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**TRIBAL TRADITIONS AND CRISES OF
GOVERNANCE IN NORTH EAST INDIA,
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO
MEGHALAYA**

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Tribal Traditions and Crises of Governance in North East India, with special reference to Meghalaya

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The second half of the twentieth century saw an upsurge in the ‘process of democratization’, though even today democracy remains a contentious term.¹ Critics point out that democracies, established with assistance from the West, lead to consensual domination.² However, countries in South Asia, which have adopted ‘democratic’ forms of governance and politics, have had different experiences. Some, including India for example, have had stable democratic governments, while others, such as Pakistan, have had repeated authoritarian interference.

Many of the newly emerging democracies have been experiencing, what Sandbrook called in the case of some African states, “deadly conflicts”.³ Sandbrook’s study shows that in Africa countries, such as Niger and Zambia, are becoming pseudo-democratic or authoritarian regimes, whilst countries, including Tanzania and Zanzibar, are making little progress towards consolidating representative democracy. On the other hand, we have Madagascar, Ghana and Mali, showing vitality in their democratic institutions.⁴

The experiences of African societies have often been studied to analyse the process of democratisation in former colonies with strong tribal traditions. Scholars suggest that democratic openings in divided societies, like those of Africa, often aggravate communal tensions. The numbers game, involved in free elections, encourages leaders to manipulate latent regional, ethnic, or religious animosities in an attempt to mobilise electoral support. In these societies, the private sector is very weak. Therefore, the state controls access to vast resources and thus, aggravates election-related tensions.⁵ Studies on the effects of legacies of tribal systems in pre-colonial Africa showed such traditions created enormous problems for new democracies.⁶

Anthropologists, such as Fortes, Evans-Pritchard and Harold K Schneider,⁷ give detailed descriptions of African societies that help us understand the structure of authority in some of these societies. In discussing the Zulu, for instance, Fortes & Evan-Pritchard pointed out that

¹ Geraint Parry & Moran Michael (ed.), *Democracy and Democratization*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

² W. I. Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, U.S. Intervention, and Hegemony*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 4-6.

³ Richard Sandbrook, *Closing the Circle: Democratization and Development in Africa*, London and New York: Zed Books, 2001, pp.49-74.

⁴ Sandbrook (2001), pp.23-47.

⁵ E. Conteh-Morgan, *Democratization in Africa: The Theory and Dynamics of Political Transition*, Westport, 1977, Ch.6.

⁶ V. G. Simiyu, ‘The Democratic Myth In The African Traditional Societies’ in Walter Oyugi *et.al* (eds.) *Democratic Theory and Practice in Africa*, London: James Currey, 1988. pp.49-70, 1987.

⁷ M. Fortes & E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *African Political System*, London, 1940; Harold K. Schneider, *The Africans*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1981.

the King owned the land and all who came to live in Zulu land had to acknowledge his sovereignty. The Zulu King exercised judicial, administrative and legislative authority over his people and performed religious ceremonies and magical acts.⁸ On the basis of such evidence, these scholars argue that in Africa it is hardly possible to separate political office from ritual or religious office.⁹ From such accounts, it is clear that in many traditional African societies land and divinity were the sources of authority and power. We can thus conclude, that in most tribal societies, age, tradition and supernatural qualities were the sources of political authority and the values governing such authorities.

Colonial intervention brought significant changes to many of the societies discussed. Schneider argues the imposition of colonial rule had an immediate effect on most African kingdoms. The authority of former chiefs was considerably reduced and the economic basis of the kingly, or the chiefly, power was undermined or destroyed, though not in equal measure in all areas.¹⁰ Yet, there is evidence to show that in other situations the colonial powers actually created conditions so that the power of the chiefs increased, particularly through what was called indirect rule.

Interventions and Western education practices, however, did not bring about a radical transformation, as far as the influence of traditional values was concerned. Studies, including *Politics in Modern Africa: The Uneven Tribal Dimension* by Kenneth Ingham, acknowledge that African students, who studied abroad and were exposed to Western government in Europe, contemplated becoming legatees of imperial rule. However, “many of those who progressed furthest in the realm of European education were still unwilling to renounce their African heritage completely”. They found refuge in the concept of *negrituda*, “taking pride in traditional African Values while simultaneously seeking to gain acceptance from the Europeans by absorbing their culture”.¹¹ The tendency to revive traditional values and institutions remained strong, despite inroads of Western values throughout colonial intervention.

