

Society and Economy in North-East India

Volume 2

Editor
FOZAIL AHMAD QADRI

Thirteenth to Eighteenth centuries constitute a very crucial phase of the history of North East India. Many significant developments took place during this period and, hence deserve the attention of historians to a great degree. Unfortunately, several consequential areas have remained unattended. Most of the studies done so far center around and focus on political and cultural developments. The Department of History, North-Eastern Hill University has always considered the socio-economic context in which various institutions emerged and developed as a *desideratum* of it's thrust area for research activities.

In the present volume, scholars of the region as well as outside it have tried to focus their attention on society and economy for an integrated view of the socio-economic, cultural and political history of the region. Each theme covered by the essays can be developed in full length studies in course of time by the contributors themselves or other scholars, for which the sources and the methods of enquiry and analysis have been indicated by the respective scholars.

Rs. 750/-
US \$ 50/-

Contributors

- Amrendra Kumar Thakur
- C. Lima Imchen
- Caroline C. Marak
- David R. Syiemlieh
- F.A. Qadri
- Imtiaz Ahmad
- J. Gogoi Nath
- J.B. Bhattacharjee
- J.B. Ganguly
- Kamaluddin Ahmed
- Manorama Sharma
- Mignonette Momin
- Punyadhar Gogoi
- S.K. Bose
- S.N. Pandey
- Sahabuddin Ahmed
- Saiyid Zaheer Hussain Jafri
- Sangkima
- Sanjeeb Kakoty
- Tejimala Gurung
- Vanlalruata Rengsi

ISBN 81-89233-40-8

SOCIETY AND ECONOMY
IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

VOLUME 2

F239
1316

SOCIETY AND ECONOMY IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

VOLUME 2

Editor

Fozail Ahmad Qadri



Regency Publications
New Delhi

Hist

SYMPOSIUM SOCIETY AND ECONOMY
IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

NEHU Library

Acc No ... 240687 ✓

Acc by ... S. Momin

Date ... 19/2/09

Class by ...

Sub-Heading by

Enter by .. No

Transcribed by
COMPUTERISED

Department of History
North Eastern Hill University

NE
954.16
SOC.2;4

Editorial Board

- J.B. Bhattacharjee
- David R. Syiemlieh
- Mignonette Momin
- Manorama Sharma

© 2006, Department of History, NEHU, Shillong.

The Publication of this book has been financially supported by the SAP-DRS (UGC). Department of History, NEHU, Shillong and the responsibility of the facts stated, opinions expressed, or conclusions reached rests entirely with the authors of the articles and the SAP-DRS (UGC) or the Department of History, NEHU, Shillong accepts no responsibility for the same.

No part of this book may be reproduced, except for reviews, without written permission from the publisher.

ISBN 81-89233-40-8

Published by *Regency Publications*, 20/36-G, Old Market, West Patel Nagar, New Delhi 110 008 and printed at *Radiant Printers*, New Delhi, Phones: 4248 4101, 5546 2898; Telefax: 2588 4571.

Email: regency@satyam.net.in • www.regency-books.com

Foreword

The period from 13th to 18th century A.D. was crucial in the precolonial phase of the history of North East India due to the emergence of states within the regions and the attempts of the Turko-Afghan and Mughal rulers of Bengal and Delhi to extend sway over the region. The Koch, Jaintia, Dimasa, Tripuri and the Meitei states emerged from the indigenous social base. Most of these included both plains and hills inhabited by different ethnic groups, while the Ahoms established a state in the Brahmaputra Valley by conquest. The origins of the Meitei (Manipuri) and the Tripuri states are dated much earlier than the 13th century, but they bloomed into the statehood in this period. Similar is the case with the Jaintia state. The Dimasas had experienced the rudiments of state formation processes in the Sadiya region of the Brahmaputra Valley, but the state under them was more or less confined to the Dhansiri Valley, with the headquarters at Dimapur, in the 13th-14th century when they came into contacts, and eventually conflicts, with the Ahoms. The Koch state also began to emerge in about 13th century A.D. after the decline of Kamarupa. All these states were monarchies or kingdoms in nature. They generated socio-economic influences for the societies within the states, and the areas outside the states were also directly or indirectly influenced by those factors that caused the rise, consolidation and growth of the states. The chieftaincies — outside the states, also internalized some of these changes. The Khasi *hima* or syiemships were political organizations of their own type; in fact, unique in many respects, but the state formation processes were certainly on-going within the type till the colonial interventions. The Mizo chiefships also showed tendencies towards state formations. The impact was equally clear in cases of the Nagas and the Arunachali tribes in the hills bordering the Brahmaputra

Valley. Some of these non-state polities also could have perhaps eventually emerged as states had the indigenous polity formation processes not been artificially arrested by the British colonial interventions in the beginning of the 19th century.

