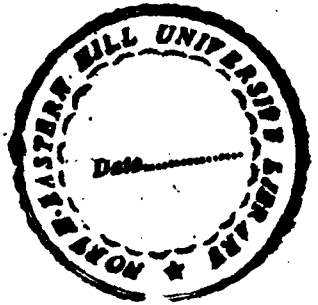


**PROCEEDINGS OF  
NORTH EAST INDIA  
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**



**FOURTH SESSION  
BARAPANI, 1983**

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*Edited & Published by*  
**Jayanta Bhusan Bhattacharjee**  
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On behalf of  
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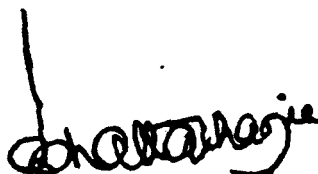
## PREFACE

It is my pleasure to introduce the Proceedings of the Fourth Session of the North East India History Association held at the Union Christian College, Barapani on December 19-21, 1983. Dr. S. K. Barpujari, Senior Research Fellow, Indian Council of Historical Research and formerly Reader in History, Gauhati University, presided over the Session which was inaugurated by Dr. B.D. Sharma, Vice-Chancellor, North-Eastern Hill University. Shri S. K. Austin John, Principal, Union Christian College did us a great honour as Local Secretary for the Session.

We are grateful to the authorities of the Union Christian College and the members of its History faculty for inviting the Session and the generous hospitality offered to the delegates. It was indeed an experiment to hold a session in a college, which has been a privilege of the Universities for similar organisations. The success of the session has greatly inspired the sister institutions and the organisers for the future. The entire college community, including the teachers, students and the residents of the beautiful campus have contributed to this grand success.

This volume contains papers that were presented at the Barapani Session. The summaries received before 30 November 1983 were published in the Abstracts of Papers volume which was distributed at the Session. I am thankful to the members of the editorial committee, Mr. Shyamadas Bhattacharyya, Dr. G. P. Singh and Dr. Milton S. Sangma for their help in editing the papers.

It is gratifying to note that the Proceedings volumes of our earlier sessions have been well received in the academic circles, and I am confident the readers shall find considerable new materials and fresh approaches for studies in the History of North East India in this volume also.



Shillong

The 25 October, 1984

(J. B. Bhattacharjee)

General Secretary

North East India History Association

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# The Hmar Tribe - Their Society and some of its aspects

R. Bhattacharjee

## Introduction

The North East India, a region of scenic splendours, is well known for the diversity of its culture and distinct racial entities. This region is a clear manifestation of natural beauty and its bearings upon the people living here. In fact few regions of the world can rival this part of India so far as the rich diversity of its population is concerned. The bulk of the region's population are tribals, who again, by and large belong to the Mongolian stock. There is no doubt that they entered this country following successive waves of migration covering the period of nearly thousand of years. Many of these communities through assimilation and as a result of outside influence have, to a considerable extent, lost their tribal characteristics. This loss of characteristics, as a consequence of outside influence and assimilation, find reflection in the societies of the tribal people, living in the plains and hills.

Of the various tribes living in North East India, the Hmar community is one which is distinctive in all its aspects. To-day there are about one lakh Hmars having their settlements in Cachar, North Cachar, Manipur, Tripura and Mizoram.

Though this community is one of the oldest ones of this region, yet, not much work has been done so far about them. But mention should be made of Mr. R. Pudiate, whose book "The Education of the Hmar people" is a valuable contribution on the subject.

Before going into various aspects of the life of this people, let us deal with the history of their early settlement.

## Origin

The Hmars originally came from an ancient City State called 'Singlang' in central China. Although, there is a good deal of controversy regarding the exact location of 'Singlang' yet it can't be denied that it has been the original home of the Hmars, as confirmed by all available sources. According to Hranglian Songate, a Hmar

historian, they were pushed out of China along with several other tribes during the Chin dynasty of 221-207 B. C. They came in successive waves through the borders of the Himalayas and moved on eastward in search of suitable lands for their settlements. The westward migration led them to the present Shan State of Burma. Then, because of the disastrous famines, they moved to the North and North-West roughly along the present Indo-Burmese border line near which they established their settlements. During the early period of British rule they came into contact with the Government of British India.

