

Emerging Political Elites in Jaintia Hills

L. S. Gassah

A strong desire to break away from tradition and move speedily towards modernity is noticed in most of the developing countries. Even if this is the case today, however many of these countries continue to have a nostalgia for some aspects of their own traditions. In many instances, the vision of such traditions is a blurred one. Traditional leadership in these countries is still a force to reckon with. The emergence of politics as the dominant theme of the new nations and the increasing politicisation of individual and his groups in these societies is a fact of great historical, political and sociological significance. But one cannot deny the fact that new pattern of leadership has emerged and this has created a considerable gap between traditional and the new type of leaders.

In our own country, we find that 'the traditional concept of society stratifies India into closed groups with well defined, though circumscribed, roles and relationships'. Thus, historically, the authority structure had largely been ascriptive and feudal. Authority was vested in persons belonging to certain privileged strata of society. Leaders were invariably drawn from among the higher caste groups and in most of the cases leadership was an aspect of the hereditary and family functions. The lower strata of castes and families were totally excluded from occupying positions of political, economic and cultural superiority. Thus according to the traditional concept of society, leadership patterns are unusually rigid and strictly ascriptive.' In the case of Jaintia Hills, though the society is by tradition a casteless and classless society, but the traditional pattern of authority and leadership structure was almost the same ascriptive one found elsewhere in India. Thus, traditional leadership was vested in persons belonging to certain original clan or clans (Kurs).

The traditional leaders are 'those who have been operating in the traditional social structure, standing for the old tradi-

tional values and institutions and satisfying various traditional needs of the tradition-oriented tribal society.... All these leaders operate within the traditional social structure and satisfying the religious or secular needs which are traditionally created and are of traditional importance.²

The authors have tried to define the terms 'leader' and 'leadership' in different ways and have given different opinions as regards the understanding of these terms. Hollander opines that 'in general, leader denotes an individual with a status that permits him to exercise influence over certain other individual .. deriving status from followers who may accord or withdraw it, in an essentially free interchange within a group context. Group consent is therefore a central feature in the leader-follower relationships'³ Other definition is that '-leaders are inseparable from any political network. They have the same importance, purpose and place as the head has in the case of a human body. A political network without a leader is like a rudderless ship. The leaders provide the means to attain the objectives of a political network.'⁴ With regard to leadership roles, Hans Nagpaul observes that 'the person who plays a role or function in a situation within the context of the culture to attain a specified goal or goals is perceived as the leader by the members of his group and is given prestige, authority and status which he would not have as a member of the group.'⁵

The traditional leadership in Jaintia Hills fulfils some of the definitions mentioned above. In Jaintia Hills the traditional leaders were that of the *Syiem* or *Raja*, *Dolois* and Village Headmen, who looked after and maintained the administration of the Syiemship, Elakas/Illakas and villages respectively. Before the coming of the British into these hills, the whole of Jaintia Hills formed a single kingdom (Syiemship). The office of the Syiem lapsed in 1835 when Jaintia Hills was annexed by the British. Therefore, after the annexation the office of the Syiem was abolished and ceased to function. The last Jaintia Syiem was given a pension by the British and retired to the British district of Sylhet (now in Bangladesh). The British subsequently declared that the whole area along with few other villages in Khasi Hills to be British Area. But on the other hand, the British retained the offices of Dolois and Village Headman and these continue to function till today aiding and assisting the District Council in the district administration.

Though the office of Syiem came into existence at the last stage of state formation in ancient Jaintia, but it occupied the apex position in the administrative and leadership hierarchy. Moreover, with regards to internal organisation, the Syiemship was split into twelve units. Each of these units was known as doloiship and this holds good even today. Each of the doloiship was and is still looked after and nursed by a Doloi or Provincial Governor. At the level of village administration, we have a Village Headman (Waheh Chnong) who runs and supervises the administration. It was thus during this period (pre-Independence) that the Jaintias had a three-tier system of government - that is, at the top level of administration and leadership we have the Syiem or Raja ; at the zonal stage, below the Syiem we have the Dolois and at the lowest rung of the ladder of administration, that is at the village level, the Headman.

