

Prelude to Integration: Political Consciousness, Political Organisations and Development in Khasi-Jaintia Hills (Upto 1952)

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Khasi and Jaintia Hills had a long history of their own. During the pre-colonial period the areas were administered by the traditional chiefs and other institutions. Even when the Khasis and Jaintias were nomads or while migrating from place to place in search of a proper habitat or while fighting or fleeing from their enemies in course of their migration, some sort of leadership had developed to guide and administer the people. The type of leadership that prevailed during that period of time could not be a democratic one because of the compelling situation. However, the improvement over the forms of leadership in the later part of their history gave rise to more systematic political consciousness beginning with the formation of modern political organisations in the form of associations or federations among the ruler-administrators and the contributions made by the educated elite of the Khasi-Jaintia society.

This paper proposes to examine the political consciousness, political organisations and their role in the political development of the area during 1946-52 that shaped the history of political consciousness and political development among the Khasi-Jaintia people.

Among the Khasis and Jaintias, the ascriptive leaders like the *Syiems*, *Lyngdohs*, *Wahadadars*, *Sardars*, *Dolois* and village headmen played an important role in the political consciousness and development of the society. At the same time we cannot deny the fact that these pristine institutions have been pushed behind the line of leadership by the educated elite or achievement-oriented leaders especially after India's independence. Since 1952 with the setting up of the then United Khasi-Jaintia Hills Autonomous

District Council, the role of the traditional chiefs and other such institutions has diminished further. The Constitutional provisions contained in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution have empowered the Autonomous District Council (ADC) to place the traditional chiefs at a subordinate position to that of the ADC. In the process, the role of the achievement-oriented leaders under the banner of those elected representatives of the people has tremendously increased in bringing more political consciousness among the people under study. But this does not mean that the ascriptive leaders had no role to play in bringing about political consciousness among the people. They did contribute and in fact they have been responsible in laying down the foundation of political consciousness and political development in the area under study.

Before India's independence, we had in Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the British Areas and Villages, and the Khasi Native States. The whole of Jaintia Hills was treated as a British Area. The integration of the Khasi States to the Indian Union was completed in 1948 after much struggle on how to preserve their identity as a separate ethnic group. It was during that time that the separatist elements caught hold of the British Areas also. But political consciousness among the Khasis and Jaintias did not start only after the struggle for India's independence. This consciousness started long before that period. For example, the Khasi *Syiem*s having realised the astute British policy of 'Divide and Rule' even over their small areas, fought against the mighty British to safeguard their land and ethnic identity. So also in Jaintia Hills the *Dolois*, and their people expressed their resentment that their area was not allowed to enter into subsidiary alliance with the British as it was the case with many other Khasi States. They understood that Jaintia Hills was not given equal chances and status with all other Khasi States. Immediately, prominent leaders of the Jaintias organised a struggle against the British.

Before the coming of the British, the Khasis and Jaintias had their own traditional institutions. With the coming of the British, these institutions were reduced in importance; their powers and functions were either curtailed or taken away by the authorities. There was therefore a feeling that some sort of organisations should be set up so that through them the people could ventilate their grievances to the British authorities. The same feeling continued after India's independence where more such organisations were set up from time to time. The people aired their views and expressed their opinions through their representatives in these organisations.

Political consciousness among the Khasis and Jaintias even before 1947 was aroused through and in the form of socio-political associations/organisations which were set up from time to time. Among the Jaintias, the year 1900 saw the formation of the Jaintia National Union which in 1931 was renamed the Jaintia Durbar. The first pioneers of the Union were Church Pastors, Christian intellectuals and educated elite of the society. This Union-Durbar used to meet very often to discuss affairs which affected the whole

of the then Jowai Sub-division. The resolutions of this Union/Durbar were sent as memoranda from time to time to the Government.

Although the Jaintia Durbar was only a social organisation, it has been able to raise enough socio-political consciousness among the Jaintias. Going through its Constitution it was stated that the main intentions in forming the Jaintia Durbar were to unite the whole of Jaintia Hills under one organisation for the purpose of safeguarding, retaining and improving upon the custom, traditions and usages of the society. It also intended to develop the people economically, socially and educationally. It served as a liaison between the Government and the people of Jaintia Hills as well as played as an instrument to work towards understanding with the different political parties in India and as an organ or spokesman of the people of Jaintia Hills.

