

The Shella Wahadarship : The Roots of Polity Formation in the War Area of East Khasi Hills District

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Tucked away in the southern slopes of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills Districts of Meghalaya we find the 'War Country', bounded by the Garo Hills in the West, the Cachar Hills in the east, the central Khasi and Jaintia plateau region in the north and the plains of Bangladesh to the South.

*Ri War*¹ or *War* country has been the centre of trade monopoly and maintained this for centuries² with the people of the plains. The precipitous cliffs descend steeply from the highlands or *Ri Lum* to the plains for about four thousand feet. While viewing this great descend from the plains, it looks like a great green wall rising immediately from the plains, which seem unconquerable and inaccessible.

Ri War is a long stretch of land which can be very hot and at times unbearable at certain places, especially during the summer months. Although the weather can get very hot, because of the location of the place, it experiences heavy downpours during monsoons, thus bringing down the temperature. Cherrapunji and Mawsynram are adjacent to this region, and they are known to have the world's highest rainfall. Winters here are very pleasant, not too cold as in the *Ri Lum*.

The people have sharp features with a tan complexion. They are very similar in looks to the plains people, but the main difference is that the *Wars* have well developed muscles, especially calf muscles. They traverse up and down steep ravines carrying heavy loads on their backs without any difficulty. They are a very pleasant people and cheerful in their disposition,³

In 1662-1663 A. D. the Mughals invaded Sarang (where the Shella people inhabited)⁴, but due to the ruthless burning of the village, these inhabitants fled upstream, a distance of about six miles, and settled there which is now called Shella. All the inhabitants did not go to one place but were scattered all over. Some landed in Muiong, some in Soh-Hynriang and some in Krem u Dei.⁵ The most important war headquarters was of course Shella.

Like the system in the hills, here too the matrilineal system is very much in practice. This means that any child born of a Shella woman is considered a 'Shella', no matter who the father is or where he comes from. The child takes the mother's title. But there are

instances where a *War* man gets married to a plains woman or a 'dkhar',⁶ then the children of such a union are not considered *war* or *Shella*. In such a case, only when the woman has relinquished all her former customs and culture, her second and third generations can claim themselves to be *Wars* or *Shellas*. It is only after such renunciation that the heirs can be inducted into the community, and they take part in the religious rites and rituals. From such heredity came the 'Dkhar' clan of *Shella*.

Although the people of *Shella* are very particular about their customs of marriage and inheritance yet we find that outside their state one does not really know them by their clan name. The reasons are as follows : (i) Although they consider the clan as an important unit of their *Khein-kur* i. e. naming their clan, yet they feel that giving too much importance to their clan name does not help them in any way, politically or socially. Therefore, clan title is not important to them. (ii) Again, in religious matters too, when electing or nominating a *Lyngdoh* or priest, clan does not play any important role as the fittest man in the village is either elected or nominated and then consecrated or *tang* to the post of a *Lyngdoh*. (iii) Due to their peculiar system of dual heredity i.e. inheriting both from the mother and father's sides, which makes them self-sufficient, they feel that clan name will not help them economically or socially. (iv) Lastly, a *Shella* male who marries a *Dkhar* woman (who in many cases were slaves), did not want to reveal their identity, so clan name was never mentioned till the second or third generation.

Religion

The *Shella* people have their own indigenous religion which is somewhat similar to the Hindu Religion. With the coming of the Mughals in 1663-1665 A.D., there are instances where a few converts were found here and there. This we can see according to Herbert's report in the succession to Syiemship in the Khasi Hills, that it was the Bengali Mohammedans from Sylhet who were the first founders of the *Syiem clan* of Mawiong. Hinduism is also prevalent there, and the people have taken to this religion more than the Muslim religion. The reason being that Hinduism is very similar to the indigenous religion. Nakane gives a clearer insight into this by saying that "... the *Shella Khasi*, like the *Jaintia*, have been much influenced by Hindu culture. However, this does not mean that the people of *Shella* adopted the Hindu beliefs."⁷

The *Shella* people were economically better off than the rest in the *Khasis*. There is a navigable river called *Rupatylli* in *Shella*,

which is called Bogapani in the Sylhet plains. This river formed a great waterway for trade and commerce. The location of Shella made it a gateway to the Khasi Hills. It supplied a lot of fruit produce, forest products and minerals. It was an important port and attracted a lot of foreign traders, who came from far off places, as far as the Middle-East and Persia. Bengal was the main market for all their produces. The mode of transportation was by boats or ferries. *Hat Pdia* or Shella market was the main commercial centre, so also *Hat Phali*. The former was held once in four days while the latter was held every day for six months in a year, i.e., during the winter months from November to April.