The society and economy experienced major changes in this period — the Mughal Rule in Bengal and Lower Assam and then the rise of the authority of the English East India Company in Bengal in the 18th century were also important contributing factors, besides the formations of states and polities at the local levels. The Srihattarajya in the Barak-Surma Valley eclipsed in this period; the lower part of the valley passed under the successive rule of the Turgo-Afgans and then Mughals, and finally, the East India Company, with the rest of Bengal, while only the upper portion of the valley, namely, the Cachar plains, formed part of the Tripuri state, Khaspur state and the Dimasa state in rapid succession before the British annexation. These factors generated indirect motivation and specific influences in matters of administrative and institutional changes within the region. The Bhakti-Sufi impact on the society in the plains was significant in many respects; the universal appeal of love and brotherhood associated with the rise of neo-vaishnavite movement of Srimanata Sankaradeva in the Brahmaputra Valley and the Gauriya Vaisnavism of Srichaitanya Mahaprabhu in the Barak-Surma Valley, and the influence of Azan Fakir in Brahmaputra Valley and of Hajarat Shah Jalal in the Barak-Surma Valley, and the works of many other Sufi saints were wonderful factors of humane social development. The long and short distance trade, particularly the hills-plains economic relationship through trade for which strings of markets emerged in the foothills and the borders between political formations, is another important area of historical interest. In fact, trade and trade-routes across the region and with the neighbouring countries had evoked British interest in the region in 18th century, which ultimately resulted in the colonization of North East in the 19th century.

A national seminar organized by the department of History, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, on 'society and economy in North East India during 13th to 18th Century', on March 3-5, 2003, addressed the issues outlined above by involving the in-house scholars of NEHU and selected experts from other institutions and Universities in the country. The seminar was in

continuation of the one held in March 2002 on the same theme for the period ending roughly in 13th century A.D., the proceedings of which have already been published as *Society and Economy in North-East India, Volume 1*, edited by Professor Mignonette Momin and Dr. Cecile A. Mawlong. We are now introducing *Society and Economy in North-East India, Volume 2*, of the same series, and contains revised versions of the selected papers that were presented in the second seminar. Our colleague, Professor F.A. Qadri, who was the convenor of that seminar, has edited the volume with remarkable affection and care. We expect this volume also to be appreciated by a wide circle of readership, like our earlier publications, and to inspire further research in the history of North East India. It is my pleasure to inform that Volume 3 (19th–20th century) of series, which emerges out of our third national seminar on the theme held in March 2004, is also almost ready. We look forward to the responses and comments of the experts on our volumes on *Society and Economy in North-East India*, which is a thrust area for us under the Special Assistance Programme (DRS) of the University Grants Commission.



(J.B. Bhattacharjee)

Coordinator

SAP-DRS (UGC)

Department of History

North-Eastern Hill University

NEHU, Shillong
25th March, 2005

Editors' Note

The vastness and variety of source material for the history of Pre-Colonial Northeast India is by now acknowledged. The Persian chronicles along with *Firman*, *Akhbarat*, etc. for the study of the Sultans of Bengal and the Mughals *vis-à-vis* Northeast India, *Buranjis* for the Ahoms and some other neighbouring groups, *Manipuri Puias*, including *Cheitarol Khumbaba* and *Laitarol Lumbaba* for Manipur, *Rajmala* for Tripura and a variety of epigraphic and numismatic evidences which constitute the chief source of information for constructing the history of the period, there is non-political literature of different type: folk-tales, folk-songs, sufi *Maktubat* (epistles) and *Malfuzat* (collection of conversations) including hagiographies, besides these there are also travel accounts in foreign languages like French, Dutch and Portuguese. There are scores of surviving oral traditions in a variety of language in the length and breadth of the region which are now being used by historians, anthropologists, sociologists and other social scientists. With the changes that have taken place in the historiographical concepts, it has become imperative for a modern historian to tap and utilize as many as varied sources of information for the study as it is possible. In the present volume readers and scholars are going to encounter a fair combination of all these sources of information.

The essays in this volume are the revised version of papers that were presented in a National Seminar held in March 2003 that covered society and economy in the region 13th-18th centuries. It was a part of a series of seminars organized by the Department of History, North-Eastern Hill University under the ongoing UGC-SAP-DRS programme. The present volume is second in the series of publications on Society and Economy in North-East India. In her essay, 'Trends, Possibilities and Problems in

History Writing in North East India: Economy and Society in 13th–18th Centuries', Manorama Sharma has made an attempt to focus on the works which are representative of the historiographic trends. She, however, maintains that most of these works are in imperialistic or nationalistic traditions and stresses the need to examine and write history from people's perspective drawing from other contemporary sources reflective of the socio-economic conditions. Mignonette Momin in her, 'Socio-economic Linkages in the Decline of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa', ascribes the decline of the state to the lack of political acumen of the individual rulers, expanding agrarian economy with various tribal groups, their political assertion leading to the emergence of new ruling families in the Lauhitya region like the Chutiyas, Bhuiyas and the Koches. She has examined the emergence of these kingdoms and the parallel decline of Kamarupa-Pragjyotisha. J.B. Bhattacharjee in his essay on 'Economic Dimension of Meitei State Formation in Manipur' delves into the theoretical formulations on the role of economy in state formation and situates the factors in the context of state formations in Northeast India contending that surplus generation, extraction and redistribution was a common factor in state formation in almost all cases. He contends that despite the paucity of sources, a careful analysis of the recorded data reveals that the process in Manipur was not different from the pan-Indian model of state formation. J.B. Ganguly's essay, 'Economic Aspects of State Formation Process in Medieval Tripura' highlights the state formation in Tripura under the chiefs belonging to the Tripuri tribe and examines the transition from the primitive communal mode of production to a tribute paying mode, according to the author was as the most crucial in the process.

