
HENRY LAMIN

**ECONOMY AND SOCIETY IN
MEGHALAYA**

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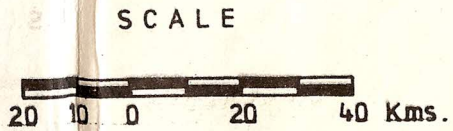
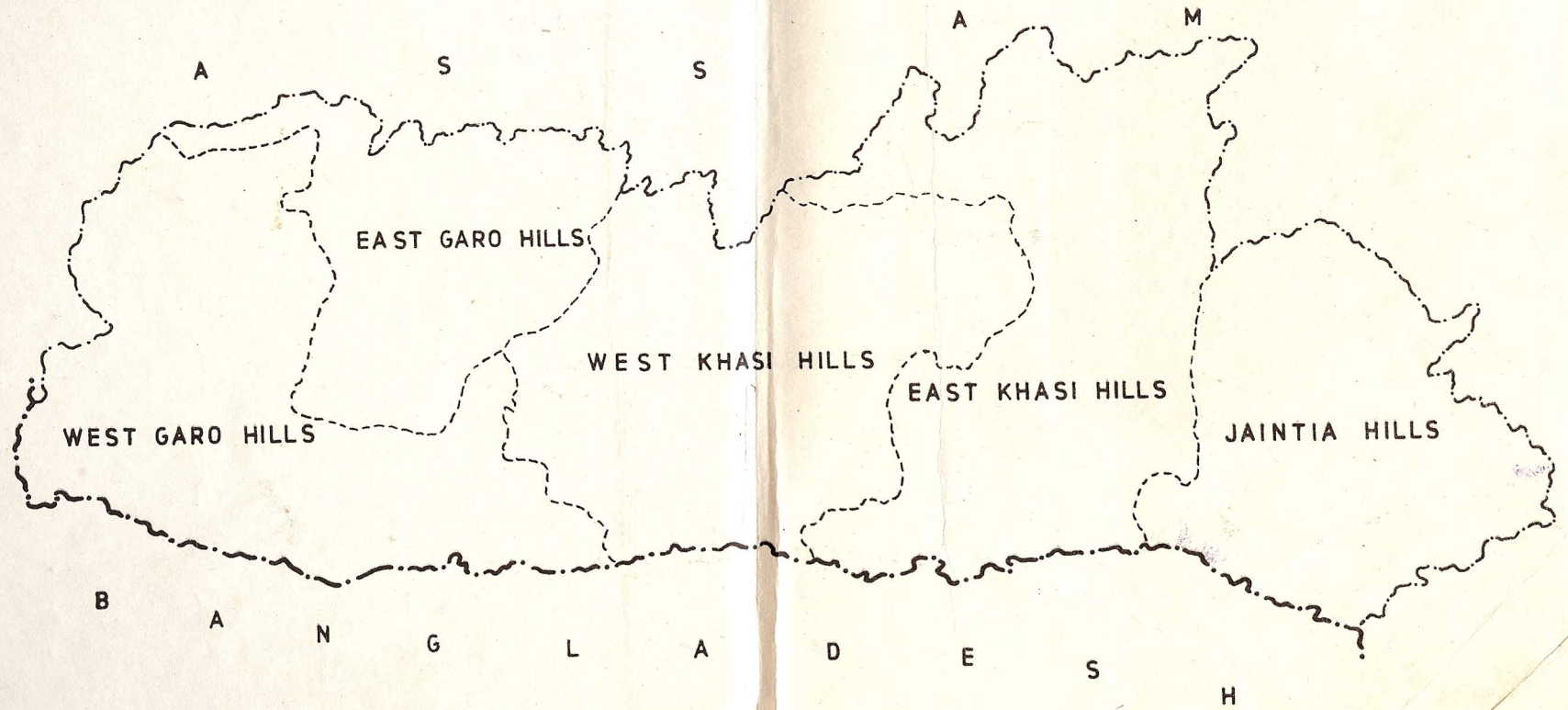
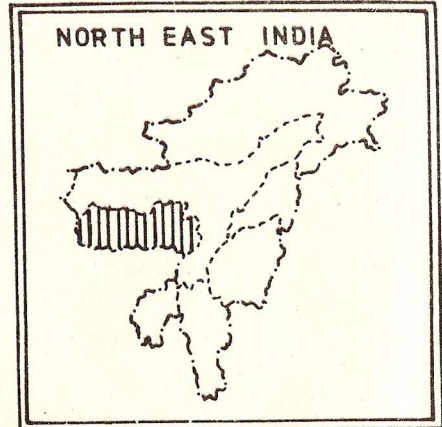
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The Pnar or Jaintia living in the Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya are undergoing rapid transformation due to the large-scale coal mining activity there. A tribal society based on subsistence economy and clan organization, they have not only shown considerable economic differentiation but also some sort of social disorganization. They have obviously encountered a heavy influx of people from outside with different socio-cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds resulting in economic, social, cultural, and even marital interactions between them and the outsiders. This interaction has been rather sudden and significant compared to what they experienced with the missionaries earlier.

