

## Doloi-Syiem Relation In Jaintia Hills (Upto 1835)

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The institution of chiefship among the hill people of North-East India is a common feature. This institution prevailed and is still prevailing among many of the tribal communities of the region. Though among some tribes the office was abolished, still we find the existence of the same among many of them, though less powerful compared to the period before the coming of the British. For example, among the Mizos, the office of the once powerful *Lat* or chief had been abolished after the passing of the Assam-Lushai District (Acquisition of Chiefs' Rights) Act of 1955 with a provision to pay compensation to the chiefs for the loss of their traditional rights and privileges. Among the Jaintias, the office of the Syiem or *Raja* (*Syiem* to his people in the hills and *Raja* to his subjects in the plains) was also abolished by the British after they had taken over the administration of Jaintia Hills in 1835. However, the British retained the other offices of the traditional chiefs in the area, like the Doloi, Pator and Wahch Chong (village headmen) to assist the British authorities in running the administration of the area concerned. This paper therefore seeks to analyse the Doloi Syiem relationship upto 1835.

The office of *Doloi* in Jaintia Hills did not come into existence all of a sudden. Different processes of traditional polity formation gradually took place at different period of time before such an important institution came into existence. Other traditional institutions were earlier at work among the Jaintia people right from the family, clan and village level of administration. Having realised that these institutions at the grass-root level could not properly deliver the goods on account of their own limitations and due to the gradual increase of population and size of the territory coupled with the ever increasing number of functions to be performed, the Jaintia people thus decided to form an institution which would gather to the general needs of families, clans and village on such necessary issues like social, economic, political and administrative matters. Such a higher institution or a political unit would cater to the needs of the people and bring together the different groups of families, clans and villages under one central authority. This

process took place when the groups of clans came to lead a more settled way of life. After permanently settling in their present habitat, further development in the organisation of their present habitat, further development in the organisation of their traditional polity also took place. Groups of villages with their clan clusters joined together to form a *Raid*. With the formation of a *Raid*, people were no longer nomads outside their own *Raid*. They did not frequently move outside their own *Raid* for fear of losing their political rights in another *Raid*.<sup>1</sup>

Before the office of *Doloi* came into existence among the Jaintias, the people were under the administration and leadership of *U Langdoh* (priest), both at the village and groups of villages or *Raid* levels. The *Langdoh* combined in himself both the sacred or sacerdotal and secular functions. But with the increase in the number of families and clans area and size of population, there was also an increase in the number of duties and functions to be performed single-handedly by the *Langdoh*.<sup>2</sup> The situation led the people to think of the necessity that the administrative set up should be restructured. As a result, it was therefore necessary to bifurcate the dual functions of religions and secular held by the *Langdoh*. In the process, it was decided by the people to hand over those functions which were purely sacred or religious in nature to the priest and other secular or administrative matters to another chief. Thus the office of *Doloi* came into existence. *U Doloi* is therefore the chief of the next higher political unit called *Elaka*, which was formed by combining a group of villages or *Raid*. Once a *Doloi* takes up his office, he normally holds it for the rest of his life. But he may be punished, expelled or stripped of his office, should he arouse sufficient hostility to his people.

A *Doloi* is elected from among the adult members of the original or founding clans of the *Elaka*. Further, even from among the original clans, the candidate(s) for the elective post of a *Doloi* were recruited mostly on ascriptive criteria rather than on grounds of achievements. However, as far as election is concerned, it cannot be attributed to be based on ascriptive criteria, but on achievement basis. All the adult male members of the *Elaka* participate in the election of a *Doloi*, regardless to which clans they belong. In other words, the electorate consist of all adult male members of all clans in the *Elaka*.<sup>3</sup>

Once a *Doloi* is elected, he normally holds the office for the rest of his life. Traditionally, and till the advent of the British, the

tenure of office was for a life time. However, a *Doloi* may be stripped of his office should he arouse sufficient hostility to his people. The people therefore elected their chiefs in order to supervise, guide and run the administration and not to oppress or suppress them. For sometime even after the British Political Agent was appointed to look after and conduct the affairs of administration of Jaintia Hills, he granted permission to the people to continue to elect, retain and remove their *Dolois* according to their own traditional customary practices.

A *Doloi* is an administrative head of an *Elaka*. He exercises his functions within the jurisdiction of his *Elaka*. In running the Administration of the *Elaka*, the *Doloi* was and is still assisted and guided by the *Elaka* Durbar or Durbar Raid and an executive council consisting of leading personalities like the Pator (deputy *Doloi*), Ki Wasan (representatives of their respective clans) and others. The *Doloi* although being the chief of the *Elaka* cannot act or decide things all by himself. Any decision concerning the *Elaka* has to be approved by the *Durbar Elaka*.

