

THE JAINTIAS

Studies in
Society
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an N. Lamare

This book **The Jaintias: Studies in Society and Change** has been the outcome of a long and exhaustive research that was carried out since 1992. Since written information on the people in study is so limited, a lot of stress is being laid on *interviews and field study*. The oral traditions and folklores of the people have been used in the best possible way to derive information.

The book also makes an attempt to throw more light on the migration, economy, political institutions, religion, marriage, inheritance and others that the people have tried to preserve.

Rs. 400/-

Dr. S.N. Lamare was born at Jowai, in Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya. He did his early schooling in Jowai and later graduated from St. Edmund's College, Shillong with honours in History. He finished his M.A. in History from the North Eastern Hill University. He was awarded the M.Phil degree in 1995 from the same university for his research on *The Cultural Transition of the Pnars from the Middle of the 19th Century to the First Half of the 20th Century*. The North Eastern Hill University awarded him the Ph.D. in 2000 for his thesis *The Jaintia Resistance: 1860–1863*. He has published a number of articles on Jaintia history in newspapers and in the Proceedings of the North East India History Association of which he is a life member. His book *Resistance Movement in North East India: The Jaintias of Meghalaya 1860–1863* was published in 2001. Collections of his poems called *Reflections* have been published in 2002. Dr. S.N. Lamare is presently working as a lecturer of history in St. Edmund's college Shillong, Meghalaya.

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Studies in Society and Change

Dr. Shobhan N. Lamare



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CHAPTER 1

Origin, Migration and Topography

The study of the different tribes, today, has not only attracted the attention of the anthropologists and sociologists but also other branches of study, like that of history and others. In trying to understand the tribal society especially when referred to the pre-literate societies, researchers are exposed to a series of problems and this is because of the lack of knowledge and information. There is hardly anything in written form, which gives information about a particular tribe or tribes. It is only when they are subjected to a case study that information can be gathered about them. Like any other pre-literate societies of the world, the tribes in the North-eastern part of India have managed to preserve their tradition by handing them orally from one generation to another. Today, the oral tradition can be seen as one of the most productive source of information in knowing and understanding a group of people that is not well known. Important information relating to their origin, migration, name of places and others can be obtained from these oral traditions even if they were handed over through many generations. In such cases, the history of the people in study would be often mixed up with legends and myths. On the other hand, these legends, myths, traditional accounts, folklores are being regarded today as a great 'democratising force'¹ in understanding the history and culture of the people.

Professor Allan Nevins of Columbia University started the first oral history project in 1948-1949. Today oral narrations and records are being accepted as an important source in helping

reconstruct the past. The importance of a proper synthesis between oral tradition, folk history along with the other sources, have been realized today in not only trying to reconstruct the pre-literate societies, but also in building up the historiography of the area in study. A note of caution, though oral traditions are being categorized as one of the important sources, it should be remembered that it has many pitfalls. The main draw backs lies in the fact that it is often coloured with myths, legends and fanciful ideas which may be far from the truth. Keeping this in mind, one way of using them, is to treat these sources as raw materials for any kind of deduction or generalization. Historians, who are writing about what had happened many years before him, have to face the challenging task of getting correct and relevant information in order that the conclusion would be objective. It is precisely because of this again, that the debate on whether objectivity is possible in history or not have been raging ever since the study of history has carved out a niche for itself. Over the years the discussion has attained much importance and has acquired significant dimensions.² With the inclusion of oral tradition, the subjective element³ had kept on hunting the historians and proper care should be taken while handling these sources and to corroborate them with other external or secular sources. If this can be done, then it will help in building up a data base, which will help further in carrying out research work and more importantly to preserve in the form of writing, something which the people have managed to retain and preserve through generations.