In Jaintia Hills the authority structure and leadership was patterned in a rigid form and based strictly on ascriptive footings at all the three levels of administration. Succession to the offices was based on a hereditary basis. The Jaintia society being a matrilineal one, hereditary passed from the uncle to the nephew. In case of succession to the office of the Syiem, if it happens that 'the Syiem had no more relatives then succession should be decided by means of divination. The principle of divination was actually resorted to in the case of J Syiem Ram Singh II (1790-1832) with the help of a local little bird called *Pdia* or parrot giving the divine oracle'.⁶ On closer perusal of the right to set up candidates to the office of the Doloi it is to be found that only those persons who belong to the original clan(s) have the right to do so. This privilege was granted to them for having originally founded the villages or Elakas/Illakas. The general population could not aspire to the elective post of a Doloi. Further even from among the original clan or clans, the candidate or candidates for the elective post of a Doloi were recruited mostly on ascriptive criteria rather than on grounds of achievements.⁷ More or less the same case applied with regards to the Village Headmen.

With the annexation of the plain areas of the Sylhet district (now in Bangladesh) to the Jaintia kingdom through conquest, the Syiem ruled over the people both in the hills and the plains. But 'his personal rule prevailed only over the conquered territory of the plain areas. In the hills section, the administration was left entirely to the Dolois (Provincial Gov-

ernors). The only symbol of their allegiance to the Raja was an annual tribute of one he-goat from each and every village under their administration....⁸ The Dolois continued to pay the same annual tribute to the British authorities at Cherrapunjee instead of taking the tribute as usual during the Rajas' time to Jaintiapur. It was also reported that Raja Indra Singh used to receive a few seers of parched rice from most of the villages every year and a few bundles of fire-wood from the places where that wood is found. These articles were expended at the *pujas* at the Rajbari at Jaintiapur. Moreover, every village in turn had to supply the Raja with coolies and other servants for cultivating the Raj lands and other purposes.⁹ This symbol of allegiance was 'rather ceremonial than political—though technically, a tribute system was symbolic of basic power system. The Raja was no more than a symbol of unity of the people; and if his activities threatened that unity, the latter would strongly oppose him.'¹⁰ It is therefore evident that though the Syiem held the highest office, but it were the people who maintained the highest authority.

The Dolois had certain powers and functions delegated to them by the Syiem, such as executive, political, judicial and religious. As mentioned earlier, the Dolois wielded extensive powers and influence over the hills section of the Syiemship and actually the entire administration was left in their hands.

At the lowest rung of the ladder of administration, we have the Village Headman (*Waheh Chnong*). The Village Headman is the leader of the people within the jurisdiction of the village and is responsible for the maintenance of the administration in various spheres. The presence of the Village Council is also of great help to the Headman. It is in this Council that the whole affairs of village administration, other activities and developments are brought to the notice of all the adult male members of the village as its members. However, it will not be out of place to mention that the highest authority at all the levels of administration rests with the people in general. The authorities, be he the Syiem, or Dolis or Village Headmen, could not go against the popular opinion of the inhabitants. Those authorities have no dictatorial power over the people because they were selected/elected by the people themselves in order to supervise the administration and not to oppress or suppress them.¹¹

The second part of this paper is to examine the emergence of the new type of leaders and the transformation brought about by them in the transitional period in Jaintia Hills. It may be noted that, unlike the past ascriptive traditional set up of the leadership, the new one is based on achievement, measured through acquisition of the elective positions. The new political structure had a serious impact on the traditional political system and administration. It has created a new relationship and roles. There is a sea-change between the traditional and the emerging pattern of roles and leadership.

