

A Tribe in Transition

THE JAINTIAS OF MEGHALAYA



Jaintia Tribal Dance

H. L. Deb Roy

Jowai College, Meghalaya

With Forward by

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FOREWORD

Dr. Deb Roy's *A Tribe in Transition—The Jaintias of Meghalaya* is probably the first attempt to write a full-fledged monograph exclusively on the Jaintias, who are also known as the Pnars, of Meghalaya. In Col. P.R.T. Gurdon's monograph *The Khasis*, the Jaintias have been considered to be a section of the Khasis, and he casually mentions the points in which Pnar social customs show variations with the customs of the Khasis in general. At some points Pnar customs show so much variation with the Khasi customs that we are led to think that instead of subsuming these two groups under one society, we may as well consider them to be two independent societies akin to each other. Historically also the Jaintias distinguished themselves as a group of people who had established a kingdom not only in their hilly abode but also stretching to the plains which now form a part of Bangladesh. In the Ahom chronicles we find frequent mention about the Jaintias, who had cordial relations with the Ahom kings of those times. In the Ahom period the relations with the Jaintias were given so much importance that a separate chronicle, the *Jaintia Buranji* was compiled. Another point of departure of the Jaintias from the Khasis is the fact that a section of the Jaintias had adopted Hinduism and had thus been linked with the great tradition of India. These, alongwith the fact that in the recent past has arisen a separate Jaintia identity fully, justify a full scale monograph on the Jaintias, and, Dr. Deb Roy has attempted to fill up this gap.

Dr. Deb Roy's basic training was in philosophy, so it is quite natural that he has been attracted towards aspects of Jaintia life which mostly concern his discipline. He has focussed his attention on an area like religion. Despite this he has attempted to make his study an integrated whole by including

in his book other aspects also which are of general interest. It is indeed very interesting to know how initially the Jaintias adopted themselves from a form of animism to a highly developed form of religion like the Shakta cult of Hinduism. And again it is also very interesting to know how in recent times a section of the Jaintias embraced Christianity and what is its impact on the traditional Jaintia society. Though the ethnographic details presented by Dr. Deb Roy may at some point lack the refinements of a professional ethnographer, but still these will be of invaluable help for those who want to study the ethnography of North East India.

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October 2, 1980

PREFACE

This book, *A Tribe in Transition—the Jaintias of Meghalaya* is based on a research study done for the Ph. D. Degree of the Gauhati University. The Jaintias live in the Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya, bordering the Assam and Bangladesh plains in the north and south respectively. This people, who retained some of their ancient socio-cultural traits, is thought to be of Mon-Khmer origin. They practise matriarchate and visit-marriage, worship dead ancestors, do shifting cultivation. Before the annexation by the British, they had a kingdom, having its capital at Jaintiapur in the southern slope of the hills. Rajendra Singha was their last king.

My attempt in this book is to trace out the under-currents of social necessities which helped to evolve this society to its present form. It is interesting to note the "collective mind" of a simple tribe in its struggle for survival. The patterns of evolution of a primitive society to a modern one through the strifes and turbulations of a life surrounded by jungles and separated by high hills, are perhaps similar. Man, ignorant of natural causes, tends to be animistic. Rules and canons of a society are very much dependent on its outlook of life. The Jaintias, in these respects, were no exception.

The Jaintias had no written script of their own. As such oral traditions in the form of tales and legends, myths and mythologies shaped the social behaviour and religious attitudes of the people. Mythologies are the sub-conscious mind of a tribe. I appended some of the tales at the end of this book. A primitive society faced with modernity generates some social contradictions. In such a juncture, the tribal ethos requires re-evaluation and re-rationalisation. The Jaintias also, in the process of evolution, assimilated many things from the neighbouring cultures. Under the kings of Jaintiapur, the influence of

Hinduism spread upto the hills. But, during the British rule (from 1835 to 1947 AD) it was western culture and civilisation which influenced the people very much. Now they are in search of a distinct identity of their own.

