

MEGHALAYA

LAND AND PEOPLE

(REVISED)



R. Gopalakrishnan



OMSONS PUBLICATIONS

T-7, Rajouri Garden, New Delhi-110027

Revised Edition 2001

© Author

ISBN : 81-7117-146-x

NEHU LIBRARY
Acc. No. 275329
Acc. by. H
Date 12/3/02
Class by. P
Sub. Headings
Entered by. K. S. J. 02
Transcribed by.

Published by:

R. Kumar

OMSONS PUBLICATIONS

T-7, Rajouri Garden

New Delhi-110027

S-V-
F237-3774

Printed at:

Arora Offset Press

Laxmi Nagar, Delhi 110 092.

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>List of Maps</i>	x
<i>List of Tables</i>	xi
1. Introduction	1
2. Physical Framework	12
3. Population and Settlement in Meghalaya	32
4. Land-Use and Agriculture	74
5. Traditional Socio-Political Institutions	115
6. Economic Development and its Infrastructure	130
7. Levels of Development	142
8. Concluding Observations	152
9. Post-Script	156
<i>Maps</i>	192
<i>Charts</i>	208
<i>Selected References</i>	213

Introduction

THE state of Meghalaya is situated in the North-Eastern region of India, between the Brahmaputra valley in the north and the Bangladesh in the south. It has a total geographical area of 22,489 Sq.km. and is divided into seven administrative districts, two sub-divisions, six special administrative units and 30 community development blocks. It has a total population of 17.60 lakhs (1991 Census), with an average density of 78 persons per square kilometer. The average decennial growth rate of population was 32.30% (1981-91). More than 80% of the population lived in 4874 villages out of the 5044 recorded villages in the state. The state is characterized by agrarian economy. The level of development is low and most of the existing industries are small scale and concentrated either in the urban centres or are located along the Shillong-Guwahati National highway. Surface transportation, particularly the road transportation play a vital role in the state's socio-economic activities.

I

The state of Meghalaya (the Abode of Clouds) is geographically better known as the "Meghalaya Plateau" or the "Shillong Plateau". The area is made of the oldest rock-formations — the Archean system. It exhibits recent tertiary alluvium also. It is, infact, an extension of the peninsular India wherein a part

of it, between the Raj Mahal hills and the Western Garo hills, underlies the gangetic plains. This part is known as the "Malda gap". The rock formations in the state, contain valuable minerals like coal, limestone, uranium, corundium, etc. The plateau has the largest exploitable deposits of silimanite in the country.

Meghalaya Plateau's elevation varies between 150M to 1961M above sea level. It is marked by heavily dissected terrain particularly in the northern and western sides; while the southern side is characterized by steep scarps or escarpments that fall abruptly to the Bangladesh plains. The western part of the plateau or the Garo hills, has an elevation of 600m above sea level. The most important relief feature of this part of the plateau is the Tura range with its highest point at Norkek, 1515M above sea level. The central and the eastern part of the plateau or the Khasi and the Jaintia hills district play prominent senile topography. This part of the plateau is characterized by the presence of many penplained surfaces, flat-topped hills and numerous river valleys. The central upland zone is the most important relief feature of the area and covers more than one-third of the area, east of the Garo hills. The highest point of this part of this plateau and that of the entire state is the Shillong Peak whose elevation is about 1961M above sea level. Southern side of this part of the plateau, as in the west is marked by escarpments which show prominent erosional features. Cherrapunji and Mawsynram, located at close proximity to each other, have the heaviest rainfall in the world — more than 400 inches annually.

The drainage pattern of the plateau is controlled by the Central Upland zone and the Tura range. These, infact, form the water-divide between the northward and southward flowing rivers. Many of these rivers follow the trendlines faults and along the joints. In southern Khasi hills, these rivers have carved out deep gorges and display a striking Karst topography in the limestone region around Cherrapunji. they have also formed some of the breath taking waterfalls.

Climatic conditions in the plateau varies, both latitudinally and longitudinally. But, in general, it is the physiography that exerts maximum influence. The western section of the plateau with lower elevations experiences high temperatures for most part of the year and has a mean maximum of 32.4°C, while it has a mean minimum of 13.2°C. The average rainfall is about 3000 mm and is

concentrated mainly during the monsoon season. However, in the central and eastern section of the plateau, a moderate climate prevails. But in the foothill regions and the escarpments of the southern sections of the plateau as well as the sub-montane regions of the northern part, a humid and warm climate prevails. In the Shillong area, the mean maximum is about 24°C, but in winter the mean minimum temperature often goes -3.5°C. The average rainfall in this section of the plateau is about 7500mm and lies in the rain shadow area. While, Cherrapunji and Mawsynram lying about 55 Km south of Shillong, receives an annual rainfall of about 14,000mm which is the highest amount of rainfall in the world.