The history of North-East India has been provided to the outside world initially through the writings of the British administrators like A.J.M. Mills, W. Allen, P.R.T. Gurdon, J.H. Hutton, Shakespeare and others.⁴ Monographs about the people were written wherever they were posted, and for a long time they had remained as an important source of information about the people residing in this part of the country. The officers were asked to learn the language and dialect of the area of posting and to understand the cultural heritage through their tradition.⁵ Many of the rhymes, proverbs, songs and tales⁶ of the people of this region have survived because of the effort and contribution put forward by these British administrators. There is no denying the fact that many of the beliefs and practices of the people had been overlooked and generalized by the administrators. With time this

had serious implications when the different cultures and traditions of the people were misinterpreted and misunderstood. This is where the colonial sources had created a problem for the researchers, more so to those who would depend heavily on them for any kind of references for their research works. The British administrators were more interested and concerned about the presenting of their routine monthly report rather than for any academic pursuits. Therefore, the case of mistaken identity and generalisation was a common feature in most of their writings.

The Jaintias are one of the many tribal groups of North East India who do not have a script of their own and for that matter any written history. Whatever little is known about them, is being handed over by their ancestors orally right from time immemorial. Though the people have come and stayed in this beautiful landscape, the history and origins of the Jaintias or Pnars of the upland region (as this is the term they prefer to call themselves) is shrouded in mystery. In fact nothing is known about their ancestral lands, their migration, before they came over to these hills. Very little work had been carried out on them and the ones that have appeared in the form of articles and news items in journals and newspapers are being based on secondary sources only.

The Jaintias have a very strong oral tradition, which is being handed over till today to the present generations. This tradition also talks about their origin and refers to their *U Khadyrnru Wasa* or the Sixteen Huts who stayed in heaven.⁷ From this *Khadyrnru Wasa*, *U Tre Kiro* or God had ordered the *Niaw Wasa* or the Seven Huts to go down to a special place prepared for them i.e., the Earth.⁸ In the process, out of the sixteen, nine remained in heaven and seven came to live and prosper in this earth. These traditions like many other traditions claim that man was directly created and send by God, to this earth. It has no room whatsoever to the theory of evolution. The people still believe that the *Niaw Wasa* came leaving the rest in heaven. This tradition is heavily coloured with myths and the interpretations are vague. It does not throw a clear picture on the origin and migration of the people.

With the beginning of the 20th century, the social structure and tradition of the people had attracted the attention of the researchers and it had been a subject of curiosity with many. There had been a good number of views that have been expressed about

them as to their origin and migration and these can be seen in the form of theories.

One theory suggests that the Jaintias were the second inhabitants to have migrated into the northeastern region, the first being a Negrito race that was either exterminated by later immigrants or assimilated by other ethnic groups.⁹ This theory clearly refers to the Jaintia as the second group of migrants into the hills but at the same time it fails to give any information about their place of origin or the process of migration or the reasons for the same. There is also no clear explanation about the negrito race and as such is indeed not clearly explained.

In another case attempts were being made by researchers to draw references from the *Puranas*. Mention is being made in this ancient text about the old kingdom of Pragjyotisha by Naraka, the ruler of Videha.¹⁰ Pragjyotisha as referred to is situated on the extreme eastern fringe of *Bharatvarsha*, and its earliest inhabitants were popularly known as the *Kiratas*.¹¹ The name *Kirata* is for the first time found in the *Yajurveda* in connection with the *Purusa-medha* or man-offering sacrifice. References about a *Kirata* girl who digs for an herbal remedy on the ridges of the mountains can also be obtained from the *Atharvaveda*. The *Kiratas* of Pragjyotisha can be identified with the Khasis, the Jaintias, the Garos, the Kacharis, the Chutias, the Tipperahs, the Nagas and the other neighbouring tribes of North East India living during the time of Naraka.¹² The *Kalika Purana* states that Naraka was “a political adventurer in pre- *Bharata* war period before the beginning of the *Kali-Yuga* or the Iron Age, roughly ascribe to 3100 B.C.”¹³ A fierce battle broke out between the *Kirata* chief name Ghataka and Naraka and after inflicting a crushing defeat on the *Kiratas* and their chief beheaded, Naraka installed himself on the throne of Pragjyotisha, later known as Kamarupa.¹⁴ Naraka captured twentyfive hundred elephants, took away jewels, ornaments, costumes, state banner etc.¹⁵ It was during this period that many of the *Kiratas* deserted the country and fled eastward. Some were pushed back to the hills.¹⁶ The *Kalika Purana* also furnishes “clear evidence that the *Kiratas* were driven back in the eastern side lying at the end of marshy region”.¹⁷ After Naraka came to power and rose to prominence, the name of the kingdom was changed from Pragjyotisha to Kamarupa. The Vedic rites and rituals were revived and his coronation ceremony also took place.¹⁸ His

