

# POLITY FORMATION AMONG THE WARS OF MEGHALAYA

ABSTRACT

By

**Elizabeth Laitflang Warjri**

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## **POLITY FORMATION AMONG THE WARS OF MEGHALAYA**

The Wars are found in a group of villages in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills Districts of Meghalaya bordering Bangladesh, and they are popularly known as War Khasis and War Jaintias respectively. The War region of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills is bounded by the Upland Khasi and Jaintia Hills on the north, the Bangladesh plains on the south, Garo Hills on the west and the Jaintia Hills on the east. In fact, these War people live in a geographically contiguous area since long time, and their language, culture and economic activities distinguishes them considerably from the rest of the Khasis and Jaintias. As a border people they incorporated in their system several elements from the neighbouring plains and in wealth and intellectual life, they had distinguished themselves before the rest of the Meghalayan tribes. Unfortunately, the partition of India in 1947 shattered the economy of the area due to the closure of the age-old trade with East Bengal and deterred the prosperity of the people.

### **Statement of Problem**

State and polity formation among the primitive tribes have of late attracted the attention of the social scientists. In the Indian context the state and polity formation among the Indian tribes in the precolonial period and colonial period are being studied by a number of scholars.

The studies done so far suggest that (i) the tribal formation underwent transformation with the emergence of private property, when the tribal societies were stratified in two classes in terms of different landholdings and the extent of political dominance that strengthened the position of the traditional chiefs at clan or tribal level; (ii) the sphere of political dominance of a chief was extended either by subduing the neighbouring tribes/clans/communities by a direct territorial conquest or through their voluntary submission to his protective authority, (iii) the authority was further strengthened by leading the people in war-path either for offensive or defensive purposes and it continued to be unquestioned, at least at the formative stage, in cases when the state came into existence through military adventurism; (iv) the ruling chiefs succeeded in developing a centralised administration with an elaborate defense structure and the means to appropriate surplus through a hierarchical state order; (v) the introduction of more developed agricultural technology to ensure increased production control on the part of the ruling chief would be an essential precondition for a centralised state authority; (vi) the families with tradition of administrative proficiency and artisans and peasants were induced to immigrate and settle in the territory; (vii) the process of Hinduisation/Sanskritisation and the role of the Brahmins in establishing the divine origin

of the rulers (i.e. of his ancestors) helped the legitimisation of the assumed status of the latter and its consolidation, and the myths that were created in the process resulted in the universalisation of the culture; (viii) the adoption of the language and culture of the majority in the territory's population by the ruling family and the aristocracy enlisted loyalty and the support of that dominant revenue paying group; (ix) the rulers emerged as the champions of their new faith and patrons of the culture and language of their subjects; (x) the matrimonial connections maintained with the ruling houses in other states with almost similar ethno-cultural traditions evoked mutual support and raised them in the estimation of the subjects; (xi) the diplomatic relations with more powerful neighbours were essential either to guarantee political existence in the face of expanding influences of such neighbours or to pacify the disgruntled elements within the state.

These formulations tentatively reflect the formation of some of the Hinduised tribal states in the plains. In case of the Wars, most of these are irrelevant as the War polities did not attain the status of even the 'early states' and the impact of sanskritisation was very nominal in this case. What we notice here is that the emerging political structure in the pre-colonial period had not yet been able to alienate the masses completely from the authority and

the process of polity formation was arrested in a fundamental manner by the British colonisation in the 19th Century.

### Survey of Literature

No systematic study has so far been attempted on the history, culture and political system of the Wars, although they figure generally in a number of monographs written on the Khasis and the Jaintias like the Khasis by P.T.R. Gurdon, The History and Culture of the Khasi People by H. Bareh, Garo and Khasi: A Comparative Study in Matrilineal System by C. Nakane, Khasi Canvas by J.N. Choudhury, and Impact of the West on the Khasis and Jaintias by P.N. Dutta. On the aspects of polity formation no attempt has so far been made by any scholar. All these works are generally on the Khasi and Jaintias, and there are very little information on the War. On the aspect of polity formation among the Wars, which we are mainly concerned in our work, none of these authors have shown any concern. Hamlet Bareh's "Khasi-Jaintia State Formation" in S.C. Sinha's (ed.) Tribal Politics and State Systems in Precolonial Eastern and North Eastern India covered only the major states in the upland Khasi Hills. Dr. B. Pakem's "State Formation in Precolonial Jaintia" in the same volume also has concentrated only on the Jaintia state. As a result, we could not come across any study on the War polity, although we have been much benefitted by the data available in the works mentioned above.