T. Gurung in her essay, 'Emergence of Ahom Monarchy in Upper Assam' examines the role of the three principal ideological influences i.e. kinship, caste and the neo-vaishnavite ideology in the functioning of the Ahom monarchy and concludes that the neo-vaishnavite ideology finally proved to be the alternative to two other ideologies as the Ahom monarch patronized the Satras as the focal point of social organization. 'Agrarian Dynamics and Technology in the Ahom State' by Sanjeeb Kakoty traces the surplus generation of the Ahom state to their unique technology as found in the study of plough used for cultivation of rice, which is the staple grown principally by the people.

C.L. Imchen in, 'Historical Reconstruction of the Relations Between the Nagas and the Valley Kingdoms' has made an attempt to reconstruct the Naga socio-political systems that developed in tandem with the formation of kingdoms in the neighbouring valley. By using oral and ethnographical data on the basis of a comparative analysis with the tribes of Africa, which he concludes more or less have many resemblances. S.K. Bose in 'Ao Naga and Their Medium of Exchange' examines the status of Naga economy and the medium of exchange prevailing in the Naga economic organization. A.K. Thakur's, 'Aspects of Socio-Political Formations in Pre-Colonial Arunachal Pradesh' examines the role of technology in the evolution of pre-colonial socio-economic and political formations with particular reference to the technology of defense and agricultural technology.

Caroline R. Marak in 'Pre-Colonial Economy and Society of the Garos' outlines the self-sufficient economy of the Garos and their later dependence on outside world and provides glimpses of their social life. Sangkima's 'Economy and Society of Pre-Colonial Mizoram,' is based on British records and the non-conventional alternative folklore materials. He contends that the economy was based on shifting cultivation and the life was migratory. Kamaluddin Ahmed attempts to reconstruct the social and economic life of the area in, 'Society and Economy in Medieval Barak-Surma Valley.' He also highlights the socio-economic forces, production relations and the political super-structure which created distinct nature and levels of social formations resulting in the division of the valley into two social patterns in the upper and the lower valleys. V. Ruata Rengsi has attempted an analysis of the problem of the surplus generation and technology in primitive societies and contends that in the Mizo society the nature of technology and ecology under normal conditions generally afforded a certain amount of surplus food in his essay, 'Surplus Appropriation and Power Structure in Mizo Social Formation.' Sahabuddin Ahmed defines the linguistic status of the area in his, 'Literary and Cultural Traditions of Medieval Barak-Surma Valley' in the context of Northeast and examines how far the literary traditions of the area was influenced by the geographical proximity with Bengal. He also surveys major Sanskrit and Bengali works by the local scholars and highlights the impact of Arabic and Persian traditions noticeable in the local writings.

Imtiaz Ahmad's 'Some Aspects of Economy and Society in Medieval Assam' makes a brief survey of two Persian sources not sufficiently interpreted and fully utilized by historians. He maintains that these sources are not free from bias and indicate some amount of arrogance on the part of the authors but provide invaluable information about which the local sources are silent. S.Z.H. Jafri's 'Agrarian Society and Local Administration in Cooch Behar and Assam During 17th-18th Century' examines the society and economy of the region on the basis of Persian sources. It also examines the management of the Mughal occupied areas in the region through local officials. Jahnabi Gogoi Nath in her essay on, 'Temple Girls of Assam: Their Role in the Society' discusses the kinds of temples in Assam which maintained temple girls and their role in the society. Drawing from a number of epigraphic evidences, the author traces the evolution of the system in Assam in context of social patterns and values in the region. Punyadhar Gogoi in 'Sericulture in Assam: A Historical Perspective' explains the socio-economic conditions of the silk growers, patronage of the Ahom kings and variety of silk worms and social categories engaged in the process of silk-worm rearing.

D.R. Syiemlieh is concerned with the role of markets in polity formations among the Khasi-Jaintia people and the geographical locations of the markets facilitating the control of markets and trade routes which were crucial in the process in his essay, 'Control of Foothills: Khasi-Jaintia Trade And Markets in late 18th Century'. S.N. Pandey's essay, 'Manipur in the Eighteenth Century' explains how the adoption of Vaishnavism was important for the Meitei rulers to get an ideology legitimizing the rule of Garib Nawaz, whose claim to the throne was contested by others. It also explains that the new Meitei society based on principles of caste and hierarchy assimilated and preserved some of the traditional Meitei customs. F.A. Qadri in his essay, 'Sufis and the Process of Islamisation in Pre-Colonial North East India' highlights the role of the Sufis, their philosophy of union, belief in non-violence and rejection of worldly needs in the process of Islamisation in the region. He argues that the immigrant Muslims played a significant social role in Bengal and Assam during pre-Colonial times, as it provided some binding force of authority, stability and assurance to people, who remained for long, 'sheep without a spiritual

shepherd.' Sufi traditions syncretised with local traditions and the Sufis adopted local language as the medium of interaction.

