

## Polity Formation in Pre-Colonial Biate Chieftaincy

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In the inaugural address to the Seminar on *Pre-Colonial State Formation in Tribal Regions of East and North-East India* organised under the auspices of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta on July 24, 1981, a statement was casually made about the status of polity formation among the Biates as falling under the category of being "Stateless". This statement was based on an earlier study of the Biate tribe and the follow up discussion in the Seminar on the *Tribe of North-East India* organised under the joint auspices of the North East India Council for Social Science Research, Shillong and the Sacred Heart Theological College, Shillong during September 22-24, 1980, which has since been published (1984). The present day Jaintia Hills covers part of two pre-colonial areas of Jaintia State and Biateram each with State like institutions during that period. An attempt to study about state-formation in pre-colonial Jaintia with special reference to the Jaintia State was made in a paper in the 1981 Seminar mentioned above. Here it is proposed to study further about state-formation in pre-colonial Jaintia with special reference to Biateram.

As with the case of the Jaintia State, pre-colonial Biateram also lacked reliable historical materials for our study. Our enquiries are, therefore, based mainly on the structural insight that we gain by studying contemporary States in the area like the Dimasa Kachari, the Jaintia and the Tripura States. Apart from the earlier fieldworks in the area covering a span of more than a decade, a recent trip during October 2-3, 1984 to the Biate areas of Fiangpui in the North-Cachar Hills of Assam has thrown more light. A number of leading personalities of the society ranging from the local member of the Autonomous District Council (M.D.C.), the headman, religious leaders, government employees and youths have responded to a number of searching questions on the idea of polity-formation as well as state-formation in Biateram.

The Biate phrase "ram" is a concept which does not indicate

any equation with the Western Concept of "State". All the respondents agree that *ram* is more applicable to territorial extent only rather than to other characteristics of the State. As such we are not so sure of the processes of State-formation in Biateram. At most, what had taken place there was the process of polity-formation through the institution of chieftainship called *Lal* or in later days *Kalim-kabur*. However, at one point of time the Biates had the concept of a sovereign ruler over the whole tribe called *Reng* or *Rajah*. It was at that point of time that the process of polity-formation gave way to state-formation but only for a very brief period. Soon, they were under the influence of a *Vai-reng* or a foreign ruler of Tripura State, sometimes in the sixteenth century. Since then, the Biates may be said to be stateless though they continued to refer to their country by the term *ram*. At a much later date, that is in the eighteenth century approximately, a futile attempt was made by Haiapuia Thlungur in asserting his rengship or lalship at old Fiangpui near present day Gunjung of North Cachar Hills.

The Biate tribe is an equalitarian society with a clan based tribal political organisation. It had adjusted itself very well to the centralised, hierarchical, territorially oriented political development; emerging social class formation; interaction between the traditional ritual symbols of the tribe like the concept of *Chung Pathian*, the tribal God-the-creator, and the advanced symbols sponsored by the neighbouring or overwhelming States like the concept of *Bolang Rajah*, the Hindu God of Tripura State. It is interesting to note the effect of such historical processes on the minds of the Biates. Our attempt to follow up these developmental processes as well as the consequences of the formation of State in Biateram is by means of a discussion of the theory of conquest vis-a-vis evolutionary theories of State formation, as well as by investigating the techno-economic, social, military and symbolic conditions favouring the growth of State.

Biate legends tell us of their coming under the leadership of Lamlira from Sinlung area, somewhere in South-East Asia or Southern China about a thousand years ago. They traced their origin to the first couple Manmasi (ancestor) and Munisi (ancestress) who lived at and worshipped *Kharpui*, the cave. They bore five sons, the ancestors of the present-day five clans -Beia, the eldest representing the Thlungur or Darnei clan, Laia of Ngamblai clan, Ngirsim of Lalsim clan, Ngola of Chungol or Nampui clan, and Thiaia of Thieite clan. From local accounts it is not clear how

did the five sons manage to find wives for themselves. But like their father, Manmasi who brought their mother Munisi from outside *kharpu*, the five sons, could have repeated the practice of procuring wives from outside their territory. This perhaps explains why Biatae women do have a say in running the affairs of their respective homes, particularly in matters concerning the marriage of their daughters.

The descendants of the five sons reached present day Champhai area of Mizoram and established Champhairam around the fourteenth century. At Champhairam the institution of the *Lal* (chief) began to evolve due to certain factors to be presently discussed. Till then the Biates were nomads and used to be under the leadership of men like Lamlira, their legendary hero, with ability to lead them to conquer nature and man. Such a leader looked after a number of families called *dong* and clans called *parwal*. It was then a loose social organisation with no trace of political or administrative organisation as representing the essential attributes of statehood. Each leadership emerged as and when each particular situation demanded as it occurred during the time of Lamlira who led his people out of Sinlung difficult days.

