

Traditional System of Governance among the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos of Meghalaya and the Changes thereof

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In most of the developing countries, there is a strong desire to break away from tradition and move speedily towards modernity. Even if this is the case today, however, many of these countries continue to have nostalgia for some aspects of their own tradition. Traditional institutions of governance and leadership in these countries are still forces to reckon with.

The emergence and role of politics as the dominant theme of the developing nations and the increasing politicization of the individual and his groups in these societies, is a fact of great historical, sociological and political significance. But we cannot deny the fact that a new pattern of leadership has emerged and this has created a considerable gap between the traditional institutions or systems of governance and the modern parliamentary system. The traditional institutional systems of governance under the leadership of the ascriptive leaders and the parliamentary democratic system led by the achievement-oriented leaders often come into conflict.

Turning to our country, India, we find that traditionally society in India was stratified into closed groups with well-defined, though circumscribed, roles and relationships. Thus, historically, the authority structure had largely been feudal. Authority was vested in persons belonging to certain privileged strata of the

society. Thus, according to the traditional concept of society, leadership patterns were unusually rigid and strictly hierarchical.

In the case of the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos, though their society is by tradition a casteless one, the traditional pattern of governance, leadership and authority structures were and are still hierarchical as found elsewhere in India. Thus, the traditional system of governance and leadership was vested to certain families or clans and others were deprived of this privilege. Almost at all levels of administration and governance, historically and according to tradition, the authority structure was patterned in a rigid form and based strictly on hierarchical footings.

Traditional System of Governance in Khasi Hills

The Khasi polity is based on the long-standing customs, traditions and usages. The customary laws of succession to different offices of traditional institutions of governance, management of affairs by the Dorbars or Councils, traditional system of judiciary or administration of justice and a few politico-religious observances are still surviving. The Khasis have a State-form of polity that is called Hima or Elaka. The titular heads are the Syiems, Lyngdohs, Sordars and Wahadadars. At the grassroots level of administration, we have in each village, an office of a Village Headman or Rangbah Shnong.

The Khasi tradition also suggests that the traditional polity was founded on religion. Residents of a particular area entrusted a priest's family or kin, that is, a Lyngdoh, to conduct both administrative and sacerdotal affairs. The priests had really laid down the foundation of the Khasi polity that later developed into Ka Hima (equivalent to a State), under a Syiem.

A Khasi Syiem could not act as a tyrant or a dictator as his powers are much circumscribed by the people who actually possess the highest authority. The residents of the Hima are his people, his subjects. He is, therefore, expected to be always concerned with the people's welfare and development, maintenance of peace and security within his Hima's jurisdiction.

A Khasi Syiem is also under the strict control of the whole community. He has to make his policies in conformity with the resolution of the Dorbar (Council), consisting of the Myntris (ministers) and presided over by the syiem, on all important

matters. Such Dorbars also transact administrative, executive and judicial business. The acts or decisions of a Syiem can be vetoed by the Dorbar Hima if such decisions are contrary to or violate the traditions and usages of the society. In judicial matters or administration of justice, the Syiem acts as a judge and the Dorbar as a jury. A Syiem is always assisted by his Myntries or Council of Ministers in all matters concerning the administration of the Hima. A Khasi state is not a full-fledged monarchy. It is rather a limited monarchy. The Syiem's powers are, therefore much circumscribed. Traditional Khasi polity also functions through various Dorbars right from the village level up to the Hima level.

Many changes had taken place in the traditional system of governance of the Khasi people after the occupation of their land by the British in 1832-33. Many of the powers and functions of the Khasi Syiems and other traditional institutions were either curtailed or taken away by the British authorities.

Jaintia Hills: The Traditional System Governance

Similar to the Khasis, the Jaintias also evolved a three tier systems of traditional administration and governance, with the Syiem at the top who occupied the apex position. In the administrative hierarchy and leadership before his office was abolished by the British in 1935. In the zonal or middle level of administration, the Dolois were entrusted with the authority to run the administration and at the lowest rung of the ladder of administration and governance, that is, at the Village level, the Waheh Chnong or village headman looked after the administration.

When the office of the Syiem was in existence, the Jaintia Syiem had to consider the Dolois as important administrators of the hill section of the Jaintia kingdom since it was the latter who actually administered and governed the hills. They wielded much power and authority over their Elakas in the hills. The hill section of the Jaintia kingdom was actually left entirely under the administration and governance of the Dolois.

