

JAIINTIA HILLS

A MEGHALAYA TRIBE-
Its Environment, Land and People

Editors :
Dr. P.M. Passah
Dr. S. Sarma



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PREFACE

This book, Jaintia Hills: - A Meghalaya Tribe

Its Environment, Land and People is dedicated to the memory of Late Professor Barrister Pakem, a former President of North East India Council for Social Science Research and a former Vice-Chancellor of North-Eastern Hill University.

From an obscure village of Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya emerged a person who was self made to shine as one of the brightest stars of Meghalaya. Professor Pakem rose from a humble beginning to the top of the academic eminence to have become the Vice Chancellor of North-Eastern Hill University, one of the Central Universities of the country. As a political scientist, he had the opportunity to show how a politician could be pragmatic and also a man of public ethics. His life and work are a great testimony to the fact that nothing is unachievable in life provided one has an iron will and a sincere aspiration. Money and wealth are not always the criteria as amply demonstrated by Barrister Pakem.

Professor Pakem was a man of varied and mixed qualities of head and heart. People all over the country who once met him appreciated his high calibre, moral character and integrity both in the academic and public life. He was an outstanding teacher, a political scientist and a liberal thinker. He was awarded the prestigious Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru Award in Social Science by Madhya Pradesh Council of Science and Technology in 1996 in recognition of his outstanding contribution to overall development studies in North East India. He was indeed one of the great sons of contemporary India. This scholar extraordinary displayed probity and rectitude in public affairs and represented values of the highest order in society.

This volume contains 23 articles by eminent social scientists and scientists belonging to agriculture, forestry, demography and life sciences. Scholars adopted a multi-disciplinary approach in their study of environment, land and people of Jaintia Hills on the international border with Bangladesh. The cultural influences are two-way traffic.

44 The Jaintia Hills eco-system is under heavy stress due to unscientific coal mining and systematic destruction of forest resources. The rich fertile lands are now exposed to forces of nature due to unplanned deforestation over the decades. The rich soil is now highly degraded. The unscientific opencast coal mining has caused wide-spread pollution of streams and rivers. The green valleys now look like deserted wild fields due to opencast mining. Nevertheless, the Jaintias are known for their zeal. They are waking up and there is new initiative and enterprise in reviving economic activities

to realise the economic potentialities of the Jaintia Hills. The Papers in this volume are ample testimony of the economic, cultural and social life of the Jaintias.

The North-East India Council for Social Science Research held a commemorative seminar in honour of Professor Barrister Pakem on 5 and 6 June 2000. We are grateful to the Indian Council for Social Science Research, North Eastern Regional Centre and Ms. Neiniroi Khonglah-Pakem for giving us generous support to hold the seminar. We also thank Mr. E.K. Mawlong, Chief Minister of Meghalaya for inaugurating the Seminar. Mr. Mawlong was a colleague of Professor Pakem in social and political field. We take this opportunity to thank Dr. S.K. Bhatia, Proprietor of Reliance Publishing House for publishing this book expeditiously.

Shillong,
November 24, 2001

B. Datta Ray
Secretary
North East Council for Social Science Research

INTRODUCTION

P.M. Passah

S. Sarma

The North East India Council for Social Science Research, Shillong held a Commemorative Seminar on , 5 and 6 of June 2000 in honour of Professor Barrister Pakem on the theme Jaintia Hills: A Meghalaya Tribe: Environment, Land and People. Many scholars from different parts of the North Eastern Region and beyond, participated in the Seminar and 22 of them submitted their Papers on various aspects of the theme. The- economic development of Jaintia Hills needs to be focussed prominently and holding of the Seminar in honour of late Professor Pakem who loved Jaintia Hills to the core of his heart, is the right step that was taken by the Council in spite of financial constraint.

✓ The district of Jaintia Hills lies between Latitudes 20°58' and 26°3'N and Longitudes 91°59' and 92°51'E and covers an area of 3295.5 sq. kms. approximately. It is surrounded on the north, the east and the south east by Assam; on the south by Bangladesh and on the west by Khasi Hills. It is populated mostly by the Jaintias or Syntengs with a small group of Biates and Hmars occupying the southeast corner of the district. The late Suniti Kumar Chatterjee; an international philologist must be correct in suggesting that the name Jaintia could be an Aryanized form of the name *Synteng* by which the people of Jaintia Hills used to be called even today. From the word *Synteng* we get *Syntein*, *Syntiang*, *Zontain*, *Zontia*, and ultimately "Jaintia". Again the name "Synteng" could also be an Aryanized form of the name "Sutong", the original clan of the Jaintia royal dynasty from which was also derived the names "Suteng" and "Sutnga".