The Jaintia Durbar was nothing but a Union of all the representatives from every sub-durbar in Jaintia Hills. With the passing of the Government of India Act, 1935, and the holding of elections in 1937, the people of Jaintia Hills witnessed a complete change in the political scene. In the 1937 elections, the Jaintia Durbar though only a social organisation, undertook the task upon itself to recommend all the candidates from Jaintia Hills. During this time, party politics did not exist in Jaintia Hills; hence the Jaintia Durbar had no alternative but to send its representatives to represent the Jaintia people. It was for this reason that candidates from Jaintia Hills contested as Independents in the elections of 1937. The candidates were members of the Jaintia Durbar; either they won or lost in the elections they remained its members. For many years the Jaintia Durbar controlled and effectively supervised the representatives from Jaintia Hills and undertook the initiative of leading the people in their political destiny. Only after Independence the Jaintia Durbar developed itself into a political party when it set up its own candidate in the 1957 general elections. No sooner had it begun involving itself in party politics than the Jaintia Durbar lost the confidence of the people and then gradually became defunct in the sixties.

In Khasi Hills too, like the Jaintia Durbar, the Khasi National Durbar was formed in 1923 to find out ways and means to bring about closer unity and co-operation among the Khasi States, to find out a possibility of constituting a common organisation, and to consider the future of the Khasi States under the new constitutional setup. Another association, the Khasi-Jaintia Political Association was formed in 1945 under the inspiring leadership of Dr. H. Lyngdoh. Unlike, the Khasi National Durbar which was not a political party, the Khasi-Jaintia Political Association got itself directly involved with political affairs when two of its candidates contested in the 1946 general elections. It may also be referred here that some scholars were of the opinion that women in Khasi and Jaintia Hills did not participate or had no role to play in politics before Independence. This was not true. For example, the Khasi Jaintia Political Association even had its

women's branch in Jaintia Hills which was formed in 1946 under the leadership of Mrs H.E. Florence as its Secretary.

On women's political consciousness, role and participation, it may further be stated that the Government of India Act 1935, provided for the representation of women to the Assam Legislative Assembly from the reserved (women) Shillong constituency. The Act also made provision for women to contest not only from the reserved seat but from the general seat as well. In 1937 general elections, two women candidates from Khasi Hills contested the Shillong reserved constituency - Mrs Berlina Diengdoh and Miss Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh. The latter won the election and it was for the first time that a woman from Khasi Hills was elected as a member of the Assam Legislative Assembly. Moreover, Miss Mavis Dunn was inducted into the Saadulla ministry in 1939 till 1941 and again from 1942 to 1945. Miss Mavis Dunn thus became the first lady from North East India to become a Cabinet Minister. In 1946, four women contested the Shillong reserved seat, and Mrs. Bonily Khongmen won the election. In the post-independence period, the first general elections were held in 1952; Miss Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh contested this election but lost to Rev. J.J.M. Nichols Roy. But the Parliamentary elections to the Lok Sabha held the same year was won by a lady candidate - Mrs Bonily Khongmen. She became the first lady from Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills to have represented the people to the Lok Sabha. After the re-organisation of Assam many women participated and played an important role in Meghalaya politics.

During the period from 1946 to 1952, a number of political associations and parties were formed in Khasi-Jaintia Hills. Mention may be made that of the Khasi-Jaintia Federated State National Conference, Federation of Khasi States, Highlanders' Union, Khasi State People's Union, Khasi-Jaintia Durbar, the Hills Union, the Eastern India Tribal Union, etc. It is interesting to observe that in most of these political organisations, initially both the traditional chiefs and the educated elite of the Khasi-Jaintia society joined hands to solve the common problems and issues. Among the educated elite of the society, Church Pastors and Elders also took keen interest by getting themselves totally involved in political affairs affecting the society. The concept of separation of the Church from politics did not exist in the minds and thoughts of the leaders. It was rather the Church leaders who actively participated and provided frontline leadership. However, this topic can be dealt with in greater detail separately.

As far as political consciousness, political organisation and development are concerned, the process of integration of Khasi and Jaintia hills brought immense opportunities to both the ascriptive and achievement - oriented leaders to prove that they were not lagging behind their counterparts in the plains. The process of integration to the Indian Union had aroused tremendous political consciousness in the Khasi-Jaintia society and the leaders who emerged during those critical years had not let the opportunities go by

without showing and proving themselves that they were second to none. The latter period of the political history of Khasi-Jaintia Hills witnessed how solid the foundation was during the period from 1946 to 1952.

On the eve of British withdrawal from India, there was tremendous political awakening and consciousness even in the far-flung areas of North-East India. The people of Khasi-Jaintia Hills were no exception to this. Some political organisation had already been set up in Khasi-Jaintia Hills like the Federation of Khasi States, Khasi States' Constitution Making Durbar, Khasi-Jaintia Political Organisation, Jaintia Durbar, Khasi-Jaintia Federated National Conference, etc.. These organisations were responsible in bringing about a lot of political consciousness among the people and provided different fora for discussion of the future political status and conditions of the people. What will happen to the Khasi States and the local traditional institutions like *Syiems*, *Lyngdohs*, *Sordars*, *Wahadadars*, *Dolois*, *Patars*, etc, after India became an independent country? What kind of status and autonomy will these traditional institutions have in a newly framed Constitution of India? Were their status and autonomy going to be affected under the Indian Constitution? Would they to continue to enjoy the same political status as it was during the colonial rule? If there are changes under the Constitution of India, will these changes affect them drastically? These and other pertinent questions were addressed and discussed threadbare by the holders of the offices of traditional institutions in particular and the people in general.