The Shella people had easy access to the rest of the country, and so became the first in the hills to get formal education. This is proved by the high school that existed in Shella before the great earthquake in 1897 A.D. It is found that the *Wahadadar* of Shella maintained their records in Bengali and the custom was followed right down to 1865 when the British prohibited its use.⁸ Shella also produced great intellectuals, writers, politicians, etc. in modern times.

In connection with the rituals performed during a marriage ceremony it is more or less the same as in the *Ri Lum*. As far as the dead is concerned the Khasi religion does not advocate burial but the practice of cremation. There is a difference between the cremation in the hills and in Shella. In the *Ri Lum* there are four kinds of cremations, namely ; (i) *Thang dieng tylli* which is a simple ceremony carried out by the poorer section of the community, (ii) *Thang bai-wait*, for the economically better off, (iii) *Thang lyntang*, is for the rich, and (iv) *Thang Lyngkhason*, which is a special ceremony performed only for the *Syiem* or ruler of the State. But in Shella there are only two types of cremations : (i) *Thang shibait-wait*, which is performed only for the common man, and (ii) *Thang nam* a cremation done for the wealthy people and for the priest or *Lyngdoh*.

Another significant difference between Shella and Khasi *Syiem*-ships is that here religion and politics are never mixed together. They are treated as separate institutions. For instance, the Khyrim *Syiem*ship has a *Syiem* or King at its head, whereas in *Hima Shella* there are four *Wahadadars* who hold the highest political and administrative authority. In the Khyrim State, the King or *Syiem* has a very important role to play not only in the administration of the state but also in the annual dance festival called *Pomblang Syiem*, very much connected with religious sacrifices. It is a ceremony to

strengthen the ties of unity between the different units of the State and above all, to pray to God to give peace and contentment in the State.⁹ All we can conclude is that in most of the Kasi states, religion is very much a part of politics and vice versa. The significant difference here is that in *Hima Shella* the *Lyngdoh* or priests, are there to perform the religious rites and ceremonies whereas the *Duakdars* or *Wahadadars* are there strictly to perform their political duties and look into the administration of the state.¹⁰

The *Lyngdoh* or priest is chosen to look into the religious aspect of life in the state. These *Lyngdohs* are in theory supposed to be elected by all the male adults, but practically till today, there has not been an instance of competition for the post of a *Lyngdoh*. Once the older residents of the village accept a certain person as the fittest to hold the post, then a village *Durbar* is held where there is an *adong shnong* (i.e., prohibition of any person to move out of the village), and at this *durbar shnong* or village council, the appointed man is *tang* or consecrated.

Inheritance

When coming to land systems and inheritance, again we notice that there is a vast difference with the system prevailing in the hills. In *Shella* the land holdings are solely private, and nothing belongs to the *Hima* or state. The daughter is the inheritress of the ancestral property. But it is not the youngest or *Ka Khadduh* but the eldest daughter who inherits the ancestral house where her parents stay. She also acts as the custodian of the family property. The reason why the eldest daughter inherits household property is because the *Shella* people believe that since she is the eldest and wisest, she will be able to act judiciously when dispute arises. She is the representative of the mother so she has to take care and give shelter to the younger ones, in need and in distress, be it a brother or a sister. She inherits this property only after the death of her parents and what is given to her is called *Ri Ing*, the best portion of all.¹ The next best property or *Ri Nongsaid*¹¹ goes to the eldest son who is called *Kni ka Ing*. The reason why the eldest son gets the *Ri Nongsaid* is that he is the eldest male member of the family and it is his duty to look into the problems of the other brothers and sisters. There are instances when the family may have to fight a case regarding any property which may belong to them, then it is the *Kni ka Ing* who has to fight the case out of his own income. In order that he should not have to take this money from anyone else, he is given this property.

