

## REORGANIZATION AND THE ECONOMIC PROBLEMS OF THE BORDER AREA OF JAINTIA HILL

L.S. GASSAH

### I

Way back in the ' eighties one of the senior and retired ICS officers who had worked among the tribals of North-East India for a long time and seen them at a very close range, wrote thus:

"Despite the carefully planned scheme to create a climate of confidence between the people of the hills and plains, Assam found herself bereft, . . . of all but a bare handful of her hill tribal population. The Assamese had looked forward to the departure of the British as the opportunity for the creation and consolidation of the 'Greater Assam' which they envisaged as the union of plainsmen of the province with the entire hill tribal population extending to the international frontier with China, Burma (Now Myanmar) and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Hydari and Bardoloi could never have fore seen that their plans for bringing the hill people closer to Assam had precisely the opposite effect and were in part responsible for Assam's final disintegration. For the hill tribals apprehended that all this talk of integration was nothing but the prelude to a wider and fiercer cultural campaign in the future".<sup>1</sup>

This attitude of indifference towards the hill tribes by the Assam leaders led to an ill-feeling between the two. It soon became abundantly clear to the tribal people and their leaders that they have to react against this indifferent attitude as their interest dictated. The tribal leaders of the tribal districts of Khasi-Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills who had experienced longer and closer association with the latter. Even some of the representatives from these districts were accommodated in the Assam ministry and harboured hopes of better treatment through progressive increase in their political weightage. But this was shortlived as they soon found that they might not succeed in holding their own against Assamese pressure. Thus, it was not long before even the tribal districts which had originally agreed to a tribal co-existence with the Assamese within a single State found disillusionment.<sup>2</sup> To top it all, in 1962, the Assam Legislative Assembly passed a bill prescribing Assamese as the official language for the entire State. This, for the tribals, in short, was the point of no return, for with Assamese as the official language, the tribal minority would at once be placed at an unfair disadvantage. "It was Assamese chauvinism, ironically enough, that diminished Assam and lost her tribal population. It is anomalous that the Assamese failed to anticipate the reactions of the tribal people to the imposition of Assamese when they themselves were so sensitive over the issue of language..... It is an attitude which the tribal people have suffered in the past with a patience beyond belief but are not prepared to endure much longer".<sup>3</sup>

The Government of India could not have been more generous than when they eventually agreed to separate the Nagas from Assam and grants them a State of their own, which came into existence from the 1st of December 1963. As expected, there was violent and bitter opposition from the Assamese, who apprehended, and rightly, that this step would create a precedent and that her remaining tribes would follow the example of the Nagas and demand separation from the parent body.<sup>4</sup> This fear of the Assamese did come true when in 1971-72 more States and Union Territories were granted to the tribal population of the them

composite State of Assam. Meghalaya is one such State which initially came into being as an Autonomous State and then from 1972 as a full-fledged State, on the basis of the North-East Reorganisation Act of 1969 and 1971.

## II

Jaintia Hills, a district in the eastern part of Meghalaya, was from the 16th November 1869 till 1971 only a Sub-Division. It was, however, on the 22nd of February 1972 inaugurated as one of the districts of the State of Meghalaya. Before the new district for Jaintia Hills came into being, a separate District Council under the provision of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India was created for the people of Jaintia Hills on the 1st of December 1964 but became operative only from the 1st of February 1966, after its bifurcation from the then United Khasi-Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council on the recommendation of the Jarman Commission set up by the Assam Government.

This district which lies to the eastern part of the State of Meghalaya, covers a land area of approximately 3,900 sq. km. The northern part of the district is a highland area of rolling hills, small bushes in between and towards the eastern most and southern parts covered with thick forests. The southern portion has a highly irregular feature. Further towards the south and closer to the border of Bangladesh, the sudden drops and depressions become more prominent till they abruptly end in sheer precipices. It is in these precipitous slope that a large number of different horti-cultural crops are grown; the most prominent ones are oranges, betel-nuts, betel-leaves and fruits of different varieties.

The Jaintias are among those tribes who lived under the traditional formations of the hills until the area was integrated into the British Indian colonial state, although their economy has already been linked with the markets in the bordering plains of the Sylhet district (now in Bangladesh). The Jaintia economy 'therefore' depended much on the markets along the foothills of the present day international boundary with Bangladesh.

In the southern slopes of Jaintia Hills, the War Jaintias are mostly engaged in their economic activities in the cultivation and production of cash crops like oranges, betel-leaves and betel-nuts. The plantations begin from the plains and foothills bordering the Sylhet district of Bangladesh and rise to an elevation of about 1,500 feet above the sea level. In the earlier days, it was upon this small precipitous area of both Khasi and Jaintia Hills that the greater part of Sylhet district and Assam depended for their supply of oranges. The British officials reported that before and after they took over the administration of Jaintia Hills, oranges formed one of the prominent goods exported by the Khasi and Jaintia people to the plains of Assam and Sylhet. A handsome revenue was also reported to have been received annually by the British Government on the export of oranges to Sylhet and Assam side. For example, Hunter estimated that in the year 1874-75, the export in oranges alone valued at Rs. 78,750.<sup>5</sup>

The transfer of power in 1947 and the change of administration thereafter, tremendously upset the economic life and activities of the Jaintia people in general and the War Jaintias in particular, their relations in trade and commerce with their counterparts in the plains led to a setback in exchange of goods and essential commodities.

