

# ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF NORTH-EAST INDIA

Volume IV Meghalaya

H M BAREH

**MEGHALAYA**

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## THE EDITOR

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ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF NORTH-EAST INDIA-4

# Meghalaya



*Edited by*  
**H.M. BAREH**



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## Introduction

Meghalaya was created as an autonomous state within the state of Assam on 2 April, 1970. The full-fledged state of Meghalaya came into existence on 21 January, 1972. It is bound on the north and east by Assam and on the south and west by Bangladesh. Meghalaya literally meaning the abode of clouds is essentially, a hilly state. It is now divided into seven administrative districts. They are: (1) Jaintia hills, (2) East Garo hills, (3) West Garo hills, (4) East Khasi hills, (5) West Khasi hills, (6) Ri Bhoi district, and (7) South Garo hills district. These are predominantly inhabited by the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garo. These tribal communities are descendants of very ancient people having distinctive traits and ethnic origin.

The Khasi hills and Jaintia Hills which form the central and eastern parts of Meghalaya is an imposing plateau with rolling grassland, hills and river valleys.

The southern face of this plateau is marked by deep gorges and abrupt slopes, at the foot of which, a narrow strip of plain land runs along the international border with Bangladesh. A number of rivers, none of them navigable, drain the mountainous state, In the Garo hills, the Manda, the Darming and the Jinjiram flow towards

the north while the Ringge and the Ganol flow in the westernly direction. Rivers flowing to the south are the Simsang which is the biggest river in Garo, hills and the Bugi. In the Khasi and Jaintia hills, the rivers that flow in a northerly direction include the Khri, the Umtrew, the Umiam, the Umkhen besides the Kupli on the border between Jaintia hills and North Cachar hills. The Kynshi, the Umiam Mawphlang and the Umngot flow to the south into Bangladesh. Meghalaya is basically an agricultural state. Eighty-three per cent of the total population depend primarily on agriculture for their livelihood. The topography, physical features and land conditions as prevailing in the state provide extremely limited scope for extensive cultivation or to bring additional area under wet cultivation. Rice and maize are the major food crops. Wheat has been introduced a few years back and the result is quite encouraging. Potato, jute, mesta, cotton, mustard, arecanut, ginger, turmeric, betelvine, black pepper, tezpara, etc., are some of the cash crops. Orange, pineapple, banana, lemon, guava, litchi, jackfruit and temperate fruits such as plum, pear and peach are some of the important horticultural crops grown in Meghalaya.)

The state has power potential for nearly 1200 mw. It could tap about 186.71 mw upto 1992-93. It is a power surplus state. About 36 per cent of electricity generated in the state is supplied to the neighbouring states. The per capita consumption is only 143.80 kw as in 1990-91. By the end of March 1991-92, 47.22 per cent of the villages, in the state have been electrified.

The public sector cement factory at Cherrapunjee has been reactivated to raise the production to 1,65,000 mt per annum. The tantalum capacitor unit of the Meghalaya Electronics Development Corporation at Umiam-Khwan is in production. The number of small scale industrial units covering service industry, bakeries, furniture-

making, iron and steel fabrication, tyre retreading, spice, etc., is increasing and the government is giving greater thrust on entrepreneurship development. The Meghalaya Industrial Development Corporation (MIDC) is assisting the industrial units by way of term loans and also by participating in equity capital.

(The total forest area in the state is 8,510 sq km with only 993 sq km under the control of the state government and the rest under the district councils and private managements.) The principal timber species are: teak, titachap, gomari, bola, pine, birch, and makrisal. Principal forest products include timber, bamboo, reed, cane, ipecac, medicinal herbs and plants, cinnamon and thatch grass, Azaleas and rhododendrons grow wild in the forest of Khasi and Jaintia Hills and many kinds of beautiful archids are found in the woods.

(Pitcher plant, the insect-eating plant of botanical wonder, is found in plenty in the South Garo, Hills and West Khasi Hills district and it is said that such a plant is found nowhere else in the world. Many rare and interesting plants are also found endemic to the State like wild citrus and pygmy lily.)

(Meghalaya is also rich in wildlife.) There are elephants, tigers, bears, wild boars, leopards, golden cats, leopard cats and jungle cats, deer of various kinds, bintorongs, slow loris, monkeys of different types including capped langurs, golden langurs and hoolocks, flying squirrels and giant squirrels. There are also many rare and interesting birds including the hornbills, partridges, pheasants, teals, snipes, geese, ducks and quails. All these are protected by law. (The state has two national parks, viz., the Nokrek National Park and the Balpakram National Park and two wildlife sanctuaries, namely, the Nongkhylllem Wildlife Sanctuary and Siju Wildlife Sanctuary.)

Mineral wealth of Meghalaya include coal, silimanite, limestone, dolomite, fire-clay, felspar, quartz and grass-sand. The total estimated reserve of coal in state is 562 million tonnes and that of limestone is around 4,500 million Wanes.