Through the British abolished the Syiem's office in 1935, they, however, retained the offices of the other traditional institutions of Doloi, Pator and village headman to assist them in running the administration of the hill section of the kingdom. Traditionally, during the British period, and even afterwards, the Dolois as

well as other traditional institutions played an important role in providing leadership in the society.

Each Doloi has his own Elaka in which he is the administrative head. He has to administer the Elaka according to popular opinion. All actions initiated or taken by a Doloi have to be approved by the members of the Elaka Dorbar. The people elected their chiefs in order to supervise them. The Dolois have certain administrative, executive, judicial and religious functions to perform within their respective jurisdiction.

Certain changes were brought in by the British in the administration of Jaintia Hills after the area was taken over by them. After the abolition of the Syiem's office in 1835, the Dolois and other traditional institutions and chiefs were retained and allowed to continue as heads of their autonomous Elekas. The chiefs and institutions were either curtailed or taken away by the British.

Traditional System of Governance among the Garos

In Garo Hills, the institutions of Nokmaship and the village council were the two traditional administrative agencies of governance. The institution of Nokmaship is as old as the first settlement of the Garo Hills.

Among the Garos, the A'khing Nokma as the head of the clan and the custodian of the A'khing land, is entrusted with certain political and administrative powers. He occupies a high and respectable place in the Garo society. He is the pivot of the village organisation through whom the basic network of the entire society is woven. In fact, the Nokma plays the leading role as the central figure in village activities and externally represents the village.

The Nokma is the centre of sociopolitical activities within his jurisdiction. He is responsible for the peace and good administration within his A'khing land. He has to keep himself abreast of all that goes on within his jurisdiction.

Under British rule, the powers and functions of the Nokmas were greatly reduced. An office of a Laskar was introduced by the British. Each Laskar was to control over ten to twelve A'khing Nokma. The Scheduled Districts Act, 1874, conferred on the Laskar some powers in matter of police, civil and criminal justice and in revenue administrations within his Elaka.

The people of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills experienced a lot of controversies that are involved in the relationship between traditional institutions which are responsible in maintaining and running the traditional system of governance and that of the new constitutional set up of institutions. On the question of leadership, two prominent types emerged during and after the British administration; the same continues even after India's independence. The British administration was responsible in bringing about a sea-change in the mindset of the tribal people of north-east India in general and the people of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills in particular. The Christian Missionaries further added to the new consciousness of the tribal people in the realm of social, political and economic developments. This was possible because a new class of people, the Middle Class or the newly educated elite sprang up and emerged during that period of time. This class of people had accumulated new ideas and their worldview was almost completely different from that of the holders of the offices of traditional institutions. Some members of the educated elite started questioning about the role, leadership and pattern of administration under the traditional chiefs and other institutions. In the meantime, India's pattern of independence and the adoption of the Indian Constitution came as handy opportunity for furtherance of the interests and political aspirations of the educated elites of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo societies.

Modernization and Westernization are the two important forces that brought a sea-change in the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo societies. The worldview of the educated elite of the society are no longer limited or concentrated within their own societies but expanded much beyond. They had heard, seen and read about the political changes that took place around the world and in other parts of India. These political developments enthused this group of people to re-examine the socio-political situation that prevailed in their own societies, and find out ways and means how to bring in such political developments and fit them, if possible, in their societies so as to enable the people to reap the fruits of the new constitutional developments and enhance their political status. A new political consciousness developed which gave rise to different kinds of sociopolitical movements in the area.

Post-Independence Pattern

In spite of the new political developments that took place in the country, the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos continue to have and maintain their traditional system of governance as explained earlier. The tradition-bound Societies are, therefore, partly governed and administered by their traditional chiefs and institutions. These traditional institutions provide to the societies, the 'hierarchical type of leadership'. On the other hand, the Constitution of India has given rise to the setting up of new constitutional institutions and the emergence of 'achievement-oriented type of leadership'. The situation is therefore bound to create a conflict of role, functioning and leadership between the hierarchical type of leadership under the traditional chiefs/institutions and the achievement-oriented type of leadership as provided by the elected representatives of the people to the various constitutional bodies.