In the first instance, there was a colonial impact which led to the birth of new elites in the region. Thus, under the colonial rule, a host of new elites sprang into existence. They formed a new class of their own with the help of their professions like government officials, lawyers, teachers and English educated elites in general. Most of them are urban based. These new educated elites were not lacking behind their counterparts in the plains. Moreover, 'under the colonial rule of the British, the Khasis and Jaintias made fast progress and their society gradually approximated to that of the plains, since the British adopted a policy of 'reclaiming' the hills people to civilization. The result was a series of administrative measures, social and economic reforms in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills whose outcome was the emergence of the middle class.'¹²

The emergence of such political elites and political leaders in Jaintia Hills can also be well seen after India's Independence. This happened because of a new kind of administrative arrangement that was brought about in the hill areas of North-East, that is, the introduction of a democratic political institution under the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India, which replaced the British and Indian administrative system for tribal affairs in *Ri Jaintia*.¹³ Under the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India, District and Regional Councils were introduced in many districts of the hill areas of North East India, including Khasi and Jaintia Hills. With the introduction of such democratic political institutions in the region, most of the powers and functions of the traditional Chiefs have been taken away and they were put under the control and supervision of the District Council. The traditional leaders are treated only as subordinate officials of the District council. This had happened because of certain provisions that contained in the Sixth Schedule. For example, under paragraph

3(i)(g) of the said Schedule, the District Council can regulate the appointment or succession of Chiefs and Headman. A specific example may be mentioned here to that of Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The United K-J Hills Autonomous District (Appointment and Succession of Chiefs and Headmen) Act, 1959, made the provisions not only for its authority to appoint the Chiefs and Headmen but even the removal and suspension of the offices by the Executive Committee of the District Council if in its opinion the Chiefs and Headmen violate the terms and conditions of their appointment. Further the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council in its amendment of the Principal Act on Appointment and Succession of Chiefs and Headmen, 1980, went even to the extent of passing an Act debaring the Chiefs, Deputy Chiefs and Acting Chiefs in taking any part in politics and elections either to the State or District Council. Though this Act does not cover Jaintia Hills, but in practice the Dolois and other Chiefs are not permitted to contest the elections and take part in any form in politics. This is another way of control enforced by the District Council over the traditional Chiefs. Thus, under the new constitutional set up, the Chiefs are pushed behind the line. They are to keep themselves content with whatever powers and functions that were left to them by the District Council. Further, under such a precarious situation, frontal leadership in the area or for that matter in the whole State passes into the hands of the emerging elites. The prevailing conditions are therefore more in favour of such elites than the old guards of tradition. Moreover, the District Council having armed with such constitutional powers, have put under it a complete control over the traditional authorities. There are, therefore, drastic effects on the powers and functions of the traditional Chiefs with the coming of the District Council into existence. The effects are tremendous which requires a different paper altogether to state and analyse the same.

“When a society changes from its traditional moorings into a modern society there is a gradual but fundamental change in the style of life of the people and in their outlook on the world. It involves a new orientation in the attitude .. Modernisation is a total transformation of society, a movement in consciously chosen direction.”¹⁴ About this ‘Choo-sen driection’, there appear two broad major current if we analyse the Jaintia society in the traditional period. One of

the currents is an attempt to transform social structure from the ones based on ascriptive to achieving roles ; secondly, an attempt at transformation of the traditional political system by making the sanction behind all inhabitants of the area and break away the old practice of allowing concentration of political authority and power only in the hands of the original clans (Kurs). This is possible especially after the new democratic set up of parliamentary democracy and the institution of District Council was introduced in the country after Independence. Such practice was not adopted only by the Jaintias, but also by the Khasis and the Garos of Meghalaya and the Mizos of Mizoram. They took advantage of the new political institution of District Council in order to consolidate leadership and bring about political modernisation. What followed was the change over to constitutional path to achieve their political ends and leadership and political identity. Under such an atmosphere, the new elites and new type of leaders emerged in the society. These emerging elites are urban-based and educated. Majority of them are alienated from traditional tribal society and forming their distinct strata in the society in transition.

