Society and Economy in North-East India

Volume 1

Editor
MIGNONETTE MOMIN
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During the last two decades or so researchers in different universities of Northeast India have revitalized inquiry into the region's pre-colonial history. No doubt they have contributed in varying degrees to the collation and organization of relevant data for their chosen topics and hence provided additional information on the same. But much of the focus of research has been on cultural and political history with hardly any consideration for the socio-economic context in which various institutions emerged and developed.

In this Volume, writers drawn from various parts of the region — both hills and plains, notwithstanding limitation of the areas covered — have tried to address themselves to the hitherto neglected aspects of study. The purpose is to work towards bringing about the integration of the socio-economic, cultural and political history of each area under study so as to arrive at a better understanding of (a) uneven developments within the region, and (b) how and why certain events and actions occurred during pre-British times. It is hoped that this overall effort will encourage further investigations into the intricacies of the peoples' contacts among themselves within the region and the region's interconnectedness with happenings in South Asia and beyond.

Rs. 400/-

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ISBN 81-87498-83-8

SOCIETY AND ECONOMY IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

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EDITORS

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and
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Regency Publications
New Delhi

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The Publication of this book has been financially supported by the SAP-DRS (UGC). Department of History, NEHU, Shillong and the responsibility of the facts stated, opinions expressed, or conclusions reached rests entirely with the authors of the articles and the SAP-DRS (UGC) or the Department of History, NEHU, Shillong accepts no responsibility for the same.

ISBN 81-87498-83-8

Published by Regency Publications, 20/36-G, Old Market, West Patel Nagar, New Delhi 110 008 and printed at Radiant Printers, New Delhi, Phone: 2588 3539; Telefax: 2588 4571.

Email: regency@satyam.net.in • www.regency-books.com

Foreword

The twentieth century has been remarkable for tremendous interest in the history of North-East India. Not only the scholars but also the administrators, the men in uniform, the media and, more than others, the public men — in and outside the region, showed keen interest in the region's past. The stresses and strains of time and circumstances drew the region to an extraordinary focus. The historians responded positively to the growing interests, individually and collectively. The earlier efforts of the amateurs — individuals, organizations and institutions — were progressively reinforced by the establishment of Universities with departments of history in the region after the independence of the country. Our department of history at the North-Eastern Hill University also contributed its share in exploring the source materials and systematizing and interpreting the information relating to the history of the region. The regional history of Norty-East India happens to be the main thrust area of our department from the beginning and we have been actively involved in creating and managing the North-East India History Association (NEIHA), which is a giant organization today.

To coincide with the Silver Jubilee of the department in 1999, we organized a symposium on trends in research in the history of North-East India. The survey of researches in that connection brought home that although the quantum of research output in the last fifty years has been phenomenal, a lot remains to be done to fill up the important gaps and to understand the process of development in the North-East as a region. In the meantime, the Special Assistance Programme (SAP) was renewed to our department by the University Grants Commission with 'Society and Economy in North-East India' as a thrust area. The SAP Advisory Committee approved our

proposal for financial support to hold seminars in the thrust areas and to publish the proceedings. Accordingly, we decided to hold a series of seminars on society and economy in North-East India from the earliest times to our contemporary period. Three seminars were planned for a thematic study of the Society and Economy in North-East India in a common historical perspective; the first to cover the period from pre-historic times to roughly about the thirteenth century AD, the second, thirteenth to eighteenth century, and the third, nineteenth-twentieth century. It was also decided to publish the papers accepted in the three seminars in three volumes.

The first seminar held on March 4–6, 2002 was an exciting experience in our endeavours to explore and analyse the extant source materials and to review the existing studies for projecting an integrated thematic view of the society and economy in North-East India till about the thirteenth century. The specialists in various aspects of the larger theme across the disciplines responded to our invitation and presented their serious studies, some of which are in the hitherto comparatively least researched pre- and proto- and early historical periods. Society and Economy in North-East India, Volume 1 contains those studies. Our colleagues, Professor Mignonette Momin and Dr. Cecile Mawlong, who were conveners of the seminar, worked out the scheme of the seminar and have jointly edited the volume with remarkable zeal and care. We expect the volume to be appreciated by a wide circle of readership and to inspire further research in the history of North-East India.

NEHU, Shillong
The 25th March 2003

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Editors' Note

The land that now stands as India's northeast region was subsumed under the name 'Assam' in colonial writings from about the mid-nineteenth century. To writers of that period the region comprised, in its broadest sense, the areas corresponding to the present states of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, as well as contiguous portions within what now constitute North Bengal and Bangladesh. This categorization was essentially in the nature of a broad geographical unit, for it was impractical to consider that entire territory as even a loosely knit political unit at any stage of the region's history. The legacy survived upto the post-British times, except for the fact that the area that is now called Arunachal Pradesh (from 1972 onwards) had been named the North-East Frontier Agency (1954–1972) and had been added to the concept of North-East India.

As in other parts of India, it was British officials charged with the administration of different areas within the region, who were responsible for constructing the histories of its people. William Robinson penned a sort of prelude to historical writing on 'Assam' in his book, *A Descriptive Account of Assam* (London, 1841). The work suffered from limitations of source material, interpretation and coherent geographical/ethnographical knowledge, so the need for a 'proper' history was felt. Edward Gait met that need more than sixty years later when he brought out the first standard text on 'Assam' under the title, *A History of Assam* (London, 1905; 2nd edn. 1926). His book heralded modern history writing in the region.