With independence in the offing the 25 (twenty five) Khasi States formally constituted themselves on August 22, 1946 into a Federation - Federation of Khasi States to safeguard the interests of the States jointly in all negotiations with the authorities prior to the transfer of power. The Federation consisted of the *Syiems* and other well respected, educated and well-informed persons of the society. Another organisations known as Khasi-Jaintia Federated National Conference was founded by Rev. J.J.M. Nichols-Roy as a counter party against the Federation of Khasi States. The former stood for the right of the so-called British Areas of Khasi and Jaintia Hills to sit on the negotiating table alongside the Khasi States when arrangements were made for the transfer of power by the British on the liquidation of the Raj. Its ground was that the so-called British Areas in the Khasi Hills were originally part and parcel of the Khasi States.

The stand taken by the Federation of Khasi States was to be on equal par with Assam, and not part of it. On the other hand, the Khasi Jaintia Federated National Conference's plea was that the Khasi States including the British Areas were one with Assam under the Special provisions of the Sixth Schedule to the Indian Constitution, guaranteeing constitutional protection and safeguard for the customs and usages of the people, governing their democratic system of administration, customary ownership of land, etc.

The Constitution of India which came into force on the 26th January 1950, treated the

Khasi States as an integrated part of the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills Autonomous District of the then composite State of Assam by virtue of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India. Unlike the other Native States of India which signed the Instrument of Merger, the Khasi States did not do that. They declined to sign the same because they could not agree to cede to the Dominion of India exclusive jurisdiction and power of governance lest it destroys the roots of their customary democratic practices which vested ultimate authority upon the citizens of the State. However, the Khasi States agreed to sign first the Standstill Agreement which literally means 'to stand where they were before' and later signed the Instrument of Accession between the years 1947 and 1948.

With the exception of the *Syiem* of Nongstoin, the *Syiem* of Rambrai, the *Syiem* of Nobosohphoh and the *Sirdar* of Mawlong, all the other traditional rulers had signed the Instrument of Accession by the end of 1947. Special mention may be made here of the high drama relating to *Hima* Nongstoin. *Sibsing*, *Syiem* of *Hima* Nongstoin would not agree to sign the Instrument of Accession unless the same was approved by the *Durbar Hima*. To cut short, he was unduly arrested one day while leaving Nongstoin, the State headquarters to attend, as a devout Christian, a Church meeting in one of the village outside Nongstoin. This incident brought more complications to the case of Nongstoin. Finally, *Sibsing* *Syiem* of Nongstoin signed the Instrument of Accession. But he did it under threat, persuasion and pressure and not by a wilful act of the ruler of a peaceful State who actually wanted to abide by the decision of the *Durbar Hima*, the highest decision-making body of a Khasi State. It may also be noted that *Wickliffe* *Syiem*, who was the junior *Syiem* of Nongstoin, an adviser to the *Syiem* was a man of strong will. During the period of negotiation for the signing of the Instrument of Accession, *Wickliffe* was camping at *Dacca* (Dhaka). After the Instrument of Accession was signed, *Wickliffe* *Syiem* was informed to come back to India via *Dawki*, the only international check-post at that time between Khasi-Jaintia Hills of India and Sylhet of East Pakistan. Mr *Wickliffe* spurned the idea of returning to India by the route prescribed for him. He sent word that he would return only by setting his foot first in Nongstoin thence proceed to Shillong. Unfortunately, the powers-that-be under wrong advice did not agree to this. This sort of attitude towards the indigenous people in general and their ruler-administrators led to numerous problems not only in Khasi-Jaintia Hills but also in the whole of North East India. As for *Wickliffe* he stayed put in East Pakistan, later Bangladesh, till he breathed his last.

In the post-independence period, political leadership in Khasi-Jaintia hills was provided mostly by the achievement-oriented leaders in the form of elected representatives to the various constitutional bodies like Autonomous District Councils and the Legislative Assembly. Traditional leaders like the *Syiems*, *Lyngdohs*, *Dolois*, etc were pushed behind the line of leadership. After the setting up of such constitutional bodies under the Indian Constitution, those traditional institutions are treated as subordinate bodies and thus

their powers and functions are either curtailed or even taken away to a certain extent. In the transitional period, there is some sort of a dichotomy being created in the society - the tradition - modernity syndrome.

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