

Nongtalang Doloiship : A Socio-Political Study of an Administrative Unit in Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya

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Mention has been made elsewhere earlier by the author about the Nongtalang doloiship and its administration. But these earlier attempts were only general in nature. A proper treatment to understand in proper prospective about this doloiship in particular was not made in the earlier studies. Here it is therefore proposed to study further about the doloiship and try to place the records in proper and systematic manner so that a fuller monograph on the same may be made available and at the same time to help understand the traditional polity at the grassroot level, in this administrative unit in particular and in Jaintia Hills district in general. It is also felt necessary to present this case study because of the fact that in the earlier studies on this doloiship some important aspects were not incorporated. This gap was realised only after an exclusive interview with the present Doloi of Nongtalang and other knowledgeable persons and also after participant observation was made during the field work. On the basis of the recent investigation on the administration of this particular doloiship in Jaintia Hills, new facts and other useful information could be gathered in order to support, supplement and substantiate the earlier studies and therefore more light could be thrown on the subject under study.

An empirical examination of traditional polity in Jaintia Hills in general, which is also applicable to the War Jaintia in particular, shows that the first stage of evolution of the polity was 'naturally the family. The family belonged to a certain clan. Members of the same clan tended to flock together in a migratory route..... It was the families and clans which formed the smallest unit of the political society called *Chnong* or a Village..... Finally, in the village, all the adult male members of approximately 18 years and above with a mouthache, from different families and clans together elected the Chief of the village called *U Waheh Chnong* or the village headman for secular matters..... The villagers also elected

U Langdoh Chnong or a village priest for religious matters. . . . The first ruler of the village was indeed a village priest whose office was elective. He combined in himself both the sacerdotal and secular functions. In the course of time with the increase of political functions the office of *U Waheh Chnong* was created'.¹ This systematic explanation of the whole process of State or polity formation in pre-colonial Jaintia gives us a clear idea as to the first stage of the evolution and development of the polity. Thus it may be said that the office of village Headman came into existence before the other offices.

The second stage of traditional polity, which is also above the village administration in Jaintia Hills in general, is the office of a Doloi (Provincial Governor). This development took place 'after a considerable period of time when the Jaintias became more settled. At a particular point of time they hit upon the idea of solidarity among the neighbouring *Raids* having common traditions and clan relations. It was also a period of competition among the various neighbouring *Raids* having varied traditions and clan relations. Thus, common traditions and clan relations and competitions among different *Raids* made solidarity movements among the *Raids* all the more necessary. It was this necessity which brought some *Raids* to form a federation of *Raids* into an *Elaka*, which was an independent political unit. In its early period, an *Elaka*, resembled a State in as much as there was no outside control at the time of its formation. But later political developments made an *Elaka* the second tier of State formation in pre-colonial Jaintia. Hence, at the later stage, it could be termed either as a Sub-state or an autonomous State with a nominal sovereign called the Doloi leading over it. Thus, an *Elaka* was in-charge of a political head with the designation of *U Doloi* or a Governor assisted in some *Elaka* by *U Pator* or a Lt. Governor. . . . To all intents and purposes, the various doloiships were either independent republics or oligarchies depending on the nature of the *Elakas*'.²

The process of development mentioned above, leads to the emergence of the office of a Doloi in Jaintia Hills. The third but the highest tier in order of hierarchical status and power in administration came into existence when the office of a Syiem or Raja was established. With this, we have therefore a three-tier system of administration in Jaintia Hills in the pre-colonial period, that is, at the top level of administration we have the Syiem or Raja ; at the zonal stage below the Syiem we have the Dolois and at the low-

est rung of the ladder of administration, the Village Headmen. This was of course the picture we had till the year 1835, because the office of the Syiem was abolished and lapsed in the same year soon after the British annexation and possession of Jaintia Hills. On the other hand, the British retained the other two offices of the Doloi and Village Headman and since then they continue to function till to-day aiding and assisting the District Council in the district administration pertaining to the welfare of the tribal people. Allen³ in his report of 1858 mentioned that 'the whole of Jaintia Hills was divided into nineteen separate "Elakas" or districts, fifteen of which are Doloiships (Doloiships); to each of these districts there is one Doloie (Dolloi), who is the chief village authority. The remaining four "Elakas" are under the charge of 18 headmen called Sirdars. Moreover, the responsibility to the Government (British) for carving on the public business of these fifteen "Elakas" rests entirely with the Doloies, yet a great part of the work is ordinarily done by village officers of an inferior grade, called "Pathors" (Pators) and "Lungdoes" (Lyngdohs). The former are deputies or assistants to the Doloies, but can only hear cases in durbar and act for their principals during their illness or absence from their jurisdiction; the latter are the village priests who also act as assistants to the Doloies. In some of the Doloiships, which are extensive and contain several villages, there are two or three "Pathors" or deputies, and the "Lungdoes" vary in number from one to ten. In the "Elakas" of Lakadong and Amwai (Amwi) there is no "Pathor"; the Doloies transact all the business themselves'. In the whole of the War area of Jaintia Hills, there are 5 (five) doloiships; Nongtalang being one of them.