## Objective

The objective of the present research has been to study the process of polity and principality formation among the Wars of Khasi and Jaintia Districts since the early settlement of these people in that area. We have tested these theories and hypothesis on the basis of the data available on the Wars and identified the forces and factors that had influenced, the polity formations among the Wars under different historical situations, besides describing the details of the War political system.

## Data

Our study has primarily been based on the intensive field work among the Wars for which interviews were conducted during 1985-87. The folktales and folk songs collected during this period have been found to be of immense value. The official archival records have been collected from the Assam Secretariat Record Office, Gauhati, West Bengal Archives, Calcutta and the National Archives, New Delhi. Although these records mainly cover the British colonial period, there are some reports prepared by the officers on the basis of enquiries, which contain a good deal of information on the pre-colonial period. A large number of secondary works on the Khasis as well as on tribal polity formation in general, by historians, political scientists and anthropologists have also been consulted and utilised.

## **Organisation**

The thesis has been organised into seven chapters for a fair treatment of the theme and in accordance with the nature and content of the data at our command. In organising the material into various chapters, it has been our endeavour to bring into focus the salient factors of the polity formation processes in the War area in the general background of the theoretical positions in tribal polity formation studies in Indian and global context.

### **Chapter I - Introduction**

The introductory chapter focusses on the geographical and ethnographic setting of the War area, its economic resources, the production and market linkage to bring out the influences of those factors on the polity formation at an early stage. The chapter also discusses the origin of the War people, their migration and the settlement patterns and probe into the stages of early social formations.

### **Chapter II - Early Political Institutions**

The second chapter deals with the clan and village level social and political institutions of the Khasi and Jaintia leading to the formation of the larger organisations like Lyngdohships, Sirdarships, Doloiships and Syiemships. This chapter brings out the process of social stratification in the matrilineal Khasi and Jaintia tribal society and highlights elements of differentiations in matrilineal system

in the War area. The chapter ends by charting the position of the War area when the neighbouring Khasi-Jaintia states (Hima) came to be formed, namely, Shillong (Khyrim and Myliem), Nongkhlaw, Sohra and Jaintia. It has been found that in the War area two main institutions have been identified namely, Wahadadarship and Sirdarship. The Wahadadarship is a unique institution not found anywhere else in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, on the other hand, the institution of Sirdarship found in the War area are similar to those found in the Khasi Hills.

### **Chapter III - Formation of Shella Wahadadarship**

The third chapter deals with the origin and development of the unique institution in War area namely, the Wahadadarship of Shella. This institution has no parallel either in its nomenclature or in the structure and functions in rest of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. Basing on the oral and recorded data, we found that in the Shella area the original settlers had organised themselves into Seng or Unions in very early period and in course of time, four of them joined together to form the Saw Seng (four Unions) or the socio-political organisations for the area. The Wahadadarship came into existence at a later stage through a process of social contract among the local union on the advice of a wise man of the area, when there was the need to resist the expansionist endeavours of the rulers in Khasi Hills and the Bengal plains

and to maintain the affairs of the area. Initially there were four such Wahadadars as the representatives of four major groups who jointly and collectively functioned as the head of the political organisation in Shella at a time of great turmoil when the British colonialism began to infiltrate into the area, the people brought a capable person from the plains named Gunga Sing and made him the Wahadadar.