*Ka Pomblang Nongkrem* popularly known as Nongkrem dance is one of the most important festivals of the Khasis. It is a five-day religious festivals held annually at Smit village 11 km from Shillong, the headquarters of the syiem (chief) of Khyrim. The festival is held as a thanksgiving ceremony to God Almighty for harvest and to pray for peace and prosperity. Shad Sukmynsiem is another important festivals of the Khasis. It means 'Dance of the Joyful Heart' and is also a thanksgiving dance. Maidens dressed in traditional fineries and men folk in colourful costumes participate in the dance to the accompaniment of drums and flute. It is held in Shillong sometime during the second week of April every year and lasts for three days. *Behdiengkhlam*, the most important festival of the Jaintias is celebrated annually at Jowai in Jaintia Hills during the month of July. It is a very popular and colourful festival where men, young and old take part in the dancing to the tune of drums and flute. *Wangala*, one of the most important festivals of the Garos is held during October-November, and it lasts for a week. This festival is observed to honour and offer sacrificies to their greatest God called Saljong (Sungod). The occasion is initiated, right in the field by simple but impressive ceremony known as RUGULA. After that the ceremony of incense known as Sasat Soa is celebrated. This is performed inside the house of the chief of the village. On this occasion people—young and old, boys and girls in their colourful costumes with feathered headgear dance to the tunes of music played on long oval-shaped drums.

Meghalaya is dotted with a number of lovely spots

where nature unveils herself in all her glory. Shillong, the capital city has a number of beautiful spots. They are: Ward's Lake, Lady Hydari Park, Polo Ground mini stadium. Elephant Falls and Shillong Peak overlooking the city and the golf course which is one of the best in the country. Three national highways pass through Meghalaya for a distance of 460 km. The state had 5,893 Km of both surfaced and unsurfaced road in 1991-92. The state is not connected by railway network. Shillong is the only airport in the state.

After colonial annexation, the present State of Meghalaya consisted of the Garo Hills and Jaintia Hills subdivision along with the Khasi States which had semi-independent status in a treaty relationship with the British Crown, In 1964, the district headquarters of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills were shifted to Shillong which also became the headquarters of the new province of Assam in 1874.

In 1905, Meghalaya became a part of the new Assam province, when Lord Curzon partitioned Bengal and tagged the area of Meghalaya to the new province of Assam and Eastern Bengal. But in 1912, King George reversed the Partition of Bengal and the area (now called Meghalaya) became part of the revived province of Assam. Meghalaya is, a now State in an ancient land. The State boasts of a most picturesque and beautiful landscape well-endowed with a wide variety of flora and fauna which inhabit hill range and intervening valleys which criss-cross the area of the State. In 1970, the new State was given the name "Meghalaya"—the abode of the clouds—reviving a name given by a geographer some fifty years back, who coined the name after being impressed by the clouds which always seem to hover over central plateau.

Shillong being the provincial headquarters had seen

the gradual evolution of parliamentary democracy. The Council of the Chief Commissioner set up under the Indian Councils Act, 1861-1909 met in Shillong and so did the first independent Council for Assam set up in 1912. The Council set up under the Government of India Act, 1916 met here for the first time on 6 April, 1916 and again under the Government of India Act, 1919 as the new Assam, Legislative Council. On 3 January, 1921, following the Montagu-Chelmsford Report of 1917 and the Government of India Act of 1919, the Governor-General-in-Council declared the areas, now in Meghalaya, but excluding the Khasi states, as backward tracts under the Act.

Following the Simon Commission Report and the Government of India Act, 1935, the areas, now in Meghalaya excluding the Khasi States, became partially excluded areas within the meaning of the, Government of India Act, 1935. These areas were represented in the Assam Legislative Council since 1920 and the later also in the pre-independence Assam Legislative Assembly.

Along with the parliamentary institutions Meghalaya still retains, through the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution, the age-old, grass-roots system of tribal democracy as practised through traditional rulers, the Syiems, Nokmas and Dolois, who continue to exist side by side with modern parliamentary institutions.

✓ Prior to 2 April, 1970 Meghalaya was a part, of the composite State of Assam. After more than a decade of peaceful constitutional agitation for a separate Hill State, the Government of India conceded partially to the demand and the Parliament passed the Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) Act, 1969 constituting the Autonomous State of Meghalaya within the existing State of Assam, Smt. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister, came to Shillong to formally inaugurate the Autonomous

State on 2 April, 1970. The old Council Chamber was selected as the Chamber for the Legislature of the Autonomous State which constituted of 37 members elected indirectly by the Autonomous District Councils, set up under the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution. The Parliament passed the North Eastern Areas Reorganisation Act, 1971 which conferred full statehood on the Autonomous State of Meghalaya. It became a full-fledged State on 21 January, 1972 and now has a full-fledged Legislature consisting of 60 members.

Meghalaya—separate geographical entity becomes an autonomous state. The political experiment of an autonomous state within the state of Assam is being tried for the first time in India. With the advent of the new state the long aspiration of the people for political Autonomy has been satisfied and now it would be expected that new state should serve as a shining outpost of Indian democracy. (The new state Meghalaya is bounded by the Brahmaputra Valley on the North-East Pakistan in the South and West and the Mikir, North Cachar hills on the East.)

