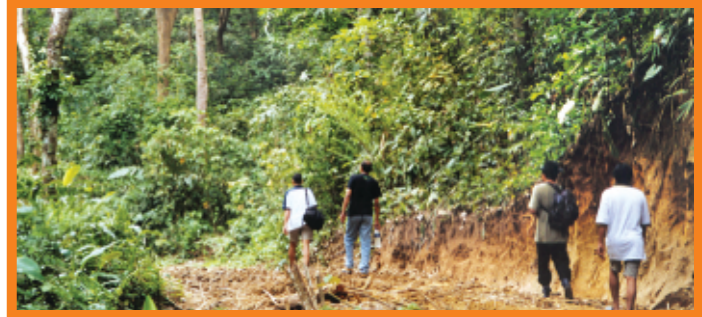


Star W O L I D A Y

DHAKA MONDAY JUNE 16, 2003



The gibbon trail



Green front



Graveyard laid to rest



Innocence in calm



Water of honour



Weaving life's pattern



Cooking the Garo way



Down the peace path



Koilatoli coal dump



LOCATION > HALUAGHAT. CATEGORY > FAMILY

Good morning Aski Pa

THE Garo morning dawns as softly as the night falls. I opened my eyes to the sound of birds -- hundreds of them in scores of species. The whole place is coming alive. I stretched, let out a yawn and jumped out.

A cool breeze washed my face. Everything looked doubly clean and beautiful in the bluish morning light. Diffused lighting has always had its own beauty which you get only in the morning.

Mashi Ma was already up and Mukti too. Molya was in the bamboo-walled kitchen, sipping tea.

The Garos are a matriarchal society. The women take the lead in everything; they own the land and the men. When a Garo man gets married, he has to migrate to the bride's

house -- just the opposite of us; when a baby is born, they take the title of the mother, not the father.

And women are the most respected of humans in the Garo society.

Close by, there

impeccably nice clothes roll off the production line. In fact, we saw similar weaving projects in many other Garo houses that day.

After breakfast, we scouted the villages stippled

wind chilly. An unearthly light descended on the paddy fields, they looked soft -- the green not quite green, the yellow not yellow but something else. Well, you'd better see it for yourself.

We arrived at Khamal Dighi, a pond where the Garos used to settle their village disputes. The system was so simplistic the Garo way. Both the parties the complainant and the accused had to take a dip in the water and stay there as long as they could. However the one that surfaced first was the guilty. The system is obsolete now. But Garos still honour the pond in a special way.

We moved on. The land became more and more removed from civilisation. We felt like we are in a place out of the ordinary. The cloud rumbled and looked like

ady obliterated. A few drops came down, cooling us off. The hills on the Indian side were now nearer and more visible, the border pillars hardly 50 yards away. We could see a few houses on the side of the hills. And a BSF watchtower was about 100 yards away. We retreated and took a few snaps and came back to our Garo host's home.

A special chicken was being prepared. Mukti wrapped the marinated chicken in banana leaves and put it on a pot of boiling water. About an hour later, the chicken was cooked in vapour, a delicious treat.

After dinner, we headed back home as the rain eased up. At Koilatoli, we took the left turn for the coal dump. Huge Indian trucks, some

rundown, rumbled down from India and dump coals. Importers in small tin-sheds look busy receiving their orders. The last tin-shed is home to two BDR men with Chinese AK-57s. They looked friendly and one even offered to walk us down to the Indian border, some 100 yards away.

The dense forests on the Indian hills beamed us with their breathtaking beauty. A few egrets flapped lazily along the hills. We were standing just on the borderline, with heaps of black coal in the background. An Indian Sikh soldier came and shook our hands. Suddenly, a bond of friendship hung in the air there. The border tension seemed something of the past. We sat there and chatted nonsense.



is a bamboo lean-to and we could hear female voices. We peeked through the big windows. It's a weaving factory and colourful Garo clothes are being made by a

with thatch-roofed mud houses. Children running naked, skewed hill dogs, oinks of the black boars tied in the backyard. And the unmistakable Garo

The Garos of Bangladesh

NO one knows for certain how many Garos live in Bangladesh. According to the 1991 census, the total number is 64,280. The large majority live in a fringe of territory -- often not more than a few kilometres wide -- along the southern side of the Garo hills.

Another area where approximately 15,000 Garos live is Modhupur Forest. Located in Mymensingh and Tangail districts, about 150 kilometres north of Dhaka, this is one of the largest forests of the plains. Detached from the rest of the 'Garo area', Modhupur almost seems like a 'Garo island' on the map. No one knows how this division of Garos over two separate regions has come about. It is important to realise that a lot of interaction takes place between Modhupur Garos and the people from the border area, and that Modhupur people are far from isolated from the other Bangladeshi Garos.

It is said that these days Garos can be found all over Bangladesh. For

instance, since the 1950s Garos have started to migrate to the betel leaf and tea plantations in Sylhet. At present, Sylhet probably has around seven thousand Garos, but no one knows for sure. Many Garos live on the tea plantations there, with labourers from various other ethnic backgrounds. At first sight, the workers' quarters seem just like ordinary villages. A closer look reveals that its population is very interesting, because of its great variation. During the days of the British Raj, many different people from all over India were taken to the plantations in Sylhet. And although the workers came to live together, the plantation 'villages' have never really come to act as 'melting pots'. People have lived together but separately. The ethnic groups have mixed



to some extent, but have largely stuck together. Even today it is possible to hear Oriya, Hindi, Bengali, Garo, and other languages, all spoken in the same village. Marriage within, rather than between, ethnic groups is still preferred. This pattern of behaviour is certainly true of the Garos on the plantations. So far, they have maintained their distinctive ethnic identity.

Budget

Microbus fare (7-seater) - Tk 3,000, **Fuel**- Tk 2,000, **Food** - Tk 1,500, **Total** Tk 6,500

.....or.....

Bus fare Tk 840@ Tk 120 per person, **Food for seven persons** - Tk 1,500, **Total** Tk 1,620

Traveltips

- Take mosquito repellents -- malaria is common in the Garo land.
- You have to walk quite a distance, so wear sneakers
- Take raincoat or umbrella
- Take BDR advice, but the Garos know their land best. Follow them.
- It would be very sunny and hot. Take cap and water bottle.
- Take shorts for a swim and torches.
- Aski Para has no electricity
- Get a Garo local guide to take you around.

Wheretostay

There are a few hotels in Haluaghat. They are not good and are cheap at around Tk 50 per person.

Alternately, you can stay at the upazila bungalow or Caritas rest house through arrangement. At Koroitoli coal depot, there are two bungalows where you can stay by