelming majority holds their Garo identity with pride, emphasizing its importance in their self-representation.

### Reasons behind this Representation

The data highlights that while a significant portion of the community values the country as superior to personal identity, the majority places the supremacy of humanity above all other forms of identity. Understanding the reasons for the chosen representation of identity is significant for appreciating the community's values, beliefs, and how they perceive their role within a broader context.

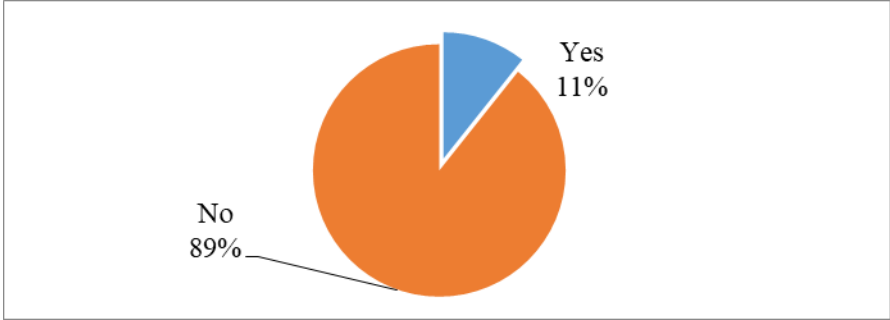


**Figure 7:** Reasons behind this Representation

About 35% of respondents believed that their chosen representation of identity is based on the belief that the country is superior to personal identity. It indicates that a substantial portion of the community prioritizes their national identity over their individual or personal identity. The majority, comprising 65% of responses, agreed that humanity is superior to all identities. It suggests that most respondents view their identity within the context of their shared humanity, valuing this common identity above other considerations.

**Whether they happy with this Representation**

The data underscores that most community members do not feel satisfied with their current representation of identity, while only a tiny percentage expressed contentment. Understanding the community's level of satisfaction with their representation of identity is crucial for identifying areas of concern, addressing discrepancies, and potentially working towards a more inclusive and accurate representation that aligns with their preferences.

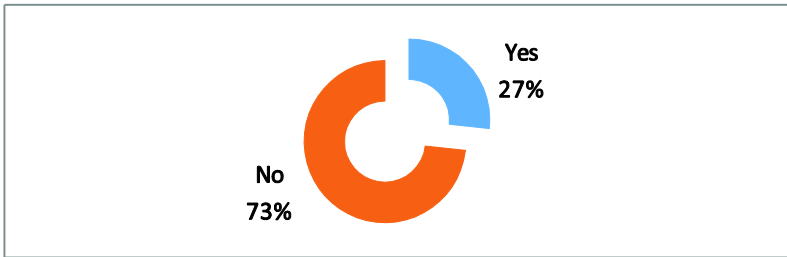


**Figure 8:** Whether they happy with this representation

About 11% of respondents expressed satisfaction with their chosen representation of identity, which suggests that some community members are content with how their identity is represented. The overwhelming majority, 89% of responses, indicated dissatisfaction with their chosen representation of identity. It indicates that many community members need to be more content with how their identity is currently represented.

**Whether they notice any Initiative to Rebuild Identity**

The data explores whether there are any initiatives within the community aimed at rebuilding their identity and the sources of these initiatives.

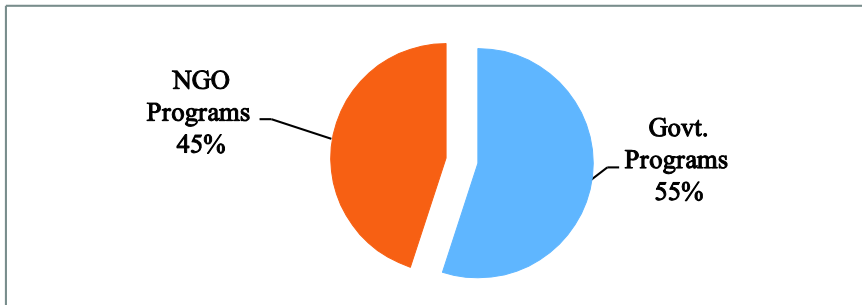


**Figure 9:** Whether they initiate to Rebuild Identity

About 27% of respondents indicated that there are indeed initiatives within the community focused on rebuilding their identity. It suggests that a segment of the community is actively engaged in efforts to reestablish and redefine their identity. The majority, comprising 73% of responses, stated that there are no such initiatives within the community. It indicates that a significant portion of the community still needs to initiate efforts to rebuild or redefine their identity actively.