The area covered by Meghalaya is roughly about 8500 sq. miles, comprising two of the five hill districts of Assam, i.e., the Garo and the united Khasi Jaintia hill districts. Meghalaya have an estimated population of more than 900,000 hill tribals, predominantly Khasia, Garo and Jaintias. Density of population is 90 persons per sq mile, about three times lower than the Indian average. Racially, these tribals belong to the mongoloid stock while their dialects are Tibeto-Burman in origin. They are the descendants of the great Baro clan which ruled a large pan of Assam at one time. Their ancestors came via Bhutan numbering 4 lakhs. At present most of the tribals are peace loving peasants practising jhum cultivation after clearing the land by slash and burn method. They are also adept in fishing wherever possible. In general,

people are brave, intelligent and colourful. Culturally, they possess a distinctive form of social organisation in which descent and inheritance are recognised through women rather than through men. Residence after marriage shifts to in-laws' house so that a man goes to live with his wife's family. This kind of matrilineal arrangements have, of course, undergone some modification among the educated and urbanized Khasis and Garos but there are important points of difference in the culture and social organization of Khasis and Garos.

Geologically Meghalaya belongs to archean group of rock (550 m. years) over which lies the alluvium of Ganga and Brahmaputra. The whole terrain was below sea and was lifted up from the floor of the sea. The geological movement was slow and free from backing that the sedimentary beds retained the horizontal character and gave rise to structural platforms, well developed in Cherrapunji. The presence of many rapids and waterfalls in the neighbourhood of Shillong indicates that this region has a youthful topography perhaps to recent uplift.

Physiographically and administratively also the central and eastern parts of Meghalaya can be grouped together under the name Khasi and Jaintia hills and the western Part Garo hills.

Garo hills covers an area of 300 sq miles lower in elevation and rise gently from southern plains. Tura range (a typical horst) and Simsang Valley are the main physiographic units.

Khasi and Jaintia hills covers an area of 5500 sq miles and it is mainly in the form of Plateau. Here general elevation varies within. 4000-6000 ft. (1219.2 to 1824.0 in.). The Shillong hills towering above Shillong town contain the highest peneplane surface. South of Shillong lies the structural platform of Cherrapunji which

are built up of sandstone and limestones. From Cherrapunji the plateau slopes very gently southwards for about 6 km. and then falls rapidly to the plains. The easternmost section of Meghalaya is the Mikir hills. The hills are rugged and thinly populated due to the presence of barren sandstones of Surma series.

✓ Climatically, Meghalaya experience two seasons—the mild Summer and the Winter. The climate is noted for its coolness and humidity. Here Cherrapunji receives the world's highest rain fall (600 inches) in a year. Whereas Shillong located 50 miles away receives only 80 100 inches rainfall. This is primarily due to Shillong's position in rain-shadow area. The Monsoon laden with heavy moisture knocked at the Cherrapunji plateau, just before reaching plateau. Garo hill located in the west receives only 43 inches of rainfall.

Politically the new state will have a full Juggled Legislative Assembly of 38 members and a council of 5 Ministers for the present. It will have a common Governor and a common High Court with Assam. At present, the overall responsibility for law and order in Meghalaya remains with the Assam Government, the new state will have, its own village and town police. It will also have enforcement powers to cover the 61 subjects out of 65 in its state list. As Meghalaya will be normally within the state of Assam Legislative Assembly constituencies in Meghalaya area will still find representation in the Assam Legislative Assembly even the new state. At present, there are 16 Assembly 4 area of Assam, reserved for Scheduled tribes of these nine are from the proposed Meghalaya area. As far as the Meghalaya am are concerned the Government and Legislative Assembly of Assam will have Jurisdiction in respect of only certain subjects of common interest including state high ways, major industries and hydroelectricity power. Again the Assam and Meghalaya

states will have concurrent powers requiring notification both by state Assemblies in 13 subjects including the acquisition of land.

Economically, Meghalaya is one geared to agriculture with rice as the staple food of the people. Many fruits are also found in the area such as apples, pears, peaches and oranges, the last being the most abundant. Apart from this short staple variety of cotton is grown especially in the Garo hills.

With a heavy rainfall the flora of the hill is regarded as the richest in the Indian subcontinent. There are about two hundred varieties of orchids in the area and few rarest species are potential Exchange earners. Soft woods are another valuable resource of the state.

From the point of view of minerals, (the state has rich deposits of coal (1% of India), limestones, silimanite, felspai (quartz) glass sand and china clay. Geological Survey, of India has located strains of uranium and zinc. Further investigations are continuing. In respect of industries also the new state have high potentiality since most of the hydel power stations of N.E. bidia, i.e., the Uiam, Umtru and Kopili are located in this region. At present small handicraft industry such as weaving of silk, muga and endi are flourishing Out there are immense possibility of setting up a few new industries like paper, and cement by utilising the local coal, limestone and timber. In Cherraponji a cement factory has now gone into production with a capacity of 250 ton per, ay or less than one lakh ton annually. )

✓ In the field of education the new state have the higher percent, age of literacy (31.5,%) than the rest of Assam (27.4%). This is mainly due to the service of Christian Missionaries. Like everywhere else the main activity of the Christian Church has been to promote education so that many of the tribes know Latin and not

an Indian script. Fascination of tribal peoples for western dress, top music, English movies and novels projects an image of the average educated tribal of the region.

In hill areas where topography is rough, rainfall is copious, transport becomes a problem. Here also one faces such difficulty of transport. Trains are nonexistent in hill areas. Only means of transport is therefore motor vehicles. But services are quite efficient. The National highway, the life line of Meghalaya connecting Gauhati with Shillong extends upto Dawki on the East Pakistan Border. Garo hills on the other hand is linked with only one all weather road from Goalpara. The new state have very few cities and towns. Only Shillong and Tura are the cities that have considerable importance. Shillong the charming hill station located at an altitude of 1961 metres above sea level is the Capital of the new state. The natural setting of Shillong has provided it with attractions for tourists which can well be developed. Tura, the headquarters of the Garo hills is located in the extreme west of Meghalaya. It is about 1412 metres above sea level and have over 30,000 population. So far as tourists are concerned this small but very beautiful and clean town has also a special appeal.