The focus of Gait's work was political history primarily based on written documents and so the subjects of discussion were the ruling families of the plains where literacy was known.

It is obvious that Gait was influenced by the then-current historical methods prevalent in Europe, which emphasized upon the use of written sources as *the* central defining feature of History; hence the events that he narrated were in the context of those rulers. But even where the plains were the focus of his work he found it impossible to establish any uniformity of periodization for all the lowlands. This was because of the limited quantity of source material on the basis of which he had to construct the history of the region. There was also the problem of differentiations in the British attitude to the ruling families of the region, as is known, for instance, from the subjugation of the Ahom kings and the recognition of the right of other rulers in the region to govern areas under their own jurisdiction (such as Tripura) according to their own conventions. Moreover, Gait could provide only occasional glimpses of what was happening in the rest of the region wherever the rulers of the plains had to interact with the unlettered groups or when the rulers of the latter groups had succeeded in patronizing writers to record their eulogies. To that extent all other sections of the population of both the plains and the hills were by and large left out of the 'main' historical episodes. This sort of academic methods and attitude suited the prevailing imperialistic ideology. That ideology was commensurate with superinducing 'order' in:

- the plains that had — from the British point of view — experienced general insecurity because of internal communal dissensions, endemic raids from the direction of the adjacent hills and/or incursions from across Bengal and Burma from time to time;
- the hills where the welter of tribes had ostensibly been living in 'splendid isolation,' without the rule of law, had known only continual feuding among them and had conducted sporadic raids into the neighbouring settlements in the plains causing disorder, destruction and a recurring sense of insecurity among the victims.

It was supposedly for these reasons that the British found it necessary to intervene in the affairs of the peoples of the plains and hills: to put an end to the disturbances and ensure

the success of colonial policies in the entire region. The histories of the various communities of the hill areas could not be written in the conventional sense because they had not yet attained the literate stage. Hence these latter communities figured in colonial historiography only in the context of British expansion into the hill areas for the purpose of establishing administrative control over them. Alexander Mackenzie's *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes on the North East Frontier of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1884) best illustrates this point. The overall picture that emerged from British historical writings on the hill tribes of northeast India fitted in with the general studies on 'primitive survivals' located in various pockets of Asia, Africa and the Americas, which literary efforts had eventually culminated in the introduction of Anthropology as an academic discipline in 1850 at Oxford University, England. Not surprisingly the imperialistic brand of colonial historiography in India largely focused on the 'transformation' of the 'warlike'/'savage'/'backward' and 'stagnating' tribes (that had resisted the British but had eventually been overcome) into law-abiding subjects of the British Empire. There was no attempt to cloak the writers' sense of duty to introduce 'civilization' in areas that the Westerners had occupied. They projected their 'civilizing' role, which ostensibly aimed at upgrading the quality of life of the people brought under imperial rule, as especially desirable in the context of the various 'primitive' hill communities that could be nurtured to fall in line with the workings of modern institutions.

No doubt the experience of conflicts in mainland India, such as that of the 'Sepoy Mutiny' (1857), and pragmatic administrative exigencies necessitated deeper understanding of the cultures of the people of the country's northeast region. This compulsion seems to have been keenly realized, as even in the plains the majority of the population had not been fully 'acculturated' *vis-à-vis* the 'mainstream' Brahmanical society, while in the greater part of the hills the rule of 'law', from the colonial rulers' perspective, had yet to be implemented. To that end the British initiated ethnographical studies and sponsored publication of monographs on the major tribes of the region at the beginning of the twentieth century. Mapping out the land and its economic potential had already been done from about

half a century earlier. Such studies were meant to arm successive government servants with adequate knowledge about the land and the people in order to consolidate colonial rule. The studies also became the repository of data and observations of historical significance that could be built upon further or subjected to thorough investigation. Simultaneously, the opening of institutions of higher learning provided interested individuals from the region avenues for accessing sources bearing on their own histories and cultures.

When British rule came to an end, anthropological and historical researches in 'Assam' continued under the aegis of the new governments. In the post-British period most anthropologists aimed at understanding 'tribal' cultures on the latter's terms before revolutionary culture change could take place on account of the 'modernizing' process that had been set in motion by the introduction of Western education, medical care and Christian proselytization. The majority of historians sought to systematize and update writings primarily on dynastic, administrative and cultural history based on collation of data largely derived from literary sources. The sources ascribed to the colonial period were principally official documents. Those preceding that period were locally produced manuscripts, inscriptions, coins and other kinds of archaeological record, which finds had been edited, translated or/and annotated through the initiative of the colonial rulers and, later, that of the post-colonial officials/professionals. Post-colonial researchers in the history of northeast India were particularly motivated by the need to address themselves to understanding the 'identities' of the region's numerous communities in the context of the nascent concept of the 'nation-state' that India had come to concretize. The initial response to that quest was to place the identities as far back in time as possible. This was especially true in the case of the literate peoples of the plains, whose roots were often traced back to the beginnings of the 'greater' Indian tradition best embodied in ancient Brahmanical literature comprising the two epics and the *Purāṇas*. As expected, such attempts resulted in highlighting common meeting grounds for events purported to have taken place as part of some grand scheme in the 'pan-Indian' context. This kind of approach underlay the dynastic histories of northern India,

to which the valley kingdoms of the northeast region were 'attached'. Works to this effect can be ascribed to 'mainstream' writers influenced by the nationalist ideology, such as H.C.Raychaudhuri (*Political History of Ancient India*, Calcutta, 1923) and H.C.Ray (*The Dynastic History of Northern India*, II, Calcutta, 1931), as well as writers of regional histories, such as R.G.Basak (*The History of North Eastern India*, Calcutta, 1933) and R.C.Majumdar (*The History of Bengal, I*, Dacca, 1943), among others.