There were many more papers presented in the seminar which are not included in the present volume as we did not receive the revised version within the extended time. Most of the contributors are professional historians. While few are members of the History faculty, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, others are colleagues from other Universities and colleges and two of them are friends from related discipline. I extend my thanks to them for meeting the methodical requirements and submitting the papers within the stipulated deadline. Professor D.R. Syiemlieh, Head of the Department of History, NEHU, took the trouble of maintaining communication with the publishers at every stage of preparation of this volume. I am thankful to him and other members of the editorial board — Professors J.B. Bhattacharjee, Mignonette Momin and Manorama Sharma for their valuable advice in the course of editing this volume. All credit goes to them for the publication and I extend my gratitude to them. Errors in the editing, if any are my making. A special word of thanks to Mr. Abraham Nongbet for excellent typing of the manuscript of this volume.

The financial assistance for the publication of this volume has been provided by the Department of History, NEHU, Shillong, from the funds of UGC-SAP-DRS. I wish to put this debt on record. I am also thankful to Regency Publications, New Delhi, for bringing out this volume so promptly.

F.A. Qadri

Contents

Foreword	v
Editors' Note	ix
List of Contributors	xvii
Trends, Possibilities and Problems in History Writing in Pre-Colonial North East India: Economy and Society <i>Manorama Sharma</i>	1
Socio-Economic Linkages in the 'Decline' of <i>Prāgjyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa</i> <i>Mignonette Momin</i>	22
Economic Dimension of the Meitei State Formation <i>J.B. Bhattacharjee</i>	58
Economic Aspect of the State Formation in Medieval Tripura <i>J.B. Ganguly</i>	77
Emergence of the Ahom Monarchy in Upper Assam (13th-15th Century) <i>Tejimala Āurung</i>	86
Agrarian Dynamics and Technology in the Ahom State <i>Sanjeeb Kakoty</i>	97
History of the Relations between the Nagas and the Valley Kingdoms <i>C. Lima Imchen</i>	114
The Ao Nagas and their Medium of Exchange <i>S.K. Bose</i>	145
Aspects of Socio-Political Formations in Pre-Colonial Arunachal Pradesh <i>Amrendra Kumar Thakur</i>	155
Pre-Colonial Economy and Society of the Garos <i>Caroline R. Marak</i>	191

Economy and Society of Pre-Colonial Mizoram <i>Sangkima</i>	201
The Society and Economy of the Medieval Barak-Surma Valley <i>Kamaluddin Ahmed</i>	217
Surplus Appropriation and Power Structure in Mizo Social Formation <i>Vanlalruata Rengsi</i>	243
Literary and Cultural Traditions of Medieval Barak-Surma Valley <i>Sahabuddin Ahmed</i>	269
Economy and Society in Medieval Assam: Gleaning from Two Persian Sources <i>Imtiaz Ahmad</i>	283
Agrarian Society and Local Administration in Cooch Behar and Assam During 17th-18th Century <i>Saiyid Zaheer Hussain Jafri</i>	292
Temple Girls of Assam: Their Role in the Medieval Society <i>Dr. (Mrs.) J. Gogoi Nath</i>	307
Sericulture in Medieval Assam: A Historical Perspective <i>Punyadhar Gogoi</i>	316
Control of the Foothills: Khasi-Jaintia Trade and Markets in the Late Eighteenth Century <i>David R. Syiemlieh</i>	326
Manipur in the Eighteenth Century: Society in the Valley <i>S.N. Pandey</i>	335
Sufis and the Process of Islamisation in the Pre-Colonial North-East India <i>F.A. Qadri</i>	343

List of Contributors

- Amrendra Kumar Thakur is Reader, Department of History, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.
- C. Lima Imchen is Professor of Sociology, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.
- Caroline C. Marak is Professor of Garo, North-Eastern Hill University, Tura Campus.
- David R. Syiemlieh is Professor & Head, Department of History, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.
- F.A. Qadri is Professor of History, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.
- Intiaz Ahmad is Director, Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, Patna.
- J. Gogoi Nath is Professor of History, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh.
- J.B. Bhattacharjee is Professor of History, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong & ex-Vice-Chancellor, Assam University, Silchar.
- J.B. Ganguly is ex-Vice-Chancellor, Tripura University, Agartala.
- Kamaluddin Ahmed is ex-Principal, Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam.
- Manorama Sharma is Professor of History, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.
- Mignonette Momin is Professor of History, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.
- Punyadhar Gogoi teaches History in Gargaon College, Sibsagar, Assam.
- S.K. Bose is a retired senior officer of the State Bank of India and a renowned Numismatist.
- S.N. Pandey is retired Professor of History, Manipur University, Imphal.

Sahabuddin Ahmed teaches History in Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam.

Saiyid Zaheer Hussain Jafri is Professor of History, Delhi University, Delhi.

Sangkima teaches History in Government Aizawl College, Aizawl, Mizoram.