From the point of view of vegetation, the plateau displays a wide variety of natural vegetation ranging from tropical mixed forest of the Garo hills to pure stands of pine forests in the higher elevation of the plateau. Sal, pine, firs, bamboo etc. are important varieties of the flora in the plateau. Sal and bamboo are common in the mixed forests in the Garo hills. In the same area, particularly in the Tura range, in higher elevations, temperate forests with pine and firs are found to be common. In the central and eastern part of the plateau, mixed tropical evergreen hardwoods forests occur at an altitude of 900M above sea level. Bamboo thickets, canes and wild bananas occur in many of the hill slopes in the region. Grasslands are found in abundance in the elevation ranging from 900M-1350M above sea level.

II

After Independence in 1947, the entire North-Eastern region of the country had only two administrative divisions, viz., The Assam province and the Union Territories of Manipur and Tripura. In the early 1950's, North-Eastern Frontier Tracts was redesigned as the North-Eastern Frontier Agency. In 1963, Naga hills and Tuensang districts was merged together and was separated from the Assam province to form the state of Nagaland. The process of reorganisation of the region thus started, continued upto 1969, when the two districts of United Khasi and Jaintia hills and Garo hills were made Autonomous. Later on, in January 1972, these two districts of Assam, became part of the new state of Meghalaya. During this period, Manipur and Tripura also became full states

while the Lushai hills or Mizoram became a Union Territory. North-Eastern Frontier Agency was redefined as Arunachal Pradesh and also became a Union Territory. Still later, in 1987, both Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh attained full statehood. Thus, the original Assam province of 1947, was reorganised to form seven states today.

Soon after attaining statehood in January 1972, the United Khasi and Jaintia hills was divided; the Jowai sub-division was upgraded to form Jaintia hill district with Jowai as the district headquarters. Along with Khasi hills and Garo hills, this district formed the state of Meghalaya. In October, 1976, the State Government issued a notification to divide the Khasi and Garo hills, into two districts each. The reason given for this division was administrative and developmental expediency. They were divided to form East and West Khasi hills districts and East and West Garo hills districts. In 1992, the West Garo Hills was further sub-divided into West Garo hills and South Garo hills districts; and, the East Khasi hills district into the Ri Bhoi and East Khasi hills district (Map-1). The headquarters of these districts are as follows :

- (i) East Khasi Hills District — Shillong
- (ii) Ri Bhoi District — Nongpoh
- (iii) West Khasi Hills District — Nongstoin
- (iv) East Garo Hills District — William Nagar
- (v) West Garo Hills District — Tura
- (vi) South Garo Hills District — Baghmara
- (vii) Jaintia Hills District — Jowai

Subsequent to this, to effect greater administrative control and for management of development efforts, specific areas were created and designated as sub-divisions. These were :

- (a) Jaintia border sub-division is renamed as Amlarem in the Jaintia hills district;
- (b) Mairang sub-division including those areas of Mairang community development block that fell in the West Khasi hills district with Mairang as headquarters in the East Khasi hills district; and

In addition to these, following administrative sub units were also created. These were :

- (i) Khliehriat including Khliehriat development block in the Jaintia hills district.
- (ii) Sohra administrative area consisting of Shella- Bholaganj development block as well as parts of Pynursla and Mawsynram development blocks in the East Khasi hills district.
- (iii) Mawkyrwat consisting of Mawkyrwat development block in West Khasi hills district.
- (iv) Resubelpara administrative area consisting of seven gram-sevak circles in Resubelpara development block and parts of Dembo-Rongsong community development blocks in the East Garo hills district.
- (v) Dadengiri administrative unit consisting of three gram-sevak circles in Resubelpara and Dadengiri community development blocks and Selsella community development blocks.
- (vi) Betasing administrative unit consisting of Zikzak and Betasing community development blocks in the West Garo hills district.

Most interesting feature of the state is that the developmental planning is and has been carried out on the basis of the existing community development blocks. Till 1981, there were twenty four development blocks. These were :

- (a) Laskin community development block, Jaintia Hills
- (b) Khliehriat community development block, Jaintia Hills
- (c) Thadlaskein community development block, Jaintia Hills
- (d) Bhoi community development block, Ri Bhoi
- (e) Mawrykneng community development block, East Khasi Hills
- (f) Myliyum community development block, East Khasi Hills
- (g) Mawphlang community development block, East Khasi Hills