The remaining *Bri* or property of the family, called *ri kynti*, is divided equally among all brothers and sisters including the eldest daughter and the eldest son. Besides these there is also *ka ri bynta* and *ri seng*.¹² The former is some kind of forest land which is left uncultivated so that the family members can use it for cutting firewood and wood for their own domestic use. This forest land is not to be used for commercial purposes. *Ri Seng*, on the other hand, is the unclaimed property of one or more clans. Any person who thinks that he can trace his ancestry to the former owners of the *ri seng*, and is found to be correct, he can have a share in the property. It may mean that he may have to trace back twenty or more generations. This system of tracing one's ancestry is called *jai*.¹³

There is nothing like this system among the Khasis. In fact in the *Ri Lum*, only the *Khadduh* is the one who inherits all the property and also acts as the custodian. Among the Shella people their system of inheritance is very systematic, fair and square. This systematic and methodical dealing with property matters has also reflected in their systematic way of administration, which we can say is very democratic. They have laid down rules as to how to conduct elections, run administration and decide cases. Another interesting thing noticed here is that the legislative, executive and judicial organs of government carry out their functions as they should in a parliamentary form of government.

The whole of the *War* region before 1662 A.D. was ruled by *Ka Ri Ki Saw Seng*, which means that there were four villages or states that collectively held the power of administration. The four states were Shella, Mustoh, Nongwar and Nongbah. In 1662-63 A.D. when the Mughals came to Sarang (original place where Shella was situated), the people of the region thought that it was better to make an agreement with all the surrounding states. So in 1663 A.D. Shella along with Mawlong, Syiemiong and Syiemlieh signed a kind of quadruple alliance at a place called *U Lum Baniang*.¹⁴ This agreement called *Sawthyndaw*.

Administration at the Hima or State level

Duakdar or *Wahadadar* means to enlighten the darkness. A school teacher from Mustoh came up with this idea because he had seen different types of rules like the Syiemship, Sirdarship, Lyngdohship, etc., and he thought that these systems were not the appropriate ones for the Shella people. He said that once we have been freed from the bondage of Kingship, we should not let our individual freedom just slip through our fingers. So his theory of *Dua-*

kdar came into existence in 1663 A.D.¹⁵ According to this theory, there are four *Duakdars*. Why should there be four *Duakdars*? The reason he gives is that as there are four seasons in a year, which are totally different, one from the other, yet all make up a single year, so also in order to obtain true justice there should be four *Wahadadars*. This was also the year of the inception of the Shella confederacy.¹⁶

The Shella confederacy¹⁷ stands till today along with its agreements which were made then. This confederacy is administered by four *Wahadadars* and it consists of 23 *Shnong* or villages. The *Wahadadars* are chosen from among the best capable persons of the whole *Hima* or state. They are elected democratically by all the male adult residents of the *Hima*. The system of male adult franchise was in practice then and it exists till today. The four *Wahadadars* are the high political officials and judicial authority in the *Hima* and at the *Durbar ki Arphewlai Shnong*. This forms the state parliament of Shella which encumbers all the legislative, executive and judicial powers in itself. This parliament consists of *kaide* - two each from the 22 villages of Shella confederacy so in total it consists of 48 members.

Qualifications

- 1) He must be a person who can support himself financially,
- 2) He must not have any incumbrances,
- 3) He must be the best and the most able man of the *Hima*, and
- 4) He must be a Shella by residence and birth.

Terms of Office

According to the original agreement of the confederacy, a *Wahadadar* is elected for life. But with the coming of the British, the term kept changing from 3 years to 5 years and even 8 years, but eventually it remained at 5 years till the present day.¹⁸

Elections

The fittest man of the *Hima* can be a candidate for the post of a *Wahadadar*. The names of the contestants will be put up and the elections take place in one day. The day before the elections there is a *pyrta shnong* - village announcement, that every male member of the villages must come out to vote. Then on the election day there is an *adong shnong*. By doing this it ensures that no one moves out of the village till he has casted his vote. The village *Sande* or headmen which may be 4 or 6 in number in each village will act

as the returning officers. After the elections are over, the person who gets the highest number of votes becomes the *Wahadadar*. Earlier such elections were quite rare because the term was for life.

All the four *Wahadadars* stay in Shella which acts as the capital of the *Hima*. Shella although it forms one of the twenty three villages, yet it does not have village headmen nor does it send two *Kaide* to the *Wahadadar's* Council because it is supposed to be a model village for administration.