I have tried to discuss their social institutions—clan, family, group marriage etc; and ceremonies at birth and death, the motive force for the matriarchate, clanship, composition of family, formation of a village-group, the conception of marriage etc. The practice of ancestor worship is, I think, very ancient to this people. In all, I attempted to present a complete picture of a group of people who were scattered over the hill under some compelling circumstances and then gradually, grew out of it into a mighty tribe. In this process, they could retain many of their age-old customs because of seclusion and social compulsions.

Though my study is, broadly speaking, a sociological one I have attempted to relate the mutual influences of social necessities over the spiritual outlook and vice versa. Change of one tends to change the other. So, a primitive society starts with animism or polytheism and culminates into pantheism or monotheism—a march from many confusion to one order. I have discussed the social problems and institutions from the standpoint of social philosophy, and the spiritual attitude from the standpoint of philosophy of religion.

My findings are based mainly on the field-study and interviews. But I have consulted on some published works only for comparison. Since the present work is an attempt to deal with the Jaintia uribe exclusively for the first time, care has been taken to give it maximum objectivity. Oral traditions and mythologies sometimes give conflicting view-points. I have tried to synthesise them. My attempt was to study the people from an academic standpoint without any prejudice to their likings and dislikings. However, if any observations appears remotely unpalatable to any of the sentiments of the tribe, it may be an accidental one and not deliberate.

I am indebted to my friends, Shri B. Nikhla, B. Sc., Shri P. Lytan, B.A.,L.L.B. advocate, and others; and my students

who helped me in my field studies. I have acknowledge their help elsewhere.

I am grateful to Prof. K.C. Das, M.A., Ph.D, (now retd) Head, Deptt. of Philosophy, Gauhati University for his guidance and advice in completing the work. I am also grateful to Dr. D.N. Majumdar, Deptt. of Anthropology, Gauhati University, who spent his valuable time in reading the manuscript and writing a foreward for this book. My thanks are also due to Mrs. R. Kapoor, Mr. Subodh Kapoor and others of Messrs Cosmo Publications, Ansari Road, New Delhi for accepting the manuscript for publication and bringing it out in such a short time.

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*The Khasi
let us discuss*

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INTRODUCTION

Jaintia Hills is the easternmost district of the newly created Meghalaya State. It is situated between 25-8" and 26-8" north latitude; and between 92 and 92-51" east longitude. The altitude of the district varies from 1220 metres to 1830 metres above sea level.¹ Its northern and southern sides slope down to the plains of Assam and Bangladesh respectively. It has 412 inhabited villages of which half have less than 200 population.² Its border in the south is with the Mikir Hills, in the south-east with the north Cachar Hills and in the east and north, with the Cachar plains of Assam and Sylhet district of Bangladesh respectively.³ Khasi Hills of Meghalaya lie in the western side. The Khasi Hills is nothing but a prolongation, as it seems, of Jaintia hill ranges. The area (Jaintia Hills) roughly corresponds to the hilly portion of the ancient Jaintia Kingdom. The total area of the district is 3295.5 sq. kilometres and the population is 1,13,875 as per census of 1971⁴ of whom roughly 50% are stated to be Christians.

The Jaintias had no written language till the introduction of Roman script in Khasi in 1841 A.D. by the Christian Missionaries. As such, no written records are available in their language. References to the Kiratas and Cinas are found in the

-
1. Basic Facts : Meghalaya, Shillong (1975) p. 2.
 2. Statistical Handbook of Meghalaya, p. 18.
 3. Map on p. (i)
 4. Statistical Handbook of Meghalaya, p. 6.