After a considerable period of time and with the increase in the number of *Elakas*, population and area, a group of *Elakas* came together to form a loose confederation of *Elakas* for the purpose of inter-*Elaka* relations, defence and foreign affairs. The office of a *Syiem* came into existence after such a confederation was formed and was practically the final stage of State formation in pre-colonial Jaintia.<sup>4</sup>

With the annexation of the Jaintia parganas in the plains of Sylhet (now in Bangladesh) in the south and Nowgong plains in the north to the Jaintia kingdom through conquest, the Jaintia *Syiems* thus ruled over the people both in the hills and plains. But the *Syiem's* personal rule and authority prevailed only over the conquered territories in the plains. In the hills section of the Jaintia Kingdom, the administration was left entirely in the hands and supervision of the *Dolois*; the *Syiem* in this case acted only as a titular head. The only symbol of allegiance and the semblance of power which the *Syiem* had enjoyed over the *Doloi's* from the hills was an annual tribute of one he-goat from each *Elaka* under their administration. But this was more ceremonial or religious than political, though technically, a tribute system is symbolic of a basic power structure. The *Syiem* was no more than a symbol of unity of the people; and if his activities threatened that unity, the latter would strongly oppose him.<sup>5</sup>

When the office of the Syiem was in existence, the Jaintia Syiems accepted and recognised the Dolois as important administrators or ministers of the hill areas of the kingdom since it were the latter who actually ran and supervised the entire administration in the hills. The Dolois wielded much power over the hill territories and being powerful heads of the hills administrative units, assisted the Syiems in those days as leaders of their warriors during war time, as well as ministers and even as ambassadors to foreign courts, especially that of the Ahom court. Whenever engaged in exercising their functions as ministers, they stayed at Jaintiapur, <sup>6</sup> the seat of the capital. Moreover, the Dolois used to spend half of the year at Jaintiapur to assist the Syiem in his administration. During their absence, the Dolois entrusted to Pators or their deputies, the management and administration of their respective Elakas. The Syiem also used to convene the Dolois to his court where State Councils were held for settling problems arising out of inter-Elaka relations.<sup>7</sup>

The *Dolois* wielded much power over their respective *Elakas*. In the hills section of the Jaintia kingdom, as the administration was left entirely in the hands and supervision of the *Dolois*, they could allow the *Syiem* to handle only matters of common interests like defence, communications and foreign affairs and that too in a very limited way. For example, the *Dolois* could take over foreign affairs from the *Syiem* in his absence or if his policy was at variance with that of the *Dolois*. There was a case when the Ahoms had captured *Raja Ram Sing I* (1694-1708) upon which the hill people rose against the *Ahoms* even during the absence of their *Syiem*.<sup>8</sup>

The *Dolois* and their people from the hills could even take a decision to do away with a *Syiem* if he so incurred displeasure or acted in a ruthless manner against them. One such incident took place during the reign of *Raja Bejoy Narayan* (1782-1788).<sup>9</sup> In another incident which shows that the *Dolois* could openly rebel against the *Syiem* if the latter happened to misbehave towards the former, took place between *Raja Rajendra Singh* (1832-1835) and the *Dolois* of *Jowai* and *Nartinag*. However, *Lt. Inglis* of the *East India Company* saved the situation by bringing the two parties together and settled the matter peacefully.<sup>10</sup> In extreme cases, the *Dolois* and their people could even resort to regicide. The last example of regicide in Jaintia Hills

was that of Raja Ban Singh (1660-1669) who was put to death by his hill people on the recommendation of the priest before whom the complaints against the Syiem's tyrannical acts were made.<sup>11</sup>

The relationship between the Dolois and the *Syiem* (when the latter's office was in existence before 1835), indicated that the former wielded extensive influence, power and functions as far as the hills portion of the kingdom, the *Syiem's* position and status was that of a titular head only. The *Syiem* reigned but the ultimate source of legitimate authority lies with the people.

The administration of the hills section of the Jaintia kingdom being left entirely in the hands of the *Dolois*, the *Syiem* had only a nominal authority over them. The *Syiem* was no more than a symbol of unity of the people. Even the British authorities after they took over the administration of Jaintia Hills recognised that the influence of the Jaintia kings over the *Dolois* and their people in the hills was of the lightest. W.F. Trotter reported that the hill people were left to themselves and the *Syiem* interfered, however, but little with, and made few demands from the people, almost all his revenue was drawn from his possessions in the plains.<sup>12</sup> Another British account stated that the Jaintia *Syiem* 'was the nominal chief of the state, but the real power was possessed by the *Dolois*. These officers were at the head of the civil, criminal and police establishments of their districts (*Elakas*). The village officers were under them, and with such powers they were generally the real heads of the government. Shackled by such a powerful and influential body of men, the Raja, Indra Singh, threw up his government for the handsome pension that was granted to him.<sup>13</sup>

The case referred to above, about Indra Singh, who became the last *Syiem* to rule the Jaintia kingdom, witnessed the fact of the delicate power relationship between the *Syiem*, the *Dolois* and the people in general in the history of Jaintia Hills. On the eve of taking over the administration of the hills portion of Jaintia Hills, the British did offer to the *Syiem* as one of the options to continue to supervise and run the administration of the hill areas only. But knowing fully well his (*Syiem*) position, status and authority over the hill areas, he outrightly refused to accept the offer. After his refusal of the offer, the British went ahead and took over the administration of the hill areas of the Jaintia kingdom. The *Dolois* tried to defend their territories and rights over the hills but could not resist long enough against the mighty British power. The *Syiem* did commit a grave mistake by not consulting

first the Dolois and the people in the hills before allowing the final launching of the British paid him Rs. 500/- per month as pension (the second option offered and accepted by the Syiem) and interned to Sylhet district till his death in 1861. In this case, the Syiem on losing his territories in the plains where his personal authority and influence prevailed over his subnects preferred rather to receive a monthly pension than to run the administration over the hills. This was the last nail in the coffin of the office of the Jaintia Syiem when it was totally abolished by the British with effect from the 15th March 1835.

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