✗ It is very wrong to say that the name "Jaintia" has now been largely replaced by the term "Pnar".¹ In fact, the people residing in the central region of Jaintia Hills are called "Pnars" by those living in the southern and northern regions and who are in turn being called as "Wars" and "Bhois" respectively by the Pnars. But all the three are collectively known by a generic name "Jaintias" or "Syntengs".

The present day Jaintia Hills district is but a remnant of the erstwhile Jaintia Kingdom which had been subjected to repeated divisions and partitions since the advent of the British in the North Eastern region and immediately after India's Independence. The Jaintia state was one of the oldest states in the region (see accompanying Map). It was mentioned in the Puranic and Tantrik literature. Its genesis is very obscure but mythologies and legends help in gleaning some facts relating to its state formation. It was computed by scholars that U Chyngklein Am, the eldest son of Ka Li Dakha and U Luh Ryndi, ruled the Jaintia state in the 3rd Century B.C.²

It is true that the present Jaintia Hills district constituted the nucleus from which the erstwhile Jaintia Kingdom eventually emerged. The Kingdom began to play an increasingly important role in the history of the North-Eastern region from the 17th Century onwards till the British appeared in the scene at the beginning of the 19th Century. It had generally peaceful relationships with the neighbouring kingdoms of the Ahoms and the Kacharis but occasionally these relationships were marred by conflicts. But the British had, in the late 18th Century (immediately after they had taken possession of Eastern Bengal), been involved in armed conflict with the Jaintia Kingdom in the plains to the south, ostensibly over the question of navigation rights in the Surma Valley which formed the boundary between the British possession and the Jaintia Kingdom. These conflicts continued until a treaty of alliance was concluded on the 10th March 1824 between Ram Singh Rajah of Jaintiapur and David Scott, the Agent to the Governor General on behalf of the British East India Company. Ram Singh Rajah undertook to help the British in the conflict with the Burmese.⁶

On the death of Rajah Ram Singh, his young nephew Rajendra Singh succeeded to the throne. The British took advantage of the young age of the king and in spite of the good friendly relations, the former decided to annex in March 1835, the plains areas of the Jaintia kingdom. Meanwhile, the British had already gained a foothold in the Khasi Hills. As the richest part of his kingdom was taken away, the Rajah felt unnecessary to hold on to a poor hilly part of his kingdom. Hence he relinquished this remaining part of the Jaintia kingdom also to the British. Captain Lister, the then Political Agent to the British Governor-General in Khasi Hills; was placed in charge of the Jaintia Hills also. Thus began the close link between the Jaintia Hills and Khasi Hills under the British administration with the exception that the Khasi Chiefs were left in control of their respective territories while the Dolois in Jaintia Hills were allowed to continue as the Company's agents.⁷

The British later introduced certain regulations pertaining to taxation that were normally operative in their fully administered areas. This provoked the Jaintias to revolt against the British and thus Anglo-Jaintia wars had to be fought which ended with the capture of Kiang Nangbah, the Jaintia hero who was hanged on 30th December 1863. This led to the composition of Jaintia Hills into a separate subdivision and the posting of a British Officer as the Subdivisional Officer in time brought about the pacification of the Jaintia Hills.⁸

The administration of the Jaintia Hills was more direct than that on the Khasi Hills where only 31 villages and the administered areas of Cherrapunji and Shillong were under direct British control. But the same Deputy Commissioner was in overall control of the entire Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills. Again unlike the Khasi Hills, the whole of Jaintia Hills was enfranchised under the Government of India Act 1835 and elected its own representative to the Assam Legislative Assembly.⁹ The adoption of the Sixth Schedule a to the Constitution of India in 1950 saw the creation of

one district council known as the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council. But in 1964 a separate district council for the Jaintia Hills was created and after the new State of Meghalaya was carved out of Assam in 1972, the new District of Jaintia Hills was also created immediately in the same year.

During the last 28 years, much had been invested through plan allocation for the socio-economic development of the district. But the State has much still to do to build and raise the capability of the people and the district itself. The infrastructure development in the district is still too weak to sustain any vigorous programme for its economic development. There are still serious bottlenecks particularly in the fields of inter-state transport, power, entrepreneurial manpower and technical manpower and in the field of social services like health and education. Thus both the human capability and the capability of the district have to be strongly built and raised to the level that can properly exploit and utilize the rich natural resources of the district for the economic welfare of the people.

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