After the Re-organisation of Assam in 1971 and the creation of the State of Meghalaya, there was an air of expectation for things to improve especially in terms of trade and commerce between India and the newly liberated nation of Bangladesh. The people of Jaintia Hills especially those inhabiting the border areas with Bangladesh eagerly expected that better relationship, at least in trade, would prevail between the two countries and this would lead to the re-opening of the border markets. There was no doubt an attempt between the two governments to channelise the much needed trade between the bordering neighbours and allow them to exchange their normal necessities through official channels, but this was shortlived. Therefore, once again it belied the hopes and expectations of the people when the entire border was sealed off and market across the international border were closed down. The expectations

of the affected people for economic prospects came to a near standstill.

However, the re-opening of a few border *hats* for a brief period between December 1970 and March 1971, seemed to suggest the fact that the people living in both sides of the international border shared the same anxieties and sufferings arising out of the closure of the markets. Thus after prolonged negotiations up to the quarter ending March 1971, a few border *hats* were declared open for transaction in listed articles only. Before the other developments ensued, the maintenance of relations was upset by the Bangladesh affairs bringing with it influx of refugees into the State of Meghalaya.<sup>6</sup>

The influx of refugees from Bangladesh during and after the war of liberation of that country in 1970-71 to Meghalaya was alarming. This state of affairs brought immense suffering to the people living in the border areas of Jaintia Hill district. The influx was much beyond the expectation of the newly formed State of Meghalaya. It put the Government of Meghalaya in a precarious situation. It was far beyond its capacity to handle such a sea of human beings within its small territory. But the worst sufferers due to the influx of these refugees were the people living in the border areas with Bangladesh. They suffered a great deal of hardship. The whole economic life of the people was completely disrupted. It was impossible for the people of the area to work in their orchards or to cultivate, plant and harvest as the whole area was almost swamped with refugees. The entire economy of the local people had to undergo severe stress and strain owing to this influx from Bangladesh. The socio-economic tension also accompanied such a heavy influx, more particularly when the economy of the border areas of Meghalaya has been badly disrupted ever since the creation of Pakistan and where even in normal times special border upliftment programmes have to be undertaken to rehabilitate the border economy.

After the Re-organisation of Assam, the State of Meghalaya came into being. It now depends on the political leadership of the State to bring upliftment and improvement in socio-economic activities of all the different districts of

the State and especially those areas lying in the border with Bangladesh which have been hard hit due to partition of the sub-continent.

Against this background, it may thus be seen that even after the Re-organisation of the North-Eastern region and the coming into existence of the full-fledged State of Meghalaya, village economies in the border areas of the State, particularly that of Jaintia Hills district, which used to thrive trading their local agricultural produces with the people across the international border have been shattered due to restrictions on trade and commerce and the closure of the border markets. The people have felt this suffocation since the partition of 1947 and they still continue to suffer.

Political parties and their leaders have been submitting memoranda and passed a number of resolutions from platforms of various socio-political organisations demanding an improvement of the plight of the people living in the border areas. Some have even demanded a 10 (ten) kilometre free trade zone on either side of the border. Others have demanded from the Bangladesh as it has received a great jolt in the post-independence period.

The urgent need for reviving border trade between Bangladesh and the neighbouring States of North-East India, especially Meghalaya, was felt as this could bring new lease of economic life to the people in both sides of the international border. In these days of liberalisation of global trade, neither India nor Bangladesh can play a role of passive onlooker. This is more so because there was already an earlier accord signed, the Indira-Mujib Accord to facilitate the traditional border trade, particularly between Bangladesh and the state of Meghalaya. According to this Accord, it was agreed that an eight-kilometre free zone all along the border between Meghalaya and Bangladesh be allowed to help grow their border trade. However, due to political changes in Bangladesh following the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, the provisions of the accord had been flouted by the subsequent leaders in Bangladesh. This led to the sealing off the border *hats*. The closure of the border has already affected a sizeable section of the Meghalaya population living in the border area.

The people in the border areas of Jaintia Hills are therefore eagerly expecting some constructive steps to be taken by the State Government of Meghalaya to improve their long plights. The State Government on its part have been trying to prepare various schemes for border area improvement. It has set up the Border Area Development (BAD) Department to look after the problems faced by the people of the border areas. What the people are eagerly looking forward to is not merely the setting up of such a Department but the action that must follow at all levels. Since certain actions involve not only the State and the Central Governments but also agencies at the international level, it is 'therefore' hoped that the State Government should impress upon other agencies at the Central and international level to take up the matter in the right earnest.

#### REFERENCES

1. Nari Rustaomji, 1983, *Imperilled Frontiers : India's North- Eastern Border Lands*, OUP, Delhi, p. 36
2. *Ibid.*, p. 37
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 37, 51
4. *Ibid.*, p. 54
5. *Report on the Administration of North-East India*, Mittal publications, Delhi, 1984 (Reprint), p. 18.
6. Hamlet Bareh, 1974, *Meghalaya*, Shillong, pp. 209-10.