

Traditional Polity in the War Area of Jaintia Hills

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This paper attempts to examine and discuss about the people inhabiting the southern part of the Jaintia Hills district and their traditional polity. The people inhabiting this part of the district belong to 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 bordering with Bangladesh are known as WAR. The War people inhabit the precipitous slopes and deep valleys to the south of the districts. Gurdon vividly described the scene in the War area thus : 'the War villages nestle on the hill-sides of the southern border, and are to be seen peeping out from the green foliage with which the southern slopes are clad. In the vicinity of, and actually up to the houses, in the War villages, are to be observed large groves of areca-nut, often twined with the *pan* creeper, and of plantation trees which much enhance the beauty of the scene. Looking at a War village from a distance, a darker shade of green is seen ; this denotes the limits of the extensive groves where the justly celebrated Khasi orange is grown which is the source of so much profit to these people. . . . In a convenient spot in a War village a clear space is to be seen neatly swept and kept from weeds, and surrounded with a stone wall, where the village tribunals sit and the elders meet in solemn conclave.'¹ Such was the beauty, abundance and serenity of the War area. Special attention and importance was given to their meeting place even if it is in the open, where many important decisions were taken unanimously ; decisions concerning the people, their welfare and the whole village administration. Traditional village polity is therefore deeply rooted in their minds and thought. The abundance of agricultural produce and other things around did not deter the people to forget the importance of administration. The opinion given above by Gurdon may be on what he saw and noticed in a War Khasi village, but it goes without saying that the same applied to Jaintia Hills also.

The People and their Migration

With regard to migration, the War Jaintias migrated from the same direction as that of the Khasis and Jaintias. Pakem opined that 'when the Jaintias entered the present hills they came in batches and were known by different names of those diffe-

rent batches such as Amwis, Changpungs, Jowais, Nartiangs, Raliangs, Sutngas and many others'.² All the batches mentioned here except the Amwis occupied and settled in the northern, eastern and western parts of the present Jaintia Hills district. The Amwis chose the southern part of the land for their settlement and perhaps they were the first to come, occupy and cultivate the land. Bareh was also of the opinion that 'there is a tradition that the Amwi-Khasis reached their present land from the East and that their ancestors were originally connected with the Mekong river. Mekong in Amwi or *Meisan* in Khasi has an equivalent of the senior Aunt, viz. mother's elder sister in English.'³ Because of the paucity and absence of any other authentic records to support and suggest as to which was the first place of settlement of the War Jaintias, it may thus appear that these people when they came to this part of Jaintia Hills perhaps first settled in Amwi village. From here they then spread over to the northern and mostly to the southern part of the land, the War area, looking for better plots of land for their cultivation. It was also found that some clans among the inhabitants of the villages in the War area have close familial relationship with those in the northern part of the district. Some old clans are to be found in both parts of Jaintia Hills.

The route of migration mentioned above is applicable to some *Elakas* or doloiships such as Nongtalang, Satpator and Lakadong. But a different feature could be observed with regard to migration of the people in case of one small doloiship in the War area of Jaintia Hills, that is, the Darang doloiship. The people inhabiting this *Elaka* are somewhat different in some respects from the people of the other three doloiships mentioned above. In the Darang doloiship, the people have a close affinity with the Khasis rather than that of the Jaintias. This might therefore suggest that the people of this doloiship came from Khasi Hills during the earlier period of their migration. They crossed the river Umngot, one of the biggest rivers in Jaintia Hills which also stands as a boundary line between Khasi and Jaintia Hills, to settle and occupy the area which now falls under the jurisdiction of Darang doloiship. Another distinct feature which suggests that the people came from Khasi Hills is their dialect. The dialect spoken by the people of this doloiship is almost the same as that of the Khasis inhabiting the Khad-ar-Blang area on the other side of the river Umngot in the Khyrim Syiemship. This, therefore further confirms that the inhabitants of this doloiship originally migrated from Khasi Hills and not from Jaintia Hills.⁴

Rev. T. Rodborne was of the opinion that the War Jaintias could be broadly divided into five sections from the point of view of the geographical locations they inhabited and the dialects spoken by the people of the area. Thus racially and culturally the War Jaintias are not different from either the Khasis or Jaintias. Though the people of the area speak different local dialects, which is a common feature throughout Khasi-Jaintia Hills, it does not mean that they are of different tribes.