Paradoxically, the earliest history writers amongst the literate sections of northeast India (irrespective of the period under study — pre-British, British or post-British times) lapped up the recognition of the 'oneness' of the valley kingdoms with the more advanced Gangetic valley — chiefly at the cultural and political levels — through the 'common' links derived from Brahmanical tradition. By implication their 'identities' could be traced further back in time at least to the Vedic period, since the antecedents of the epic/Puranic traditions supposedly originated therein! Simultaneously, they tried to harp on the distinct identity of each of the kingdoms within the region and to place their rulers on par with their contemporaries in the Indian mainland. While doing so, they overlooked obvious factors underlying historical processes, i.e., those of geography and the material milieu. They missed out on the linkages between socio-economic conditions and the institutions that evolved in the region, choosing instead to almost indiscriminately apply the yardstick of developments that had taken place in the Gangetic basin to the northeast region even in the absence of substantiation. In the process the history writers overlooked questions of chronological differences, morphological diversities and the corresponding organizational variations as to the rise and development of cultures and their corresponding institutional organizations within the subcontinent including the northeast region. At the same time they highlighted the differences between the plains and the hills within the region and chose to view the peoples of the latter area (as did the earlier writers), as 'isolates'. They conceded contacts between the two culturally different groups only at the level of political relations and of trade, and even those communications were viewed from the perspectives of the

lettered groups. Thus many of the writers tended to persist with ruler-centred depiction of events, which trend they had inherited from the British.

Expectedly most of the works were in the nature of administrative studies and those of cultures pertaining to the period of British rule in the region and its aftermath. This was because of (a) constraints of historical methods that banked on written material to the near-exclusion of other sources (such as archaeological finds, oral traditions, etc.); (b) persistence of the approach initiated by writers of the colonial period, which was characterized by narration of events associated with the historical figures that had been in positions of political and economic power. As a result the histories of the region missed out on the broader social context of those events and generally lacked coherence, comprehensiveness and connectedness.

History writing in northeast India has been ridden therefore with problems of methods and approaches. It was to address these problems and to explore ways of reducing/overcoming them that the History faculty, North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong, organized a Seminar on Society and Economy in Pre-Colonial Northeast India on March 4-6, 2002. The Seminar was sponsored by the ICHR, New Delhi, the UGC-SAP-DRS of the Department of History, NEHU, Shillong, and the NERC-ICSSR, Shillong. The choice of the theme stemmed from the realization that the integration of political, economic and socio-cultural histories of the region had yet to be achieved. The idea was to take stock of the data used and interpreted by writers dealing with the history of the region or with that of specific areas within the region, to revaluate existing assumptions, to present sources hitherto neglected, misunderstood or overlooked and to discuss possibilities of interpreting the evidence commensurate with the significant advances that have been made in Indian and non-Indian historiography during the last half-a-century. Towards this end the pre-colonial period was identified, keeping in mind the necessity of a broad-based conceptual framework within which the studies were to be fitted in, because of problems in following the generally accepted periodization of Indian history into 'ancient', 'medieval', 'modern' for northeast India. This, despite the nagging awareness that even the concept

'pre-colonial' was fraught with difficulties in terms of its practical application for the entire region. Nonetheless, for the purpose of delimitation, contributors dealing with the history of the people of the plains were requested not to stretch the discussion beyond the thirteenth century, so that the remaining chapters of the precolonial period (upto about the eighteenth century) could be tackled later. This periodization was tentatively agreed upon considering the possibility of dating on the basis of the extant sources. However, this yardstick could not be applied to the hills of the region, because of the nature of the source-material available, and contributors handling their history were left to deal with topics before the advent of the British into the hill areas. At the very outset therefore the problem of periodization in the region's history became a glaring issue on which many of the participants had something to comment. Related to this was the debate on the use of 'pre-colonial' as a concept. As some rightly pointed out, there had been no uniformity in either the chronology of colonialism or the establishment of colonial economy for the entire region. Most of the participants felt the need for further discussions on such issues confronting history writing in the region and suggested holding follow-up Seminars broadly pertaining to the same theme but in the context of the Ahom, British and post-British period towards a connected history of the region. After all, the history of northeast India is the thrust area of most Departments of History in Universities located in the region. This Volume is the first in the series of academic exercises on the above-mentioned theme.

The essays in this Volume are the revised versions of papers that were presented at last year's Seminar and have been accepted for publication. Admittedly some of them reflect the constraints of constructing aspects of the socio-economic histories of different areas within the region based on the extant sources. This is particularly true of papers on the hills, where there were no written records pertaining to the history and culture of the 'highlanders' prior to the coming of the British, save for occasional references to certain tribal communities in the written sources mainly from the post-twelfth century onwards. The authors have tried therefore to demonstrate possibilities of using less conventional sources,

such as the oral traditions and objects of material culture. They have arranged relevant data from such sources in conjunction with the evidence of the pre-colonial and early colonial source material to indicate socio-economic linkages in the evolution of patterns in society and economy during pre-British times. In doing so some of them have also indicated avenues for combining the research techniques of History with those of related disciplines, particularly Archaeology and Anthropology. Some of the papers on the plains display a more critical use of both literary and epigraphical sources than attempted before. The authors' intention was to arrive at a more holistic picture of socio-economic developments instead of focusing on the actions and achievements of individual rulers, as had been typical of earlier writings. The authors have tried to crosscheck the authenticity of the evidence, wherever possible, with that of numismatics and archaeological remains. Some of the essays in this Volume have resorted to the comparative method in terms of handling sources and using concepts developed in the study of other societies. The authors have thus broadened the scope of probing into aspects of the socio-economic history of the hills and plains of the region by raising new questions and suggesting answers to them. So even in the event that their techniques and approaches are challenged by subsequent studies, their purpose — to present new and alternative sources of information, to reinterpret the evidence of conventional sources, to stimulate new lines of inquiry and reformulation of problems and ideas towards enhancing fruitful new understandings — would still be served.