The number of Doloiships mentioned above, seems to have suggested only the Doloiships that existed in the hills portion of Jaintia Hills. But on further perusal of the history of the area, it appears from the records that during the reign of Ram Singh I (1701-1708) a war broke out between the king and the Ahoms. During the war, three dolois in the plains of Jaintiapur were captured along with the king. The three dolois were of Mulagool, Jaflong and Charikhata.⁴ Further, it was also mentioned that when another Jaintia king by the name of Jai Narain (1708-1731) was captured by the Ahom King, two dolois, the Doloi of Nartiang from the hills and the Doloi of Charikhata from the plains besides Patra of Koma, Sasthi of Jnong and many others came from Jaintia and applied for the release of their captured king.⁵ What we gather from the above records is that there might be some dolo-

ships also in the plains under the jurisdiction of the Jaintia Kingdom. Whether these doloiships in the plains were administered in the same manner as that of the hills, the detail is not known. A further probe into the administration of these doloiships is therefore extremely essential in order to complete the history of doloiship administration in Jaintia Hills especially in the pre-colonial period.

If we look at the map of Jaintia Hills, we find that the Nongtalang doloiship is situated at a very strategic position from the point of view of security because of its closeness to the international border line with another foreign country, that is, Bangladesh. This doloiship is also situated right at the Indo-Bangladesh border in the southern part of Jaintia Hills District. Moreover, the jurisdiction of the doloiship covers the precipitous slopes and deep valleys of the War country. In the whole surroundings one finds large groves of areca-nut, often twined with the *pan* creeper and of orange trees which much enhance the beauty of the scene. In the hill-slopes different varieties of horticultural crops are grown extensively while their produce is considered to be the main source of so much income and profit to the War people, especially in the pre-independence period.

The people inhabiting this doloiship and other adjoining doloiships in the southern part of the present district of Jaintia Hills, belong to the Jaintia tribe of Meghalaya but they prefer to call themselves as WAR JAINTIA or simply War. Of course, all the people both in Khasi and Jaintia Hills living in the southern part of the districts and in the border area with Bangladesh are known as WAR.

The Nongtalang doloiship being located right at the international border line with another country and another people, played a prominent role in trade and commerce with the plains of Sylhet in the pre-independence period. The War Jaintias too had a long history of an earlier and intimate contact with the people on the other side of the border especially those in the plains of the Sylhet district of the present Bangladesh. Against this background it may be mentioned that, "From the time Sylhet emerged out of the blue waters of what is now known as the Bay of Bengal, the people of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills must have been the first to put their feet on it and as the things started to grow there, they must have been the first customers of all the products of the vast plains that is known as Sylhet.....and with the background of necessities, trade grew up between the Hills and the plains and continued

till the modern times".⁶

The period of the frequent and direct contact especially in terms of trade relations between the Jaintias and the people of Sylhet district may be traced back even to the time before the British ruled over Sylhet. Although occasional raids and skirmishes in the frontier took place between the fierce tribes of the hills and the plainsmen, yet business transactions were carried on between the two when such unhappy incidents did not take place. The area under the jurisdiction of the Nongtalang doloiship was more exposed to the plains of Sylhet. Jaintiapur, the ancient capital of the Jaintia Kingdom, was also not far from the War area. This closeness of the area to the centre of administration helped in many aspects, especially in terms of trade and commerce. Moreover, this fact could be clearly observed because of the reason that Jaintiapur served as "the great entrepot in which all commercial dealings are transacted between the inhabitants of the plains and the hills. The articles specified are bartered for salt, tobacco, rice, and goats, but the intercourse was much obstructed by injudicious monopolies and heavy transit duties. . . . this trade had been very seriously interrupted for some time by a feud between the different tribes, which was at length satisfactorily adjusted by Mr. Inglis, and officer temporarily attached to the Sylhet Light Infantry, who was deputed by Captain Jenkins for this purpose in April 1834".⁷ Thus, this account provides us with another striking confirmation of the trade relations and commercial dealings transacted between the Jaintia people in general and the War in particular with that of the plainsmen of Sylhet in the period as far back as 1834.

A Dolo is elected by all adult male members of the *Elaka* from amongst the members of the original clans. For example, in the Jowai *Elaka*, the Dolo is nominated by the *Soo Kpoh* (four clans) and later on by other clans as well and elected by all adult male members of the *Elaka*.⁸ In the War area too, in the Nongtalang *Elaka*, the Dolo is nominated by the *La Poh* (three clans) from the villages of Nongtalang, Lamin and Nongbareh. This is because the original clans from among the *La Poh* mostly came and spread over these three villages. These three villages have so far produced men of good calibre with ability and presence of mind to lead, head and supervise the administration of the doloiship. At present, the Dolo of this *Elaka* belongs to Lamin Village, from the Gayang clan, one of the major clans among the *La Poh*. He was elected and appointed as dolo in the year

1942. In this doloiship, even the sub-original clans, but considered as members of the original *La Poh* have the right to nominate a candidate to the office of the Doloi. Thus, it is evidently clear that the right to set up candidates for the Office of the Doloi is confined only to the original clans of the *Elaka*. The general population could not aspire to the elective post of a Doloi. Further, even from among the original clan or clans, the candidate or candidates for the elective post of a Doloi were recruited mostly on ascriptive criteria rather than on grounds of achievements. 9

On further investigation as to the methods of election of the Doloi of Nongtalang in the pre-British period, we come to know during the interview with the present Doloi himself and other knowledgeable persons that the methods of election adopted by the people of the *Elaka* were quite different from the one introduced by the British.