Aspects of Traditional Polity

The general pattern of traditional polity and administration in the War area was the same as found in other parts of Jaintia Hills in the pre-British period and even after that. During the pre-British period a three-tier system of administration existed in the whole of Jaintia Hills. Thus, we found the office of the *syiem* at the apex of the administration; at the zonal stage below the *syiem*, there were *Dolois* and at the lowest rung of the ladder of administration, that is, village administration, there were village headmen (Waheh *shnong*). The British took over the administration of Jaintia Hills in 1835 and declared the whole area as British Area. Its administration was placed at a different footing unlike that of the Khasi States. The British abolished the office of the Jaintia *Syiem* in 1835 itself. But with regard to the offices, of *Doloi* and village headman, the British Government retained them in order to assist the British in running the administration of the area. As the War area was under the jurisdiction of the Jaintia *Syiemship*, the same pattern of administration applied to it also.

Like in the other parts of Jaintia Hills, the War area too was and is still looked after by the *Dolois* and village headmen (Rongbah *Chnong*). The two offices till date supervise the administration of *doloiships* and villages respectively aiding and assisting the District Council in the administration of the area pertaining to the welfare of their people. In general, the powers and functions of the *Dolois* in the War area were and are still the same as found in other *Elakas* of Jaintia Hills. Of course, there are differences here and there; for example, the *Doloi* of Nongtalang does not perform any traditional religious function. Secondly, he does not enjoy any special privilege over land or own any market as his counterparts do in some other *Elakas* of Jaintia Hills. As far as the powers and functions of the village headmen are concerned, the same common pattern is not applicable to all villages. Village administration therefore, differs from one place to another.

An empirical examination of traditional polity in Jaintia Hills in general, which is also applicable to the War area 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. Centering around families and clans was generally a society where leadership fell on the seniormost male member called *U Knyi*, literally a maternal uncle of the family or clan. This was a natural way for the Jaintia families and clans to adopt while migrating from place to place. *U Kynyi* performed both secular and religious functions. In secular functions he was called *U Knyi* or uncle and for religious functions he was called *U Langdoh* or priest. Finally, in the village, all adult male members of approximately 18 years and above, with a moustache, from different families and clans together elected the Chief of the village called *U Wahe Chnong* or the village headman

for secular matters. A person so elected was very often an able warrior. The villagers also selected *U Langdoh Chnong* or a village priest for religious matters. As a matter of fact, the *Langdoh* of the village was the *Langdoh* of the *Raid* which was the higher unit above the village. 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. In days gone by *U Waheh Chnong* was subservient to the *Langdoh*. In all matters the village leaders were assisted by the village council called *Ka Durbar Chnong* just as the family and clan were assisted by the Family Council or *Ka Durbar Yung* and the Clan Council or *Ka Durbar Kur*.⁶ This explanation provides a systematic analysis of the first stage in the evolution of State formation in pre-colonial Jaintia.

In the War Jaintia area, every village has got its own *Rangbah Chnong* or Village Headman. In some villages he is also given the title of *U Myntri Chnong* or village minister. According to tradition, a village headman is to be elected from among the adult male members of the original clan or clans (*Kurs*) only. The original clan (s) are those who were the earliest settlers in the village. Since it were they who possibly first occupied and cleared the forests for settlement, thus the privilege was granted to them for setting up of candidates for the office of village headman.