In India, such propensities can be viewed in many Indian communities’ response to colonial influences. One striking example is that of the Brahma Samaj, which had leaders like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who, while invoking the Indian traditions found in ancient Upanishadas, “valued the modern Western culture and organized educational institutions in the country for its spread among the people”.¹²

Politics in these traditional communities was based on two principles: the wise should rule and all members of the group, except slaves and women, should participate in ruling, in a spirit of partnership and consultation.¹³ In a sense, the practice of such politics is based on the principles of egalitarianism and popular participation. However, the democratic content of these systems could not, and should not, be judged by different standards of societies including those viewed as more advanced.

⁸ Fortes & Evan-Pritchard (1940), pp.29-30.

⁹ Fortes & Evans-Pritchard (1940), p.xxi.

¹⁰ Schneider (1981), pp.235-36.

¹¹ Kenneth Ingham, *Politics in Modern Africa: The Uneven Tribal Dimension*, London and New York: Routledge, 1990, pp.4.

¹² A. R. Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, Bombay, 1976, pp. 287-290.

¹³ Charlotte Waterlow, *Tribe, State and Community- Contemporary Government and Justice*, London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1967, p.2.

The nature of these systems of governance and their “democratic” practices varied from society to society. In fact, there is no unanimity among scholars regarding the democratic content of these societies’ political practices. V. G. Simiyu argues, it is illusive to attempt to prove that democracy existed in these societies before the coming of colonialism. He claims there was a mixture of rudiments of democratic tendencies and practices on the one hand and aristocratic, autocratic and/or militaristic practices and tendencies, with varying degrees of despotism, on the other.¹⁴ Despite such differences of opinion, there is no doubt that traditional political institutions and political values of tribal societies of former colonies were of a different genre.

If a form of modern democratic governance, particularly one with declared ‘liberal democratic goals’, is introduced in such societies through external intervention (although such intervention might find indigenous allies!), then traditional political values can be expected to come into conflict with the new political values. Prevalence of particular sets of values reflects the nature of consciousness of a community. Thus, imposition of values foreign to the existing consciousness may generate conflicts.

In the case of Africa, such conflicts were reflected in a new leader’s attempt to resort to what has been termed “Africanization”, which was promoted at the expense of efficiency and integrity. During this process, according to Duignan and Jackson, “African traditions of gift-giving, and protection of kin definitely contributed to practices that in a modern setting appeared corrupt”.¹⁵ Yet, it is not merely appearances that create problems. The very essence of a democratic government - of any liberal variety - means professing the rule of law and necessitating competitive politics. This presents serious problems in, what may be called, ‘traditional settings’, because the political practice under such circumstances would often be influenced by the remnants of traditional values. This is not a phenomenon limited to Africa, nor are such conflicts only experienced by tribal societies when “democracy” is introduced through an external initiative. Many Western countries have experienced almost similar conflicts, though at a different level and in a different context, during, what Bendix called, the ‘great transformation’.¹⁶

Many tribal societies, who were introduced to Western democratic systems by outside forces, were organised under traditional institutions and adhered to norms other than the ones professed and often practised by Western liberal democracy. Therefore, until recently the question that should have been posed is whether remnants of traditional values, particularly values like kin protection for instance, continued to influence their social and political attitudes and behaviour. It is also necessary to examine the consequences of such influences for the new system of governance. Another relevant question is, how will the introduction of new values including those of individual rights, the rule of law, equality before the law and other liberal democratic values affect the traditional institutions and values?

Evidence of persistence in following traditional values, as we argued above in the case of Africa, is also found in the tribal societies of the north eastern part of India, now referred to commonly in academic circles as ‘North-East India’. This region, comprising the Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura,

¹⁴ Simiyu (1988), p.51.

¹⁵ Peter Duignan and Robert M. Jackson (eds.), *Politics and Government in African States*, London: Croom Helm, 1986, p.26.