This book is both on the traditional economy and society of the Pnar and the changes and continuity, which have been witnessed recently. Primarily based on a case study, the findings of this study reverberate much beyond the boundaries of the village and the district in question. Hence, the book should be of interest not only to the students of social transformation but also to those who are involved in the administration and development of the tribal areas generally.

Dr. Henry Lamin (b. 1958) joined the Department of Anthropology, North-Eastern Hill University, as a lecturer in 1988. While actively engaged in teaching and research he has made significant forays into politics as well. He was Deputy Chairman, Meghalaya Forest Development Corporation, since 1988 and in 1993 he rose to the rank of a cabinet minister holding vital portfolios like Education, Arts & Culture, and Fisheries of the Government of Meghalaya. He was the Vice-President of Hill People's Union, a major political Party of Meghalaya, during 1986-88 and later became the President of All party Hill Leaders' Conference in 1992. He is currently holding the charge of the Ministry of Soil Conservation and Fisheries and also associating himself with the academic activities of the Department of Anthropology, NEHU, Shillong. He has also been a state level footballer and an accomplished musician too.

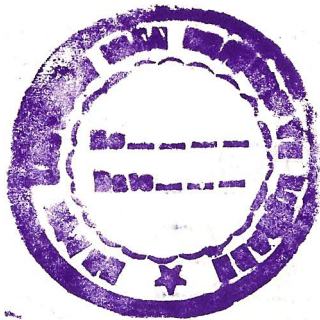
MEGHALAYA



ECONOMY AND SOCIETY IN MEGHALAYA

Changing Frontiers of a Pnar Village

HENRY LAMIN



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PREFACE

The Pnar (also referred to as Jaintia and Synteng) are a scheduled tribe living in the Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya. Before the coming of the British merchants who subsequently became rulers of India as a whole the Pnar had extensive trade and close political relations with the people of Bangladesh on the one hand and those of Assam on the other.

Literature on the Pnar is not scanty as these people have received a lot of attention of the Europeans as well as Indian scholars. But most writings on them are either historical or ethnographic in nature and no one has hitherto made an indepth study of any village in order to bring out its changes and continuities, its stresses and strains, its pains and problems, etc. in a single chord.

The present study is such an attempt. It is primarily based on my fieldwork in a village called Bapung in the Jaintia Hills. However I have tried to bring in informations from other villages into this book and weave a common thesis about continuity and change in the Jaintia Hills as a whole. In doing so I have remained painfully conscious of the fact that any attempt at generalization is risky without enough comparative data. My age-old familiarity with the region and people and my personal as well as academic concern about whatever is happening in the region and among my people are perhaps not enough to give me that academic legitimacy to speak about them without proper qualifications. I am quite conscious of the fact that I might slip into one of such dangers.

If I have committed any mistake in this work of mine I am alone to be held responsible. I only wish that those who have guided me in doing this piece of research and those who have helped me in various ways in completing this work and seeing to it that it is published are not disappointed. Of these people I would like to pick up a few

and mention their help.

First of all I should like to express my gratitude to Professor A. P. Sinha for initiating me into this work and giving me enough impetus to carry out this work. But without the formal and informal guidance of Dr. K.H. Bhatt, now in Mysore University, the present study would never be completed. My deepest gratitude is to him for every kind of support which he ever readily extended to me.

I had the benefit of discussing this work with a number of my colleagues and friends. They were Professor A.K. Ghosh, Professor P.K. Misra, Professor B.N. Saraswati, Professor T.N. Pande, Professor H.W. Sten, Dr. L.S. Gassah, Dr. L. Imchen, Mr. S.B. Konale and Ms. Monica Laskor. I am grateful to every one of them for their kind help. I should also put in record here that the authorities and staff of North-Eastern Hill University have always been very kind and helpful to me in carrying out my research. I am also thankful to Professor B. Pakem for giving me personal guidance at various stages of my student life and even later.