The Volume begins with a discussion on issues of historiography to highlight the trends, problems and possibilities of studies in the region's society and economy prior to the Ahom period, the commencement of which period can be dated with absolute certainty to A.D. 1228. Thereafter the papers have been arranged area-wise, in the absence of a broad consensus of identical topics cutting across them. But not all areas within the region have been covered. There are three papers on the Khasi-Jaintia, two each on the Mizo and Naga, one on the Meitei, one on the Surma-Barak valley, two on the Brahmaputra valley and one in the context of Bakhtiyâr's invasion of Assam. Some papers have an overlapping of information, though not

necessarily of perspectives. Some other papers have focused on aspects of society more than those of economy. Our task is to present the views and priorities of the authors based on their understanding of the sources and interpretation of the evidence so that readers can draw their own inferences from them. We have provided diacritics in the last four papers, and that too only in the context of *early* (not contemporary) place-names, personal names and non-English common terms as gleaned from the sources written in scripts other than the Roman.

Most of the contributors are members of the History Faculty, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. The others are our colleagues in related disciplines within the University or in the same discipline from outstation academic institutions. We extend our thanks to all of them for meeting the methodological requirements and submitting their papers within the stipulated deadline. Professor David R.Syiemlieh, as Head of the Department of History, NEHU, took the trouble of maintaining communications with the publishers at every stage of the preparation of this Volume for publication. He and the other members of the editorial board — Professors J.B.Bhattacharjee and Manorama Sharma — gave us valuable advice in the course of editing this Volume. To them we extend our gratitude. Errors in editing, if any, are entirely of our own making.

We wish to place on record that the Department of History, NEHU, rendered financial assistance from the funds of the UGC-SAP-DRS for the publication of this Volume. We acknowledge our debt of gratitude to Regency Publications, New Delhi, for the promptness in bringing out the Volume.

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Role of Khasi-Jaintia Women of the Meghalaya Plateau in Pre-Colonial Society and Economy

Amena Nora Passah

Among the many forces that make up history, it was human interaction that enabled society to shape the variants of ideas and institutions, marking its transition from one level of development to another. Men and women have played vital roles in societal and economic development. Undeniably the participation of women in society is of great significance and their contribution is hardly negligible as they more than often provided the support and the framework on which society was based. It is a fact, however, that most disciplines of Social Sciences in discussing the development of human society have ignored women's multifaceted roles. It can be said, "... woman's place in human social life is not in any direct sense, a product of the things she does, but of the meaning her activities acquire through concrete social interaction."[1]

Ignoring women's participation was perhaps not deliberate. This came about only because at an earlier stage, the writings were done by men, who might have genuinely believed that women were just part of the scenario and all important work was done by men and hence only what men did needed to be documented and recorded. By reporting on the activities of men, it was assumed that the scope of women's activities would be understood too. In this respect, Shiela Rowbotham observed, "The social relations of

women have altered over time, just like those of men but most history looks at women, through the situation of men."[2]

However, from the last quarter of the 19th century, there has been a growing movement, to make women — the silent invisible half of the population — more visible in history, so as to make the interpretation of history viable and complete. Feminist scholars and writers have questioned and criticized the traditional male dominance in society. This wave of critical awareness, ultimately, brought home to the people that the economic participation of women in the development of society had always been there. Indeed Mary R. Beard states:

> The prominence of women in history is hard to miss if one keeps one's eyes open and seeks in the true scientific spirit ... from the artifacts of the preliterate age, in folklores, in myths, in religious literatures, in printed and unprinted manuscripts, in some general histories, in particular studies of women conducted by careful modern scholarship.[3]

Thus, there has been the growth of women's history in the last thirty years. It has fused personal memories, oral traditions and existing records and documents to highlight women's experience and multi-dimensional role in society. There has been an ongoing recasting of historical knowledge. The debate of whose doing/being or what deserves to be recorded is still very much existing and controversial and women's history, like Black history or Labour history has contributed to the argument. Like 'labour', women are very much a component of society and consequently of history. Women's studies, abroad, have had considerable influence on India. Even Meghalaya has not escaped this strongly emerging trend in history. However, no one has comprehensively focused on the unseen contribution of Khasi-Jaintia women in the society and economy in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills during pre-colonial times.*

In the post-colonial period, information on the womenfolk can be gleaned from archival records, gazetteers, journals and books

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* This paper was presented at the National Seminar on 'Economy and Society in Pre-Colonial North East India' organized by the Department of History, N.E.H.U, 4th–6th March 2002. This paper was prepared with assistance from SAP-DRS project of the U.G.C., Department of History, N.E.H.U., Shillong.