¹⁶ Reinhard Bendix, *Nation-Building and Citizenship*, New Delhi: Wiley Estern, Reprint, 1969, pp.48-54.

is inhabited by 294 communities, of which 156 communities are recognised by the constitution of India as 'scheduled tribes'.¹⁷

Asilie Pusa has pointed out the definition of tribe, which is inherent in the constitutional position, is based on a process of identification introduced by the British administrators whose view was to give such groups political concessions. This form of identification alleged that when a group appeared to be clearly Hindu it was defined as a caste, and, when it was 'animist' it was classified as a tribe. In effect, it had nothing to do with the stages of development.¹⁸

Scholars such as Andre Beteille and F. G Bailey argue social groups in India cannot be termed as tribes because they are not isolated from the mainstream social system.¹⁹ Pusa argues that the positions taken by these scholars reflect results of studies on tribes that have only had links with mainstream India. He points out the communities identified as tribes in north-east India might not have had substantial links with central Indian culture and social systems.²⁰ However, Bailey and Beteille also point out that there are social groups in the country, which identify themselves as tribes. It is important to note that identification is based more on political principles than on cultural characteristics. Whether such communities are actually tribal, in the anthropological sense of the term, may be debatable but, as Pusa argues, these communities identify themselves as tribes and have developed a consciousness on the basis of such an identity.²¹ We do not intend to enter into a debate about the justifiability of identifying these communities as tribes because our concern here is to understand the conflict situation, which is apparently related to the community consciousness and the values attached to what these communities claim to be their traditions.

The region under discussion is inhabited by a large number of communities who identify themselves as tribes and has been in the news because of insurgent violence and ethnic movements. Attempts at understanding these incidents have so far been limited to examining rebellious and ethnic violence in terms of nationality aspirations.²² It is necessary to realise that while these conflicts and the attendant violence have attracted considerable attention from social scientists, scholars have ignored the fact that most of the communities inhabiting the seven states are new to the system of governance introduced by the Constitution of India,

¹⁷ The Constitution of India recognizes some communities as scheduled tribes because of their social and economic backwardness at the time of the adoption of the Constitution. For a list, see K. S. Singh, *People of India An Introduction*, Calcutta, 1992.

¹⁸ Asilie Pusa, *Politics in Naga Society, -The Inter-Tribal Relations*, Un-published Ph. D. Thesis, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, 1996, p. 12.

¹⁹ Andre Beteille, *Six Essays in Comparative Sociology*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1974; F. G Bailey, *Politics and Social Change*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963.

²⁰ Pusa (1996), pp.9-11.

²¹ Pusa (1996), p.11.

²² Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back, Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland*, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advance Study, 2000; B. Pakem, *Insurgency In North-East India*, New Delhi: Omsons, 1997; Phanjaubam, *Insurgency Movement In Northeastern India*, New Delhi, 1993; Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers of The Mist: The Tales of War and Piece From India's Northeast*, New Delhi, 1994; Sujata Miri, *Communalism in Assam*, New Delhi: Haranand, 1993; Sanjib Baruah, *India against Itself*, Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1999; M. Horam, *Naga Insurgence-Thirty Years*, New Delhi, 1988; P. K. Shukla, *Transforming The North East Tackling Backlogs in Basic Services and Infrastructural Needs; High Level Commission Report to The Prime minister*, New Delhi: Government of India, Planning Commission, March 1997; Jyotirindra Dasgupta, 'Community, Authenticity and Autonomy: Insurgence and Institutional Development in India's North-East', in Basu Amrita and Atul Kohli (eds.), *Community, Conflict and the State in India*, Delhi, 1998.

as adopted in 1950. Hence, politics of this region have peculiar problems, which at times generate situations of crisis.

This is seen clearly in the events that took place in Meghalaya during the late 1990s and subsequently. In August 1998, when crime suddenly increased in the capital town of Shillong, the traditional local government organisations, called *Dorbars*, created vigilante groups, which physically punished unfamiliar people found in their territories, without any trial. This resulted in nine deaths over the course of a week. In an unprecedented step, the Shillong bench of the Guwahati High Court had to direct the state government to take steps to protect the life and liberty of the people. The most disturbing aspect of this particular case was that almost all those who were killed were people who did not belong to the indigenous ethnic community.²³

Many regional tribal organisations have been publicly taking positions that contradict some of the basic principles of liberal democracy. The Khasi²⁴ Students' Union, for instance, declared that no other student organisation will be allowed in the Khasi Hills.²⁵ Such conflicts are present in most of the hill states in the region but because they are seldom reported in regional newspapers, information on these incidents is not readily available. The states of Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur do not have as active a press as Meghalaya and therefore evidence of such violent conflict is not made public as easily, yet conflicts take place in these states as well. A daily newspaper reported that in Mizoram a non-tribal curfew was imposed by some Mizo organisations during which the tribal population was allowed to move about freely but the non-tribal population was confined to their residences.