When the office of the Jaintia Syiem was in existence, the Doloi of Nongtalang was selected and elected by the eldest uncles of the original clans of the *Elaka*. Thus, whenever the office of the Doloi falls vacant, the eldest uncles from amongst the members of the original clans met together and discuss among themselves about the matter of selection of the new incumbent to the office. After considering the essential qualifications and other qualities of the candidates concerned and when they found that a particular candidate fulfills all the conditions necessary according to traditional customs and usages, then a consensus is arrived at among themselves as to who should be selected as the new Doloi. Then the uncles brought the candidates and presented him before the Lyngdohs. Before the out-break of the Padu-Nongtalang conflict, there were altogether eight Lyngdohs in the Nongtalang *Elaka*. But after the end of the conflict, the number of the Lyngdohs was reduced to six. The reason being that after the conflict, two villages - Padu and Mawlong decided to join and merged with the Doloi of Jowai, who also accepted them to be included under his jurisdiction. Thus, till today these two villages are included within the area of the Doloi of Jowai.

With the consent and after the approval of the Lyngdohs, the next step taken as to the methods of election of the Doloi, was to introduce and present the candidate to the Syiem for his confirmation of the selection and final appointment as the Doloi of the *Elaka*. There was also a provision of an acting-Doloi during the transitional period. If it is so happened at any time that the office of the Doloi is lying vacant as a result of death, resignation or

deposition of the former Doloi, then one of the Lyngdohs would act and take the charge of the Doloi. In this case, it was always a tradition that the Lyngdoh of Nongtalang village would assume the responsibility of an acting-Doloi. During this transitional period, the acting-Doloi exercises all the powers and functions of the Doloi. An acting-Doloi remains in office until the appointment of a new Doloi.

Once a Doloi takes up the office, he normally holds it for the rest of his life, though there are provisions that he may be punished, expelled or deposed from his office should he arouse sufficient hostility to his people. This old-age tenure of office practised by the people from time immemorial came under a drastic change after the British took possession of Jaintia Hills. Of course, for some time the British Political Agent did permit the Jaintia people to elect, retain and remove their Dolois according to their own traditional methods. But soon the Political Agent appointed in the area found it not suitable and convenient to let this practice continue. He, therefore, proposed to put an end to such a practice. Thus, subsequently the Political Agent, in November 1850, passed an order that, for the future, persons elected and appointed Dolois were to hold their offices for three years, provided they conducted their duties efficiently; at the end of every three years a fresh election was to take place, but the former Doloi might be re-elected under these orders as often as the people choose to elect him.¹⁰ Further, the Dolois were to be 'nominated' by the inhabitants of their respective *Elakas* and are to be confirmed by the Principal Assistant Commissioner.¹¹ The British authorities had therefore changed the entire traditional procedure of 'election' to that of 'nomination'. The change made in the tenure of the office of Doloi by the British was not altogether free from objection and criticism by the holders of the office. For example, U Don, the Doloi of Jowai fervently objected to the system of election for a period of three years only and asserted that the bulk of the people disliked it. This was, of course, rejected by Mr. Allen, the Member of the Board of Revenue.¹²

Against this background, it was also observed in the case of Nongtalang doloiship, that 'election' of the Doloi was in fact introduced by the British Government. The British officials conducted the election. With the introduction of the election system, the inhabitants of the *Elaka* elected the Doloi and the suffrage was purely a manhood one. Thus, the adult males, above 18 years of age, who are the genuine inhabitants of the *Elaka* are

allowed to exercise their franchise. As suffrage was confined to men only, women and children are therefore not allowed to take part in the election. Campaign and canvassing by the candidates also took place during the election.

With regards to powers and functions, the Doloï of Nongtalang enjoys the same powers and functions as that of the other Dolois in Jaintia Hills. With the absence of the office of Pator in the *Elaka*, the Doloï transacts the whole administration of the *Elaka* himself. Unlike the other Dolois in the district who enjoy certain privileges like revenue from market collection, *Rek* lands etc., the Doloï of Nongtalang does not get these privileges. With a view to legitimising the functions of the office, many Dolois in Jaintia Hills, were offered ceremonies and other investitures after their election. Some of these rites in those doloiships pertaining to the investiture of the Doloïship are still practised. But in the Nongtalang doloïship, these investitures and ceremonies are no longer performed. On enquiry as to why certain traditional rites are not in vogue, the Doloï informed that since his conversion to Christianity, he has nothing to do with the performance of any traditional religious functions as found in some other Doloïships.

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