The state of Meghalaya is a small state and is one of the seven sister states of NE India. It, is surrounded by Assam on North and East and by Bangladesh on South and West side. It acquired statehood on January 21, 1972 and consists of the former Garo Hills district and United Khasi and Assam. Its capital is located in Shillong and has seven districts with a population of about 17 lakhs. (The state has the world's wettest place Mawsynram located 58 km from Shillong with an annual average of amsynram 12,163 mm or 486.5 inches. This is caused by orographic lifting (1872-97). Dr Hooker has collected more than 2,000 flowering plant species within ten miles of Cherrapunjee.) Agriculture is the main occupation of

over 80 per cent people of the state. Main crops are paddy, maize, potato, cotton, tejpatta, cabbage, cauliflower, pineapple and oranges. Coal and limestone mining are also sources of income for the people,

(The state has a very rich floral diversity. The Khasi flora, which is characterised by the prevalence of brilliant glossy, leaved evergreen forest tree elements. There occur over 20 varieties of palms. Other predominant plants include cultivated betelvine and arecanut, figs of different types, oaks, oranges, Diospyros, jacks, plantains and screwpines. Laurels, wild nutmegs, Pinus Khasia are abundant in forests. There are several beautiful orchids, ferns, mistletoe, mosses and Lycopodiums occurring as ground flora. Bamboos of many kinds and several grass species are also found. These forests shelter several kinds of wild animals such as the wild buffalo, wild boar, tiger, etc. )

### The Khasis

There are conflicting views about their exact origin, The four groups of Khasis have generally been recognised as 'Bhoi' who live in northern part Of Khasi Hills, the 'Lyngngam' who live in western part; the 'Wars' living in southern part and the 'Khyngriam' who inhabit the central plateau. Khasi people are generally short-statured (1m to 1.5 tall) with Mongoloid facial features. In earlier days males used to wear 'dhoti' and 'turban' but now they prefer European dress. Females wear a long piece of cloth tied on the shoulders hanging down to little above ankles called 'Ka Jainsem'. Khasi women are fond of gold. The Khasis use swords, spears, bows and arrows as weapons and carry shields for their defence. Children and adults are also very fond of catapult (Culel) (a stone throwing device). Marriage within the clan is not permitted. The ceremony consists of mixing of liquor from two different pots (gourds) and eating by the bride and bridegroom from the same plate.

The youngest girl remains in her parents' house and inherits property. The Bridegroom has to shift there with his small belongings such as clothes, etc. Divorce is common and is effected by the public declaration. The Khasis relish pork, beef and dry as well as fresh fish. They also eat fermented soyabean as chutney with dry fish. Their other typical favourites include. So-hplang (Moghania vestita, a leguminous tuber eaten raw, after deskinning), Nei-lieh (Perilla frutescence eaten as chutney), Sohriew, (Coix lachrymajobi, a kind of maize), Digitaria cruciata var, esculenta (a small millet), Sohngang (bitter brinjals—Solanum gilo, Solanurn Khasianurn, and Solanum torvum), Jaiur (zanthoxylum acanthopodium), tree tomato (Cyphomandra batacea), ricebean or Rymbaija (Vigna umbellata) and Soyabean (Rymbaiktung). (The chewing of 'kwai' (betel leaf, lime and raw arecanut) is very common) be it day or night, except when asleep. It also generates heat in the body and because of its protein and calcium content as well as chlorophyll, increases body resistance. In winter, "Kwai" keeps the body warm. In ancient times Khasis never used to take milk as such, but now take it with tea which they like strong. Khasi houses are built upon stone pillars or wooden (or bamboo) pillars, due to the hilly and seismic terrain. The non-Christian Khasis used to believe in a God or Creator and there was a ladder or a communication between Hynniewtrep and the Heaven. Some also worship cobras of a species called "thlen" but this is prevalent only in very remote areas and the sect is now, rare.

In general, people are very conservative in moving out and treat other as 'dkhars' (foreigners). The typical Khasi dance 'Nongkrem' is unique in that the girls wear lot of solid gold jewellery, slowly inch their feet only without any jerks or move up the ground and young Khasi boys holding "chamars" or fans in hands make a

circular motion. Only virgins are allowed to take part in the dance before the 'SYIEM' or the Chief of the particular area.

The Garos are believed to belong to the Bodo group having Tibeto-Burman lineage and trace their origin to a place known as 'Tarua' in Tibet. There are two major groups—hill Garos and plain Garos. Unlike the Khasis, Garos are polygamous subject to a maximum of three wives, and marriages generally are contracted outside a specific group. The major groups among the Garos are Marak, Sangma, Momin and the Machong (Maharis). Garo men traditionally wear 'Gando', a blue cotton lungi with red stripes. The women wear 'Riking' which is fastened on shoulders with two strings and leaves the knees bare. They are slightly darker with Mongoloid features and have sturdy physique.