Finally I should like to state that I am ever indebted to my parents and other members of my family for their affection and help. I shall not forget to mention here the hospitality, affection, and warmth of the people of Bapung.

HENRY LAMIN

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I

INTRODUCTION

Pnar on Jaintia is the name of an ethno-linguistic group of people living in the Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya. The area inhabited by these people can be geographically differentiated from the areas inhabited by the War, Hadem, Bhoi (Karbi), Lalung, and the Khyrwang. Thus the word 'Pnar' encompasses an ethno-linguistic and geographical area within the administrative boundaries of the Jaintia Hills District.

The objective of this study is to outline the social and economic life of the Pnar or Jaintia. This study focusses on different aspects of change in their traditional society and economy in the wake of the commercialization of the coal. With the increase in commercial production of coal in the Jaintia Hills the flow of money to the area has increased considerably, which in turn has affected the economic and social life of the people there. As more and more people from outside have come to work in the area it is quite natural that it affects the traditional mode of life of the local tribesmen.

My interest in the present study grew from my observation of the frequent traffic jam along the National Highway No. 44 while visiting my home during holidays and other occasions. Though traffic jam in Shillong itself was quite frequent I used to wonder why so many trucks on this highway? I began to ask where do these coal-loaded trucks from the Jaintia Hills go? Who are the people who are involved in the operation of these trucks or the supply of the coal? What could be the impact of it on the local people?

Some of the assumptions I made soon were as

follows. One, commercial exploitation of coal has further induced the exploitation of other natural resources of the area. Two, outsiders with different levels of skills and with different socio-cultural background are instrumental in bringing about many social and cultural changes in the area. And, finally, the increased presence of the people from outside has been responsible for the growing ethnic tension and conflict.

Conceptual Background

The most essential activity of any human group is perhaps to feed itself. This is particularly true of many tribal groups of north-east India. It is undeniable that everything we eat—animals, vegetables, cereals, etc.—comes directly or indirectly from the nature. But the modern man is less oblivious of this fact as he lives in the world of processed foods and supermarkets unlike the tribal who has a natural alliance with the nature. The latter not only draws food from her but also the shelter, clothing, and other tools for his survival.

Occupational specialization takes place when some sort of division of labour comes into existence. This brings about further specialization of skills acquired by individuals or groups. But since each occupation is given some kind of cultural value by the society not all occupations get equal amount of encouragement for specialization. Such values may be temporary or permanent but they have an important role to play in determining the importance of certain occupations in a society.

The size of an occupational group is also an indication of the particular attitude the group holds towards its occupation. An occupation which is neither lucrative nor prestigious does not normally attract a large number of people. Even when an occupation is lucrative it may not attract many local people if the prestige attached to it is too low but this normally does

not seem to matter with the people from outside. This is probably how commercialization of many economic pursuits becomes possible.

(i) *Commercialization*. Commerce means an exchange of merchandise specially on a large scale. Production of goods and services may be for self-consumption or for sale. By commercialization, I mean large scale utilization of natural and human resources for sale in the market. Money plays an important role in such an economy: it is a medium of exchange, a unit of value, and a means of accumulating capital. When money comes to play an important role market is automatically created to facilitate the smooth flow of transactions between the buyers and the sellers.

(ii) *Market*. Originally, market was understood as a public place or a town where provisions and other objects of daily use were displayed for sale. When generalized, it means any group of persons who are in intimate business relations with each other and carry out extensive transactions in one or more commodity. A great city may contain as many markets as there are important branches of trade and these markets may or may not be located in specific places. The idea of locality is not necessary in modern market conceptualizations. The traders may spread over a whole town, region, or a country and yet form a single market if they are, by means of meetings, published price lists, the post office, telephones, etc. in close communication with each other. A market has certain essential components like commodity, buyers and sellers, a place for selling and buying, one price for one commodity at one time, etc. Markets are also classified according to area, time, and nature of competition.

(iii) *Land*. The term 'land' has a special meaning in economics. It does not mean soil as in ordinary parlance, but it is used in a much wider sense. Land stands for all natural resources which yield an income

or which have an exchange value. It represents those natural resources which are useful and scarce, actually or potentially.