It is important to examine whether such conflicts are generated by a clash of values, inherent in traditional political practices, but manifested in a modern context. This question becomes particularly relevant when considering that, in most of these societies, institutional arrangements of the pre-constitutional and, therefore, pre-liberal democratic era, continue to function along side the government of the democratic republic, established in 1950.

Many communities of North East India have been demanding constitutional recognition of their traditional institutions, which in the contemporary sense, are not democratic because in most cases, women are not permitted to participate and certain public offices are restricted to certain clans of particular tribes. This is discussed in *Empowering and strengthening of Panchayati Raj Institutions/ Autonomous District Councils/ Traditional Tribal Governing Institutions in north East India*, a consultation paper prepared by the National Commission to review the working of the Constitution.²⁶ Often, organisations making such demands and the forces behind them do not appear to understand the differences in their conception of democracy with the democracy introduced by the Constitution of India. Prevalence of traditional tribal values and conflict with values of modern democracies become obvious in such demands.

It is worth questioning whether traditional organisations fail to recognise democratic principles because they adhere to traditional political values, which do not respect many

²³ News items in *The Shillong Times*, 18, 19 & 20 August 1998.

²⁴ The Khasi is the largest tribe of Meghalaya.

²⁵ *The Shillong Times*, 28 September 1998.

²⁶ National Commission To Review The Working of The Constitution, *Empowering and strengthening of Panchayati Raj Institutions/Autonomous District Councils/ Traditional Tribal Governing Institutions in north East India*, New Delhi, 2001.

principles of democracy established by the Constitution of India, or because there are new vested interests emerging? There is, of course, no doubt that traditional tribal values of the not too distant past, continue to influence political values and attitudes.

Also of relevance is whether traditional values interfere with the systems of governance that profess principles of individual liberty and the rule of law. Waterlow has pointed out that in tribal societies an individual belonged to the tribe almost as closely as a bee belonged to its swarm, or a bird to its flock. Every activity of life was communal and was regulated by exact and sacred customs, which determined each person's *function* and *status* in the group. In such societies, an individual had no legal rights *against* the group; and the group would be held collectively responsible for an individual's actions.²⁷

In such societies the community receives precedence over the individual. It is obvious that such precedence would not be compatible with forms of governance that profess individual liberty. The principles of individual liberty, the rule of law and the expectation of competitive politics come directly in conflict with traditional values of tribal life, implying group assertion, kin-protection and collective effort. These conflicts will of course be sharper in societies where traditional institutions and organisations acquire both political and legal recognition under the new system of governance. Legal recognition of traditional organisations, institutions, norms and practices in turn, affects traditional values, thus creating a political reality of a unique nature.

Some tribal communities in India experience conflicts of this nature, which end up affecting the process of governance. However, the problem has not been taken seriously by social scientists. The study of tribal societies in India has often been influenced by a trend set by ethnographers of the colonial period. One of the most well known studies of Indian communities followed this approach even during the 1990s, particularly with respect to communities from Indian tribal states.²⁸

Economic problems of Indian tribes have received considerable attention from social scientists.²⁹ The process of early state formation and the emergence of ethnic consciousness among these communities have also been studied by some anthropologists and historians.³⁰ There have also been attempts to examine 'tribal' attitudes towards development and state policies and how other definitions of tribal areas have converted tribal people into strangers in their own land.³¹ Yet, there has hardly been any work on the political value orientations, particularly values concerning the rights of the individual *vis a vis* the community or of Indian tribal communities and the conflicts between traditional tribal values and the value premises of governance under the Indian constitution. Contemporary study of Indian democracy ignores the interface of Indian democracy with traditional tribal values. For instance, a major publication such as Finkel *et al.*'s *Transforming India: Social and political*

²⁷ Waterlow (1967), p.3.