The major occupation is agriculture which is largely practised on "jhum" (slash and burn) lands. The sole agricultural implements are a dao (a kind of broad sword) used to clear the jungle and a small hoe. 'Me principal jhum crops are rice, maize, cotton, yams, Aroids (Colocasia, Alocasia and Xanthosoma), ginger; turmeric, sweet potato, millets (Foxtail and Finger), etc. The seeds are dibbled into holes dug up at some intervals at the onset of rains. The men remain in field houses during crop season in order to protect their crops from wild beasts. These are built high upon big trees to ensure safety from rampaging wild animals. They use bamboo ladders for climbing into these houses.

The Garos will intermarry with any person except Jugis or Sweepers. The marriage proposal is generally from girl's side, though groom's parents' consent must be obtained. In the Abengs it was customary for the youth selected to run away when asked to marry a girl. Divorce is recognised and, widows are allowed to remarry but

they must do so in their husband's family. A Garo, like a Khasi, leaves his native village and settles down with his wife. Normally they set up their own house after marriage. The property is inherited through the female to the daughter and through her to the son-in-law,)

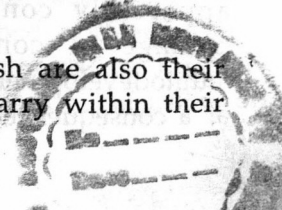
The non-Christian Garos believe in the Supreme God and in evil spirits. The evil spirits are pleased by animal sacrifices to save themselves from misfortunes. The staple food of the Garos is rice. In addition, they eat all kinds of meat whether of dead or killed wild and domesticated animals. They eat meat of snakes, lizards, white ants, elephants, buffaloes, cows, pigs, goats, fowls, etc. Dried fish and beef are relished much. Other eatables include yams, Colocasia (Kachu), Alocasia (Mankachu), Xanthosoma (Pudh Kachu), beans, millets (Finger and Foxtail), maize, chillis, bitter brinjals, etc. Milk and butter are not on the menu in villages.

The village headman or Nokma is considered to have authority on jhum lands. All members of the village are allowed to cultivate land rent-free and a newcomer to the village is required to pay a nominal rent. The village councils used to decide most of the disputes through the Laskars who were the Honorary Magistrates.

*2/11/06* ~~The~~ Jaintias are also a Mongoloid tribe. However, not much has been written about them in the historical accounts. They are also known as 'Pnars' or 'Syntengs'. The dress of Jaintia women is distinct as they wear a sort of dhoti black in colour having a white strip on the side and over that the Jainisem' like Khasis. The religion of Jaintia people closely resembles Hinduism. They never take beef and worship the cow on certain occasions. They used to be averse to milk and butter or ghee. Rice is the staple food. ★

Pork, mutton, fowls and dried fish are also their main dietary items. Pnars generally marry within their

*2/11/06*



own tribe. In Pnars, however, there is a striking difference in respect of married life. The Pnar husband, after marriage visits his wife's house only at night as in rural Kerala. Generally he remains in his mother's or sister's house. The property is inherited from the mother to the eldest daughter known as, 'Ka Mai'. The Pnars can have more than one wife but never from the same village.

The study of 'ethnicity' and 'development' is fundamental in the study of social change but unfortunately both these concepts are usually so loosely defined that they overlap with a number of other related concepts. Ethnicity is essentially an ascriptive phenomenon, founded on certain primordial characteristics like language, religion, culture, geographical territory, and so on but its boundaries being flexible and subject to change in time as well as space its subjective connotation—sense of a belonging to a group—is often found to be the only valid ground on which it stands.

Ethnicity has been found to be closely related to state and development. The process of development, on closer scrutiny, is found to be more growths-oriented than distributive, and more state-centred than emerging from the people's needs. Consequently, it has been one of the determining factors for the ethnic upsurges everywhere. Most such upsurges, in final analysis, crave for a better control over local resources or better redistributive justice. Incidentally, the ethnic phenomenon itself is often made a scapegoat for lack of development or blocking it and therefore consider it as anti-development. Efforts to reconcile these two apparently conflicting concepts are found in the coinage of concepts like 'ethnonationalism' and 'ethnodevelopment' but ethnicity is more acceptedly seen as a consequence of the failure of developmental efforts.

Development is not yet a discarded goal. It is not only an irreversible process but also an ongoing phenomenon. But development as it is understood today—as directed change—is not an uncontested value either: it is very often contested by ethnicity itself. In other words, the ethnic and development priorities sometimes compete with each other throwing the community concerned in a state of multiple ideological conflicts. One such example is found among the Dalus. Hence intend to develop this theme here in this study with the case study of this community living in a village called Killapara situated in the Indo-Bangladesh border of the West Garo Hills District of Meghalaya. But since this community is rarely known even within Meghalaya a brief introduction may be desirable here.