#### **Chapter IV - Conflict and Survival**

The beginning of the 19th Century witnessed great turmoil in War area as well as the rest of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills because of the British expansionist policy. The British plan to construct a road connecting Sylhet and Gauhati through Khasi Hills eventually led to the Anglo-Khasi War in which the War area became an important theatre of war as the British army from Sylhet marched through the War area against U Tirot Sing, the Syiem of Nongkhlaw, and other 'rebel' Khasi chiefs. The rulers in War area did their best to resist the advance of the British troops. The people stood solidly behind their rulers and many of them laid down their lives in the conflict. When the Anglo-Khasi War (1829-33) ended in British victory, the War area with the rest of the Khasi Hills passed under the control of the British Government and the traditional rulers became subordinate to the British authority. In 1835, Jaintia Kingdom was annexed by the British, and the War Jaintia with the rest of the Jaintia Hills became British territory.

The pattern of British administration, particularly in the context of their professed policy of non-intervention, has also been discussed in this chapter.

#### **Chapter V - The War Political Structure**

This chapter deals with the development of political structure in the War area since the independence of the country in 1947. The structure that emerged in the area had to adjust three influences, namely (i) the War political tradition, (ii) the adjustments made by British colonialism, and (iii) the democratic tradition introduced by the constitution of India. The continuity of the tribal tradition and institutions guaranteed by the sixth schedule became a responsibility of the District Council with headquarters at Shillong established in 1952. The Wars have since been subjected to the administration and laws of the local rulers, the District Council, administration and the state and the Union Government. In this chapter, we have also described the origin and growth of middle class since the closing years of the last century.

#### **Chapter VI - Governing Factors of Polity Formation**

This chapter has reviewed the process of polity formation in the War area and examined the basic trends and factors involved in the process in light of the leading theoretical works from Federich Engels to Classen and Skelnick in the global context, the works of Surajit Sinha and others

in the context of tribal India and those of Amalendu Guha and J.B. Bhattacharjee on the North East. We have examined the formulations of these authors in light of the development in War area and endeavoured to suggest reformulations of some of the major issues for understanding the process of polity formation in a specific tribal area out of our War experience. We have found that the private property which has been crucial in the analysis of Engels and others was undoubtedly an important element in War polity formation, particularly in the matter of social stratification and that the sanskritist influence was also to some extent noticeable in social formation in War area. The most crucial however, was the influence of the cultures both from bordering hills and plains and a need for the people to adjust themselves to the environment that they live in. The Brahmanical Hindu model of state formation was not very effective as neither a state of early Indian variety could come into existence in War area nor did the Hinduism make any significant impact on the people. What we have noticed is that the War model was basically an indigenous model, although it had absorbed other influences. The spontaneity of growth was arrested by the British colonisation in the 19th Century.

#### **Chapter VII - Conclusion**

The concluding chapter gives a resume of the discussions in various chapters of the thesis and focusses on the contemporary trends in the emerging War political culture.

## Major Findings

It has been our endeavour to bring to focus the evolution of the War polity. In spite of the scanty nature of the data, we have been able to give a profile of the political institutions of the War people. In the process we have also discussed the leading models of state and polity formation studies, particularly the 'surplus' model and 'Brahmanical Hindu' model. We have found that the polity formation process in the War area had been influenced by various factor and the political institutions had absorbed various traditions. The War had carried with them the Khasi-Jaintia traditions when they migrated to their present territory. However, this was the Khasi-Jaintia tradition of very early times, because the major political developments in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills took place only after the Wars had already left the upland Khasi Hills. The Brahmanical Hindu influence, and at a later stage the Mughal influence, had some impact on the War people. But the influence had been of very limited nature since the Wars were neither Hinduised nor the concept of caste and kingship develop in the area. The War political institutions like Sirdarship and Wahadadarship, in fact, survived in their own local conditions, although the state formation process in Khasi Hills on the one hand, and Bengal plains on the other, considerably influence the growth of these institutions, as the people had to defend themselves against the expansionist

endeavours of both. The stratification started with the emergence of private property, and the land system and inheritance in particular considerably absorbed the influences from the plains, but the class formation process remained at a low key. The masses were never completely alienated from the emergency ruling elites as the societal control over the political institutions continued. The spontaneity in the process of institutional growth was arrested by the British colonisation and restructurisation of administration. Finally, the Wahadadarship was the symbol of War political identity. It has no parallel either in Khasi-Jaintia Hills or in the neighbouring plains. The word Wahadadar has perhaps a Persian-Mughal origin but in its organisation and functions it is an indigenous model of the War people.

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