### **Whether they notice any other forces that initiated to Rebuilding Identity**

Of those who indicated the presence of rebuilding identity initiatives, the majority (55%) identified government programs as a source for these initiatives. It implies that a significant portion of the community relies on government-supported programs as they are under-developed. The government wanted to rebuild its image, often linked with anti-nationalism. As a part of such initiatives, the ruling party wanted to gain political support in the community areas and provide them with extra financial and non-financial support. It increased the interaction with the older adults and the younger generation, giving a sense of integration (FGD-1). Hence, the government initiative for rebuilding images implicitly linked with the state-sponsored cultural homogenization approaches where the state deliberately wanted to construct an ideal image for their entire citizen.



**Figure 10: Who takes identity rebuilding imitative**

On the other hand, a considerable proportion (45%) of respondents who mentioned rebuilding identity initiatives identified NGOs as the source of these programs. It indicated that people of the Garo community often rely on NGOs for financial support and socio-economic development. As a result, the NGOs wanted the people of the Garo community to raise their voices, educate themselves, and portray themselves the way they wanted. These development agendas also connected with the Universalist or

transnationalism approaches where they emphasized constructing images that will be out of the state-sponsored initiatives that indicate a tension between the government and development partners and activists who shared common goals that eventually linked with global governance and transnational discourses.

### The Challenges faced regarding Ethnic Identity

Under these critical terms, the data highlights that the community faces multiple challenges related to their identity, including accommodation, land, enculturation, shortages of fundamental rights, and ethnic discrimination.

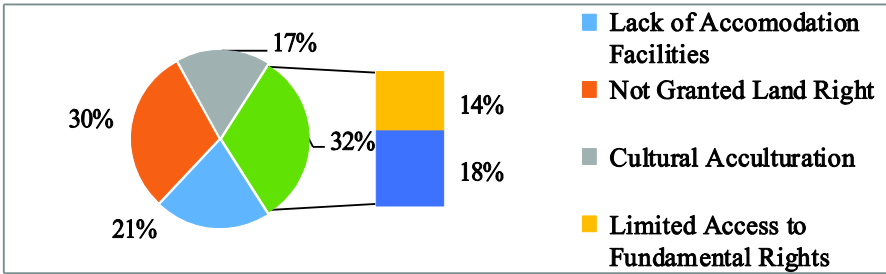


Figure 11: The Challenges faced regarding Ethnic Identity

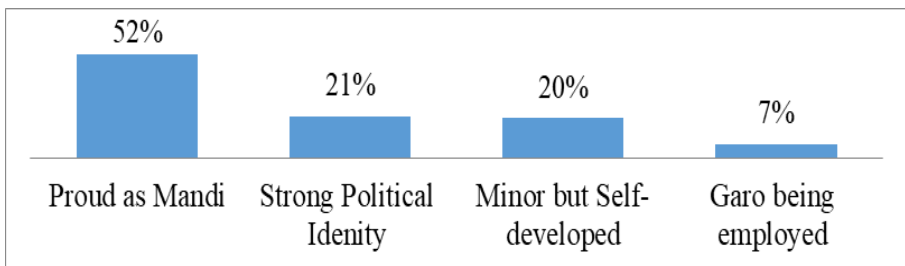
A significant proportion, representing 21% of responses, identified accommodation as a challenge against their identity. Most of the respondents stated that a portion of the community faces housing and living arrangements issues that may impact their identity. As highlighted by 30% of respondents, land emerges as a substantial challenge. Land-related challenges can encompass land ownership, access, or disputes, significantly affecting the community's identity. Acculturation is identified as a challenge by 17% of respondents. A portion of the community perceives difficulties maintaining their cultural practices, traditions, and language, which can be a crucial aspect of their identity.