The village headman performs all secular functions in the village. He is also the spokesman of the village. It is also his duty to administer and dispense justice to the people. He is the judge and the *Durbar* is the jury. He is authorised to settle petty cases and disputes arising in the village amicably. In carrying out his duties and functions, he is always assisted by the village *Durbar* which plays an important role in village administration. This *Durbar* consists of all adult male members of the village whose age is above 18 and with a moustache. It is a democratic institution in which every adult male has a role to play in decision making. Decisions in the *Dubar* are taken by consensus rather than voting.

With regard to village administration in Jaintia Hills in general and in the War area in particular, it was found that not two villages have almost the same type of administration.⁷ This typical difference of traditional polity at the grass-root level of administration is evidently clear and provides an interesting study if one examines empirically the case of one such village administration. To stress this point a case study of Nongtalang village is presented here. This village is one of the biggest villages in the War border area of Jaintia Hills. It is also the headquarters of the Nongtalang *Elaka*. The administration of this village gives us an interesting insight into the intricacies of traditional polity that is prevalent in the area.

Village administration in Nongtalang is different in many respects from the other villages with in the Nongtalang *Elaka*. Administration of the village centres round one *Durbar*, known as *Ka DURBAR MANNIEW*, which literally means, the *Durbar of*

Uncles. This *Durbar* consists of 12 (twelve) clans (*Kurs*). Each senior uncle represents his clan in the *Durbar*. Membership, therefore, is confined only to the twelve clans. All the twelve *Uncles* of the *Durbar* are strictly selected from among the non-Christians. It was done so, because of the fact that they have to perform those traditional religious ceremonies. Thus any member of the twelve *Kurs* who has been converted into Christianity cannot become a member of the *DURBAR MANNIEW*.

The unity and smooth conduct of the day-to-day affair in the administration of the village is thus held and under the responsibility of this *Durbar*. Another important feature in the administration of this village is the prominent role played by the *Lyngdohs*. There are two kinds of *Lyngdohs* in this village. One of them is called *U Lyngdoh-Niam* or Priest, and the other is *Lyngdoh-Korbar* or Secular Head.

U Lyngdoh - Niam is selected from the *Lyngdoh* clan of the village. His main duty as his title suggests, is to perform religious functions though at the same time he has also some secular duties. He is the one who is empowered to perform all traditional religious functions in the village. Thus, he is a respectable person with respectable duties to perform. He is also the Headman of the village. In this manner he is the spokesman of the village. Thus his duty is not confined only within the four walls of the village but even outside, in its external relationship with the near and far villages. He represents the people of the village in the doloiship and speaks for and on its behalf.

U Lyngdoh Korbar is the secular head of the village. Thus, he is mostly engaged in the administrative affairs and in running and supervising the village administration. He also acts as the Chairman of the village *durbar* and convenes it. He holds a subordinate position to that of the *Lyngdoh-Niam*, and thus functions only as a Deputy-Headman. As in the case of the other *Lyngdoh*, he is also selected from the same *Lyngdoh* clan of the village.⁸

The second stage of traditional polity, which is above the village administration in Jaintia Hills in general, is the office of a *Doloi*. 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 precolonial 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 *Daloi*

leading over it. Thus, an *Elaka* was in-charge of a political head with the designation of *V Dalo*i or a Governor assisted in some *Elakas* by *N Pator* or a Lt. Governor. To all intents and purposes, the various daloiships were either independent republics or oligarchies depending on the nature of the *Elaka*'.⁹

The same historical development mentioned above applies to the War Jaintia also. The neighbouring *Raids* having common traditions and clan relations assembled together to form a federation of *Radis* with a common purpose in administration. This led to the evolution of an *Elaka* under a *Doloi*. In the whole of the War area we have 5 (five) Doloiships. As there is no systematic and clear cut territorial demarcation of the boundary lines of the doloiships, we find that some villages which are situated right at the international border line with Bangladesh are under the jurisdiction of the *Doloi* of Jowai, whose headquarters is at Jowai, far away from the border area. But the people who live within his territorial jurisdiction still owe their allegiance to the *Doloi* and his administration.¹⁰