The *Durbar ki arphewlai shnong* is held at Phali while the court of the *Wahadadars* is situated in Shella. The *Wahadadars* are supposed to be self sufficient in themselves yet we do find that they do get a good amount of income or gift though not a regular salary.¹³

Income of the Wahadadars

The source of their income comes in three categories, viz., (1) *Hat bam* - taxes levied at the market situated at Shella called *Hat Pdia*,²⁰ (2) Payment from the 23 villages in cawries, and (3) *Bai kachari* - court fees. Let us look into the first category. According to the laws laid down, there are several taxes that are levied on several goods which go to the income of the *Wahadadars*. Under the first category the taxes levied are as follows :

- i) **Khewa lieng** - Taxes are levied on incoming boats that dock at *Hat Pdia*. These boats belong to the *Dkhar* or plains people so since they have docked their boats at the market place, they will have to pay toll tax. These taxes are never levied on the *War* people.
- ii) **Pyrha** - This is another tax levied only on foodgrains which is brought in by the *Dkhars*.
- iii) **Musa pha** - Tax levied on oranges. This tax again is not levied on the local traders but on the *Dkhars* who buy the fruits.
- iv) **Khrong** - This is another tax imposed on those people who come to the market or *Hat* but are not residents of any of the twenty three villages.
- v) **Dan** - Tax levied on miscellaneous items besides foodgrains and oranges, e.g. *Tezpatta* produced in maunds, turmeric, pepper, betel vine, arecanut and all kinds of fruits bought by the *Dkhar*.²¹ This tax is again levied against those items bought by the plains people from the locals.
- vi) Lastly, tax levied on out-going forest products, e.g. Cane bamboo, etc. These taxes are collected from *Hat Bam* or *Hat Pdia* now called *Hat Shella*. It is held once in four days, so the *Wahadadars* take turns in collecting these taxes, for e.g.

A collects in the first market then B on the second, C on the third and D on the fourth.

(II) Coming to contributions from the villages each village must pay annually 80 cawries to the *Wahadadars*, so in total they receive $80 \times 23 = 1840$ cawries annually, which is again divided equally among all four *Wahadadars*.

(!II) Lastly, there is the *Bai Kashari* - Court Fees. Every plaintiff who files a suit and who launches a complaint to the court will have to pay a certain amount of fees. This fee is theoretically supposed to go to the *Wahadadars* only, but in practice this is not so. Instead annually, these fees are divided equally amongst all the forty eight members of the *Wahadarship*.

Functions and Powers

The four *Wahadadars* cannot function by themselves nor can they take any decisions alone. They will have to get the consent of the majority of the members.

- 1) The power given to the *Wahadadars* are all laid down in the agreement signed when the Shella confederacy came into existence.
- 2) Their main function is to look into the collective security of all the 23 villages. It was for this purpose that the Shella confederacy was created.
- 3) The *Wahadadar* is to keep the market place clean.
- 4) They also function as an appellate court.
- 5) They also function as an original court.

When it comes to judicial function, the court of the *Wahadadar* has both original and appellate jurisdiction.

The Village Administration

At the village level, there is another government that functions. Alongside with the *Wahadadars* it consists of four to six *Tymmen shnong* or village headmen. These headmen are elected democratically by all the male members of the village. The prescribed age for eligibility to vote is 21 years. The system of voting is the same as that of the *Wahadadars*. The only difference is that this election is for the headman of one village only. Each village has the power of *U Sandi* (village authority) to function. Besides these headmen the village sends two representatives called *Kaide* to the *durbar ki arphewlai shnong*. These two *Kaide* can either be from amongst the elected headmen or any other two persons. When they sit in the *durbar* or court of the *Wahadadar* they are referred

to as *Sandi*. In total this *durbar* consists of 48 members.

These *Sandi* of four or six headmen of a village have been given the power of *Synshar* or rule and *bishar* or judge. This power although entrusted to them yet the consent of the majority of all the male adult members is taken into consideration at a *durbar shnong*. The outcome of the decision is called *Ka rai U Sandi*.

When decision is to be taken on any matter that arises in a village every male adult must be present after being informed by *pyrta shnong*. If any one is absent he is fined. If there is no decision on any issue then the case is taken to the *durbar* or court of the *Wahadadar*, but this is very rare.

The Shella State or Shella Confederacy is really a unique set up. We can say that such a kind did not exist anywhere else in India during this time. Justice was the aim and utmost desire of the people. From the kind of administration that existed then when kingship was so very popular and along with it suppression and exploitation, the Shella administration can definitely be considered an ideal of democratic government.

Reference

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