The idea of a family council or *dong rison* under the clan council called *parwal rison* or *nam rison* under the *tharthlungin* ; a council of five clans called *namtin dewan* or *namringa dewan* under the *Kalim-Kabur* ; and a village council or *Khua dewan* under the *Siarkalim* was developed at a much later date when the roots of state formation began to take place at Champhairam. After crossing the rugged mountain ranges, deep river valleys and inhospitable terrain from Sinlung to Champhai, the Biates finally found the Champhai area like a heavenly abode. Champhai area even today is usually regarded as the granary of Mizoram. It was much fertile when the Biates first arrived there. It was so much fertile that after sowing the seeds the Biates went to attend to their field only when a particular local bird indicated the time of harvest by its sweetest note. When asked for the name of the local bird none of the respondents could give the name. In all probability the specie of that bird had already become extinct with the gradual loss of fertility of Champhai land.

It was customary for the Biates that until the bird announced the approaching of harvest season to go on dancing and merry making for seven days in each house until the whole village could celebrate the festival in every household. In fact they continued the festival after harvest also to complete the round. This festival

is called *Zawlsuak* and at Champhai the Biates used to spend four to five months in a year to complete the round of all households. Now only a few well-to-do persons of the tribe can perform this festival. In addition to *Zawlsuak*, there are other festivals connected with cultivation like the *Chemchoikut* (before cutting the jungles and forest for *jhum* cultivation), *Ramcharkut* (before burning the *jhum*), and *Labangkut* (before harvest). Thus so much time had been spent on festivals.

The above account is made to indicate the economic aspect of state formation among the Biates. When their economic condition was at its best, they used to spend their surplus production in the *Zawlsuak* festival. As a result the state system could not emerge and the loose social organisation continued. But such a life in an idyllic setting could not go on for ever. Soon the Pawis, the other late comers entered Mizoram. The rich and fertile valleys of Champhai attracted the attention of those new comers. That was a danger signal to the Biates. They had to fight against the influx of the Pawis but they had no chief nor any leader ready to rise to the occasion. After many years of training in the perfection of the part of dancing and merry making, they found to their dismay that what they needed most at that moment was a *Lamlira* to lead them against the Pawis.

It was at that critical juncture that a decision was made to have not only one but two chiefs, the *Lals*, to meet the situation. What ever amount of surplus wealth that used to be spent on dancing and merry making was then placed in the hands of the two chiefs. Those two chiefs were the *Thlungur Lal* from the *Darnoi* clan representing the first son, of their great ancestor, by birth-right based on the law of primogeniture and the *Namtual Lal* of the *Munning* group from their great ancestor who was regarded as the bravest fighter of the five sons. Since then the system of dual *Lalship* existed among the Biates as long as they remained in *Champhairam*. This was the first stage in the process of state formation among the Biates.

The pressures from the Pawis continued unabated inspite of the Biate *Lals*. At that point of time, the institution of *Lalship* was similar to that of the *Jaintia doloiship* before the growth of *Jaintia State*. There was, therefore, a desire on the part of the smaller *Kuki* tribes akin to each other to gather together and consolidate their position against the Pawis. Thus the *Hallam* community was formed in *Champhai* area among the Biates, *Hrangkhawls*, and *Khelmas* or *Sakecheps*. These three tribes forming

the Hallam cluster of tribes were already on their way to form a State of their own with their *Reng* or Rajah to rule over them. This is in all probability the darkest period in the history of the Hallams.

We do not have any empirical evidence to show that the Hallams had actually reached the final stage of state-formation nor do we have a list of their rulers or *Rangs*. The last *Reng* of the Biates, at least, was believed to have lived at Vervek in Mizoram until the institution of chiefship was abolished by the Mizo Autonomous District Council in 1956. Apparently, the Hallams were sandwiched between the Pawis to the South and the Tripuris to the north. Since they had no enmity with the *Vai-reng* (foreign ruler) of Tripura, they were easily brought under his influence. The present place called Vairengte (*Vai* = foreign ; *reng* = ruler ; *te* = either Biate on the plural form) lying on the Silchar Aizawl road in northern Mizoram and supposed to be earlier under the control of Tripuris is believed to be the erstwhile headquarters of the Hallams when they were under the influence of the *Vaireng* of Tripura State.