²⁸ K. S. Singh, 'A Report on the Release of the Quantitative Data on People of India By Honourable Minister of Human Resource Development Sri Arjun Sinfg on 24 December 1991', *The Journal of the Anthropological Survey of India*, 39:1, Calcutta, 1990.

²⁹ D. N. Majumdar & T. N. Madan, *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1956; L. P. Vidyarthi, *Report of the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, 1973-74*, Delhi: The Controller of Publications, 1977.

³⁰ .Surajit Sinha (ed.), *Tribal Polities And State Systems In Pre-colonial Eastern and North Eastern India*, Calcutta and Delhi: K. P. Bagchi, 1987.

³¹ Nadini Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns, An Anthropological History of Bastar 1854-1996*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.

dynamics of democracy has no reference to the tribal traditions and practices interlaced in the contemporary political reality of the country.³²

If we look at the history of North East India it is not difficult to notice that most of the communities, particularly the one's living in the hills, remained in an early stage of development until recently. At the time of the arrival of the British, in the nineteenth century, even the most advanced state of North East India, Assam, had a semi-feudal society of petty producers. The British monetised the economy and introduced changes along capitalist lines.³³ The situation in the rest of the region was worse than that of Assam. Descriptions of some tribal communities' livelihoods during the period of early British rule, can be found in the writings of officers.³⁴

The British gradually extended their rule and by 1889 the entire area came under their control, though some areas with difficult terrain and inhabited by hill tribal communities were left virtually un-administered.³⁵ Having taken control over most of the area, the British began to introduce a form of governance of their own. Until the arrival of the British, the notion of territorial political authority was unknown in the hills and there is no evidence of early state formation.³⁶ The British followed a policy of gradual integration through a plan of governance, which they believed to be suitable for the conditions of the hill tribes and without interfering too much with already existing institutions.

The British also tried to introduce "civilisation and order" but a policy of minimal interference with backward hill areas was followed. Chaube shows that none of the major political reforms introduced by the British were extended to the tribal hill areas of North East India. These were called and treated as excluded or partially excluded areas.³⁷ In fact, the British virtually followed a policy of non-interference in the affairs of the region's tribal societies, unless it was necessitated by some interest of the Empire or of the British regime in India. Some scholars seem to regard this as a measure taken by the British to protect the tribal people. For instance, D R Syiemlieh states that by the 1870's the British administrators had begun "to see the need to safeguard the tribal peoples" of North East India through a policy Chaube calls 'segregation'.³⁸ Nonetheless, the prohibitive cost of overpowering these people could have also dissuaded the British from interfering with their situation.

Such isolation made it possible for these communities, inhabiting the area, to adhere to their own ways of life and thus facilitate the persistence of traditional political values and practices. The nature of these values are, however, not very clear so far as North-East India is concerned, as many works, including those cited above, remained descriptive narratives. Works on the tribal communities' history and culture in the region also do not discuss this

³² Francine R. Frankel *et al.*, *Transforming India: Social and Political Dynamics of Democracy*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.

³³ Amelendu Guha, *Planter Raj Swaraj, Freedom Struggle And Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947*, New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 1977, pp.25-26.

³⁴ R. B. Pemberton, *The Eastern Frontier of India*, New Delhi: Mittal, 1979 [1835]; P. R. T. Gordon, *The Khasis*, Guwahati, Reprinted, 1975; A. J. M. Mills, *Report on the Khasi and Jaintia Hills*, Shillong, 1901 [1853]; Alexander Mackenzie, *The North East Frontier of India*, New Delhi: Mittal, 1979 [1884].

³⁵ H. K. Barpujari, *Problems of the Hill Tribes: North-East Frontier, Vol.3*, Guwahati: Spectrum, 1981.

³⁶ Shibanikinkar Chaube, *Hill Politics in North-East India*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1973, p.7.

³⁷ Chaube (1973), pp.18-25.

³⁸ D. R. Syiemlieh, *British Administration In Meghalaya, Policy and pattern*, New Delhi: Heritage, 1989, p.142.

issue.³⁹ Despite this scholarly neglect, it remains one of the core political issues affecting the process of governance.