A considerable segment, at 14%, identified shortages of fundamental rights as a challenge to their identity. It implies that some community members feel their fundamental rights need to be adequately upheld, impacting their sense of identity and belonging. Ethnic discrimination is noted as a challenge by 18% of responses. It indicated that a significant portion of the community believes they face discrimination based on their ethnicity, which can affect their identity and social inclusion, making them closer to transnationalism

because they highlighted such issues critically to create pressure towards the state to ensure the protection of the ethnic minorities.

### Whether hesitate or fear to Portray Garo Identity

The data explores whether there is any hesitation or fear outside the community to identify as Garo and the reasons behind this hesitation openly. The data emphasizes a notable sense of pride, political engagement, perceived development, and contributions to the larger society within the community. These factors collectively contribute to the absence of hesitation or fear when openly identifying as Garo (*Mandi*). The data shows that none of the respondents (0%) reported hesitation or fear when openly identifying as Garo (*Mandi*). It implies that most of the community is comfortable and unhesitant in acknowledging their *Mandi* identity. Regarding the reasons for this lack of hesitation or fear, the following key points emerge:

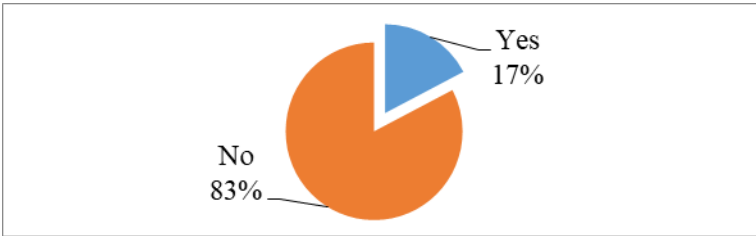


**Figure 12:** Reasons of no hesitation or fear to portray Garo identity

A significant portion of respondents (52%) expressed no hesitation or fear because they felt proud of their identity, which suggests that a strong sense of pride in their cultural and ethnic identity drives their openness. A notable segment, 21%, cited their politically solid identity as a reason for not hesitating or fearing to openly identify as Garo or *Mandi*. The community's political engagement and representation may contribute to their confidence. About 20% of respondents said they do not hesitate because they consider themselves a minority but still developed. It indicates that the community's perceived development and progress contribute to their self-assuredness in openly identifying as Garo (*Mandi*). Only 7% of them reported that their children are employed by the government and the country, which reduces any hesitation or fear regarding their identity, which suggests that the community's integration and contributions to the broader society play a role in their comfort with their identity.

### Whether new Generation's Hesitate regarding Ethnic Identity

This section presents information on the self-identification of the new generation of informants. This data shows that most informants did not feel embarrassed to identify themselves as *Mandi*. Whether the new generation hesitated or feared when it came to openly identifying as *Mandi*. The data reflects a mixed perception among the new generation, with a significant portion expressing no hesitation, while a minority acknowledges some hesitation or fear regarding their identity.

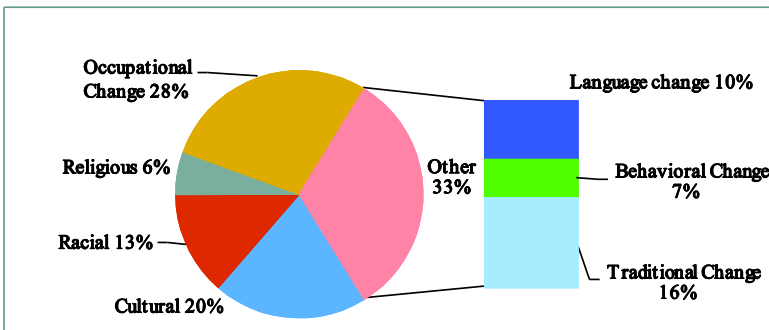


**Figure 13:** Whether new Generation's Hesitate regarding ethnic Identity

A notable minority, comprising 17% of responses, indicated that the new generation does experience some hesitation or fear when openly identifying as *Mandi*, which suggests that a portion of the younger community members may not be as open or confident in asserting their *Mandi* identity. Most respondents (83%) reported that the new generation did not feel the same hesitation or fear. It indicates that most of the new generation within the community is comfortable and unhesitating in identifying as Garo or *Mandi*.