published in English or the vernacular. These can be used to portray the distinct stages of development of women as social entities and their activities in the society and economy. However, pre-colonial records are difficult to come by. Periodization was thus difficult to arrive at due to the absence of written materials and dating methods. I have therefore made extensive use of materials depicting how European travellers, administrators and missionaries viewed and observed these tribal groups called Khasi-Jaintia, on the former's arrival and first contact with the latter in the 17th and 18th centuries. Roles could not have changed much or drastically, at that point of interaction. I have also consulted traditional songs, such as those sung by women while pounding rice or winnowing grain.[4]

In Northeast India, the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo tribes of the area that now constitutes the state of Meghalaya are the only matrilineal tribes here. For a long time, foreign and Indian observers alike had looked on them as matriarchal societies, in spite of Chie Nakane's anthropological work[5] where she stated that these tribes were one of the few matrilineal societies in the world. From a distant past, while their counterparts in the plains and elsewhere were struggling for their rights, the Khasi-Jaintia-Garo womenfolk enjoyed an 'enviable'[6] position living, as they were, in a matrilineal society. Today internal forces and factors of change have tremendously challenged this 'enviable' position. However, this issue falls outside the ambit of this study. This work would only attempt to highlight the hitherto 'silent' role of the Khasi and Jaintia women in the society and economy of pre-colonial Khasi and Jaintia Hills.

Matriliny has some broad principles which include claim of descent from the lineage of the mother, matrilocal residence pattern, girls, especially the youngest daughter inheriting property, prominence being given to the *kñi* (the mother's brother) in the family, in social and religious spheres. The main features of matriliny were strictly followed in the Jaintia Hills. The mother was the legitimate owner of her children. She had a natural claim and jurisdiction over her sons also. The son was expected to die in his mother's house and had to be brought to her house if he passed away in his wife's home. A death ritual called *slewbindi* had to be performed if the son died in his wife's house. He belonged to his mother's house at all times even after his death. His bones had to be preserved along with those of his mother.[7]

In spite of Chie Nakane's anthropological work, the view has persisted that women held all the power in the home and society. She was the owner and dispenser of family and ancestral property. It was wrongly understood that womenfolk (especially the *khadduh* or youngest daughter) reaped the benefits — lineage through the mother, inheriting the ancestral wealth and property. Indeed, she enjoyed these, and was the prime figure in religious and customary rights. She was the family priestess. Among the most important spirits worshipped by the Khasi-Jaintias were those of the first ancestors of the clan, who could inflict much pain and sorrow upon the living if all the funeral and commemorative rites were not performed. Women played an important role in the performance of these rites. Again, the women performed the rites of feeding the dead, within a year following the placement of the deceased person's bones in the family cairn.

However, the reality in pre-colonial times was that apart from the enhanced status in religious affairs,[8] the freedom of women was curtailed. The *khadduh*, contrary to post-colonial observations, was only the custodian of the family property. She had no say in the administration and disposal of ancestral property. It was her *kñi* (maternal uncle) who oversaw the property and had the last word in family matters. It can be said that the *khadduh* merely kept the moneybox but the key was with her maternal uncle or her eldest brother.[9]

Again, though the women apparently enjoyed a high status in society, they were denied political power. In fact, for centuries, in other parts of the world too, "political power and all other decision making processes and social prestige have been monopolized"[10] by men. This might appear incongruous in a matrilineal set up, but the harsh reality was that this denial of political rights to women was true. Again, the Khasi-Jaintia polity has always been acclaimed as a vibrant democracy, but the denial of political rights to women, who formed a major constituent of the population, belies this belief. The *dorbars* of the chiefs and 'kings', as well as the *dorbar shnong* (locality durbar) were exclusively male-oriented. The women were denied political and administrative responsibilities in the society and while they might have had some say in family discussions, they were not given the final say in important decisions.

The responsibility the *khadduh* bore outweighed the privileges. Her house was the port of call for every family member and the

meeting place of her kith and kin. One can imagine the expenses she had to incur, looking after the gastronomical needs of her kith and kin. Moreover, when a brother had differences with his wife and came back to his maternal home, it was the duty of his sister to maintain his upkeep. Till date, even among the Christians, the mother's house is the hub of activity. On Sundays, after the Church services, the brothers and sisters would congregate at the *khadduh's* place, especially if the mother was still alive, and interact and have food together.

However, it is in the economic arena that one finds the Khasi and Jaintia women, particularly the latter, in their element, more independent and confident in outlook. The Jaintia women played path-breaking roles, not only in agriculture, the manufacture of various items of crafts, but also in trade.[11]

Apparently, by the standards of the time, the Khasi-Jaintias were well-off and the material condition was tolerably good.[12] Although the Khasis were industrious cultivators,[13] they could not produce enough for the needs of the entire population of the hills, and had to import food from the plains[14] or, according to John Willes (a Collector of Sylhet), the Khasis came down to their lands in the Plains at the time of harvest and carried off the produce.[15]

On the whole, the economy being more or less agricultural, the women no doubt had an active participation in the agricultural work. Sharp division of labour based on sex was definitely there. Since menfolk concentrated on hunting and defence they left the women to take care of domestic work, agricultural activities, crafts and carrying products to weekly markets and trade and commerce.