With the adoption of the Constitution of India in 1950, this region, like the rest of the country, became part of the sovereign Democratic Republic of India. The government and politics under the Constitution of India needed to adhere to the values of a form of liberal democracy because the Constitution envisaged a system of government modelled on the lines of Westminster.⁴⁰ Frankel pointed out that the process of democratisation in India revolved around the principle of individual equality, imposed on interlocking hierarchical social structures and cultural norms, whose configurations differed across regions.⁴¹ It is therefore clear that the experiences of democratic governance in these societies, under the Republic, need to be closely examined in order to understand the political processes in the region. In particular, attention needs to be given to the problems related to the processes of development. Since in many of these societies traditional organisations, institutions, practices and values persist, it is important to understand the consequences for governance.

Available works on traditional institutions are mere narratives of administrative changes based, at best, on British official records and, at worst, on hearsay. V. V. Rao's *A Century of Tribal Politics in North East India (1874-1974)* is a work based mainly on the earlier ethnographers, British records and personal interactions with tribal and non-tribal politicians of the later period. The book is written in the format of a school text without bothering to provide evidence for the conclusions drawn. Rao collaborated with some of his friends and students to bring out a series of books on government and politics of the region, but all of these belonged to the same genre. We need not spend much time analysing these books because, for purposes of political understanding, they are not of much help.⁴²

R. S. Lyngdoh's *Government and Politics in Meghalaya* is merely a descriptive statement of the hill state movement and its influence on political parties.⁴³ S. K. Chaube closely studied the emergence of hill politics in North East India from the British period to the 1970s.⁴⁴ He traces the evolution of modern administrative systems in the area and recounts the history of its integration in what he calls 'national politics'. Written in the form of political history, Chaube's work does not go into the realm of values. In fact, social science literature of the region does not discuss values and premises of governance at all. The effects of the introduction of the constitutional government on traditional semi-tribal, semi-feudal societies of the north-east region, remains unexamined even today.

There are, of course, some attempts at describing the traditional institutions of the region's tribal people. The customary laws and systems of justice of the tribal people are well-documented.⁴⁵ *Social and Political Institutions of the Hill People of North East India* was a

³⁹ Milton Sangma, *History and the Culture of the Garos*, New Delhi, 1981; N. S. Sen, *The Origins and Early History of the Khasi Synteng people*, Calcutta, 1981.

⁴⁰ Granville Austin, *Working of Democratic Constitution: The Indian Experience*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.

⁴¹ Frankel, *et.al.*(2000), p.4.

⁴² V. V. Rao, *A Century of Tribal Politics in North East India (1874-1974)*.

⁴³ R. S Lyngdoh, *Government and Politics in Meghalaya*, New Delhi: Sanchar Publishing House, 1996.

⁴⁴ Chaube (1973).

⁴⁵ Sir Keith Cantiel, *Notes on the Khasi Laws*, Shillong, 1974, Reprint; Dr. L. S. Gassah, *Traditional Institutions of Meghalaya: A study of Dolo and his Administration*, New Delhi: Regency, 1998; Kusum & Bakshi, *Customary Law and Justice In The Tribal Areas of Meghalaya*, Bombay, 1982.

major attempt at presenting a descriptive account of such institutions.⁴⁶ It also attempted to highlight changes that occurred after the independence of India, in particular, the exposure of societies to the federal democratic polity of the country. But, the conceptual and theoretical innocence displayed by this work is such that the data and analysis both become unreliable. For instance, while describing the traditional institutions and their practices, most scholars did not try to date, nor name traditions. Hamlet Bareh's description of the *Khasi Syiemship* as state, makes one wonder when early state formation began in these hills.⁴⁷ A scholar writing on *Jaintia*⁴⁸, for instance, freely uses nomenclatures, such as *Dorbar Myntri*, *Barkandaz* and *Chowdhary*, obvious loan words, without realising that these need not necessarily belong to a distant past.⁴⁹

So far as the effect of exposure to the federal democratic polity, introduced by the Indian Constitution, is concerned, these scholars merely described the new rules and procedures introduced under the Republic. They do not question how the new institutions affected traditional institutions and practices. Both Bareh and Pakem, have freely tried to equate traditional practices and institutions of the tribes concerned with modern practices and institutions. For instance, Pakem translates the terms the *Daloi*, the *Pator* and the *Wasan* as police and magistrate.⁵⁰ It is necessary to remember that until recently most of these societies were pre-literate and unlike in the case of Africa, trained anthropologists have yet to study them in depth. As a result, folklore is considered as tradition.