period was marked by a synthesis of Aryans, non-Aryans, Alpine Aryans, the Austric, the Bodos and the other *Kiratas*.¹⁹ The above references though drawn from the Puranic and Tantric literature,²⁰ does not give a clear picture and study about the Jaintias, except that they were being brought within the collective term known as the *Kiratas*. Another indication is that, North Eastern part of India, inspite of its topography, dense forest and inhospitable nature for human habitation, was "colonised by the enterprising early humans".²¹ Prof. H.D. Sankalia had proposed the cultural sequence for North East India in the following manner:²²

New Stone Age (B)	c. 2,000–1,000 B.C.
New Stone Age (A)	c. 5,000–2,000 B.C.
Mesolithic	c. 10,000–5,000 B.C.
Late Palaeolithic	c. 20,000–10,000 B.C.
Middle Palaeolithic	c. 50,000–20,000 B.C.
Early Palaeolithic	c. 2,00,000–50,000 B.C.

On the other hand, P.C. Dutta in his article "Early man in North East India" (1988) has proposed, "early man appeared in North East India during a climate phase of the middle sequence of the middle Pleistocene epoch, between 400,000 and 300,000 years ago or a little belated".²³ In the case of the Jaintias, though there are prehistoric sites with strong legends and tales, yet none of these sites have been subjected to proper scientific dating.

Late Prof. B. Pakem provided more light on the people in study by looking into the megaliths that are scattered all over the region. He pointed out that the megaliths do throw some signs and indications that perhaps the same were erected around the Iron Age.²⁴ So far as the terminology is concerned, the term 'megaliths' does not only include the large stone only like the monoliths in Nartiang and Sutnga or the menhirs or obelisks, or the stone circle, stone rectangle and stone row, some of which are called cromlechs or the stone chambers with a single flat stone covering called dolmens. Instead in Jaintia Hills the term would also include the big stone bridge at Amwi and Syndai, the microliths like stone jars at Saipung; stone figurines at Dawki; stone carving at Jowai and meteorite stones called locally as *U Sdai Pyrthat*, literally an axe of thunder. In fact, whatever is connected with erected or artistically decorated structure of stones may be grouped

under the term 'megalith' in the context of Jaintia Hills. Archaeologists, geologists and other specialists in the field, however, may not agree with this general observation.²⁵ Generally, there are three basic types of megalithic erections viz., menhirs or standing stones, dolmens or flat table stones and the cists, which are box like structures, used for the internment of bones. Although structurally these megalithic types are similar to those found in Europe, and other parts of India and South East Asia, yet there are significant differences in the methods and rituals connected with the erection of these stones, particularly the dolmens. The dolmens in the South of India and eastern Mediterranean countries are connected with burial practices, those of North eastern India do not come under the category of burial structure, due to the absence of any mortal remains of the deceased in them. However, in the Khasi and Jaintia hills, cists and a number of dolmens have been used as repositories for the charred bones of the deceased.²⁶ Owing to the absence of academic study in this regard, it is difficult to conclude whether the Pnar people had this megalithic culture in the true sense of the term. At present it can be said that the process of erecting stones was just a 'historical continuity'.²⁷ The stones were mainly erected for the purpose of commemorating, religious rites and some secular purposes. A number of questions are being asked on the manner in which they were cut, carried and erected. Was it possible for the people to have evolved a technology to carry out such difficult tasks during that time? Or was it borrowed from outside? There is every possibility that they might have acquired the knowledge, of carrying out the work when they came into contact with the other groups at the time of migration from their ancestral lands.