A *Doloi* is elected by all adult male members of the *Elaka* from among the members of the original clans. For example, in the Jowai *Elaka*, the *Doloi* was nominated by the *Soo kpoh* (four clans) and later on by other clans as well and selected by all adult male members of the *Elaka*.¹¹ In the War area too, in the Nongtalang *Elaka*, the *Doloi* was nominated by the *La Poh* (three clans) from the villages of Nongtalang, Lamin or Nongbareh. This is because the original clans from among the *La Poh* spread over these three villages. Sometimes 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 a *Doloi*. Thus it is evidently clear that the right to set up candidates to 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.¹² More or less the same rule applied with regard to the village Headman.

Before the office of the *Doloi* came into existence, *U Langdoh Raid* combined in himself both the sacred and secular functions. However, with the evolution of the next higher political unit called *Ka Elaka*, the office of the *Doloi* was also brought into being. Thus, there arose a need for bifurcation of the dual functions which were previously confined only in the hands of *U Langdoh Raid* with that of the head of the *Elaka*. '*U Doloi* being also a Chief of the *Elaka* could either function directly or through his Deputy called *U Pator* with the assistance of *Ki Tymmen Ki San* (Elders) or simply *Ki Wasan*'.¹³ After this bifurcation took effective step, the secular functions were taken away from the *Langdoh Raid* and handed over to the *Doloi*. The necessity to bifurcate the religious and secular functions into two heads arose because of the increase in population and size of the territory consisting of a group of villages. This increase was seen to be more prominent in the secular fields.

So, while the sacred function was retained by the *Langdoh*, that of secular function was entrusted to the *Doloi*.¹⁴

The *Doloi* besides being the secular ruler, had also to perform other multifarious functions. He has certain executive, political, religious and judicial functions. In the past, especially during the Anglo-Jaintia Wars many *Dolois* showed their leadership ability in military and guerilla warfare. Many of them took active part in guiding and commanding their people against the British in order to save their motherland from the gruesome hands of the invaders.

Traditional polity in Jaintia Hills could not be complete without reference being made to the third and final stage of the process of the evolution of State formation in the pre-colonial period. This final stage was in the form of *Ka Hima* or State. The entire process took shape when 'a group of *Elakas* came together to form a loose confederation of *Elakas* for the purpose of inter-elaka relations, defence and foreign affairs.'¹⁵ With the coming of *Ka Hima* into existence, it becomes the apex of Jaintia State organization.¹⁶ Thus, in the pre-British era, Jaintia Hills had a three-tier system of administration. But *Ka Hima Jaintia* under the supervision and control of its *Syiems* or *Rajas* continued to exist only upto 1835 A. D. As the War area was within the jurisdiction of *Ka Hima Jaintia*, the same rules and pattern of administration applied to it also.

In studying the traditional polity of either the Jaintia people in general or the War in particular, one could identify the fact that the people even while they were in the process of wandering like nomads from one place to another during their migratory period, did have certain ideas about polity formation and most importantly the need of administration. The troubles they had to face from their enemies did not deter them to overlook the need and importance of smooth functioning of administration for the benefit and general welfare of the whole society. It thus appeared that polity formation even in the earlier stage of the society took a firm root. Secondly, heads of particular clan(s) showed their leadership role and ability to conduct the affairs of administration and for this act, leadership was confined only to the members of the original clans. So far and unlike the other tribal groups in North-East, especially among the Mizos, no voice of dissentment or disapproval of the system was seriously raised as to the abolition of the same though many changes had already taken place in the post-colonial period. What is more pertinently clear to be observed is that continuity remains in the midst of so many changes.

Notes & References

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- In this paper the author made a detailed analytical and comprehensive comparative study of two villages ; one village is taken as a case study from the northern part of Jaintia Hills and the other from the War area. An attempt was also made in this study to test and find out emperically the different type/types of village administration in Jaintia Hills. All the data and information for this study was based on field work by actually visiting both the villages under study.
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