Agriculture

Probably because of the steep slopes and deep valleys of the Khasi Hills, settled agriculture was never in vogue. As was common with the other hill tribes of the northeastern region, jhum was generally followed in the Khasi Hills. They did not seem to have used the plough, instead tilling the soil with *mohkhiew* (the hoe). There had been no considerable progress in agricultural technology except in the Jaintia Hills. The Jaintias living and cultivating in the plains of the erstwhile Jaintia kingdom and the valley in the Jaintia Hills, had followed settled cultivation, using the plough.[16] This could have been because the Jaintias had more plain lands than the Khasis and had more

intimate interactions with the Plains people. In Jaintia Hills, where wet rice cultivation was carried out, the land was well irrigated by means of channels that led into small squares of land into which the whole field was divided. The soil was made into a thick paste in the Jaintia Hills, by means of the plough and in the Khasi Hills with the hoe. The mud was stirred up by means of cattle, which was driven several times over the fields until the soil acquired the right consistency. Dispensing with nursery beds, the seed was sown directly in the fields. When the plants were about four inches high, water was let in again. Then came the weeding, which was done several times up to the time of the harvest. After they were dry, the sheaves were collected and thrashed out on the spot, either by beating them against a stone *(shoh kba)* or by men and women treading them out *(iuh kba)*. Then the women collected the grain and placed them in large bamboo containers *(ki thiar)*.[17]

The Sung valley of the Jaintia Hills is known throughout Khasi and Jaintia Hills as a very fertile region and it is here and other parts of Jaintia hills that women worked shoulder to shoulder with their menfolk. The women who had little children, worked with their babies on their back, and securely fastened them there by a cloth tied over their shoulders.

Jaintia women were out there in the fields under the blazing sun or pouring rain, sowing or reaping. This activity has been beautifully brought out in the song *'I kamram ka kynthai ha iung ha lait'* (the duty of the women at home and outside) composed by Silbi Passah. Here she sings about her mother who is reprimanding herself for having overslept, when she should have been out in the fields at the break of dawn. She speedily prepares her meal, wrapped in a leaf and calls out to her daughter to bring her the *sop kjat* (pieces of cloth to tie around her ankles) to protect her from insect bites on the field. She laments that a woman has to do everything for the comfort and prosperity of her family, the whole day spent in sowing and cultivating, coming home only at dusk. Then she wearily makes her way home, carrying pieces of wood in her *khoh*[18] at her back, to light a fire at home. Then after her ablutions, she sits down to give the evening meal to her children around the hearth. It is assumed here that she would have advantage of this family time to counsel her children on what was wrong and what was right.

Corn was grown. Stories abound of women pounding the corn all day and even into the night. The mashed corn would be steamed to make *kpu saru* (a delicious mashed corn dish). *Kpu handow* would be another item, made out of powdered rice. This was one of the items prepared by the women for U Kiang Nangbah and his warriors. Jaintia *chyrmit* (turmeric) and pepper were indigenously grown in Jaintia Hills by both men and women but the cleaning and grinding were done by women. Till today, there is tremendous demand for the pure unadulterated *haldi* (turmeric) of Jaintia Hills, not only in Meghalaya, but in other places as well.

Pottery

However, it was in art and craft that Jaintia women were comparatively advanced than their Khasi counterparts. This was evidenced in pottery making and in the weaving of cloth. In fact, it was in the field of pottery making that the Jaintia women had made a distinctive contribution to the economy.

Women may have worked side by side with their menfolk in augmenting their income, but it is in the manufacture of pottery that they had played a dominant role in pre-colonial times. Contemporary records are not available, but from records of the 19th century, one gathers that the art of pottery making was known and practised in Larnai (Jaintia Hills) and Nongstoin in West Khasi Hills.[19] Pottery of a coarse description was made in these places.[20] In Nongstoin, one is not clear whether men or women fashioned pots, but in Larnai, it is known that pottery making was the domain of the female members of the family. The predominant female potters were concentrated in and around Larnai in the Jaintia Hills and nearby places like Ummulong and Tyrsang because of the short distance from the Sung valley, the only source of clay.[21]

Pottery was generally considered a woman's industry, at least before the introduction of the wheel, yet the contribution of menfolk cannot be denied.[22] The potter's wheel was unknown and the women fashioned the pots by hand.[23] Throughout the processes of manufacture, women played the most important role. However, men from the potter's family occasionally assisted in the first grinding and mixing of clay on the leather mat or wooden board. They also helped in transporting the raw material, i.e., clay from

Sung valley, which is situated around fourteen miles from Jowai and is not far from Larnai.

The Larnai potters are known to have been hereditarily engaged in making pottery.[24] However, in spite of their craft being hereditary, there does not seem to be any specialized potters' clan[25] as in Assam. The pots they made were the ordinary pot *(khiew ranei)*, water pot *(khiew um)*, a round flat pot with a corresponding lid for making Khasi pancakes popularly called *kpu tharo* or *Pu tharo*, and flower pots *(khiew syntiew)*. Their wares found their way to many places in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and reached the Brahmaputra and Surma valleys also.