Questions are also being raised from time to time as to whether these monoliths were erected by the Jaintias themselves or by the autochthones. Since the identification of the latter is still difficult, it has been supposed and accepted that the Jaintias were the builders of the megaliths found in their area. The oral tradition of the people, stresses that the Jaintias were the first settlers in the region and refused to move westward after entering their present habitat. This came about after a long migratory process. Prof. Pakem is of the opinion that the migration of the people must have been somewhere around the 3rd century B.C.²⁸



Monoliths in Nartiang



Monoliths in Nartiang



Monoliths in Nartiang



Monoliths in Nartiang

One more theory suggests that the Jaintias entered the present hills in batches and were known by different names like the Jwai, Nartiang, Ralliang, Changpung, Sutnga, Amwi²⁹ and others. This assertion suggests that the Jaintias did not migrate as a tribe to their present habitat. It was only much later that they formed a single group and came under one centralized administration and were more or less leading a more sedentary way of life. This theory also has it that, the Amwi's of War Jaintia, reached their present habitat from the east and that their ancestors were originally connected with the Mekong River, located in Cambodia.³⁰

A different view projects the Jaintias to be the original inhabitants of a state in the Chinese region called 'T' Sin-tiang. This is an Austric word and the people of this state were called 'T' Sin 'tiang or 'T' Sin-tien. In course of time they came to be known as Synteng or 'Syntein'.³¹

Writers such as P.R.T. Gurdon refers to a tradition which indicates, "North as the direction from which they migrated, and Sylhet as the terminus of wanderings, from which they were ultimately driven back into their present hills fastnesses by a great flood, after a more or less peaceful occupation of that district."³² Gurdon also gives references about J.B. Shadwell, who mentions a tradition amongst them, that they originally came into Assam from Burma via the Patkai range, having followed the route of one of the Burmese invasion.³³ He further adds that, "tradition, such as it is, connects them politically with the Burmese, to whose king they were up to a comparatively recent date rendering homage, by sending him an annual tribute in the shape of an axe, as an emblem merely of submission."³⁴ What one fails to understand from this kind of deduction is the stress made by Gurdon himself on the "less peaceful occupation" of the region. Does it imply that there were others before them residing in the district? Could it be those Negrito race as Stephen Fuchs had pointed out? Or the autochthones as Prof. Pakem had referred to? Further, the references about their migration and allegiance towards the Burmese ruler somewhere in history is, as Gurdon himself prefers to call it "inexpressibly vague".³⁵ As a corollary to the above, tradition has it "that in early times they moved gradually from east to west."³⁶

Yet in another development, the theory put forward by Dr. Lalit P. Pathak an eminent demographer along with the guidance of late Prof. B. Pakem have raised a lot of eyebrows.

Dr. Pathak through his own findings has claimed, "that the origin of the tribe was located from South Western Turkey".³⁷ He also pointed out that the matrilineal people of Jaintia area of Lukka was stressed in Southwest Anatolia during the first Millennium B.C.³⁸ The Lukkan state, according to him, was located along the banks of the Sianta River called by the Greeks as Xanthus, now known as Koca, flowing into the Mediterranean Sea in South West Anatolia.³⁹ He further adds that, "Herodotus tells us that there is one custom that sets the Lukkans or Lycians apart from all other people. Their practice of naming themselves not after their father, but after their mothers".⁴⁰ Toynbee through his historical maps have depicted about the northern foreign invasion that was carried out in Anatolia and Greek areas.⁴¹ He pointed out that as a result of this invasion, huge population from these areas fled by sea routes towards Egypt and Cyprus.⁴² The prominent groups among those who have migrated during the 13th and 12th centuries B.C. were the Lukkans or Jaintias, Achaeans, Tutusha and Shekelesha towards Egypt and another group towards Phoenicia and Syria.⁴³ The conclusion drawn here are highly debatable, and as it stands now, until further research works are carried out on this area, Dr. Pathak's theory had added another dimension to the already perplexing problem about the origin and migration of the Jaintias. Dr. Pathak made his observation largely on the basis of similarity of name places. He does not make mention about how a Mongoloid people should have had their origins in Turkey nor does he talk about how this and other groups in Turkey and Anatolia could have migrated eastward.

Today, many scholars seem to agree that the Jaintias are an offshoot of the Mon-Khmer race of South East Asia and had ascended the hills through the Assam valley.⁴⁴ They appear to be the descendants from some of the earliest mongoloid immigrants into India, who changed their language through contact with Austric speakers, either in Myanmar or on the soil of India, in prehistoric times.⁴⁵ It is likely that they were spread over a much wider tract, probably over parts at least of the plain lands of Sylhet and Kamrup, before they became finally confined to the hills.⁴⁶

The above traditions and views about the origin, route of migration of the Jaintias have added more insight into the life of the people, but not forgetting of course, that they are hypothetical conclusions. The oral tradition refers to *U Dieñ-Jri* or rubber plant,

which acted as a bridge between their ancestral land, and their present abode. Nothing much about the location and place could be extracted except that it is being referred to the east and would remain as a passing reference.