Naturally, the Tripura Rajah would not allow any other title of *Reng* near about his State. The Biates and other Hallams had to acquiesce due to constant pressures of the Pawis and later on the Luseis under the Sailos from the south. At the same time, the title of *Lal* was also not viewed with favour by the Tripura Rajah as it was almost the equivalent of *reng* or *raja*. The Biates of Jaintia Hills still used the words *rangpa* and *lalpa* interchangeably while addressing the heavenly sovereign though the Biates of North Cachar Hills would give precedent to the word *rengpa*. The result was that a new designation of *Kalim-Kabur* was conferred by the Tripura Rajah on the Chiefs of the Biates along with an official symbol and authority called *Bala* or a bangle made of either platinum or silver. Later on, the bangle was added with British coins. The *bala* was used to be handed over by one generation of *Kalim-Kabur* to another.

The term *Kalim-Kabur* was not Biate in origin. Most of the Biates believed that the term was derived either from Tripuri or from the Hrangkhawls. However, this is a subject matter for further enquiry. Incidentally, the Hallams of present day Tripura with more than a dozen sub-tribes also have similar titles of *Kalim-Kabur* with a *Rai* over them and an over all control in the past by the Rajah of Tripura. It appears to the present writer that the titles of *bai* and *reng*, are the equivalent of the title of Rajah though for historical reasons the *rai* or the *reng* might have been vassals

to the Tripura Rajah. The political stratification of the Biате society beginning with the institutions of *Lal* in Champhairam and of *reng* in Vairengte was further reinforced by social stratification in the new order set up under the influence of the Tripura Rajah.

According to the political system of *Kalim-Kabur*, the following is the classification of the Biате society based on the information given by Pu Lalpuia Darnei of Fiangpui, Haflong.

Royal Title	Intermediate Title	Common Title
<i>Kalim</i> (Reserved for Darnei and Nampui clans by rotation).	<i>Kabur</i> (Reserved for Ngamlai and Ngirsim clans by rotation).	<i>Kamsakok</i> (for Thieite clan)
With two assistants Senior- <i>Palanta Khuksung</i> who will succeed to <i>Kalim</i> . Junior- <i>Palanta</i> who will succeed to <i>Palanta Khuksung</i> .	With two assistants Senior- <i>Palanta Khoisung</i> who will succeed <i>Kabur</i> . Junior- <i>Palanta</i> who will succeed <i>Palanta Khoisung</i> .	With one assistant <i>Palanta Jokosung</i> .

Explanation – *Kalim* and *Kabur* each requires two assistants because there are two clans by rotation for the same office. That is, if the present *Kalim* is a Darnei clan, the senior *Palanta Khuksung* is a Nampui clan, and the Junior *Palanta* is a Darnei clan. Similarly, if the present *Kabur* is *Ngamlai* clan, the senior *Palanta Khoisung* is a Nagirsim clan, and the Junior *Palanta* is a Ngamlai clan.

But rigid social stratification is not evident inspite of this strict clan stratification in politics and administration. This is so because any form of rigid classification is contrary to Biате social practice. After all, the five clans belong to the same family. They accept the above classification only for the purpose of administrative convenience. Even in administration, both the *Kalim* and the *Kabur* cannot take any decision unilaterally. They have to decide any matter jointly and in the presence of their assistants including the Thieite clan. The Thieite clan accepts this arrangement not only because of any class structure but also because its ancestor happened to be the youngest child of the family. The fact that the system continues to exist even today testifies to its

general acceptance which arrangement was more or less imposed upon the Biates by the Tripura Rajah. It gained general acceptance though imposed by foreign rulers because it was based on both the ascriptive and achievement principles. The new system was definitely better than the old system. Pu Jamchonga Renga Lalsim, MDC, opined that "Whereas in the old system of *Lal* and *reng* upto the fifteenth century there was occasional anarchy, that of the system of *Kalim-Kabur* since the sixteenth century was half democratic".

Any half-way measures, is however, bound to remain unsatisfactory. This is also true of the system of *Kalim-Kabur*. Towards the close of the eighteenth century and the beginning of British penetration into the hill areas of North East India, Haia Puia Thlungur (or Darnei clan) asserted the rights of the Biates to have their own *Reng* or *Lal*. He argued that since the Tripura Rajah had no more influence over them the system of *Kalim-Kabur* be discarded. He crowned himself with a *Lukhim*, a royal crown and put on the *Chemsei*, a ceremonial sword. But the Nampui clan which used to occupy the institution of dual Lalship along with the Darnei clan while in Champhai area and also a co-Kalim with the Darnei clan while in Tripura, challenged Haia Puia Thlungur. The Nampui clan said that he could not make such a unilateral declaration of becoming a *Reng* or a *Lal* all by himself without going back to the Tripura Rajah for his consent. The intention of the Nampui clan was quite obvious. While the Nampui clan did not oppose the idea of having a separate Biate *Lal* or *Reng* they also liked to be associated with the Darnei clan in the revived Biate institution of *Lal* or *Reng*, in accordance with Biate traditions. But before the whole process could be completed, Haia puia Thlungur died and his *Lukhim* and *Chemsei* were also buried along with him at old Fiangpui near the present day Gunjung of North-Cachar and Jaintia Hills. He was perhaps the last *Lal* or *Reng* of the Biates of North-Cachar and Jaintia Hills.