The Dalus are a small and very backward community. Though their exact population is riot known, a conventional estimate Puts the figure at 9000, including those living in the districts of Assam like Darrang and Goalpara. They have only two graduates till now and majority of them are illiterates or semi-literates earning their bread mainly by selling their manual labour. Published literature on this community are scant. It is clear that the Dalus consider themselves to be migrants from Imphal valley and descendants of an ancestor called Vijay Singh Dhalji who, according to Sarkar was a king and, according to Roy, a warrior. According to Samadhyaya also he is the son of Commander Vishub Singh Dhalji. He is believed to be the descendant of Arjuna's son Babrubahana. Once Bhagadatta, the King of Assam, attacked Manipur and forced Dhalji to flee his country with some of his followers, which is estimated to have occurred in the early seventeenth century He took refuge in the Garo Hills and established a village there, which is still known as Dalu Gaon though not a single Dalu lives there today According to Sarkar the Dalus of

this village sold their lands to the Koch and the Hajong tribes and left it due to problems of water and the ravages caused to their crops by the wild elephants. But the present headman of that village, a Koch, agrees only with the second reason and considers the inability of the Dalus to pay the revenue as more important reason compelling them to leave that village and shift to Killapara, about four kilometres away from Dalu Gaon. According to some villagers, however, the first place where they settled was called Roga in the West Garo Hills. But this is perhaps wrong though the Dalus of Dalu Gaon are known to have, visited that place for collecting articles like bamboo and firewood, which they sold in Killapara hat. This hat took place on every Monday. The very next day they left for Roga to collect those articles which they brought down along Bhugai river on Sunday. This perhaps explains the fact that Dalu language has many similarities with the Roga dialect.

Coming back to their history, there is some confusion about certain aspects. For instance, Samadhayaya and Roy mention about the return of Dhalji to Manipur after some years of hiding in the Garo Hills and that he was not accepted back by his own community. But Sarkar does not agree with this view. Further, between the first two authors too there is some disagreement: the first says that being discarded he returned to the Garo Hills and settled there but the latter says that being unaccepted by his own community he was so disgusted that he discarded many cultural symbols of their society such as vegetarianism, sacred thread, and the 'Singha' title and adopted non-vegetarianism and the 'Dalu' title. Here again Sarkar has a different view. According to him, the adoption of new cultural symbols was compelled by the need to camouflage himself and his fellow members for the fear of being attacked and killed by the army of King

Bhagadatta was imminent. Here it may be worthwhile to refer to a passing but significant note by Majumdar. According to him, the Dalus of the West Garo Hills District are none but those Manipuri soldiers who were brought there by the British. It also appeared from the present investigation that their migration to the Garo Hills must not have crossed two hundred years, which meant during the British period only. However, a careful historical research is called for before a tentative history of their migration is drafted.

It is, however, fairly agreed that the Dalus now living in the bordering areas of Bangladesh, parts of the Garo Hills, and some districts of Assam are gradually dispersed from their original habitat in the Garo Hills. About hundred years back, many of them shifted to the present Killapara village surrounded by the Bhugai river on the east, Bangladesh on the south, Choipani on the north, and Gangbhanga village on the west. Others went to either Mymensingh District of Bangladesh on the south or the adjoining areas of Assam on the north.

The Dalus are believed to be Kshatriyas and professing Vaishnavism. They are considered to be vegetarians and wore the sacred thread until they migrated to the Garo Hills. Though they have abandoned most of these cultural symbols they still continue with a host of other cultural traits of Hinduism. Here, a discordant note is offered by Bipin Das, an ex-employee of Border Security Force and married to a Dalu woman. According to him, they were originally known as 'Loo', which indicates that they probably belonged to the Loi community of Manipur, which is considered to be 'untouchable'. This is not accepted by the present Dalus though this contention also establishes that they are of the Manipur origin. Their traditional language is considered to be Manipur but the influence of Assamese and Bengali languages on their language at present is

quite clear from a list of 77 Dalu word prepared by Sarkar. Their immediate neighbours are the Bengal and the Garo but due to their cultural and religious proximity with the Bengali their interaction is more intense with them than with the Garo.

But they have a feature of their social organisation which seems to be closely shared by the Garo. This is their *dapha* or clan system. The whole society is subdivided into twelve clans, namely, Nengma, Doroong, Kara, Maibara, Chicang, Peera, Koon, Gnadhi, Mashi, Nikinin, Luru, and Sisang. Roy also mentions of Bapar as one of their clans and spells most of these clan names a little differently but Bapar was not known to the villagers of Killapara and some of these are believed to be of the Garo origin. They also have what is called the *gotra* system found among most caste-based societies. The *gotra* names found among them are mainly Shandilya, Alamban, Grihtakosi, Bharadwaj, and Kashayap. Their marriage and funeral rites also have a clear proof of their being Hindus.

Today, they are essentially a labour-class people in Killapara, where about 600 of them live amidst a better-off class of the Bengali. Their lands have been mostly sold away to the Bengali, Garos, and the Catholic Mission which is running a school called Sacred Heart School at Gangbhanga village. Only about 8 to 10 families own small plots of land which they cultivate on the basis of family labour and grow crops like wet paddy, cereals, and some cash crops which they sell at Choipani or Barengapara markets.

The Bhugai river is the principal source of their drinking water excepting a few households which have their own dug well or hand pumps. Most of their houses are thatched and can be easily distinguished from the Bengali or Garo houses which have roofs made of

corrugated and galvanised iron sheets. Electricity is also not available in most of their houses.

The important political events like the partition of India, the creation of Bangladesh, and the creation of Meghalaya as a separate state seem to have affected them most. The first incident divided them into two countries, the second made their area a battlefield, and the third incident completely peripheralised them geographically as well as economically. Now, as rightly pointed out by Roy, their very survival as a community is at stake. Their survival has been endangered even physically as floods have become more recurring after the GREF (Ground Reserve Engineering Force) Road has been constructed on the southern border of the village, which virtually acts as a dam creating havoc for the villagers, particularly those who live in huts.

