

Garos ... shifting cultivation....*Bhoga* cotton

Jhum or Shifting cultivation often portrays a tarnished form of agrarian activity - an agent of deforestation and harbinger of environmental destruction. It reminds us of the vast swathes of tropical forests that once dominated remote and pristine hinterlands but were eventually abolished over centuries thanks to agricultural expansion. Although greatly shrunk in extent nowadays there were rich traditions of agriculture across the shifting fields of the highlands of the subcontinent. Various indigenous communities of central, south, south-eastern, western, and north-eastern India exercised a basic form of cultivation by clearing and burning forests, applying hoe, broadcasting seeds, and growing rice, pulses, various cucurbits, and other crops.



The Garos of the Western part of Meghalaya (once part of extended Bengal) were efficient shifting cultivators on the undulating hills of their habitation. Historically, the Garos were the inhabitants of the hills but spread over a much larger geography. In the pre-colonial and the colonial era, the Garos were part of a large community of cotton growers from hills and valleys that encompassed the Garo Hills eastwards (Khasi Hills, the hills of Cachar, and towards the Naga and Mikir Hills), the hills of Chittagong and Tripura, and towards the hills of Bhutan. They also dwelled in the riverine plains of Western Assam and northeastern Bengal with a reticulated network of small and large rivers. The mighty Brahmaputra flanks the Garo Hills, creating its northern and western borders with its floodplains and numerous tributaries. Along these vast tracts of their territory, they cultivated a special type of cotton which was famous as ‘Garo’ cotton and was quite in demand far beyond their regions. As a result, these shifting cultivators developed a prosperous agricultural economy.

Rich soil stretches across the fertile lowlands around the Garo foothills, the valley region, the foothills between the plains, and the higher hills constituted the agroecological zone of cotton cultivation. Not only cotton, they cultivated superior rice that is “equal to the *Benares* long rice”, and mustard seeds of a quality “twice as big as any produced in the *pergunnahs* of Bengal” in rich black soil, mixed with red. The oil from these mustard seeds was as ‘superior as the size of its grain’ - so says the historical accounts.

So, the cotton was a product of these hills and their foothills, the slopes of which were particularly suitable for the cultivation of hill cotton. The Garos have long produced great quantities of cotton which was comparable with other varieties of cotton brought to the colonial Calcutta market. The variety of cotton, *Bhoga*, was primarily grown by the Garos, and also by the Rabhas and Hajongs living in the adjacent hills. An estimate says along with the Garos, the

Rabhas, and the Hajongs on the hills around the estates of Bijni and Karaibari produced about 20,000 maunds of cotton every season and bartered them for rice and dried fish. *Bhoga* was also preferred in the neighboring hills of Tippera (Tripura), Chittagong, and Sylhet. Francis Buchanan's account through the provinces of Chittagong and Tippera noted the *jhum* cultivation of cotton, dry rice, ginger, and other crops which were sold to the *Bengalese* in return for salt, fish, earthenware, and iron. Not only Buchanan, but it also drew the attention of many explorers or collectors like Eliot and Taylor who meticulously described the nitty-gritty of cultivation. Shifting cultivation or *jhumming* was performed along the slopes of the hills and in the plains during this period. Fallow fields with the ashes of the burnt cotton crop of the previous season were turned over with the help of hoe at the time of the first rains. Sowing performed in the months of April-May was followed by a short period of weeding and the final harvest in autumn. Cotton was not grown alone but interspersed with other essential crops, such as paddy.

Probably, the Garo cotton belonged to the *Gossypium arboreum ssp cernuum*, an ecotype that has evolved across the northeast and around and grown profusely. Based on this local variety and its intrinsic quality, indigenous communities like the Garos, Rabhas, and Hajongs developed a prosperous agricultural economy that survived for centuries.

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Collector: Avik Ray