After his death there were constant struggles for leadership among the Biates. Since they could not settle the question of leadership among themselves, they could not consolidate themselves for forming a State of their own. In such a situation, the splitting of people under contending leaders was the result. The present day generation of Biates looked back with sadness at the division of their people at old Fiangpui. But inspite of such a split territorily, there was a ray of hope for continuing their racial unity as expressed in a song by one of the leaders who led his group

towards Naga Hills. This song was given by Pu Jamchong Renga Lalsim, MDC and a part of it, in Biata language, is as follows :

*"Omtaro Voi Kattang Ketu*

*Omtaro Voi Lunglenghai Ketu*

*Kipa Khuorai hingzawla kaltang Ketu*

*Pualmual Khotwer inthara thirgsk zou hai*

*Thangyan bil ang chima kah heingan nomin"*.

In brief, the song means that : "I will go, you stay here, we will remember you . We will also remember that we are one though we are separated".

The rest of the Biates was further divided into three groups. One group along with the Changsan and the Thadou tribes went to Feithut in the Langting area. Later on, both the Changsans and the Thadous left the place. Similarly, at a much later date the Biates also left the place for Thingdol, the present cultural centre of the Biates. It was from Thingdol that a group of Biates hived off to present day Jaintia Hills. The second group left old Fiangpui and went to Vangvui area between West Cachar and South-eastern Jaintia Hills. The last group who remained at old Fiangpui ultimately shifted to Haflong area and retained the name Fiangpui to the present day. It was at this stage of complete disintegration that the British found the Biates without any State and without control by any other neighbouring States.

In terms of ritual-status or symbolic conditions, the Biates had earlier accepted the concept of god-king of the deep forest or *Bolong Rajah* from Tripura. The concept of *Bolong Rajah* was a later intrusion of Hindu influence. Like the Jaintias, they simultaneously worshipped their traditional God, *Chung Pathian* and other lesser gods of different clans. *Bolong Rajah* was called in Biata language, as *Nuai Pathian* when referring to him colloquially, or *Nuai Mala* when they referred to him in the real sense. In carrying out their political functions, the political authorities of the Biates were greatly influenced by the concept of *Bolong Rajah*. Till the time of writing it is still a hallowed practice that only those who are well-versed in traditional religion and the concept of *Bolong Rajah* can become the *Kalim-Kabur*. Since there are only four to five non-Christian families living in the two traditional Biata villages of Jahai and Thingdol who are qualified for holding the offices of *Kalim-kabur*, the Biata Christians have started taking up the stand that Biata Christians can also become the *Kalim-kabur*. But in such a changed cultural environment, the difficulty will arise regarding the question of who should conduct the worship of tra-

ditional deities and spirits, leave alone the question of *Bolong Rajah*. The Biates have gone a long way from *Chung Pathian* to *Bolong Rajah* and now to *Jesus Christ*. Almost all the present day official village head men (*gaonburas*) and the traditional village headmen (*Siarkalims*) are Christians, but the office of *Kalim-kabur* are still manned by non-Christians.

Here, then, is an example of a community starting from a simple social organisation of the family and clan to that of a tribe with a polity of its own. While the polity formation of a tribe usually leads to the formation of a State, the case of Biate polity was different. Surrounded by the three powerful States of Dimasa-Kachari Jaintia and Tripura, the Biates as indeed any other Kuki or Naga tribes in the area could not have easily reached the final stage of state-formation. However, in the Champhai area as well as in the Vairengte area, the Biates had more or less reached the final stage but for a very short period of time and hardly to be noticed by the scholars or chroniclers of the time. Having accepted this position, it is very significant to note the process of decay of the short-lived Biate State. That State was built on a very weak economic base. In Champhai area, for example, the economic surplus that was produced was just enough for arranging festivals of merry-making and dancing. When the Pawis, the Luseis and the Tripuris, appeared on the scene both their political and economic stability were shattered and the Biates, once again, became a tribe of nomads in search of a country (*ram*) and a king (*reng*). The instability thus produced shook the very foundation of their State until the community itself disintegrated at old Fiangpui in North-Cachar Hills and the splinter groups reached as far as Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya. The Biates though now without a State could still present the remnant of their short-lived State. Its stump could clearly be seen in the form of their continuing traditional political classes based on clans and the continuing ritual-status or symbolic conditions in their traditional culture through the political offices of *Kalim-kabur*.

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