

## Queens In Khasi- Jaintia Tales : A Query

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Modern scholarship reveals a greater awareness of the historical value of Oral tradition. People's oral account of their tradition, though at times shrouded in fanciful details, often provides the material for history, especially what has been designated as people's history which is not conceived as mere record of events but treated in terms of people showing how they have shaped their social and political institutions and framed their worldview. For a people's history a probe of native oral traditions is indeed useful. The data thus collected will be an important part of the synthesis of pre-literary history.

A question may be raised : Can we produce a history from oral sources alone ? To answer this question one needs to remember that a historian uses any kind of evidence that is likely to help him reconstruct the past. But for the history we are talking about, the People's history, oral evidence is obviously the most important source. We must remember that in a pre-literate society education was interwoven into the life of the society. Life was woven throughout all parts of the social structure. religion and worldview and elders had a special understanding and their responsibility was to pass on valuable information to the next generation by the spoken word. Parents, grand-parents and elders told and retold tales and legends to the children by the bedside, by the campfires, on the hillside, in the forest and at special gathering during the day and at night. It was an ongoing process of communication and education. With such an education the child was established in the society. He/She would know himself/herself and the history of his/her people, of their own institutions.

However, a warning needs to be sounded. We are committed to the use of oral accounts but must emphasize the pitfalls of an over-enthusiastic attachment. We must remember that oral tradition represents merely the raw material for the use of the historian, and not history in its final form. What is required for the historian is to obtain answers from the evidence at his disposal by asking questions and thinking about the evidence. Oral tradition is the

evidence or document from which the historian extracts the answers. It is the duty of the scholar to make up, by further research, for the limitations of a narrator's memory or grasp of the acts which he transmits. The claim to historicity of a legend or a tale and the fanciful details are to be tested through an objective and scientific approach to history. The distinction between fact and fiction is to be made and care is to be taken for a pragmatic use of oral narratives.

Thus to obtain answers from a document or evidence at his disposal (in the context of this paper oral tradition is the document) the historian needs to start by asking questions. As a folklorist, I intend to make a query in this paper, which I expect the historians to follow up.

In a recent seminar on the Status of Women in Tribal Culture of Meghalaya organised by the Centre for Literary and Cultural Studies, North-Eastern Hill University and sponsored by the North-Eastern Regional Centre of Indian Council of Social Science Research, Dr. L. S. Gassah made the following observation :

*Women of the Jaintia Society, though occupying a distinctly higher status in social and economic sphere, are subject to certain restrictions so far as participation in political affairs is concerned. Traditionally, in political matters, a woman does not have any role to play and she is not allowed to participate in political decision-making process. Women are not allowed to attend any durbar or council. They are not given the right to speak or attend any public meeting which concerned the political affairs of either a village or elaka or hima (state). It is a taboo to see women in a political platform. According to traditional custom, they are not given the right to vote in any election to the offices of the traditional chiefs. We therefore come across many tenets which speak about the misfortune or bad days waiting ahead if a woman takes in any form of political activity. Deliberations and decisions, planning, administration and policy-framing and the burdens of management belong to the man. However, it is not out of place to mention about the existence of women rulers. Reference may be made to the legend of Ka Syiem Latympang who established her own kingdom. She was quite powerful and wise. Thus, although political affairs were dominated by men, the society had 'occasionally' produced such able rulers among women too!*

In another paper, presented in the same seminar, Dr. P. M. Passah maintained that men in Jaintia society considered that women

were concerned with domestic affairs and should not dabble with public affairs and women accepted this position as they felt that politics was man's concern and profession. But, Passah has also mentioned of two legendary women ruler, *ka Piang Sariang* and *ka Syiem Latympang*(2)

Talking of the status of women in Khasi society, Dr. Juanita War and Ms. I. M. Syiem also observed that the area of political and administrative affairs was barred to women as was seen in Jaintia Culture. Women could not normally hold offices of the chieftain although they enjoyed a high status and played their role in various other spheres of life. However, Juanita War has also mentioned of a Woman chief, *ka Lar Syiem* of Nobo Sohphoh Syiemship. She has also mentioned one function performed by women within the orbit of state affairs. The mother or the eldest sister or the niece of the *syiem* (the chief) usually become the *Syiem Sad* the state priestess in charge of religious and some other functions such as keeping of the *syiem's* income and possessions.<sup>3</sup>