### **Present Settlements**

The Hill areas inhabited by the Hmars were conquered and brought under the British rule in 1871. These areas were made into five groups of tribal rural units, one of which was added to each of the Mizo district (now Mizoram), Cachar, North-Cachar, (then one of the Sub-divisions of Cachar), Tripura and Manipur.

### **Similarity with other Tribes**

There is a misconception among a large number of people that the Hmars form a branch of the Lushei tribe, and many others still believe that the Hmars and the 'Kukis' are the same people. Even Major Shakespeare, while writing about the Hmars in his book, "The Lushei-Kuki clans", mentioned them as old 'Kukis' and 'Khawtlang' to differentiate them from Lusheis and those currently known as Kukis (in Pudiate's book, 1963). The Hmars are a distinct community having their own distinct history of origin, customs and traditions etc. Besides, they have many things in common with the Lusheis and Kukis.

In Mizoram, the Hmars live in a large number and probably the community of Hmars stand second from the numerical point of view, the 'Lusheis' being the first.

Although the Hmars have been living in an area ranging from Tripura to Manipur for hundreds of years, they can still be considered belonging to the same society because of their common origin and common language. With the passage of time, they no doubt have lost many of their distinctive features, but whatever still remains of their age old social system and the structure of their society, almost wholly belong to all the Hmars.

### **Social Structure**

A glimpse into the structure of the Hmar society will enlighten us about a community which is a conglomeration of the past and

the present. The village occupied the most important place in the traditional administrative system of the Hmars ; for, according to the materials available, even till the late fifties, every Hmar village was a self-sufficient administrative unit under a Lal or Chief. The Hmar Chiefs acted as the guardian of the society. Theoretically they were regarded as the owners of all lands of the villages. Although the Hmar Chiefs might appear to many as dictatorial Rulers, yet, the way they ran their administration certainly contained some elements of democracy and social justice because these Chiefs had to ensure equal justice for all the members of the village community.

### **Village Administration**

The office of the village Chief was a hereditary one. The youngest son was to become the Chief when his father died. The village Chiefs were assisted by a Council of Ministers who were elected by the village people. The importance of the role played by the Hmar village Chiefs as the Leaders and Rulers of their village communities was very great till it was done away with. The Hmars certainly did not like the change or else they would have themselves brought about it. Their traditional village-based system which lasted for thousands of years and which was now practically abolished, certainly speaks of a system, based on the principles of equality, democratic values and social justice. The Chiefs, who theoretically owned all the lands of their villages, distributed lands to the villagers according to a equally applied principles, equally acceptable to all their subjects. The village Chief was entitled to preferential treatment in respect of having land for himself for the service he rendered to the society.

The next man of importance in the village was the 'Khawnbawl Upa' or Prime Minister, who also acted as the legal advisor to the Chief. He was also known as 'Sihmang Upa'. The Chief appointed him. The Sihmang Upa, for his service to his community received preferential treatment when he received his due share of village land. There were some other persons whom the Chief appointed as Sihmangs and Khownbawls and they assisted the Chief in their administration, in discharging his duties to the village people. For their service to their community they were allowed to enjoy rent-free tenures.

### **Nature & Character of the Society**

A cursory look at the traditional administrative setup of the Hmar and the manner in which their Chiefs controlled the admini-

stration enable one to understand that they were democrat to a considerable extent because, the administration they headed, by and large, were practically run by the men whom the Chiefs appointed to the different posts under him according to the opinion of their peoples. Therefore one has to admit that the Hmars are true democrats.