Dalu ethnicity has not only been crippled by the conflict of cultural ideologies within themselves but also constrained by their overall backwardness. This is the most crucial point for them to resolve today and the answers are riot clearly visible on their sweat-smeared horizon. The present essay shall attempt to bring out some such issues rather than provide an answer: the Dalu themselves have to search their way out. The major issues of their ideological conflict are discussed below:

The Dalu are clearly divided into Vaishnavite and non-Vaishnavite groups though the former constitutes a small group of 8 to 10 families only. By Vaishnavites, they refer only to those who have taken *diksha* or initiation from the teacher or guru. In this sense, even a family may have, and there actually are, members who are Vaishnavites and others who are not. For instance, the parents may have taken *diksha* whereas the children may not have. However, a borderline does exist at the family level too and the people do make a distinction between

Vaishnavite and non-Vaishnavite families. To become a true Vaishnavite is not easy: he/she has to lead a disciplined life and act according to the teachings of his/her *guru*. He/she must avoid non-vegetarian foods, alcohol, and perform various rituals devoted to the guru everyday. All this cannot be expected to be adhered to by all and sundry Hence it is confined mostly to a few relatively better-off Dalu families and the large majority of them are for all practical purposes, non-Vaishnavites.

The difference between these two groups is not merely that of religious beliefs and practices but is also marked by, apart from economic differentiation, marital restrictions outside the group. Normally, no negotiated marriage takes place between these two groups. The former also consider themselves to be ritually purer and thus superior to those who belong to the second group, However, they are not given any special respect by the non-Vaishnavite Dalus. They often challenge that there is no pure Vaishnavite Dalu in the village. This was in fact proved by no other person than Prafulla Sarkar himself, who is the most prominent Vaishnavite in the village with all signs and symbols of Vaishnavism. He was seen taking non-vegetarian food in a number of occasions even during our short fieldwork. This, however, does not mean that the ideological conflict between these two groups is resolved.

As stated earlier, both *gotra* and *dapha* systems are currently followed but the community is actively engaged in either underplaying *gotra* or *dapha*. One section of the community, with Vaishnavite leanings, is apparently highlighting the former and underplaying the latter whereas the other section is engaged in exactly the opposite. This ideological conflict was apparently dormant prior to our visit to this village but when our students began to ask questions on these subjects this conflict seems to have got sharpened. That this conflict

was not resolved was clear from the contradictory answers which our students were collecting and it was not immediately clear why it was happening so. It was only after about a week or so that things began to fall in shape and our mind was clear.

The ideological conflict revolves round the question whether they are originally clan based or *gotra* based. One section of them argues that they were originally clan based and adopted the *gotra* system only when they were Hinduised during the reign of King Pamheiba of Manipur. On the other hand, there are some of them who vehemently oppose this idea. According to them, *dapha* system was adopted from the Garo after they settled in the Garo Hills. Their vagueness about the names of their *daphas* and the inability of many of them to state even the names of their *daphas* sometimes made us doubt if it was really central to them. But our experience elsewhere shows that erosion of clan consciousness has been a concurrent feature of most Hinduised communities. Due to their closer interaction with the Bengali the clan organisation must have received a less sharp focus in order to make themselves feel at par with the Bengali.

On further investigation, this conflict seems to have been aggravated by the conflict of orientation among the Dalu of the village. They have two reference groups before them: the Garo and the Bengali with apparently different cultural traits. Orienting themselves towards the Garo seems to carry a hope of getting the Scheduled Tribe status more easily whereas orienting themselves towards the Bengali seems more in keeping with their traditions. This cord with their traditions not only makes them feel culturally superior to the Garos but also makes them feel at par with the Bengali. Politically, they are dominated by the Garos as it is they who represent them in the District Council, the Legislative Assembly, and the Parliament. But educationally and otherwise, they are

under close supervision of the Bengali as it is they who teach them in their schools and provide various kinds of guidance to them. Thus, it is difficult for them to ignore either of these two communities though it is the Dalu who are at the receiving end always.

The conflict between gotra and dapha also includes the question of whether they will have to remain Hindu or become Christian. The Garo being Christian, they apprehend that orienting themselves totally towards them might later mean abandoning Hinduism, which they do not want. Eating or not eating beef is also associated with this dilemma. Though there is no reason why religion or food habits should also be homogenised with the Garo the players *in this* ideological conflict seem to have become successful in generating a lot of apprehensions in the minds of the (mostly) illiterate adult members of their society.

Closely associated with the above two points in their conflict over caste or tribe identity, as though these are mutually exclusive in all respects. This conflict has taken special significance after the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council Acts, Rules and Regulations as amended upto 31st December, 1968 gave recognition to the Dalus (and the Koches) as a tribe. The state has clearly, so to speak, passed the buck to the Centre. For instance, the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly in its Budget Session of 1984 discussed the issue of recognising the Banai and the Dalu as the Scheduled Tribes. While the Meghalaya Peoples' Front proposed that they should be recognised, the Meghalaya Union of Peoples' Party opposed it. The then Chief Minister, Captain Williamson Sangma, stated at that time:

... the Committee on the Welfare of Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes of the House itself had studied the issue at

length and recommended recognition of these communities as Scheduled Tribes of Meghalaya and that if further investigation in this respect was at all called for, it was for the Government of India to do so. The matter was then passed unanimously by the House.