Thus, "the kingpin of the socio-economic and political determinant is the elite structure in the State. In Meghalaya the traditional elite is giving way to modern elite. While the role of ascriptive leaders like the Nokmas and the Laskars of Garo Hills, the Syiems, Lyngdohs, Wahadadars and the Sardars of Khasi Hills, and the Dollois of Jaintia Hills has been diminished by their respective District Councils that of modern leaders has increased partly due to their achievement-orientation in the various fields of professions like business, law and teaching. Most of the modern leaders of Meghalaya come mostly from the legal and teaching professions and very few from among the traditional leaders. It is hoped, therefore, that the present political elite of Meghalaya has the capability to cause an inter-action between the socio-economic environment and the political institutions prevailing in the State.. Further, most of the Pre-Independence Leaders from British Areas (of Meghalaya) were western educated, cosmopolitan in outlook and comparatively liberal. They come largely from among the urban elite and continued to be at the helm of affairs even after independence. The British Areas also pro-

vided men who joined hands in the struggle for India's freedom though their contribution could not be adequately appreciated as they were far away from the main theatre of India's struggle for Independence. Presently, political leaders come from every nook and corner of the State irrespective of the fact, whether they come from the erstwhile British Areas or from the erstwhile Khasi States".¹⁸

After closer examination of the whole process of economic and socio-political development of the Jaintia society in the traditional period, it may be concluded that with the introduction of the new system of administration, the past practice is in the process of disintegration. Though there was no such movement to abolish the offices of the traditional Chiefs and institutions like in the case of Mizoram, but the fact remains that the new administrative set up helps and gives way and opens an avenue to replace the traditional leaders by that of the representatives of the people elected every five years through adult franchise to the State Legislative Assembly and the District Councils. It is through this present system that educated, intellectual elites, lawyers and businessmen find their way to take up the rein of leadership from the traditional leaders in the form of politics and elections. Unlike the latter, the former are more urban conscious, literate/educated and exposed to the outside world. They no longer remain inside the cocoon of their village jurisdiction and tribal society but are thoroughly exposed to the world outside their own. The new pattern of leadership as it exists today, reflects a transition from individual to collective, from the hereditary to elective and from ascriptive to achievement-oriented. With this, leadership roles have been transformed.

References

1. Rangnath, *The Changing Pattern of Rural Leadership in Uttar Pradesh*, Sindhu Publications Ltd., New Delhi, 1974, p. 152.

2. L. P. Vidyarthi, and R. K. Rai, *The Tribal Culture of India*, Concept Publishing Co., Delhi, 1977, p. 233.
3. E. P. Hollander, *Leaders, Groups and Influence*, OJP, 1964, p. 16.
4. Vidyarthi and Rai, *op. cit.*, p. 231.
5. Hans Nagpaul, "Leadership : A Frame of Reference," in, *Leadership in India*, L. P. Vidyarthi, (ed) Asia Publishing House, London, 1967, p. 60.
6. B. Pakem, "State Formation in Ancient Jaintia," Seminar paper on 'Pre-Colonial State Formations in Tribal Regions of East and North-East India', organised by the *Centre for Studies in Social Sciences*, Calcutta, 24-26 July, 1981.
7. B. Pakem, "The Changing Power Structure of the Political Institution of Jaintia Chieftainship," *The Journal of North-East India Council for Social Science Research*, Shillong, Vol. II, No. I, April 1977, p. 2.
8. B. Pakem, "The Socio-Political System of the Jaintia Tribe of Assam ; An Analysis of Continuity and Change," in K. Suresh Singh (ed), *Tribal Situation in India*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Simla 1972, p. 353.
9. W. J. Allen, *Report on the Khasi and Jaintia Hills*, 1853, (Reprinted, Govt. Press, Shillong, 1975,) p. 4
10. B. Pakem, *Op. cit.* (note 8).
11. L. S. Gassah "Village Administration in Jaintia Hills - A Comparative Study of Two Villages," *The Journal of NEI-CSSR*, Shillong, vol. iv, No. I, April 1980, pp. 11-12.
12. P. N. Dutta, "The Emergence and Role of the Middle Class in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, 1824 - 1950," in B. Datta Ray (ed), *The Emergence and Role of Middle Class in North-East India*, Uppal Publishing House, New Delhi, 1983, pp. 112-113.

13. B. Pakem, *op. cit.* (note - 7), p. 3.
14. S. P. Aiyar, *Modernisation of Traditional Society*, MacMillan, Delhi, 1973, p. 4.
15. B. Pakem, "Meghalaya : The Politics of Ethnic Groups," Seminar paper on 'State Politics in India', Kurukshetra University, 23-25 March, 1981.