### Overall Changes occurred in terms of Identity

The data underscores that identity transformation is a multifaceted phenomenon within the community, encompassing various aspects such as culture, race, religion, occupation, language, behaviour, and tradition.



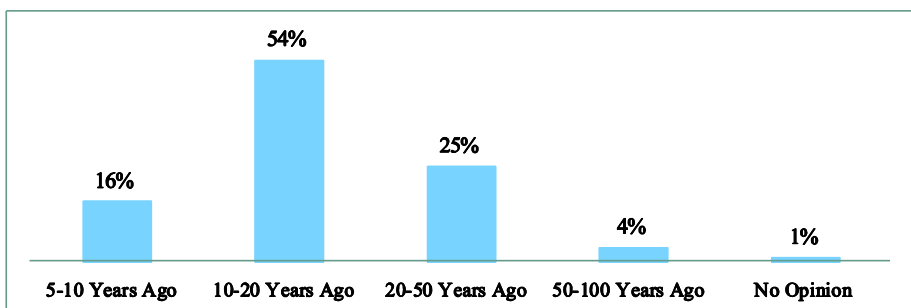
**Figure 14:** Overall Changes occurred in terms of Identity

About 20% of respondents identified cultural changes as a prevalent aspect of identity transformation. 20% of respondents explore that many community members perceive changes in their cultural practices, values, and traditions. A substantial but slightly smaller segment, at 13%, indicated racial changes in their identity. It implies that there is recognition of shifts in how the community is racially categorized or perceived. Only 6% reported religious changes as part of their identity transformation. 6% of respondents said that some community members perceive shifts in religious practices, beliefs, or affiliations. A significant and the largest segment, 28% of respondents, highlighted occupational changes as a critical aspect of identity transformation. It implies that many individuals in the community have experienced shifts in their occupations or work-related identities. A notable but smaller group, at 10%, acknowledged changes in language as part of their identity transformation. They said that shifts in linguistic identity are recognized within the community. Another minor proportion, at 7%, identified behavioural changes as an aspect of their identity transformation. It implies that some community members recognize shifts in their behaviour or conduct.

Finally, 16% of respondents perceived traditional changes in their identity. 15.7% of respondents said many community members recognize shifts in traditional customs, practices, or values. Understanding these changes is essential for the community to navigate identity-related challenges, preserve cultural heritage, and adapt to evolving social and economic dynamics.

**When Self-identity Begins started to Change**

This study explained how many years the level of self-identity changes. However, most of the informants reported that their level of personal change began within the last 10-20 years.

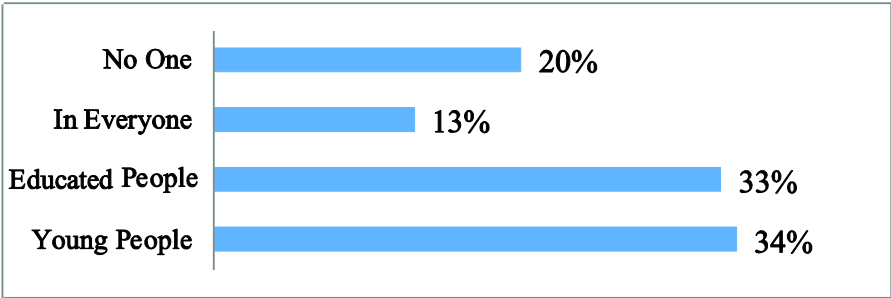


**Figure 15:** When Self-identity Begins started to Change

A diagram of the dataset shows that 16% of respondents felt that their identity was changing between 5 and 10 years, and 54% of informants felt that personal change had started 10 to 20 years ago or during this period. About 25% of informants felt that their identity had started to change between 20-50 years, and only 4% of informants felt that their identity had started to change 50-100 years ago. The number of informants who did not comment on when their change occurred was 1% of the total informants.

**People Who Are Mostly Changing Their Self-Identity**

Analysis of the data in this diagram shows that a significant percentage, representing 34% of the responses, suggested that the "New Generation" is perceived as the group most commonly changing their self-identity. It indicates that younger individuals in the community are often viewed as more open to self-identity changes.