### **Role of the Priests**

The Priests also played an important role in the society of the Hmars. A person well versed in the religion of the Hmars was appointed as the Chief Priest. His main job was to offer the sacrifices to Spirits. This was a devise to cure the sick. For the priestly service he rendered to the society he used to get rice, paddy etc.

### **Role of the Blacksmith**

The role of the Blacksmith was also no less important in the Hmar society, for it was he on whom the village community depended for the manufacture of agricultural implements and necessary weaponry etc.

### **Part played by the 'Lothlang'**

The other peoples of importance in the old Hmar society were the Lothalang. They usually belonged to big families, whose members had earned recognition as hard working people. They enjoyed right to preferential treatment in the matter of lands allotted to them, and in return to this favour done to them, they paid the Chief taxes, at such rates as are double the ordinary rates of taxes.

### **Part played by Vatlang**

The ordinary village folk were called Vatlang. They used to cultivate the lands allotted to them by the Chief and fought tribal wars when their Chief wanted them to do so.

This was the structural pattern of a traditional Hmar society which existed for thousand of years and even till the middle of this century. But the second half of the twentieth century saw the start of a process of change.

### **Present Village Setup**

When the village authority came to power after the enactment of the Manipur Act of 1956, the office of the Chief was practically abolished. Under this Act the Chief was made the Chairman of the village authority without any discretionary power. Today in the hill areas the village Committees are functioning under the

control of District Councils. But in the plains i.e. in Cachar the Hmars have village Committees guided by village Panchayats. The Chiefs distribute the reserve land meant for the tribals among their people. They have to collect a house tax every year from each of the families living in their villages and deposit the money thus collected with the government. But Cachar is a highly populous district and the tracts of land available for the Hmars are becoming fewer and fewer with the passage of time and there is already a scarcity of lands where they can raise their crops. As a result, they have now engaged themselves in Pineapple cultivation.

It has already been said that the Hmars are a democratic people with a keen sense of social justice. If we look back at their traditional administrative system as it was till 1956, we find that the Hmar Chiefs, though they always wielded immense power, never lost their democratic character. Theoretically though all the lands belong to the Chiefs yet practically all the people belonging to his community were the owners of these lands. The Chiefs were only the distributors of these lands. But as the distributors of lands also, they had to act abiding by the advice of their Council of Ministers and their society's prevailing customs. He was hardly able to take decisions independently.

#### **Effects of the Present Administrative Setup**

The abolition of the office of the Chief in general and in the Lushei hills in particular, was perhaps a premature and unfortunate step. It has brought about a demoralising effect on the Hmar people. With the introduction of the new systems, their spirit of self-help and self-reliance was greatly disturbed and they have had to become totally dependant on the Govt. charity. The result of this has been that their attitude towards those who are responsible for these harmful changes has become considerably unfavourable.

#### **Slavery**

As we have already seen, the Hmars' was an enlightened social system based on democratic principles and social justice. But even this social system also suffered a serious malady, the institution of serf-dom, which was certainly an astonishing aspect for a society like the Hmars. A considerable number of the people of the community used to suffer the fate of serfs for a long time. The practice was condemned by the British rulers but it continued till a large number of Hmars embraced Christianity. Today there are no slaves.

## Family Life

The family life holds an important place in the social life of the Hmars. The father is the head of the house and his voice is obeyed. He represents the family in all public meetings and as the guardian of the family discharges his duties like providing food and shelter for the entire family. The mother is entirely devoted to household works. In fact the father is the family's key-man whereas the mother manages the kitchen affairs.

The Hmars live in joint families of a particular type. When the son of the head of the family marries, he brings his wife into his father's family and lives there till their several children grow up to their marriagable age. After that this son of the head of the family leaves his father's house with his wife and grown up children for a new one of his own. The system is a healthy one, for under this system the future members of the new families get themselves trained in founding and maintaining new families of their own having learnt how to lead a healthy family life.