In the light of the above, we are confronted with a question : if women were debarred from participating in state affairs, how could there be a few legendary lady - chieftains? We are aware of the well-known tenet which says about the misfortune or bad days waiting ahead if a woman takes in any form of political activity — 'Woe worth the day, the hen begins to crow'. (*Adur lanot, wei ba la kynih ka 'iar kynthei*. If such a *taboo* was sincerely honoured how could there be lady chieftains like *ka Syiem Latympang*, *ka Piang Sariang* and *ka Lar Syiem*

A number of legendary references need to be carefully examined in this context. One tale relating to the *Syiem-Lieh* family of Nongkhlaw runs as follows : Once some Khasi hunters from the western uplands in course of a hunt, came eastward to Jaintia Hills. When night fell, they accidentally got into the house of an old woman where they proposed to spend the night. The woman had adopted two attractive girls who were not produced for fear of her guests falling in love but were kept hidden in the roof above the kitchen. At the dead of the night, the strangers stole into the kitchen on hearing some strange human voices and found the beautiful ladies. The strangers hurried away taking them off to their land. The fair maidens were anointed as the rulers of the newly emerging state.<sup>4</sup> Another tradition suggests that Ka Lieh was the founder of the Nongkhlaw 'royal dynasty' and she was the sister of one Ka Teng, the *Syiem*-priestess of Sutnga state.<sup>5</sup> Tradition also says that women were even engaged in the battlefield and two ladies,

Ka Jem and Ka Sanglar were placed in charge of administration at Sohiong and Nongkhlaw after their brother U Syntiew had a successful military campaign for extension of territory. <sup>6</sup> Maram syiem-ship also had once a lady *syiem* Ka Wan Rani.<sup>7</sup>

The tale of Ka Syiem Latympang is more elaborate <sup>8</sup> but it needs to be ascertained whether it is a tale or a legend. However, in the minds of the people Ka Syiem Latympang was a great queen, a sagacious ruler and a great warrior.

These references suggest that there might have been once a few female rulers in Khasi-Jaintia Hills. The tales at least suggest that women were not debarred initially from participating in state affairs. The institution of *ka Syiem Saa* is another evidence. Whether the states did really have women rulers is an issue that needs to be carefully examined. Folklorists are aware that tales sometime do have fanciful references but it is the responsibility of oral historians, as we have mentioned in the first part of this paper, to seek truth through the details. In the case of legends, however, this question does not arise since legends do contain historical facts.

In case of the tales and traditions referred above, it seems to be prudent to ask the question : Were there really (at least) a few Women rulers in the states of Khasi- Jaintia Hills ? It might be that women were gradually put to a subordinate position so far a state affairs were concerned after the state-structure developed a more complex form and pre-state political institutions and structures were replaced by more elaborate state apparatus. The *taboo* that prohibits women to speak in public and participate in public including state affairs might be a later creation.

But all these are queries that I intended to make. We expect the historians to extract answers.

### Notes & References

1. L. S. Gassah, 'Status of Women in Jaintia Culture', paper presented in a *Seminar on the Status of Women in Tribal Cultures at Meghalaya*, CLCS, NEHU and NERC, ICSS&- Shillong, 13-14 July, 1988. Omphasis added.
2. P. M. Passah, 'Status of Women in Jaintia Society and Culture', paper presented in the *Seminar of the Status of Women in Tribal Cultures of Meghalaya*'
3. Juanita War, 'Status of Women in Traditional Khasi Culture'. I. M. Syiem, 'Women in Khasi Society' papers presented in the *Seminar on the Status of Women in Tribal Cultures of Meghalaya*.

4. See for details, Hamlet Barch, *History and Culture of the Khasi People*, Spectrum, Guwahati, 1985, p. 76.
5. *ibid* p. 76
6. *ibid* p. 77
7. *ibid* p. 103.
8. See, Hamlet Barch, *Khasi Fables and Folktales*, Firma KLM, Calcutta 1971, p. 37-39.