**Figure 16:** People Who Are Mostly Changing Their Self-Identity

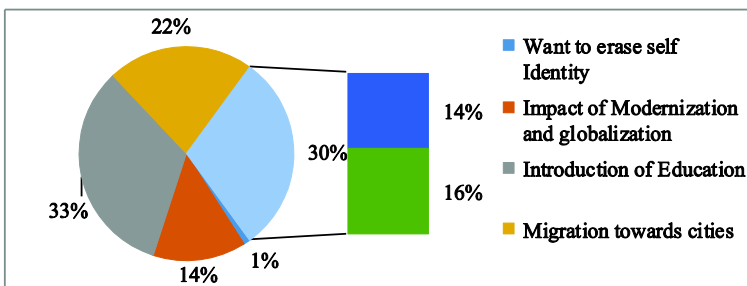
The largest group, comprising 33%, identified "Educated People" as primarily changing their self-identity, which implies that individuals with higher levels of education are seen as more likely to alter their self-identity. A noteworthy percentage, at 13%, suggested that self-identity changes are observed across all age groups or categories, indicating that self-identity changes are not limited to specific groups. A substantial proportion, making up 20%, indicated that no change in self-identity was observed among any particular group. It suggests that self-identity remains relatively stable across the community.

The data reflects the community's perceptions of which groups or categories of individuals are most likely to change their self-identity. It highlights the potential influence of generational differences and education in shaping self-identity. Understanding these perceptions is essential for recognizing the

dynamics of self-identity within the community and the factors that may contribute to self-identity changes. It also offers insights into the role of education and generational shifts in shaping self-identity.

### Reason of Changing Identity

Analyzing the data from the participants in this study revealed how many factors were the prominent influencers behind their identity change, which includes the impact of globalization and modernization, familiarity with modern education, rural-to-urban migration, adverse reactions to socio-economic transformation, the impact of capitalism, and negative changes in self-identity that indicated the influences of global governance and transnational forces regarding the reasons of changing identity.



**Figure 17:** Reason of Changing Identity

About 14% of respondents felt that their identity has changed due to the impact of modernization and globalization. The informant thinks exposure to global influences and modernization processes impacts how individuals perceive and shape their identities. A large group of informants, making up 33%, identified the "Introduction of Education" as a primary reason for changing self-identity. It implies that educational opportunities and exposure play a substantial role in self-identity changes.

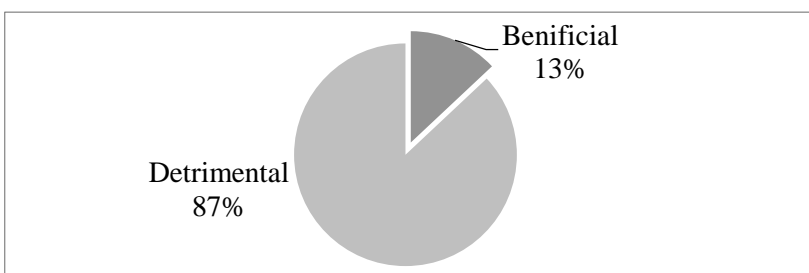
A notable percentage of informants, at 22%, attributed self-identity changes to "Migration towards Cities." It indicates that urbanization and shifting from rural to urban environments influence how individuals perceive their identities. A portion of respondents, also at 14%, claimed the "Side Effect of Socio-Cultural Reformation" as a reason for self-identity changes. They say that societal and cultural reforms can impact self-identity dynamics. A substantial proportion, representing 16%, cited the "Impact of Capitalism" as a reason for self-identity changes. It implies that economic factors and market-driven influences may contribute to self-identity alterations. A tiny minority of respondents, at 1%, views a "Negative Image of Self Identity" as a reason for self-identity changes. They say that self-perception and self-esteem play a role in self-identity dynamics.