(iv) *Labour*. In ordinary understanding, 'labour' means an unskilled person. But in economics it is used in a wider sense. Any work, whether manual or mental, which is undertaken for a monetary consideration is called labour. Any work done for the sake of pleasure or love does not fall under it. Labour not only includes the highest professional skills but also the skilled work. Further, it is not only the means of production but also the end of production. Some of its general characteristics are: it is inseparable from the labourer, the commodity that a labourer has to sell must be delivered in person, labour is not lost, labour has a very weak bargaining power in informal sector in particular, the changes in the price of labour react rather curiously on its supply and there can be no rapid adjustment of the supply of labour to demand.

(v) *Capital*. In ordinary language, capital is used in the sense of money but when we talk of capital as a factor of production the economist regards it as that part of man's wealth which yields income. It is better defined as "produced means of production of machines, tools, and instruments, etc. All of them are produced by man to help him in the production of more goods. It may be classified into fixed and working capitals. Fixed capitals are, for instance, those goods which are used in production again and again till they wear out, such as machinery, tools, rails, etc. whereas working capitals are the single use producer goods like raw materials, goods in process, and fuel.

(vi) *Enterprise*. In the earlier days the entrepreneur could not be clearly distinguished from the landlord, the labourer, or the capitalist. It is only with the growth of capitalism that a separate category of persons called entrepreneurs has emerged.

Related Studies

There are a number of books written by British administrators and scholars on the Khasi-Jaintia Hills of which *The Khasis* by P.R.T. Gurdon is one of the most important one. This is a comprehensive account of social, cultural, linguistic, economic, and various other aspects of the Khasi and Jaintia as obtained in early twentieth century.

After Independence a number of books have been published by Indian scholars such as Hamlet Bareh, Nalini Natarajan, J.N. Choudhury, Shadap-Sen, and Soumen Sen. These scholars have contributed to various aspects of the Jaintia society such as religion, folklore, customary law, and political institutions. Here, the recent contributions made by the teachers of North-Eastern Hill University like Barrister Pakem, G.S. Gassah, and others should also be taken note of.

Quite a few studies have also been conducted on the impact of industrialization on tribal communities of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and West Bengal. It is important to mention some of them here. To begin with, B.B. Mondal, in his *Industrialization and Social Disorganization*, observes a number of changes in the industrial areas of Hazaribagh and Dhanbad. These two areas are exposed to coal mining activity for a number of years. This has brought about changes not only in the villages concerned but also in surrounding villages. Some of the changes noticed in the area are as follows: displacement of people from home and hearth; disorganization of village life; process of detribalization; introduction of cash economy; shift from egalitarian to class society; change from communal goals to personal goals, growth of criminality; ineffectiveness of traditional leaders about social control; more anxiety among people leading to alcoholism, petty quarrels, etc.; preference for conjugal family; inbredness; change in food habits; free mixing between tribals and non-tribals including

marriage and illegitimate sexual relationship; contact of new diseases; and changes in language, dress, religious ceremonies, etc.

L.P. Vidyarthi and B.K. Rai have summarized the findings of several researches conducted in Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. These studies also confirm that industrialization bring many changes in the socio-economic life of a tribal community. One important change noted by many researchers like Vidyarthi, Rajendra Singh, J. Sarkar, T.R. Sharma, P.K. Das Gupta, and J.S. Tandon is the alienation of land owned by the tribals. The plots of land were taken either by the government for setting up industries or purchased by non-tribals, often paying very low prices.

The tribal people of Meghalaya have one advantage over the tribes elsewhere, particularly in peninsular India, which is the protection of their land from being alienated. For instance, the Meghalaya Land Transfer Act, 1971 reads:

No land in Meghalaya shall be transferred by a tribal to a non-tribal or by a non-tribal to another non-tribal except with the previous sanction of the competent authority.

Any transfer of land made in contravention of the provisions of this section shall be void and shall not be enforceable in any court.

It is felt necessary to exempt any transfer of land to, or in favour of any company, corporation, society (including cooperative society), autonomous body or association, wholly or substantially owned and controlled or managed by the Government and which the Government of Meghalaya may by notification, specify in this behalf and a municipal corporation, municipality or town committee constitute under any law from the provisions of the Meghalaya Transfer of Land (Regulation) Act, 1971 in order that the

prohibition on transfer of land now imposed for such transfer under the existing provisions of the Act should not be impediments to developmental works in the state.

There are many other studies conducted on Meghalaya but the subjects of study are different from that of the present one. This study, based on the case study of Bapung village, makes an attempt at understanding the traditional and changing socio-economic scenario in the area.