## Economic Life based on Agriculture

Agriculture dominates the economic life of the Hmars. Almost all of them are engaged in agricultural activities. There are of course a very small number of people who do not live by agriculture. They are the black-smiths and professional priests etc. who live on articles of food and other necessaries which they receive from their fellow villagers in exchange for the services they rendered to them. There are also a small number of Hmars who live by running shops or are engaged in other business activities.

The method of agriculture followed by the Hmars is a primitive one. Their conversion to Christianity and progress in education has not brought about any marked change in this sphere. The village Chief and his Ministers open a large tract of land for the year's cultivation. The method of cultivation they use is called 'Zhooming'. The process is somewhat complicated. It begins in January. First the cultivators select the piece of land to raise his crops. Then he fells all the trees and bamboos and when the felled trees and bamboos have dried up he sets fire to them. By doing so he not only cleans the land but also manures it with the ashes and then only the cultivator starts cultivation. After a few years of cultivation the piece of land becomes barren and the cultivator has to choose another piece of land to raise his crops in. When all the land in the locality become baren, all the villagers leave it for a new one to set up a new village. Thus a great demerit

of Zhoom method of cultivation is that it rapidly diminishes the quality of lands available for Zhooming. The crop, the Hmars produce most, is rice; besides rice, they produce all kinds of vegetable and fruits including cucumbers, water melons and Pineapples etc. Weeding is done three to four times a year and an average Hmar family cannot cultivate more than two acres of land. This practice, is both wasteful and inefficient and harmful not only to the Hmars but also to the whole Nation's economic life. But the practice has not yet been abandoned nor has it been improved upon. Today, when there are almost no lands available for Zhooming, especially in the Cachar district, the Hmars have taken to Pineapple producing which is also not much profitable. As a result, they seem to be heading towards an economic crisis.

### **Present Economic Problem**

Both the Cachar district and the State of Tripura where perhaps a large number of the Hmars live are over populated areas. Now uncultivated lands are no longer available. Therefore, an intensive improved method of agriculture, suitable for adoption in the hill areas has to be developed if these people are not allowed to go down to the ruins. The method has to be such as will not destroy the fertility of lands. Even then the Hmars' economic problems will remain considerably acute. What is needed, is the diversification of economy. This can be done by encouraging and persuading them to take to various business activities, services, craftsmanship and professions for which necessary facilities have to be made available to them. This will reduce the pressure on land to a considerable extent in the areas where the Hmars are living.

### **Marriage System**

The marriage system of the Hmars is an important aspect of their traditional social customs. In the olden days, which they consider as their glorious past, the traditions of bravery and the spirit of adventure was the order of the day.

Family or clan-consideration has no place in the Hmar marriage system. A Hmar can marry almost any women except his sister, aunt, mother or grand-mother. Marrying the first cousin is considered legitimate by almost all the Hmars, excepting a few who has some prejudice against it. There are also a very few instances of polygamy among the Hmars.

In the marriage system the bride's price is one of the most important factors. The boy has to pay the bride-price for the girl he is going to marry and the amount of money he pays as the bride-price is divided among some of the bride's relatives, the major share going to her father.

Formerly this price was paid in terms of 'Mithun' which used to cost the bridegroom about Rs. 40/-. But today, when the prices have gone up manifold since then, the prospective bridegroom may have to pay even more than 1,000/- if he makes the payment of the bride's price in terms of money, instead of by giving a 'Mithun' which is generally done. Different clans of Hmar have fixed different rates of bride's price which also vary according to the varying family status and the beauty of the bride. - Thus we find the payment of bride-price is a must in a Hmar marriage. Thereofre, the boy who fails to keep his word in respect of its payment runs the risk of losing his wife. The spread of Christianity has been very wide among the hill tribes in Cachar, North-Cachar and Mizoram where more than 90% Hmars have embraced this religion. Their conversion to Christinity has nodoubt enabled and inspired them to shed many evils off their social life and also to make progress in the path of attainment of better education. But almost all the Hmaits of these areas are losing their own cultural and traditional traits and developing an aversion to their own social system, regulations and traditions. But in Tripura where the Hmars still adhere to their tribal faith, they have been able to retaja their distinct traditional, cultural and social traits.