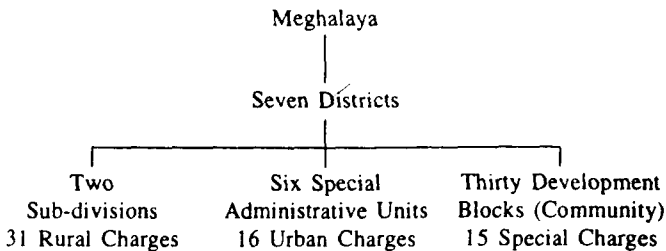
- (h) Pynursla community development block, East Khasi Hills
- (i) Shella-Bholaganj community development block, East Khasi Hills
- (j) Mawsynram community development block, East Khasi Hills
- (k) Mairang community development block, West Khasi Hills
- (l) Mawkyrwat community development block, West Khasi Hills
- (m) Nongstoin community development block, West Khasi Hills
- (n) Resubelpara community development block, East Garo Hills
- (o) Dembo-Rongsong community development block, East Garo Hills
- (p) Sonsak community development block, East Garo Hills
- (q) Selsella community development block, West Garo Hills
- (r) Dadenggiri community development block, West Garo Hills
- (s) Rongram community development block, West Garo Hills
- (t) Zikzak community development block, West Garo Hills
- (u) Dalu community development block, West Garo Hills
- (v) Chokpot community development block, South Garo Hills
- (w) Dambu-Aga community development block, South Garo Hills
- (x) Betasing community development block, South Garo Hills

But there were many overlappings and difficulties in identifying the boundaries of the districts and community development blocks. However, these were ratified. Thus, instead of 24 development blocks, six more were created after 1981 for practical convenience : Mairang east and Resubelpara west were

treated as community development blocks along with Nongstoin, Khonjoy and Sonapahar (Map 2). In other words, the six new community developmental blocks that were created after 1981 included :

- (a) Amlaram community development block — from sub-division in the Jaintia hills districts.
- (b) New community development block included 14 villages of Mawkynkneng community development block and 55 villages of Pyrursla development block.
- (c) Nongpoh community development block included 174 villages of the Bhoi area and 61 villages of Mairang development block.
- (d) Samanda development block consisting of lower portion of Songsak community development block in East Garo hills district.
- (e) Rongpara development block included areas east of Simsang river in Dambuk-Aga community development block in the West Garo hills district.
- (f) Mawshynreit (Sonapahar) development block included 220 villages of the Nongstoin-Sonapahar community development block in West Khasi hills district.

Thus, from administrative and development point's of view, the state of Meghalaya was divided as follows :



During the period 1901-1991, the population of the state increased from 3,04,525 to 17,60,640 recording a population growth of +292.28%. The average decennial growth rate during this period was 32.04%. Broadly speaking, the population growth in the urban centres of the state was rapid.

The population of the state is unevenly distributed and is in fact, determined by physiographic factors and accessibility. The population of the state is mainly concentrated in :

- (i) the area around Shillong Urban Agglomeration, Jowai, Nongstoin, Williamnagar, Tura and Baghmara.
- (ii) the neighbourhood of Cherrapunji and Dawki, and
- (iii) northern, western and southern fringes of the Garo hills.

The sparsely populated areas of the state is, therefore, found in the northern and southern Khasi hills, most of the Jaintia hills and the interior of the Garo hills. The average density of population in the state is about 78 persons per square kilometer. It is well below the national average of 267 persons per square kilometer (1991).

The population of the state can be classified into two headings, i.e., (1) tribal, and (2) non-tribal. The tribal component in the population is about 80% of the total population. In the interior locations of the state, like in the Mauzas of the Garo hills, the tribal component is often as high as 97%. However, in the peripheral parts of the state, the percentage of the total component in the population decreases. More than 40% of the non-tribal population of the state are concentrated in the urban areas and the rest, are dispersed in the rural areas.

Percentage of literacy in the state is higher than the national average and stood at 33.35% in the 1991 Census. At the district level, the highest percentage is found in the East Khasi hills district with 41.10% and was followed by 32.28% in East Garo hills district, 30.95% in the West Khasi hills district, 25.44% in the West Garo hills district and 23.77% in the Jaintia hills districts. The percentage of literacy is highest in the urban centres, e.g. 62.92% in the Shillong Urban Agglomeration, 65.84% in Jowai and 58.01% in Tura. The rural literacy for the state stands at 26.98% in 1981.

The state has also experienced in-migration of population. According to the 1981 census, migration from other states of the country to Meghalaya constituted 6.4% of the total population. Beside these, the state has also received migrants from Nepal and Bangladesh. Migration had exerted substantial influence on the socio-cultural milieu of the state. But, on the whole, migration

has resulted in the inhabitants of the state. Among the migrants, as a whole, Nepalis, Marwaris and Bengali muslims have played an important role in the regional economic activity of the state.