Today, the term Jaintia is used to denote a group of people mainly inhabiting Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya and belonging to the following subgroups, the Bhois, the Biates, the Hadems, the Lalungs, the Pnars and the Wars.⁴⁷ The Jaintias can also be found in the neighbouring hill districts of Khasi Hills, Karbi Anglong, North Cachar Hills and in the plains of Cachar of Assam,⁴⁸ and in the adjoining district of Sylhet in Bangladesh. The total area of Jaintia Hills as estimated in 1868 was 2,100 sq miles.⁴⁹ Originally, the Jaintia kingdom consisted of three parts viz. the Jaintia hills, neighbouring plains in Sylhet and territories of present day Nowgong district. The hilly portion was the original home of the ruling family.⁵⁰ In the 18th century the kingdom was bounded in the north by Gobha-Sonapur, south by the river Surma, east by the river Kupli and in the west by the Brahmaputra. At times some principalities of Kamrup and Karimganj were included in this kingdom. The hill portion was peopled by the Jaintias, the Jaintia plains of Sylhet by the Bengali and the Nowgong portion by the Jaintias, Dimasas, Lalungs and the other tribes.⁵¹ The kingdom for that matter included both the hills and the plains and people belonging to different races have resided within it. The ruling family belonged to the Jaintia tribe Pnar.⁵²

Many things have chanced right from the days of the Jaintia kings down to the British Raj; and from the time of India's independence to the merging of the hill tribes to the Indian union. Presently, Jaintia hills is a part of Meghalaya and it is situated between 25° 3' to 25° 45' North Latitudes and 91° 58' to 92° 47' East longitudes.⁵³ It covers an area of 3819 sq kms and located at an altitude between 1250 and 1750 meters above sea level.⁵⁴ With the transfer of two blocks, I and II in 1951, with an area of 1543.6 sq kms to the united Mikir and North Cachar Hills district,⁵⁵ the area of the Jaintias was further reduced. It is bounded in the North by Karbi Anglong District of Assam (formerly known as the Mikir Hills District); East by North Cachar Hills and the Cachar District of Assam; South by Bangladesh and west by the East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya.⁵⁶ The upland region acts as a watershed between the Brahmaputra and Surma Valley.⁵⁷

According to the 1991 census, Jaintia Hills has a population of 2,20,47⁵⁸ souls. The district is made up of 459 villages and around 11,9872 people reside in them.⁵⁹ Jowai itself has a population of 20,601 people. The general density of population was 58 persons/sq km.⁶⁰ The sex ratio was 973. The literacy percentage was 35.32 and the percentage of literates was higher among the females i.e., 36.31 than among the males 34.3 percent. In the urban area the literacy percentage stands at 81.37% while in the rural areas it was at 30.35%.⁶¹

The topography of Jaintia Hills also has much to offer. The central part is mainly constituted by the rocks of the Pre-Cambrian age. The pre-tertiary and tertiary rocks are found above these rocks, which form the basement for the younger formation.⁶² The rocks are predominantly composed of sandstones with clay, coal seams and fossiliferous limestones. These are all tertiary formations and belong to the shelf facies stage.⁶³ The hill area is divided into three lateral sections running east and west and corresponding to those of the Khasi hills of which they are extensions. In the south is the War area, which extends to the plains of Bangladesh and Cachar. The North comprises of the Bhoi region, and then the central upland region. Jaintia hills is made up of hills, valleys, rivers and lakes. Some of the important ones are listed. The highest peak in Jaintia hills is Maryngksih, which, stands at 5,337 feet high⁶⁴ and is located near the eastern border of the district. South of Nongkhlieh is Lum Iakorsing which stands at 4,751 ft. To the east of Sutnga, in the Narpuh area we have Lum Bah-Bo-Bah Kong (hill where two sisters-in-laws were carried) and is 3,367 ft. high.⁶⁵ The oral tradition narrates a story about a man who married two sisters at a time. Since such practice was unacceptable to the society and being unable to bear the treatment of their neighbours, the man decided to take his wives to the hill. Overcome by fatigue, the two women had to be carried by the husband on his back and it was from this time onwards that the name came to be attached to the hill. This tradition like many others fails to comply to certain queries like when, why and how? Interestingly, from a distance, the ridge till today has an appearance of a person carrying two others on his back.⁶⁶ To the south of Narpuh is Lum Sanaraja, which stands at 2,925 ft., Lum Tiniang is in the east of Raliang and is 4,396 ft. In the Daloishop of Nangjni is Lum Nangingi, which is at 4,548 ft.⁶⁷