Reasons are rife on how women took to the art of pottery craft. A legend associated with Larnai pottery goes that while a woman was making pots, God asked her the secret of her expertise. She replied, "I got it from God". But on being asked for the third time, the woman got irritated and retorted that she knew it on her own. God was furious with her impatience and insolence and cursed her that she would always be involved in fashioning wares of soil and earth (pottery). Apparently, had the woman been a little patient, God would have in all probability given her the knowledge of making wares from steel.[26]

A second conjecture is that men understood that women's hands were delicate and could deftly fashion the pots.[27] They were considered to have finer aesthetic skills. Another reason could be that as the men were constantly engaged in raids, fishing, hunting, clearing forests, etc and were not able to stay in the village for long periods they delegated this art to their womenfolk, which, in course of time, led to the monopoly of pottery craft by the womenfolk. This view may be seen as chauvinistic but it could well have been true. The fourth plausible reason was that Jaintia women treated their husbands with utmost respect and would do anything to ease their burden and to help in augmenting their income.[28]

Weaving

Gurdon has commented that Colonel Waddell was wrong in saying that the Khasis were unacquainted with the art of weaving, for a considerable weaving industry existed at Khyrwang, Mynso and Sutnga valleys of Jaintia Hills, which had been overlooked by him.[29] It is also known that the Khasis imported

their requirement of silk cloth from either Assam or the Jaintia Hills.[30] In Khasi Hills, weaving is done mostly by women of the present day Bhoi district of the Khasi Hills.[31] They weave cotton cloths which they dye with the leaves of a plant called *u noli*.[32]

However, the weaving industry of the Bhoi region must have been a small undertaking because it is commonly known among the Khasis and Assamese that the designs on the Khasi *jainsems* had no doubt been supplied by the Khasis but were actually woven by the weavers of Sualkuchi of Assam from time immemorial. Gurdon had observed that the Khasis obtain their silk cloths from the Assam valley and from the Nongtung or Khyrwang villages in Jaintia.[33]

Weaving industry, however, apparently flourished in the Jaintia Hills. It seemed that the spinning of *eri* silk and weaving of cloth was quite an important industry among the Jaintias in that distant era. Mr. Stack, in his admirable note on silk in Assam, overlooked the fact that the *eri* thread was in great demand only in Jaintia Hills, for the Khasis did not weave silk or cotton cloths.[34] Captain Trotter informed that cloths of coarse and arid silk were manufactured in Khyrwang and Nongtung villages of the Jaintia Hills.[35] Gurdon again observed that "these cloths are the handiwork of women alone, ... in the leisurely manner in which they work, it takes a year to complete it."[36] It is indeed apparent that the women having to perform domestic duties and agricultural work could at most devote only some time to weaving. Nevertheless, it was a surefire way of adding extra income to the family.

The women at Nongtung and Khyrwang rear their own *eri* silkworm and spin the silk from the cocoons. The Khyrwang villages in the Jaintia Hills have given their name to the vertically striped cloth, *ka jain khyrwang*.[37] The Khyrwang cloth is red and white, mauve and white or chocolate brown and white. Again, Gordon notes that the ladies of Khyrwang weave a special pattern of cotton and silk cloth, striped red and white.[38]

Cotton cloths, on the other hand were manufactured principally at Mynso and Sutnga in the Jaintia Hills.[39] At Mynso, sleeveless coats were also manufactured. As mentioned earlier, the women of Bhoi and Lyngngam also wove cotton cloths. There is a strong possibility that men and women must have also woven cotton cloth at Nongstoin.[40]

In Shella, women embroidered their ceremonial garments like *jainkup saru* with black woollen thread. The homespun traditional cloths that have come down to us from pre-colonial times are a tribute to the women of the Jaintia Hills.

Basketry

Khasi and Jaintia women and men were well versed in the craft of basketry based on bamboo and cane. These baskets came in various sizes and shapes, mostly conical, and were used for keeping food items and for storing and transporting goods from the fields to the houses and to the *hats* (markets) in adjacent areas or to the plains of Surma and Brahmaputra valleys. Nimble and expert fingers wove articles of daily use. The common ones were the 'baskets' with head straps like those used by the Lepchas, but much neater, and a netted bag of pineapple fibre (said to have come from Sylhet).[41] These bags were called *ïarong* and were actually made by the Khasi-Jaintia women. The Shella women also made strings out of the barks of trees like *Tuklum, Tushat, Tushir* and *Teiñ bah* and then made ropes out of the strings.

Trade and Market

The Khasi-Jaintias were keen traders and a considerable number of the people earned their living by travelling from one place to another.[42] Though Trotter mentioned that the chief markets were at Jowai, Nartiang, Shangpung, Nongjngi in the Jaintia Hills, Shillong in the Khasi Hills and Jaintiapur and Mulagul in Sylhet,[43] the markets in the hills may not have been markets in the way we understand them today but were more or less entrepots. The Khasi-Jaintias exchanged goods between themselves and with other tribes and plains people, through the *hats* (weekly or periodical markets) situated at the borders and the foothills, where they exchanged their surplus produce to balance their deficits.[44]

Women showed their physical presence in the markets. They contributed immensely not only in brisk business activities but also serving as hardy porters, in ferrying goods from the hills to the plains and vice versa. H. Walters in his account of his travels in

the Sylhet region mentioned that during his journey "a group of Casia women passed by bearing at their backs, conical baskets, suspended from their forehead by bands of matting and heavily laden with lumps of smelted iron ore. The women are the best porters and young boys and girls bear their appropriate loads. The men were armed with bows and arrows or long naked iron swords." Robert Lindsay, the Collector of Sylhet also witnessed "a caravan arrive from the interior of the mountain, bringing on their shoulders, the produce of the hills .... the men walking by their side, protecting them with their arms. The elderly women in general, were ugly in the extreme of masculine appearance ... young girls are both fair and handsome. ... The strength of their arms and limbs, from constant muscular exercise in ascending and descending these mountains, loaded with heavy burthens, far exceeds our idea. I asked one of the girls to allow me to lift her burthen of iron — far from its weight, I could not accomplish it."[46]