Epics; and the description of those people suggests that they may be the ancestors of the Jaintias.¹

(The Jaintias resemble Mon-Khmer people of Indo-China in some basic points of speech, festivities and in erecting stone monoliths. So, it is rightly believed that the Jaintias came to their present habitat from the south-east.) Perhaps, they took the same route of migration to Assam like the other primitive hordes of people, i.e., from the east or from the south-east to the north-west.² It is believed that once the Jaintias lived in the plains of Assam. This is evident from the names of places like 'Ka-Meikha'—(Kamakhya temple)—paternal ancestress, Pagarjuh (Jo)—tic—(Pragjyotisha), Dorr-ong (Darrang) etc.³

The Jaintias who belonged to the stock of Mon-Khmer race were followed by waves of the Tibeto-Burmans who poured into the Brahmaputra Valley and its neighbourhood from all directions and drove the former into the neighbouring hills.⁴ The final of their migration might have arisen out of the rivalry of religion and culture followed by the conquest of Assam by Naraka of Mithila between 200-500 A.D.⁵

(Whatever may be the fact, it can safely be surmised that prior to their migration to their present abode, they were living in the plains of Assam. The Jaintia tribe entered first into the area south of the river Kopili, now included in the district of Jaintia hills. There are legends which narrate how the people crossed the river Kopili⁶ in their journey or how the clans scattered from the east (Jaintia Hills) over to the west (Khasi hills).⁷ Furthermore, the density of monolith erection also suggests the same conclusion. Monoliths are noticed

fewer towards the west. According to tradition, the Sutnga Siemship was the oldest in Khasi and Jaintia Hills. This also suggests that the Jaintias are the first inhabitants in these hills.¹)

The exact time of the migration of the Jaintias is not known. It is assumed that they had migrated to these hills in the pre-Puranik period consequent on some historic necessities. It might be the fact that when the condition of Assam was hot following the persecution of the Kiratas under the Aryan influences by Naraka,² the former took shelter in the hills.

The reference to 'Stri-rajya' (Kingdom of females) in the Purana is thought to be the Jaintia Kingdom as the Jaintias follow matrilineal social laws and customs.³ But, this might be a naive suggestion because the 'Stri-Rajya' referred to above might very well be any kingdom bordering the hills of Brahmaputra valley. It might refer to the Nagas, the Mizos or to the Manipuries who might have abandoned the system of matriarchate long ago under some alien influences. However, no authentic history of the Jaintia Rajahs is found except in the chronicles of Ahom Kings (Jayantia Buranji). The record is very much valuable; it narrates the relation between Ahom and Jaintia Kings since 1500 A.D.

The Kiratas came into contact with the mainstream of greater Indian life during the period of Mahabharata. The battle of Mahabharata may be put around 950 B.C. The great king of Assam, Bhagadatta, participated in the battle of Kurukshetra with his Kirata and Mongloid soldiers. The Kirata and Mongloid people also got mention in the Yajur and Atharva Vedas.⁴

It is stated in the Sabha Parvan that the Pandava brothers went out with their armies in all directions to conquer and levy tributes for the celebration of the great sacrifice (Yagna).⁵

1. The History of the Civilisation of the People of Assam (P.C. Choudhury) p. 83.
2. The Khasis (P.R.T. Gurdon) p. 11, History & Culture of the Khasi People (H. Barih) p. 16.
3. Mother Goddess Kamakhya (B.K. Kakati) p. 29 & p. 42. and Hist. & Culture of the Khasi People (H. Barih) p. 18.
4. The History & Civilisation of the People of Assam, p. 83.
5. Mother Goddess Kamakhya, p. 16 & p. 29.
6. Mythology
7. History & Culture of the Khasi People, p. 19.

1. Ibid, p. 19.
2. The Goddess Kamakhya (B.K. Kakati) p. 37 & et. el.
3. The History & Culture of the Khasi People (H. Barih) p. 6.
4. The Place of Assam in the History & Civilisation of India (S.K. Chatterjee) p. 16 & 18.
5. Ibid, p. 14.

It is mentioned in the Jayantia Buranji that Bheem, the brother of Zudhistir led an army to the state of Jayantia. The king was a Brahmin who refused to subdue himself under the Pandavas. He was then ordered to be dragged before Bheema. In the process of dragging him, the private part of his person got mutilated. That was why the place was named 'Kosepur' and the people 'Khasia'.¹ But there is doubt about its historic authenticity. However, one thing is clear from the foregoing that the kingdom or the tribe was not named till then as 'Khasi' or as 'Jayantia'.