It is also worth examining whether traditions are also being invented to suit newly emerging social forces. It appears from discussions on "traditional" institutions, carried out by many indigenous scholars that modern political values may be, unwittingly, interpolated with traditional ones. A passage from Pakem is evidence of this trend. While attempting to trace the history of traditional political institutions of the Jaintias, Pakem uses a myth, narrated by Gordon, a British ethnographer of the nineteenth century, to suggest the entire Jaintia hills were brought under the central authority of '*ki Syiem Sutnag* (Sutunga dynasty)'. He then goes on to state,

"With the conquest of the Jaintia plains in the thirteenth century A.D., the central authority had for the first time, its own territory where its writs covered every aspect of administration. The Jaintia plains were regarded as the Union territories of the Jaintia Union, entirely under the control and supervision of the central authority".⁵¹

It is not difficult to comprehend why the ideas behind the political system, established by the Constitution of India, were impressing tribal scholars in a manner which led them to invent concepts such as 'Union territory' and 'federation'. These authors do not provide any evidence for their assertions nor cite sources.

For example, Pakem mentions that along with the establishment of the kingdom, a three-tier system of administration came to be established in Jaintia hills.⁵² He also states that an extra tier was constituted whenever the province was too large. This picture would lead one to

⁴⁶ Sarkar & Datta Ray, *Social and Political Institutions of the Hill People of North East India*, 1990.

⁴⁷ Hamlet Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi people*, Shillong, 1967, pp.70-79.

⁴⁸ Another major tribe of Meghalaya, claimed by many indigenous scholars to be of the same race as Khasi.

⁴⁹ B. Pakem, 'The Changing Structure of the political Institution of Jaintia Chieftainship' *NEICSSR Journal*, Shillong Vol.i. no.1 [no date], pp.80-92.

⁵⁰ Pakem (n.d.), p.82.

⁵¹ Sarkar & Datta Ray (1990), pp.81.

⁵² Pakem (n.d.), p.81.

believe that a kingdom with federal characteristics was in existence in Jaintia areas. He then contradicts himself, “We have tales of warfare between one Jaintia unit against the other as in the case between the Sutngas and the Changpungs, and many others”.⁵³ A scholar, familiar with tribal systems of governance throughout the rest of the world, would have looked at these so called Jaintia units as warring tribal groups or clans instead of looking at them through the prism of the Indian Constitution, which stipulates territories and units within the Indian union. Had there been a Jaintia kingdom with a three-tier system of administration, there could not have been *warfare between one Jaintia unit and another*. Those so-called units and tiers of administration might have been independent tribal groups occasionally brought under one chief.

It may be possible to explain the situation with the model of a segmented state,⁵⁴ but Pakem makes no effort in that direction. It is possible to argue that the history of such tribal groups, as constructed by these twentieth century authors, and the traditions attributed to such history might have been constructed to suit the requirement of contemporary politics. There are, therefore, no studies at present that either date the traditions or analyse their political value orientations.

In view of the above, it is essential to have a close look at the relationship of the traditional institutions and organisations of some of these communities with the institutions of modern governance, particularly the ones which remain active under the new system of governance. A quick look at the contemporary literature of tribal politics and the contemporary political situation of the region makes it clear that Meghalaya is the state in which these organisations are most active, though to some extent such organisations are also active in Arunachal Pradesh.⁵⁵

The state of Arunachal Pradesh and its inhabitants started participating actively in modern democratic politics relatively later than the other hill states of the region. By the early 1990s, the state had a population of 8.65 lakhs comprising 26 major tribes or communities and divided into 3649 villages and 12 towns.⁵⁶ There are books and monographs on most of these communities that describe their habitats, dress, ornaments, food habits, family life and cultural traits.⁵⁷ *Gazetteers of Lohit, Tirap, and Subansiri*, contain information on various aspects of the state and its communities.⁵⁸ Analysis of political values and orientations of these communities, their traditional institutions and the influence of these institutions on modern governance is virtually absent, except for documentation of some local governments.⁵⁹

⁵³ Pakem (n.d.). p.85.

⁵⁴ Aidan Southhall, ‘The Segmentary State in Africa and Asia’ in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30:1 (1988). A segmentary state is one in which the spheres of ritual suzerainty and political sovereignty do not coincide.

