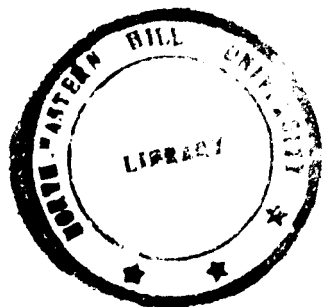


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Social and State Formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills

(A STUDY OF FOLKLORE)

SOUMEN SEN



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A People and Its History

Every people has a history of their own. If, however, we limit our idea of history to that of written records then only do we discover a people without any history, and thus if a question is posed: 'Is there really any people without a history?' the reply will surely be in the negative. In fact, what appears to be absent is not history but a conscious attempt on the part of the people themselves to collect and preserve materials for history. This in turn involves a question of a career and a character of a given people and a logical use of both by a historiographer. He is to treat history not in terms of chronology and achievements or downfalls, dynasties and battles, but in terms of people—how they have shaped their lives and institutions, their history, culture and character.

A career is something achieved; a character, not of an individual, but of a given people, is a process. It is only in this process that real history is to be discovered. Otherwise history would be nothing but a success story as pointed out by Thomas Mann in the words of one of the characters of his novelette, *The Black Swan*. Referring to America, the said character of the novelette Ken Keaton, an American himself, says that his country lacks historical atmosphere. 'Of course, it had a history', he says, 'but that wasn't history, it was simply a short, boring *success story*...

there was *nothing behind them*, while in Europe there was so much behind everything, particularly behind the cities, with their deep *historical perspectives*'.¹ One important reason for this lack of atmosphere, what Ken Keaton and for that matter Mann asserts, is the absence of custom like the *rod of life*, an old German folk custom, 'because there were no villagers there and the farmers were not farmers at all but entrepreneurs like everyone else and had no custom'.²

It seems curious when we hear such a statement that the Americans have no history at all; what they have is a boring success story. This, we presume, has a reference to the history of the United States of America for the last two centuries—the career of a new federal state. What Mann emphasises, we understand, is the lack of historical perspective or *something behind* the so-called history. But then a distinction is to be made between the career of a nation and the story of a people. When we look at the career, we get what we usually designate as history. But when we are interested in the story of a people or the peoples' history, we must look for the culture and character of those people. Probably this situation has been explained, for the sake of convenience, as history and pre-history respectively, a distinction which is peculiarly elusive, particularly in India. By culture we mean a social heritage and to understand that heritage, 'we are driven in the end', as Eliot asserts, 'to find it in the pattern of the society as a whole'.³ In contrast, a career has a connotation of a hierarchical effort and that is why Toynbee finds that 'There is no human interest in a 'career' unless the subject of it is a 'character', which maintains its self-identity through all its reactions to life and all the enlargement of its experience'.⁴

By and large historians have ignored the peoples' history, due to the absence of recorded chronological events; convenien-

1. Mann, Thomas, 'The Black Swan', *Stories of a life-time* 1961, Vol. II, p. 365. emphasis added.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 365.

3. Eliot, T.S., *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, 1948, Ch. 1 p. 23.

4. Toynbee, Arnold J., *Greek Civilization and Character*, 1953, p. viii.

tly called it pre-history and left the quest to the social anthropologists. That is why, talking of Indian history, Henry Berr says, 'India has had some episodes, but no history'.⁵ Commenting on this statement Stuart Piggot observes, 'indeed this unfair generalization does come home when one is attempting to work out any sort of coherent chronological framework in periods allegedly within the realm of recorded Indian history; but nevertheless there are certain phases of ancient Indian culture which lie distinctly beyond any possible form of literary record'.⁶

The study of the culture actually requires a historical perspective, in the absence of which, as Mann asserted, there can be a success story, but not history. And this is what Toynbee takes as a career, on which there cannot be any human interest, if not associated with character, which again is a product of definite culture or social heritage. Mann, therefore, very significantly, seeks a custom behind every history.