Under the new constitutional set up, the hierarchical leaders are pushed behind the line of leadership. This is possible because of the constitutional provisions that empowered the elected representatives through the ADCs to pass the Acts, Rules and Regulations putting the traditional chiefs and institutions at a subordinate position and status in their relations with the ADCs. Of course, as far as leadership is concerned, it is not only the case in the relationship between the traditional and modern type of leadership, but in the whole of Meghalaya leadership has been provided by the educated elite and the elected representatives of the people at the District Council and State level. The stages for such changing political processes have been clearly provided by constitutional development. Thus, soon after India's independence, the tribal leaders of north-east India had demanded political autonomy and the introduction of administrative measures to enable the tribal people to run the administration of their respective tribal areas through certain constitutional machinery. The Constituent Assembly after accepting the report and recommendations of the Bordoloi Sub-Committee decided to incorporate the Sixth Schedule to the Indian Constitution which provided for Autonomous District Councils in certain hill districts of the then composite State of Assam. Thus, in 1952, five ADCs were created for Khasi-Jaintia Hills, Garo Hills, Mizo Hills, Mikir Hills (now Karbi Anglong) and North Cachar Hills.

In Meghalaya, with the setting up of the Autonomous District Councils, more control was placed over the traditional institutions. This is possible and effective because of certain provisions that contained in the Sixth Schedule itself and the different acts, rules and regulations, passed from time to time by the ADCs. Traditional institutions in Meghalaya have, therefore, to remain content with whatever power and functions left to them by their respective ADCs. This is another blow to the traditional authorities inflicted on them by the British. The powers and functions of the traditional socio-political institutions in Meghalaya have been greatly curtailed and marginalised by the modern constitutional institutions.

The roles and participation of these traditional institutions that exist today in Meghalaya at the grassroots level cannot be set aside. Indifference towards their role and functioning is a grave mistake on the part of any government machinery. The modern constitutional institutions should think of strengthening and improving the powers and functions of the different types of such institutions instead of adopting a confrontationist and indifferent attitude towards them. There are actually certain areas in which immediate cooperation and constructive and active interaction between the two sources of authority in the State is called for.

Traditional polity and governance in Meghalaya had undergone many changes. The forces of change have brought tremendous effects not only in the mindset of the general population but also on those who are the holders of the traditional offices. The Twentieth and Twentyfirst Centuries have, therefore, brought not only changes but challenges to the tribal societies in north-east India in general and the people of Meghalaya in particular.

On the basis of the recent political developments in Meghalaya and the continuing tug of war between the traditional institutions and the ADCs, some initiatives have been taken by the traditional chiefs, especially the Khasi *Syiems* to demand for constitutional recognition and direct funding from the Government of India. Broadly speaking, the Khasi *Syiems* have demanded from the Government of India:

1. To initiate constitutional measures aimed at restoring and preserving the traditional status and powers of the traditional institutions by a suitable constitutional amendment; and

2. To define through the constitutional amendment the legislative, administrative and judicial jurisdiction of the Khasi traditional heads in the *Dorbar* in accordance with the customs practiced and respected by the Khasis since time immemorial.

To this effect, the members of the Federation of Khasi States (FKS) have also drafted a proposal for Constitutional Amendment to be included in the Thirteenth Schedule under Article 244(3) which shall apply to the Khasi *Hima(s)* in the State of Meghalaya. The debate on this issue is still going on. Till date, there seems to be no clearcut outcome of any decisions taken on this vexing issue either from the State Government of Meghalaya or the Government of India. Meanwhile, the other developments are also taking place whereby another organization other than the Federation of Khasi States has come into existence on 27th July 200, viz. the Federation of Khasi Traditional Institutions (FKTI). To some observers, this recent development may put to an end the ongoing movement against the ADCs, because the FKTI was constituted at the initiative and with the blessing of the Khasi Hills ADCs KHADCs. The newly formed Federation, which had been formed in the backdrop of the ongoing anti-ADC campaign by the FKS, has agreed to work together with the KHADC in finding out ways and means to improve the traditional system of governance and to remove irritations, fears and apprehensions among the traditional institutions on the role and functioning of the District Councils.

The present Century poses more challenges to the tribal societies of north-east India and Meghalaya is no exception. What will happen from now on is not very clear. People have started questioning many things which sometimes they did not feel like doing in the past. The situation is becoming more difficult even for the traditional chiefs and institutions. They have to answer many problematic questions on traditional governance and even on their role and functioning which the society itself has entrusted on them. The people of the State have also questioned the relevance of the traditional chiefs and institutions vis-a-vis not only their role and functions but, also their relationship and status vis-a vis constitutional institutions.