III

The state of Meghalaya clearly illustrated variations in the proportions of working population and percentage of various categories of population to the total population. At the same time, the state also indicated a distinct trend between the urban and rural population structure. According to the 1991 Census, 71.96% were engaged in the primary sector, 11.82% in the secondary sector and 6.32% in the tertiary sector of the economy of the state.

The state has an agrarian economy with more than 75% of the population, directly or indirectly, dependent on agriculture. This percentage is concentrated on only 8.2% of the total geographical area of the state. The important crops of the state are potato, rice, maize, pineapple, banana and so on. Climatically, the region is an advantageous position as it favoured cultivation of crops, fruits and vegetables throughout the year. However, the rugged terrain had imposed serious limitations on this. As a result, the intensity of agricultural activity is very high in areas enjoying favourable conditions like in the Dadenggiri community development blocks in the East Garo hills, Mawphlang, Bhoi area and Mawrynkneng community development blocks in the East, West hills Bhoi districts.

Animal husbandry and dairy farming are important; the state has 5.4 lakhs head of cattle, 29,000 buffaloes, 26,000 sheep, 1.8 lakhs goats, 2.07 lakhs pigs and 14.19 lakhs birds in the poultry (1982 Agricultural census). The state also had the highest number high yielding cross-bred cattle in the country.

The forest cover in the state are rich and extensive. Many of the existing locations of the forests in different parts of the state have been brought under reserved forests category today. They provide good quality timber and other forest products such as fodder grass, bamboo, firewood, etc. along with various species of medicinal plants and orchids. The state is also rich in mineral resources, particularly coal, limestone and sillimaninite. The state has a great potential for hydel development. However, per capita

power consumption is far below the national average, i.e., 69 units as compared to 154 units of electricity. Yet, within the North-Eastern region, its consumption is the highest. Thus, out of the total energy generation of 1155 million units in the region, the state's share was 367 million units and was second only to Assam (1982-83).

Important industries in the state are confined to the manufacture of cement, plywood, a chemical factory, oil mills and so on. Almost all are of the medium scale industry. Other enterprises classified within the industries are saw-mills, engineering units, flour mills, preservation units, sericulture, etc. come under the small scale industry.

Roads are the main lines of transportation and infact the lifeline of the state. There are two national highways — one from the north to south via Guwahati to Shillong and extending upto the Bangladesh border and terminates at Tamabil — a distance of 155 Km; and the other from Shillong to Silchar via Jowai. it has an east to west orientation. This highway from Silchar in Assam extends to Aizawl in Mizoram and to Agartala in Tripura. Other important regional roads are Paikon-Bajendobe-Tura-Dalu-Baghmara road in the Garo hills and the Mendhipathar-Phulbari-Tura road. Besides these, Shillong-Jowai-Garampani road and the Shillong-Nongstoin-Tura road are also important.

The state has a total road length of 5,200 Km of which surface road length was only 2,761 Km. The density of the roads per 100 Km was 23.17 Km while 3.92 Km of road was available for every thousand population in the state. It is apparent that the high density of roads coincided with favourable relief and higher productivity and vice-versa. However, much of the state is dominated by difficult terrain and remained inaccessible; thereby reflecting low level of development.

IV

Level of development in the state is low. Apart from Shillong and few other centres in the state, all other areas display the characteristics of backwardness and inaccessibility, in agriculture and industrial development. But by far the most important factor that has determined the developmental process in the state, has been accessibility pattern and availability of investible capital

within the population of the state. Besides, the mountaneous topography and the availability of suitable sites for carrying out economic activities had also exerted considerable influence. However, following are the main problems of economic development of the state :

- (i) topography and imposed isolation are the limiting factors that inhibited growth;
- (ii) location of major resources in relatively inaccessible areas. This compelled heavy investments in developing transport infrastructure. As a result, the state has developed only primary export commodities;
- (iii) lack of market for capital goods followed by minimum interests in investments;
- (iv) high cost of transportation; and
- (v) scattered and dispersed nature of the exploitable resources and the relative geographical inertia, combined to retard growth and development of the state.

The present attempt on the study of the geography of the Meghalaya plateau, therefore lays emphasis on the following points. These are :

- (a) even though the state has a great potential to develop there are notable limitations. The present effort is to identify these limitations;
- (b) the state has immense mineral resource potential as well as the potential for the development of hydel power. But there are not enough infrastructural facilities available. The present effort will enable one to identify these;
- (c) the state has inadequate transportation network; as a result, many areas are still inaccessible. The present effort will analysis this issue;
- (d) the present effort will also take into account the position of the state in the region and the national levels.

In order to facilitate such an analysis possible, the present effort adopts a systematic approach to deal with various problems highlighted earlier.