In the context of perception regarding ethnic identity and whether their identity changed over time, a large number of respondents (54%) perceived their identity as aboriginal, followed by Mandi, 44%, which indicated that they wanted the recognition as aboriginal, but the government denied recognizing it. Therefore, they were also perceived as Mandi, but in most cases, people called them Garo or tribal, which was also a denial of their rightful identity. In recent times, Christian churches have tried to rebuild their identity as Christians, not either ethnic minorities or Sansakers, which also created jeopardies regarding their identity. The study implies a clear gap between stakeholders regarding identity, where one side preferred their traditional identity. However, the outside wanted to call them differently, and people on both sides chose their positions based on their belongingness. So, there was an ongoing debate on the identity of the Garo communities among the Garo communities, Government agencies, and Christian missionaries in the study area.

However, regarding identity change, a small number of respondents (17%) felt that their identity was under threat. It claimed that the younger generation is mainly influenced by the modern education system and lifestyles that led them to leave their traditional profession, which they carried over a generation. As a result of professional shift and migration to cities, younger generations are reluctant regarding their identity. They also mentioned that the changes are ongoing processes that started over a century ago, but they acknowledged that they felt that they all went through rapid changes in the last two decades. Therefore, they have witnessed a rapid change in people's perception of their identity, making them sceptical towards the external factors and any changes that might diminish their traditional culture, ultimately creating a loophole where their people might not prefer their identity in the upcoming days.

### **Perception of Changes in Identity as Beneficial or Detrimental**

The data explores how community members perceived the changes in their identity, specifically whether they considered them beneficial or detrimental.



**Figure 18:** Perception of Changes in Identity as Beneficial or Detrimental

A small number of respondents (13%) believed that the changes in their identity were beneficial, which suggests that a portion of the community perceives the identity transformations as favourable and advantageous. On the other hand, about 87% of the respondents felt that the changes in their identity were detrimental.

It indicates that a significant portion of the community views these changes as negative or harmful to their overall identity and well-being. The data highlights a prevalent sentiment within the community, with most respondents expressing concern or dissatisfaction regarding the changes in their identity. The significant majority perceives these changes as detrimental, indicating a sense of loss, challenge, or adversity concerning their evolving identity.

**Beneficial and Detrimental Aspects of Identity Changes**

The data reveals that while the majority of respondents perceive the identity changes as detrimental, there is a minority that recognizes certain positive aspects. These include the community's alignment with modern society and the growing awareness against superstition.

**Table 2: Beneficial and Detrimental Aspects of Identity Changed**

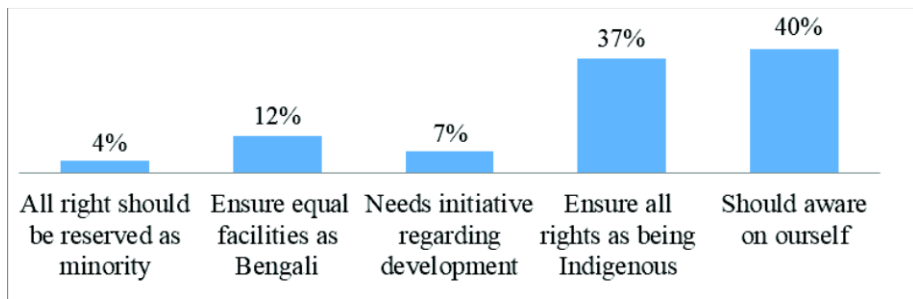
<b>Detrimental Aspects</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Beneficial Aspects</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Language are disappearing	19	Society moving forwards	4
Community bonding are diminishing	21	Aware against superstition	9
Traditions and culture are disappearing	47		13
Total	87		
			<b>100</b>

In the context of beneficial aspects, about 13% of respondents mentioned that the ongoing changes regarding identities are beneficial, whereas 9% of them felt that it raises awareness of superstition. The rest (4%) felt that their community was moving forward. It indicated that abandoning superstitious beliefs and practices is a positive transformation, and increased awareness and rejection of superstitions are beneficial aspects of identity changes, illustrating the influence of development agencies in bringing about such changes.

On the other hand, a vast majority of respondents (87%) perceived the identity changes as detrimental, with specific concerns related to the disappearance of traditions and culture, diminishing community bonds, and language loss. The most prevalent detrimental aspect, reported by 47% of respondents, is the disappearance of the community's traditions and culture, which suggests that many community members are concerned about losing their cultural heritage. A substantial but smaller segment, at 21%, perceived the diminishing sense of bonding within their communities as a detrimental aspect of the identity changes. It implies that some community members are worried about the erosion of social cohesion. About 19% of them are concerned about the disappearance of their language as a detrimental aspect of identity changes. It highlights the importance of language preservation.