### **Religioms Life**

In their religious life the Hmars are the worshipers of Spirits and Natural objects like rocks, mountains and rivers which they believe are inhabited by innumerable Spirits. They do not worship the Celestial bodies, the Moon, the Sun and Stars etc. In Cachar, North-Cachar and Mizoram the Hmars no longer practise this religion because their wholesale conversion to Charistinity in these areas is now almost complete. The Hmars who still practise their old religion, believe in the existance of God whom they call 'Pathien'. According to their belief, 'Pathien' is the creator of all things. They also believe in the existance of the Soul and the life after death.

Once the Hmar country was annexed to the British-India and some kind of British-Hmar friendly relationship established,

the British felt no further responsibility towards these tribal subjects. The British agents looked only after the maintenance of Law and Order and saw to it that the country did not cease to be a part of British India and the uprisings were militarily suppressed. The new rulers exacted taxes from the tribals at very high rates, but never paid any attention to their needs. The advancement in modern education has opened their eyes and they are now quite conscious of their rights.

### **Education**

In the past these people did not make any advancement in the attainment of modern education for no fault of their own. The education system the British had established was meant mainly for the privileged classes. It is their large scale conversion to Christianity which was first responsible for the spread of modern education among the Hmars. The Christian Missionaries were the first who devoted themselves to these tasks. After independence there has been a rapid increase in the number of educational institutions all over India. The Hmars have not failed to seize the opportunity. Today there is an L. P. School in almost every Hmar village. Almost all the children above six years of age go to school. They have all been imbued with the idea that success in life comes through education. The modern education system was first introduced in a Hmar village in 1910, when a School was set up at the initiative of some Hmar villagers and Missionaries. There was no Text book in the language of the Hmars and therefore instructions had to be imparted through Lushei language in Mizoram and through Manipuri language in Manipur. But in Cachar and the North Cachar Hills the Hmar pupils receive instructions through their own language and the Text books written in Hmar for the pupils upto class IV standard were used and they are approved by the Board of Education Assam. There are some other Text books written in Hmar for the pupils upto class VII standard and they are used in the Schools, though not approved by the Board.

The message of Christianity and the modern education system initiated by the Missionaries were something new to the Hmars and truly this has revolutionised their attitude towards life. Now in the field of education they are no longer far behind the others. The number of college students and the University degree holders is rapidly increasing.

With their large scale conversion to Christianity and increasing spread of modern education among them, the Hmars have lost

also their traditional system of education which was informal in character, but whose aim was to equip the learners with some practical knowledge which would enable them to live a successful practical life. The education the Hmar children used to receive under that old traditional system might be age-old but it was not purposeless. But this cannot be said of the general education they receive today. It may be enlightening for a modern society but fails to equip the students with such kind of knowledge as will enable them to earn their livelihood. Therefore the education they now receive often becomes useless in their practical life. What they need is not only modern but also an employment oriented education. But the problem assumed an all India character even before it began to affect the lives of these people.

Thus the energetic, hard working children of the hills are doing everything possible to build up a bright future for themselves, but they find themselves confronted with the educational and economic problems which are not the creations of their own. The present system of education, however modern and enlightening can hardly fill their need, because it does not help them to tide over the economic problems facing them today. Therefore, the system of education meant for them has to be an employment oriented one, which will enable the students to find jobs for themselves. The Govt. has to come out with a definite programme specially designed for the fulfilment of these aims. There is already a simmering discontent in the minds of these people and that has to be got rid of through the implimentations of these programmes by such officials who have sympathetic attitude towards the hope and aspiration of the people, otherwise the situation may take a turn for the worse.

### References

R. Pudiate, *Education of the Hmar people*, 1963.

The study is mainly based on the information supplied by the Head Master, Hmar High School, Fulertol, Cachar.