In the upland region the important valleys are the sung, the Jowai North and South valleys, the Letein, the Myntang and the Umiurem Valley. The rivers, on the other hand, can be broadly divided into two viz., (i) those flowing north into the Brahmaputra and (ii) those flowing South into the Surma. Rivers flowing north into the Brahmaputra are Myntang, Umiurem, Waikhyrwi, Mynriang and Kupli. Those flowing south into the Surma are Myngngot, Myntdu, Prang, Lukka and Simlieng.⁶⁸ Apart from the above, the place is full of streams and brooks.⁶⁹ Lakes like the Um Hang and Thadlaskein adds a lot of beauty to the region. Thadlaskein with the legend of U Sajar Nangli makes it all the more interesting and fascinating. The rivers and lakes are mostly fed by rainwaters and as such the flow of water is not constant through the year. Mention may also be made of a tank carved out of a solid rock near Syndai, which, have been used during the time of the Jaintia kings as a royal bathing place.⁷⁰ J.H. Hutton, who visited Jaintia Hills in October 1925, has this to add regarding the tank. He remarks: "A little further on is a tank cut entirely out of a solid rock with gutter and drains likewise excavated out of the rock to bring the rain water from the slopes above it to keep it full. The tank is 22 feet 11 inches broad by 29 feet 2 inches long and descends inside by three broad steps, the depth in the center being 6 feet. Opposite the path, on the hillside of the tank, is an elephant carved in one block with the tank so as to stand in the water and be almost submerged when the tank is full to the brim. Opposite it is a flight of 6 steps to the bottom of the tank left in the block when excavating."⁷¹

The Myngngot forms a natural boundary between the Khasi and Jaintia Hills in the South. The river flows through rugged terrain before it enters the plains near Dawki. The suspension bridge near Dawki is the only motorable bridge over the river. In the plains the river is known as Maheshkali.⁷² The Myntdu, which encircles Jowai and which, is known by different name as it passes different area is the most popular with the Pnars of Jowai and neighbouring area. The Syntu Ksiar or the Golden Flower is well known for its scenic beauty. In the plains the river is known as the Hari.⁷³ The underground water level in Jaintia hills is quite high, particularly in Jowai. Many houses in Jowai have their own private ponds, which provide clear drinking water through the year. The region is also rich in its flora and fauna. Great varieties of

vegetation and animals are seen within the area. The continuation of the primitive methods of cultivation had led to the decline of the forest area in some parts of the district. This in turn had a strong impact on the existence of wild life both the mammalian and avian fauna. Some of the rare species of wild life in the region are the golden langur, the golden cat, the bison, hoolocks, tiger and the clouded leopard. Among birds are the hornbill and the imperial pigeon.⁷⁴ The mineral resources of Jaintia Hills are associated with the tertiary sediments formed during the Eocene age. Important minerals found are coal, limestone, phosphorite and lithomargic clay. The first two are the most important economic minerals, whereas the latter two are not been made use of till date. Coal reserve in the entire district is estimated at 40 million tons.⁷⁵ The important coal fields are Sutnga, Wapung, Lakadong, Ioksi, Moosiang-Lamare and Jarain. Limestone on the other hand is estimated to be in the order of 1100 million tons.⁷⁶ Sutnga, Nongkhlieh, Lumshnong and Syndai are the important limestone deposits. The other important mineral found is China clay, which till date has not been made use of. The reserve of China clay is in the order of 2 million tons and the areas of deposits are Shangpung, Thadlaskein, Myngot and Mulieh.⁷⁷

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