**Opinions regarding Ethnic Identity are being changed**

The data explores various suggestions regarding the ongoing preferred identity changes. Respondents were asked to express their viewpoints on how these changes should be addressed or what they believe should be done.



**Figure 19:** Opinion regarding addressing the changes of Ethnic Identity

A significant portion of respondents, which was 40%, mentioned that they should aware of preserving century-old cultural heritage, which indicates the sensitization regarding cultural preservation for the younger generation, and 37% of them mentioned that all their rights are also needed to ensure as being indigenous people that reflects a desire for specific rights and support tailored to their unique identity. About 12% of respondents felt that the government should ensure equal facilities as Bengali, which implies a desire for equality and inclusion. Only 3% emphasized that all constitutional rights should be reserved for minorities. It indicates a desire for comprehensive preservation and protection of their rights within the community. It also demonstrated the existence of simultaneous modernization efforts from both the government and development practitioners in the study areas.

## Discussion

The direct incorporation of Garo areas by the British Administration, the establishment of Christian Missionaries in 1860/the 1870s, mass migration in Pakistan period and 1971, the way Garos lost their property and fellow citizens in 1964 and after the liberation war 1971, the construction of Bangladesh as Uni-cultural and Uni-language nation-state, and the inaccessibility in the forest areas led them towards the construction of ethnogenesis that pushes them to revive their identity and links them with their lost tradition (Bal, 2007). It is also noticed in this research that the ethnic identity of Garo communities has been constructed over a while as a reaction against the mainstreaming dominant culture and politics. Regarding the constructionist perspective, the identity must be interpreted by considering the context because the situation pushes to reestablish forgotten traditions to strengthen their societal position. This study implies that the ethnic identity of Garo communities did not persist but rather changed over time, and people of Garo communities consciously constructed their own identity that differentiated them from the Indian Garo communities as well as linked them with their tradition, culture and history.

In terms of individual perception, they perceived themselves as a *Mandi* or sometimes aboriginal based on the situation. Most of the time, they preferred their ethnic identity to be portrayed outside their community. They preferred these types of identity to construct a link with their ancestral tradition, preserve their century-old culture and distinguish themselves from the Bengali community who lived beside them in the study area. Therefore, the respondents did not appreciate how Bengali or other people called them Garo because they felt it was a political agenda that wanted to hide their identity. It did not represent them correctly, falsifying their true nature; they became excluded from mainstream history. It also found that the mainstreaming culture and politics intentionally draw such images where Bengali is known, and Garo (rest of the ethnic minorities) are unknown ones; Bengali is the rational, sophisticated, and developed culture to compare the Garo who are irrational, unsophisticated, and underdeveloped one. Hence, there was a pattern of representation of other cultures that are different from the dominant culture where their (others voice) voices are muted and forced to represent themselves accordingly. For example, they perceived them as a *Mandi* people. However, all textbooks, government official documents, and even Bengali neighbourhoods called them Garo, which does not historically and accurately represent them, which indicates the nation-state sponsored initiative of rebuilding images which not only hesitated towards the minority

rights but also wanted to homogenize them socio-culturally to make them ideal citizen alike the majority one.

Hence, the construction of ethnogenesis images unconsciously or often consciously led them to express themselves as they are, which means they intentionally developed an identity that reestablished their forgotten traditions and linked with their cultural heritage to strengthen their position in society. As a part of such intention, they wanted to represent themselves as a Garo (*Mandi*) with pride and without hesitation or fear. It also indicated the strong perception of their cultural identity, and most of the community members have a deep sense of pride and identity linked to their Garo heritage. Although the chosen representation of identity is based on the belief that the country is superior to personal identity and humanity is superior to all identities, that also suggested that most respondents view their identity within the context of their shared humanity, valuing this common identity above other considerations. It also indicated how people of the Garo community simultaneously preferred their national identity and other interpersonal identity based on the situation. Their interpretation and preferences also vary based on their requirement.