(The term 'Jaintia' has been derived from the tribal word 'Zain-tein' which is a synonym of 'Synteng'.² Some writers also assume that the word 'Synteng' was a derivation from 'Sutunga' (Suteng), the ancient ruling dynasty of the Jaintias.³ It appears that the two words 'Synteng' and 'Jaintia' have got a mutual link. Dr. Barch holds that Teng or Tien was the ancient mother of the race wherefrom sprang up the word Zain-tein.⁴ But this explanation seems to be a far-fetched one. It may be assumed that 'Synteng' is a derivation from 'Zaintein' or 'Jayantia'. If Synteng denotes other than the inhabitants of Jaintia Kingdom, the Jayantia Buranji or the Puranik references might have quoted the name at ease. So, it may be said that the name 'Synteng' (Jaintia) is a later evolution alongwith the evolution of the kingdom itself. In this present context, I mean, 'Jaintia' or 'Synteng' the people who inhabit the geographical area of the Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya.)

These people were probably numerically few when they crossed the river Kopili and entered into the eastern side of the Jaintia Hills. It was perhaps, a journey for food and security. They scattered over the hills towards western side in small batches, always keeping a link with the mother population. So, a new village or a new spot of migration would never be too far. Their strong racial instinct and urge for survival

1. An Account of Assam (Dr. J.P. Wade) p. 38.

2. Kirato-Jana-Krti (S.K. Chatterjee) p. 167.

3. Tribal Situation in India (Dr. B. Pakem) p. 362.

4. History and Culture of the Khasi People (H. Barch) p. 13 & p. 62.

nourished another vital factor—the matriarchate which influenced the physical and spiritual evolution of the Jaintia society. In the spiritual plans, ancestor worship cast its spell on the people giving rise to many animistic beliefs and practices.

The ancient habitations were centred round the places of Shangpung, Mynso, Sutnga, Nartiang, Jowai. It was the Jaintia king who opened markets to those places¹ and so it would be reasonable to suppose that the concentration of population was in those places. Gradually they scattered far west and south-west (bordering Jaintiapur). Gathering of food and its production compelled them to tread through the new jungle paths. Shifting cultivation would demand more labouring hands and cooperation of all. This resulted in democratic institutions like village councils and socialistic approach to problems. People found that they could survive collectively.

The Jaintias were never self-sufficient in the basic necessities of life. They had to depend on plain's market (Ka hat) at Jaintiapur for the import of rice, dry fish, salt, cloth etc. Also that was the outlet for export.) Even today, they are dependent on outside for those things. Their problem mainly was the problem of marketing. So, when the Jaintia Kingdom was extended up to the hills, the people did not bother, rather they welcomed highly the establishment of markets (those were perhaps five in number). The Jaintia king was nothing more than a symbolic principle of unity of all the scattered village-chiefs. He was the federal head, and the village-units (Doloiships) were the federating units. The King was needed only for defence and foreign affairs. He would act as an arbitrator in case of village feuds or conflicts among the Dolois which they themselves would fail to square up.

(Culturally and spiritually they were independent. Tribal animism, ancestor-worship and other religious rites found a fertile place in the wheel of tolerant Hindu religion.) The visible Hindu influences were absorbed spontaneously. The tribals did not find any vital difference with the Hindus other

1. The Khasis (P.R.T. Gurdon) p. 190.

than the language. So the history of Jaintia kings found no religious conflict with the hill people. The king was their king and they tried to imitate the king and his religion, Hinduism. Still the people living in the border areas prefer to call them Hindus.