Sanjeeb Kakoty is Research Fellow, Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development, Guwahati.

Tejimala Gurung is Reader in History, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.

Vanlalruata Rengsi is Reader in History, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.

Control of the Foothills Khasi-Jaintia Trade and Markets in the Late Eighteenth Century

David R. Syiemlieh

Introduction

In the seminar organized by the Department of History, North Eastern Hill University, on "Society and Economy in North East India" in 2003, I had presented a paper on "Technology and Socio-Economic Linkages of the Khasi-Jaintias in Pre-Colonial Times".¹ This was an attempt to understand the term "Pre-Colonial" in the context of the region in general and the Khasi-Jaintias in particular. One difficulty in applying the term "Pre-colonial" to several of the tribes in the region is that the term is often understood to cover their history over several centuries after their pre-history. In the case of the tribe under study, there are references to them in the [ancient] Puranic texts² and in later literature over a rather long span of time. The material comes in the [medieval] Ahom Buranjis,³ coins, material remains and inscriptions, apart from references in Bengali texts and early [modern] European-English reports.⁴ While three phases of periodisation have been applied to the general histories of India, for the hill tribes of the region it has been compressed into just one concept. It may therefore be prudent, where material is available and can be dated with certainty, to add the words early, later as the case may be, to the term pre-colonial to better understand the term.

The material available and used is often too scanty to build up reasonable understanding of their history prior to the advent of their interaction with the British. This is clearly reflected in the histories of the Khasis. Other than the detailed study by Namita Sen Shadap,⁵ all others give little attention to the history prior to the nineteenth century. There are problems with the use of some other sources. For instance several writers have depended heavily on oral traditions to explain the past. Pre-literate societies are known to have had the gift of passing down information over several generations. Some of these traditions have come to us today after interpolations, intentional or otherwise. This therefore makes our reliance on such sources a matter of concern. One way out of this dilemma will be to use where available, historical material in other language and which make reference to the tribe under study.

In as much as the terms ancient, medieval and modern are not quite applicable for periodising the histories of the hill tribes in North East India in particular, the term pre-colonial would vary in time from tribe to tribe which came under this influence and interaction. In the case of the Jaintias this phase of their past would cover many centuries, possibly even the entire phase of the 13th–18th centuries. Such a long time would suggest for instance that their economy and technology was stagnant or innovations were only reluctantly being adapted. If changes were being made, for instance, to the use of iron implements in the excavation, dressing and erection of monoliths, it has not been possible to assign dates to these activities. Again a way out of this dilemma will be to use, where available, literature in other languages on the tribe under study. In the case of the Khasi-Jaintias the use of Bengali and Assamese literature would help get across this problem of the use of sources.

This paper will take up a discussion of the two issues of trade and markets in the Khasi-Jaintia foothills in the late eighteenth century. In the discussion the focus will not be so much on the economic dimension of that past and activity but the political implications of control by the Khasi-Jaintias of the foothills and the trade and markets located therein. By this we may then arrive at an understanding of the significance of the border markets in Khasi-Jaintia life and the impact these markets had on the community at large. When this is established, it will then be

possible to take up in the third seminar of the series, a connected account of the markets and border trade under colonial rule.

Territorial Limits

It is uncertain when and why the Khasis left the Assam plains after their migration into what we today refer to as North East India. In the process of taking possession of the hills the Khasis evolved their own social and state structure. They first moved in the southern direction into what was to become the Sutnga *hima*; therefrom they moved both south into the plains of the Surma valley and west into the central highlands of old Shillong and Sohra *himas* and further towards the westernmost part of their settlement in the *himas* of Nongkhlaw, Rambrai, Nongspung, Jirang and Nongstoin. Though there is no sequence known of this migration and settlement, that the settlement was from east to west can be substantiated by the advance of their technology in erecting of monoliths and the dressing of some of the larger stone remains and the oral tradition that the move westward was in part triggered by the search for iron.⁶

While the state formation process was relatively far advanced in the Jaintia *hima*, state formation in the several Khasi *himas* had not progressed evenly. Tradition tells of the existence of thirty Khasi *himas* and twelve *Dollois* in pre-colonial times. It is understood that the term *Khadar Dolloi* is with reference to the twelve *Dollois* of the Jaintia State and the number of these functionaries who assisted in the administration of that *hima*. That the term of the official has an Assamese origin suggests that the Jaintia *Rajas* borrowed the term and perhaps their functions and applied it to the administration of their *hima*. That there were numerous Khasi *himas* prior to the eighteenth century there is certainty. But whether there were actually thirty *Syiemships* is a matter of contention.⁷ The state formation process of these *himas* was somewhat different to Jaintia, in that many were very small to small *himas*; not all were directly in contact with either of the peoples of the Brahmaputra and Surma valleys and not all had Brahmanical influences as Jaintia and some of the *himas* in the War, the southern region were to experience. Several of the *himas* were large enough to have included in their territories the foothills to the north and south. Eight Khasi chiefs of whom we may note

Shillong, Jirang, Myriaw and Rambrai *himas* had control of the *duars* entering from the hills into Kamrup. Across the hills the larger states that had land in the Sylhet plains were Sohra, Maharam and Nongstoin. Shella, a much smaller *hima* comprising a number of villages was located on the very foothills.