Thus, the Khasi-Jaintia women contributed their mite to their economy, also in bearing on their sturdy backs their hill resources (especially the heavy iron) to *hats* at the foothills. This aspect of their work should not be construed that the Khasi-Jaintia women were being treated as beasts of burden or treated with contempt by their menfolk. In an era where fights and ambushes were commonplace, the men had to move as lightly and freely as possible to prevent and ward off sudden attacks from marauders. The Khasi men, in fact, had always prided themselves on being protectors of their womenfolk and their clan. However, a point of distinction must be made here. While Khasi women apparently served only as porters, the Jaintia women played a visible role in the day-to-day business of trade at local markets or in the *hats* on the foothills. In the song *'Likhih kikhan u lai Chilot'*,[47] the singer sings of the preparations the woman makes, to go to trade at Sylhet. The pan leaves *(tympew)*, betel nuts *(kwai)* that she would be eating throughout the day (either because of preference or for breaking the monotony of the long journey) would be wrapped in a sturdy leaf *(sla lamet)* to be eaten along the way. *Kpu saru* (corn bread) would be similarly packed. Before she left the house, she would request her husband to come home straightaway after dusk and roast the *Kha rang* (a delectable dried fish item). With their *trop* (conical basket) on their backs, the women would trudge along, but their otherwise tedious journey to *Chilot* (Sylhet) would be

interspersed and enlivened by story telling and laughter. Among the many items taken to the market was their pure *chyrmit* (turmeric), much sought after even till today. When they reached the markets, they were in their element, haggling over the worth of the various items and trying their best to secure a profit. So much so that one can say, trading is the lifeline of the Jaintia women. There were no particular clans as such that were engaged in a particular trade, but anyone who had an aptitude for trading could go on these weekly or periodical visits to the *hats*. A Jaintia market was — and is — free for all females as buyers and sellers.[48]

Iron Industry

The iron industry was originally of considerable importance, but is now almost extinct.[49] Iron is derived from minute crystals of titaniferous iron ore, which are found in the decomposed granite on the surface of the central dike of that rock, near the highest portion of the plateau. Iron exists more or less throughout the ranges of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and has been excavated by these tribes[50] long before colonial rule. The inhabitants have worked these coalmines, from time immemorial. The ore was preferred to English iron by Bengali blacksmiths because of its malleability and being more easily worked. However, the quantity of iron being exported from the hills seems to have been small. The Jaintia iron, when brought into the market, contained more than half dross that ate up the profits and rendered the iron trade an unprofitable one.[51]

Iron was mostly worked at Nongkrem and Mylliem.[52] While men did the main work, women performed the washing of the extracted ore. They worked the ore against the stream with their feet, occasionally turning and mixing it with a hoe. They then pitted the ore in a heap to dry and wash it again. This washing was repeated four times.[53] The double bellows were worked by a man or a woman with a leg on each, swaying from foot to foot. Sometimes the working on the bellows involved two, where a man and wife were at work.[54] An illustration exists of a woman tending to the bellows.[55]

It is thus clear that the Khasi-Jaintia women of the pre-colonial period played instrumental roles in resource generation. Due to peculiar features of the Khasi-Jaintia matrilineal set up, the women

while being assertive forces within the four walls of their homes, could not really contribute administratively, politically or socially to the society. However, it is universally accepted that a woman's status in society can be gauged by her economic independence. This is apparent in the visibility of women in many areas of economic pursuits. On the whole, in an era when women were sensitized to serve men unquestioningly, there would probably have been no gender conflict that is now rearing its ugly head in these Hills.

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23. P.R.T. Gurdon, *op. cit.*; p. 61.
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25. *Ibid.* At the National Seminar on Society and Economy in Pre Colonial North East India, organized by the Deptt. of History, NEHU, Shillong, March 4–6, 2002, during the discussion on Ditamulu Vasa's paper, "Pottery and its Importance in Understanding Human cultures and Civilizations. An Ethnoarchaeological Perspective", Dr. G. Adhikary stated that there were two categories of potters in Assam, the Kumar (users of the potter's wheel) and higher in caste status than the *Hira* (non-users of the potter's wheel).
26. Such were the observations and comments of Smt. Pyrtuh, a present day potter in her interfacing with A. Choudhury.
27. As pointed out to A. Choudhury by the potter's (Smt. Pyrtuh) late husband.
28. This was related to the writer by a Jaintia gentleman who is now no more.
29. P.R.T. Gurdon, *op. cit.*, p. 27.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*
32. This is perhaps the wild indigo or *ram* of the Shan settlers in the Assam Valley.
33. P.R.T. Gurdon, *op. cit.*, p. 59.
34. Quoted in *ibid.*
35. W.F. Trotter, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
36. P.R.T. Gurdon, *op. cit.*, p. 59.
37. The *jain khyrwang* was earlier worn as a sort of lungi by both Jaintia men and women, but today, only women generally wear it. Today the *khyrwang* teams up beautifully with a *muga jainsem* worn on one side only and pinned up on the left shoulder.

38. P.R.T. Gurdon, *op. cit.*, p. 27.
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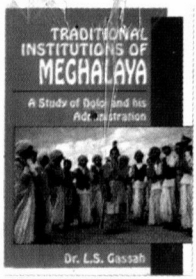

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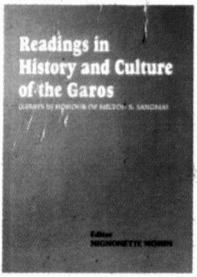

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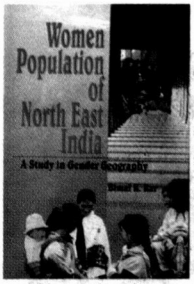

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