As mentioned earlier, the Jaintias were independent internally. They had to pay, through the Doloi, some homage annually in kind (he-goats etc.) to Jaintiapur. They did not pay anything as tax. So, when the Britishers tried to impose house tax and interfered with the customs and religion of the people, the Jaintias under the leadership of U. Kiang Nongbah rose in revolt (1860 to 1863 A.D.).¹ The Jaintias suffered most from this rebellion. U. Kiang Nongbah was hanged, and others died in fighting or in custody. Jowai, the present district headquarters was ravaged to the ground. But the heroic sentiment of the people rebuilt them.

Though the rebellion was quelled yet the people could not be subdued. So the backdoor policy of bribing the village leaders was pursued. He who went against the will of the community, was outcasted, banished or excommunicated. Here came in the missionaries with the Bible and made the propaganda—'if you sinned (even against your people or otherwise), come to Jesus'. The tribal life of intricate customs and beliefs made many to abandon those as it would be profitable to take revenge by ruling those who outcasted them.

So the first batch of converts to Christianity were 'the betrayers', 'the sinners' (against the tribal customs and beliefs) and the opportunists. They were the second line of rulers who tried to follow English mind and behaviour. They became more fanatic in alien faith and would condemn the customs and habits of their fellow men in fullest zeal. As a result the missionaries spread to the villages to save those 'sinners' from the infidels; constructed churches, worked as the listening outposts of British India and made thereby a big chasm in the bosom of tribal mother. A village got partitioned into the

1. The Statistical Account of Assam (W.W. Hunter) p. 206-7.

'Mission compound' and the old 'village' (Shnong). The policy of divide and rule came into force.

Though the wave of western life and culture has fascinated many, yet the old habits and customs are not all gone out totally. Still a part of it may be salvaged out from the verge of extinction for re-evaluation in its proper perspective. The aim of the subsequent chapters will be to take out those socio-religious habits of the Jaintias and to examine those critically from philosophic angles.

Time and period have got a spell on the crowd mind. Once the people tried to identify with the thriving culture of India. Now everything appealing is western. Furthermore, this is a period when Eastern Indian tribes are asserting their identity (?) when everything Western is good. The dominating influence of Western culture and religion alienated them from the mainstream of Indian polity; the 'zoo and museum' policy of the government of India forced them to seek an identity outside the broad spectrum of Indian culture. The ignorant non-Christian tribals are hesitant to divulge any information of their socio-cultural practices or religious beliefs to a D'khar (non-tribal) readily. Sometimes the village priest or the one who knows these things will not speak out for fear of unknown harm. (I have experienced such difficulties during my interviews). Now, only a few know about the intricacies of their socio-religious rites and rituals. It may be feared that soon these will die out with the death of those old men.

However, I undertook many strenuous field studies, interviews etc. throughout the Jaintia Hills. The Jaintia tribe lacks a written language—only the Khasi language was given a written shape by the missionaries in 1841 A.D. in Roman alphabet. The educated elites and the flag-bearers of the British rulers were mostly Christians. 'Skur' (School) in Jaintia means 'Christianity'. So the observation by those on the culture and religion of the Jaintias are bound to be biased.

Therefore, the published facts have been crosschecked and compared with the information derived from oral interviews, questionnaires, and with published and unpublished myths and mythologies. The data culled in and coalesced, have been

tried to examine critically, with an intention to discover the inner motivation of the collective tribe-mind.

The present-day hub of Jaintia socio-religious life is Jowai, the headquarters of the Jaintia Hills and the biggest town of the district. In this study, Jowai has been taken as the base and the other two zones—the Jaintia 'bhoi' (northern border) and the Jaintia 'war' (southern border) areas—are cited in case of differences in socio-cultural activities. This tribe came first to the 'bhoi' area, proceeded to the central part (Jowai area) and stretched out to the southern zone (war area).

Map and photographs were inserted for better illustration. The mythologies of the Jaintias were collected and shown in a separate section. All the socio-religious activities are linked directly or indirectly to those mythologies.

The aim of the present investigation is to unravel the underlying philosophic currents which have moulded them and have been shaping their way of life.