An element nurturing the more developed state formation process in Jaintia, the easternmost of the "Khasi" states was the Brahmanical myth of the origin of that *hima* which J.B. Bhattacharjee has studied in detail.⁸ This apart it was also the only hill state to have had control of the Sylhet plains beyond the foothills, extending even up to the river Surma. Another factor for the more advanced nature of the Jaintia state was the size of this *hima*. It abutted on the Karbi hills further east, the foothills in Nowgong and Kamrup, running across the entire hill region of the Meghalaya plateau and well into the Sylhet plains. Of the control of the foothills to the north and south of the Jaintia State, more will be said presently.

Border Hats

Markets were largely located in the foothills. The importance of the markets in Khasi-Jaintia economy is illustrated in the tribe naming the days of the week after the weekly markets. The Khasi markets in the hills would be a later development. The larger and more important *hats* in the southern foothills were Pandua, of which Robert Lindsay gives a detailed description,⁹ Punatit in the Laur Pargana and Jaintiapur. Of these Jaintiapur was a flourishing mart, located well into the plains and closer to the river Surma.¹⁰ It was linked with a road that connected the Jaintia capital with the hill territory and went on towards Rahar in Nowgong. Pandua located on a hillock close to Shella, was a mart "where the Bengal, Assam and Garrow goods are bought and sold".¹¹ On the Assam foothills of the Khasi-Jaintia *himas* were located the Nauduar, the nine passes opening the hills to Kamrup. Some of the principal markets located here were Barduar, Rani (under the management of a vassal of the Khasi *Syiem* of Nongkhlaw), and Sonapur.

We have earlier said that there did not appear to have been markets in the hills.¹² The political and economic forces which would change this situation (to be discussed in the third part of the seminar series) had not developed even in the later part of the

eighteenth century to open markets within the hills. Throughout the later pre-colonial times, the Khasi-Jaintias were to control the foothills to such an extent that these were to become the territorial limits of the several *himas* towards the northern and southern plains. The absence of markets in the hills however did not prevent cross-hill trade. Their control over the several *duars* and the markets located in these openings into the northern plains and the numerous *hats* located likewise in the southern foothills enabled Khasi traders to shift commodities from one valley to another. The markets in the foothills mentioned were of two types. They were held periodically to enable the Khasi traders to exchange their produce. Some others were more in the nature of entrepôts if the commodities such as *muga*, fruits and iron were to be sold in markets across the foothills. Pre-colonial Khasi-Jaintia economy was not a money economy. The Jaintia Rajas were known to have minted and circulated to a limited extent Khatra rupees. Cowries were in circulation in Sylhet and some exchange could have been transacted using this form of money but to a limited extent. The commodities exported from the hills, of which iron was the single largest export and the import principally of rice into the hills was made possible by the surplus exchange of exports from the hills through barter. Whatever material was moved through the hills from *hats* in either of the foothills appear to have been in the control of the Khasis. There is no reference to the people of the Assam and Bengal plains being involved in the cross-plateau trade. However it cannot be ruled out that they were not involved in the exchange of commodities.

The eight Khasi chiefs' controls of the lands in the northern foothills were in the nature as fiefs from the Ahom monarch. They paid nominal allegiance for the control of these passes. The policy that the Ahom rulers followed towards these hill chiefs was one of conciliation. With a view to disarm the frequent inroads of the hillmen into the Assam plains, they admitted them to a share in the produce of the soil, a policy which was also pursued towards the tribes bordering the northern hills of the Assam valley. The explanation of this policy is explained in part in the geographical position of Assam and the extreme difficulty the rulers faced in defending a valley of four hundred miles length from the inroads of the hillmen.¹³

Changed Situation

That Ahom-Khasi relations were quite cordial is apparent as there are very few references of the more dominant Ahoms attempting to extend their rule over these hill tribes. The Khasi-Jaintias however appeared to have more political, social and economic interaction with their neighbours in the southern plains. The Bengal *Nawabs* like their Ahom counterparts did not disturb the hill people from exercising control over the foothill *hats* and the business conducted there.

The trade in iron and limestone was well under way by the time the East India Company was granted the *Diwani* of Bengal in 1765. The colonial authorities immediately applied a boundary, a hill-plain divide where previously there was none. Problems then very naturally arose over the control of the foothills. The Company believed their right extended to the foothills and the Sylhet plains which was a natural extension of the Bengal plains. New revenue and administrative arrangements for Bengal quickly affected the Jaintia Raja. The East India Company officials, many of whom were engaged in private trade, questioned his collection of tolls on all boats plying on the upper reaches of the river Surma. They believed that their private trade too should have the benefits of toll exemption as the Indian traders were enjoying. It was over this issue of toll and control of the Surma that the Calcutta Council decided to exert military pressure over the hill chief. Proceeding from Sylhet on 24 March 1774 with three companies of *sepoys*, Captain Ellerker was ordered to move towards Jaintiapur reaching the place after five days' march. There was one small skirmish enroute and another sharp engagement at Jaintiapur before Raja Chatra Singh went into the hills. Peace was eventually made when the Raja signed a treaty with the Company, on 12 June 1774, promising to pay the Company Rs. 15000 as compensation for the cost of the expedition and that there should be free and unimpeded navigation on the river Surma.¹⁴