This is where the matter stands even after a little more than a decade now. There is no serious and concerted effort on the part of the community, except at individual levels, to get the Dalu recognised as a Scheduled Tribe. Their insignificant size of voters, lack of leadership, and political awareness among the members, apathy of the dominant communities in the district, etc., are identified as potential factors responsible for what they have not been able to achieve so far. With such a small size of population and with only two graduates so far, the sympathy of the dominant communities is essential if they are to be developed. The majority of them being menial workers in the informal sector, they cannot be expected to participate in any effort towards this even if they had their own leaders. This problem is further accentuated by a host of apprehensions shared by the members of their community about becoming a tribe such as having to become Christian and eat beef, among others. The fear of losing the Kshatriya status, which has given them a sense of pride, if nothing else in material terms, is another bottleneck in the minds of the people. Archibald Sangma, the representative in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly from that area, recalls that the Dalu were actually offered the status of a Scheduled Tribe earlier but they refused on the plea that their caste status would fall and they would have to eat beef.

All this is understandable from how basically an illiterate, minority, and peripheralised community perceives things in the surrounding. For them, the Garo represent the tribal world and to become tribe means

essentially to become Garolike. The vast differences within tribes in terms of dress, food-habits, etiquettes, etc., are not known to most of them. Of course, the Garo, as any other dominant community, would perhaps like to homogenise the Dalu culturally but 'that is a different question altogether. The Dalu have also seen the Bengalis prosper despite being Hindus and retaining all traits of Hinduism. The Bengali case has shown that they need not become 'tribe' in order to develop themselves: rather they should abandon 'tribal' habits like alcoholism and gambling. In other words, the Garo and Bengali communities stand as reference groups for them with apparently unbridgeable attributes.

Regarding the ambivalence of caste or tribal identity it may also be pointed out that the very question of descent is being hotly debated within themselves. The 'pro-clan Dalu', if use this expression, are apparently keen to emphasise on what may be described as parallel descent, in which the sons trace their descent through their father and daughters through their mother. Accordingly many returned the clan names of sons and daughters according to the clan names of their parents. Some of them, of course, informed that the daughters take their mother's *dapha* only when they inherit mother's property. This is what Roy perhaps refers to as 'vestiges of matriarchy'. But most villagers, with or without Vaishnavite leanings, deny this outright and say that they are patrilineal. They even alleged that the claim of the other group is unfounded and motivated. In any case, this clearly shows an ideological conflict within them and they have not been able to sort it out by themselves.

For many they have to tread either the Garo or the Bengali Path. The third path, which may call the Dalu Path, is not easily visible even to the most educated of them. But, perhaps instinctively, some of them consider that they should not lose the Dalu identity and become

either Garo or Bengali in the process. They are ready to become a tribe, and even dream of becoming so, but not at the cost of their identity or without having to lose their Dalu identity.

The Dalu identity is being gradually revived, mainly in the initiative of the non-Vaishnavites. Their emphases are on their language, dress, festivals, rituals, etc., but all these are, as stated above, in a state of flux. Many of them claim that they can speak in their own language but often speak in the Bengali language and feel more esteemed to be able to do so. Their dress, festivals, and rituals are also largely same as those of the Bengali but they often come out with examples of their culture such as *bastu pooja* or propitiation of the village deity, and *habisanna*, a mourning ritual practised by them. These are often claimed to be exclusively theirs though it is informed that even the Koch and Hajong tribes have the practice of celebrating *bastu pooja* and this practice is also reported from various other tribes though the name of the rituals may vary according to linguistic variation. For a small community without any strong economic and educational foundation it is indeed very difficult to expect its culture to be entirely different unless it is a recent migrant group in a completely different milieu.

Hence Dalu identity may perhaps be better justified in subjective sense than on the basis of any objective criteria though theoretically they can develop certain exclusive cultural symbols or draw new boundaries between themselves and the neighbouring communities. The fact that they call themselves "Dalu" and are conscious of this identity in itself is a great cultural asset. Such a subjectivity may be difficult for them to translate into objective identity markers but that it is not always necessary either. Their sense in the glorious past is an enough condition to give life to such an identity.

It is partly due to absence of exclusive cultural markers and partly due to their insignificant demographic size that they are often seen ambivalent about their identity. The ideological support, which is much needed for sustaining such a culture and giving it a clear identity, is often missing due to their poor literacy, economic condition, and other such conditions of dependency besides those mentioned above. The need for development is so compulsive for them that many are ready to redefine their identity in order to make it congenial for development.

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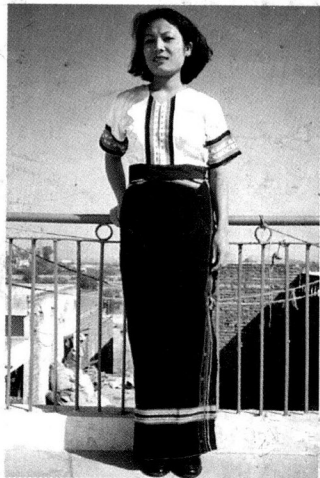
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He contributed several papers at seminars and articles to the journals on different subject—matters such as—social change in north east; Tribal education, economic issues of hill areas, etc.

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