And this is of special significance in the study of history of India. It must be admitted that we can never have a single history of India if it is to be a true history of the peoples that inhabit the country. Instead we can have or we have already a scanty record of history which can be described as the Aryan success story in the case of ancient India, and that of, say, the Imperial Guptas, or the Mughal Empire and British colonial rule, which should better be described as career history but not the peoples' history.

Historians themselves have faced these problems while writing the history of India. *The Cambridge Shorter History of India* (Ancient India) begins with the following observation :

'The most striking feature of the literature of ancient India when compared with European literature is the absence of historical works.... The early literature is entirely religious and exegetic in origin, and while important data regarding the

5. Berr, Henri, quoted in *Pre-historic India*, Piggot, Stuart, 1950, p. 11.

6. Piggot, Stuart, *op cit* n. 5, p. 11.

social life of the people can be deduced from it, it contains little reference to historical events....'⁷

It appears from this observation that the writers were more concerned with historical events and in the absence of any systematic record of them find it difficult to construct the history of ancient India, although the sources available provide 'important data regarding the social life of the people'. In fact, the usual interest in history has come to be an interest in political history and so the writers regret that 'The two great epics, while throwing light on life in the heroic age, contain little of importance for political history'.⁸ And this is the approach for which the word *history* gets a meaning which surely circumscribes its scope, leaving the world of people unnoticed. The meaning is construed like this: 'A written narrative constituting a continuous methodical record, in order of time, of important or public events'.⁹ But we have already emphasised that history as a record of mere events can at best be a success story or the story of a career, not the real history explaining the social formations. The Oxford Universal Dictionary therefore comes with another meaning of history as 'A career worthy of record'.

It is an admitted fact that so far as ancient India is concerned, there cannot be a single history. What we have is admittedly the Aryan success story and that is what we know as Indian heritage. Then what about the diverse cultures and sub-cultures of peoples of this country, their movements, invasions and migrations and the areas of cultural diffusion? Thus in the absence of a clear perspective, history has come down to a class-room exercise without identifying the people. The other way, i.e. the sociological quest, becomes all the more important in India, because of the existence of diverse cultures in this country. The historiographer, therefore, is to find out a definite method in

7. Allan, J., Wolseley-Haig, T., and Dodwell, H.H., *The Cambridge Shorter History of India*, Part I, Ancient India, Indian edition 1958, p. 1.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

9. *The Oxford Universal Dictionary*.

writing the history of ancient India as has been proposed by Piggot: "The discovery and interpretation of Indian pre-history must therefore rely on the same methods as have been used in Europe to study the course of human development before the advent of a written history".¹⁰

Nihar Ranjan Ray also speaks of a logic of history in the first chapter of his *History of the Bengalees* ('*Bangalir Itihas*'). Ray believes that without a logic of history, without an analysis of the causal factors, history can never be written. And in finding out this logic of history a historiographer must study a people in the model of the evolution of the human history with a distinct sociological outlook and methodology. Ray writes,

'We must analyse the distinction between the History of Bengal and the History of the Bengalees The history of Bengal we know is the story of ancient dynasties, the story of the Kings, the Kingdom, the Capitals of the Kingdoms, the warfares and the victory or defeats in those wars . . . the society described there is the society seen in a narrow perspective, of the higher castes and not of the people It is the peoples' history which is the real history, And a peoples' history is to be discovered in the folkways, the folk religion and ultimately the socio-political institutions based on the economic life of the people That is the logic of history and that logic is to be found through a sociological outlook and analysis, . . .'¹¹

What was true of the Bengalees, is equally true of the Khasis and the Jaintias, or of any other people. We are, however, presently engaged in studying the social and political institutions of the Khasi-Jaintias and that we propose to do by the same methodology, i.e., by an analysis of their folkways, the folk religion, and the economic structure. In doing so our material, is their folklore, as these people do not have any written history.

10. Piggot, Stuart, *op cit*, n. 5, p. 12.

11. Ray, Nihar Ranjan, *Bangalir Itihas* (in Bengali), Abridged edition, 1966, Ch. I, pp. 1-3 (Translation, of the lines quoted, by the present author).