Following the short engagement in Jaintiapur came a more serious and protracted problem for the Khasis. As they were now entering into both trade and political relations with the Company officials, they were not free to exercise their territorial claims over the foothills. Consequently after 1765 the Khasis are reported to have made several raids into the Sylhet plains. The Khasi reason

why they made raids is unexplained. However we may deduce that these raids came as a response of the hillmen finding their *hats* and their control over the lowland in Sylhet passing to the Company administration. Experience showed Robert Lindsay, the Sylhet district Collector, whenever the Khasis raided the plains, to immediately follow the Khasi confederate chiefs into the hills to keep them out of bounds. "This policy", he wrote, "was never attempted during the Mogul Government, but I found it attended with every good affect I wished for."¹⁵ To prevent further raids several Khasi chiefs were given rent free lands in the plains of Sylhet with the intention that this would act as deterrents against raids by the hill people. Holland, Lindsay's predecessor as District Collector of Sylhet granted such lands called *tunkhwahs* (land granted to a chief for military service) among others to Oboo Singh of Mawsmi and Soubu Singh of Cherrapunji. Lindsay later appointed a "Bengali-Khasi", Baroo, *Choudhury* over a small *pargana* of Shamnagar and put under him several *ghats* between Solegur and Chattack to protect that part of the river Surma.¹⁶

The first serious attack on Sylhet occurred in 1783 when the hillmen demanded the head of a *havildar* who had treated them with contempt. Pandua was attacked with considerable loss to both sides. The *havildar* who had got the wrath of the hillmen was enforcing an order of the local Company authorities prohibiting the collection of the toll from the markets on the foothills. That the Company authorities recognised the collection of tolls by the Khasi chiefs is evident in the advise an officer gave to his Dacca Council that markets should not be set up "close to the hills where Cosseahs collect musool".¹⁷ Four years later in 1787, the Khasis made another bid to exert control over the foothills and their *parganas* in Sylhet. Ganga Singh, the *Syiem* of Shella, led this time the reprisal against the Company.¹⁸ Following the attack it was suggested by an official of the Company that the boundary be, "closely defined within which we should not admit the Hill Rajahs to exercise the smallest authority, though we might cultivate their friendship, and give every encouragement to their people to come amongst us unarmed, and settle as subjects and ryotts."¹⁸ Willes, the Collector, wrote to Lord Wellesley, the Governor-General, in more detail:¹⁹

I think the policy to be pursued with all these hill people is first to establish the several limits, and then whenever the occasion comes to support our own authority within our own

territories, and not, as at present, having lands nominally the Company's partly subject to us and partly subject to the Cosseah, in which they exert authority.

The hill chiefs again attacked Pandua in June 1789. The provocation was the confinement by the Sylhet administration of a Bengali supporter of the Khasi chiefs who held *tunkhwah* lands in the plains.²⁰

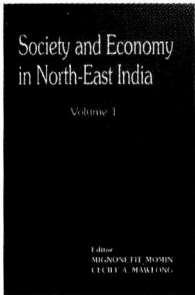
The Khasi raids into the plains necessitated for the Company more firm control over the foothills and the framing of a policy to direct the Company's interests in Sylhet with the Khasis. On the recommendation of Willes, the Governor General-in-Council instructed that the hill Khasis should not be permitted to hold any land in the plains within the Company's limits, either as proprietors or farmers or under and tenure whatsoever. The Khasis were to be allowed free movement in the district for the purpose of trade provided they descended unarmed and conducted themselves peaceably. Regulation I of 1790 was subsequently incorporated into the Company statute book. This regulated the Company trade in Sylhet and restricting the movement of British subjects beyond the northwest of the Surma.²¹ As a further step to prevent the hill peoples raiding the plains, it was proposed in 1799 to survey the foothills and to demarcate the border with the Khasi hills.²²

In all this narration the perspective has largely been drawn from literature which provide the British view of things. Were the Khasis able to have expressed their grievances in written form apart from their use of force, or had the colonial power the opportunity to know the Khasi view of things, the reasons for their disturbed situation would have been better understood. We can only deduce that the Khasis were disturbed that the expanding British power was affecting their long established rights over the border *hats* and the collection of tolls. One other factor must also have been a concern for the Khasis. The Sylhet plains supplied much of their requirement of rice. An effective method used by the British in retaliating the raids into the Sylhet plains was to prevent rice and salt from going up into the hills. This same tactic would be later be followed by the British in their taking control over the Jaintia, Garos and other hill tribes of the region. The colonial power had early realised that if the markets were closed and their entry restricted into the foothills, the hill chiefs would not only have lost their political control over much of the plains, it

would also have closed their markets and their source of revenue thereby making them more dependent on the new regime.