In the case of representation, a large number of the Garo people (89%) were not happy with how other people represented themselves because it was linked to the prejudices and stereotypes of the Garo community. They felt that people (27%) often wanted to rebuild their identity and actively worked to reestablish and redefine it. However, many Garo community members did not take the initiative. They indicated that they often prefer the tribalism discourse as a medium to distinguish them from the Bengali people and did it consciously. The people of the Garo community also notice the several rebuilding initiatives regarding their identity from the Government and NGO sides, and, in both cases, they are sceptical of relaying them unthinkingly. The acculturation process, the limited access to fundamental rights, ethnic discrimination and denial of land rights emerge as substantial challenges regarding their identity, affecting them harshly and also excluding them from the larger society. The more they were excluded, the more they wanted to represent themselves as they were, which also constructed a strong sense of pride towards their culture and ethnic identity. Therefore, the development agencies and activists emerged as saviours of the ethnic minorities who supported them and invoked them to challenge the nationalist narrative towards their identity construction efforts. Now, they also use their identity in an intensely political way that puts pressure on the state apparatus as a soft power and engage with the governmental administration because they realise

that the more they are integrated, the more they hold the political power, strengthening their position in society.

In the context of representation, a small segment (17%) of the young generation felt hesitation in representing their ethnic identity because of the occupational changes that occurred in recent times due to taking education and moving to the cities. The changes in language, culture, religion and behaviour also led them towards this confusion resulting from increased interaction, integration and collaboration with the larger society. However, a large number of them (83%) did not hesitate to represent themselves as the way they are, and they often developed a new identity based on their interpersonal relationship outside the community and simultaneously maintained their traditional way of life, which indicated a multilayer identity in the twenty-first century. Hence, people of the Garo communities are also sceptical towards the changes that have occurred in recent times because they are affecting their way of life and are linked with their ethnic identity and the way they represent themselves. To preserve their ethnic identity and century-old culture, they felt (40%) that Garo communities should be aware of their culture, heritage and tradition, and the government should ensure all the rights being Indigenous; 37% also expressed the need for equal facilities and development initiatives as Bengali enjoyed accordingly.

## **Conclusion**

The construction of ethnogenesis, which is based on the ethnic boundary, was the basis regarding the perceptions of the identity of the Garo communities in the study area. Garo communities in the study area experienced several types of discrimination from the British period to the Bangladesh period that led them to construct ethnic boundaries, which also pushed them to differentiate themselves from the Bengali communities. Hence, these experiences converted the Garo tribes into Garo tribe, which constructed one ethnic identity that also linked them with their forgotten history and century-old culture. Thus, constructing a unique identity also helped to grow a strong sense of ethnicity, which is reflected through how they represent themselves. It means the ethnic discrimination, historical subjugation, and prejudices constructed by the stereotyped images of the Garoness that also push them towards exclusion from mainstream society. The way they represent themselves was the reaction towards the exclusion or otherness that was consciously constructed by the Bengali people, which was also linked with the colonial discourse of representation. Due to the collective consciousness of the Garo communities, they became more rigid.

They simultaneously wanted to integrate with the border society to counter the existing narratives on Garo and formulate a new one. As a result, the more the interaction, integration and collaboration increased, the more they changed themselves continuously.

In addition, to construct ideal nationalistic images, the state initiated several initiatives to rebuild the ethnic identity that homogenised them with the majority, where the global governance and transnational forces entered through the help of globalisation and neo-liberal capitalism who wanted to construct images beyond the narrative that nation-state portrayed. As a part of such an initiative, they also increased their pressure and followed another mechanism to pressure the state to ensure their universal human rights accordingly. These types of forces also implicitly bring some changes in people's mindsets, which also dramatically shifts their perception regarding identity. Therefore, the perception of preferred identity, especially the younger generation, is constructed as a way that simultaneously formulates the individual identity that is linked with the interpersonal relationship, transnational forces, global governance, nationality and differentia from the Indian Garo community but becomes rigid in the case of ethnicity, which still is the basis of the representation of the Garo community in the twenty-first century.

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### **Declaration about the Conflict of Interest**

There is no conflict of interest among the authors to be declared.

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