END NOTES

1. Mignonette Momin and Cecile Mawlong (eds.), *Society and Economy in North East India*, Vol. 1, Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2004, pp. 21–34.
2. B. Pakem, "State Formation in Pre-Colonial Jaintia, Surajit Sinha (ed.), *Tribal Politics and State Formation in Pre-Colonial Eastern and North Eastern India*, Calcutta, 1987, p. 243.
3. S.K. Bhuyan (ed.), *Jayantia Buranji*, Gauhati, 1937; S.K. Bhuyan, *Deodhai Assam Buranji*, Gauhati, 1933.
4. F. Hamilton, *An Account of Assam*, edited by S.K. Bhuyan, Gauhati, 1963; W. Hamilton, "Gentiah", *The East India Gazetteer*, Vol. I, London, 1828.
5. *The Early History of the Khasi-Synteng People*, Calcutta, 1981.
6. For details of this early history of state formation see the article of B. Pakem referred to in footnote 1; also read J.B. Bhattacharjee, "Brahmanical Myths, Royal Legitimation and the Jaintia State Formation", which is chapter 5 of his book, *Social and Polity Formations in Pre-Colonial North East India*, New Delhi, 1991; Homiwell Lyngdoh, *Ki Syiem Khasi Bad Jaintia*, Shillong, 1964, and Hamlet Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*, Shillong, 1985.
7. Refer to the memoranda of Hamlet Bareh and R.S. Lyngdoh in R.T. Rymbai, *Land Reform Commission for Khasi Hills*, Shillong, 1974, p. 58, p. 97.
8. J.B. Bhattacharjee, op. cit.
9. Robert Lindsay, *Anecdotes of an Indian Life*, edited and with an introduction by D.R. Syiemlieh, Shillong, 1999.
10. Syed Murtaza Ali, *History of Jaintia*, Dacca, 1954.
11. R.H. Phillimore (comp.), *Historical Records of the Survey of India: 18th Century*, Dehra Dun, 1945, p. 82.
12. D.R. Syiemlieh., op. cit., p. 31.
13. National Archives of India, Foreign Political Consultations, 21 December 1835, No. 16; West Bengal Archives, Bengal Political Consultations, 24 November 1835, No. 17.
14. For details see, D.R. Syiemlieh, *British Administration in Meghalaya: Policy and Pattern*, Heritage Publishers, New Delhi, 1989, pp. 16–18.
15. Walter K. Firminger, *Sylhet District Records*, Vol. iii, Shillong, 1917, No. 3.
16. *Ibid.*, No. 119.
17. *Ibid.*, Vol. ii, No. 172.
18. For details of this and other raids, read, D.R. Syiemlieh, *British Administration in Meghalaya: Policy and Pattern*, New Delhi, 1989, pp. 16–24, and P.N. Dutta, *Impact of the West on the Khasis and Jaintias: A Survey of Political Economic and Social Change*, New Delhi, 1982, pp. 28–42.
19. Walter K. Firminger, op. cit., Vol. iii, No. 119.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, No. 146; B.C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteer: Sylhet*, Vol. ii, Calcutta, 1905, p. 35.
21. W.S. Seton-Karr, *Selections from the Calcutta Gazette*, Vol. ii, pp. 30–31.
22. B.C. Allen, op. cit., p. 36–37.

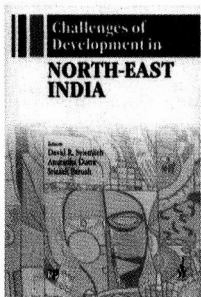


Society and Economy in North-East India (Volume 1)

Mignonette Momin and Cecile A. Mawlong (eds.)

In this Volume, writers drawn from various parts of the region — both hills and plains, notwithstanding limitation of the areas covered — have tried to address themselves to the hitherto neglected aspects of study. The purpose is to work towards the integration of the socio-economic, cultural and political history of each area under study so as to arrive at a better understanding of (a) uneven developments within the region, and (b) how and why certain events and actions occurred during pre-British times. It is hoped that this effort will encourage further investigations into the intricacies of the peoples' contacts among themselves within the region and the region's interconnectedness with happenings in South Asia and beyond.

ISBN 81-87498-83-8; 288 pp.; Rs. 400.00



Challenges of Development in North-East India

D.R. Syiemlieh, Anuradha Dutta and Srinath Baruah (eds.)

This book is made up of a collection of papers presented in a Seminar organized by the ICSSR North Eastern Regional Centre at Shillong. All the contributors focused on a single theme that India's North East needs development.

The twenty-three papers in this volume have been grouped in themes covering polity, society, economy, tourism, education and health. All the authors of the articles are persons who

Either live in the region or have had long academic interest in the region. Their articles therefore reflect much more sensitivity and details of the North-East focusing on the question of its development.

This book calls for a wider readership cutting across the activists, policy makers, researchers, development agencies, and those who are concerned with the future of the region.

ISBN 81-89233-34-3; 520 pp.; Rs. 1150.00



regency-books.com

Regency Publications

20/36-G, Old Market, West Patel Nagar, New Delhi-110 008 [India]

Phones: 42484101, 65462898

E-mail: regency@satyam.net.in, info@regency-books.com