⁵⁵ National Commission (2001).

⁵⁶ Census of India (1991).

⁵⁷ B. K. Baruah, *A Cultural History of Assam*, Guwahati, 1969.

⁵⁸ Choudhury Dutta (ed.), *Arunachal Pradesh, Lohit District Gazetteer*, Shillong: Government of Arunachal Pradesh, 1978; *Arunachal Pradesh Tirap District*, Shillong: Govt. of Arunachal, 1980 and *Arunachal Pradesh Subansiri District*, Shillong: Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh, 1981.

⁵⁹ A. C. Talukdar, *Political Transition in the Grassroots in Tribal India*, Gwahati: Omsons Publications, 1987.

The situation in Meghalaya is slightly better; there are some works on the traditional political and administrative systems.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, none of these studies go beyond description based on British official sources and writings of ethnographers from the early British period. In Gassah's work, for instance, all the primary sources are the records of Colonial administration.⁶¹ In one of Gassah's chapters on the affects of British administration on the powers and functions of *Dolois*, the discussion merely pertains to the administrative steps taken by the British to curtail the powers of the Dolois and other traditional authorities. He merely laments that some old authorities and institutions disappeared as a result of British decisions and others lost power.

For example, whilst summing up the process that weakened traditional authorities and strengthened British bureaucracy in the Jaintia hills, he states that with the tremendous powers vested in the hands of the British officers, the traditional chiefs in the area were reduced to mere assessors or jurymen.⁶² However, he does not examine the political implications of this. He is not preoccupied with key questions: How did the people, who were used to traditional authorities and practices, adapt to the new authorities? Were the values they adhered to, under the traditional system, in conflict with the values of the new system, introduced by the British? Were the interests protected by the earlier arrangement adversely affected by those changes (in other words, what were the effects on power relations)?

Gassah, however, is no exception. The rule in North East Indian studies, with respect to this subject, is to merely narrate and remain at the level of superficiality. Pakem, another well known scholar of the region, believes that under the British the priest had lost his political roles and that all the secular functions of the priest were taken over by the British.⁶³ Like Gassah, Pakem too did not ask the obvious questions.

The point that needs to be made is that where studies of traditional institutions were concerned, social scientists followed the method that went by the name of political history in the region. While political history could be a useful discipline to understand societies, as in the work of Romila Thapar on the Mauryas, the diluted form of this discipline practised in North East India merely reproduces official records.⁶⁴ Furthermore, due to the nature of these records from the British period, discussions remain at the level of comments on events, individuals and institutions required by a colonial administration. What the British administration thought necessary to record and whichever analysis it thought was required, remained the guideline for the early ethnographers and administrators. Subsequently, "political historians" virtually lifted the records maintained by the British.

A typical example of this approach is found in H. K. Barpujari.⁶⁵ He titles a discussion on the hill tribes of North East India in the British period 'problems of the hill tribes' because these tribes and their activities were referred to as a 'problem', in the records. It has been pointed out that this approach reproduces facts from official records or narrates events without even questioning social and political implications.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Gassah (1998); Bareh (1967); P. N. Dutta, *Impact of the Khasis and Jaintias (A Survey of Political Economic and Social Change)*, New Delhi, 1982.

⁶¹ Gassah (1998), pp.73-4.

⁶² Gassah (1998), p.49.

⁶³ Pakem (1997).

⁶⁴ Manorama Sharma, *History and History writing in North East India*, New Delhi: Regency, 1998.

⁶⁵ Barpujari (1981).

⁶⁶ Apurba K. Baruah, 'On Approaches to the study of history', *Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, Shillong, 1998, pp.21-25.

To overcome this handicap in understanding the conflict of values, it is necessary to closely examine the workings of traditional institutions of tribal communities. Particular attention needs to be given to the value premises, the changes introduced by the British administration and the Constitution of India and their effects on the traditional values and practices. This obviously requires an examination of the “traditionality of tradition” itself.

Since, the most active and the most influential of traditional institutions are to be found at the *Dorbar shnong* level in Meghalaya, a fruitful exercise can be carried out at that level. It is necessary to keep in mind that though these tribal institutions at the village level continue to exist and function actively in the new socio-political conditions of the Indian republic, their very nature might have undergone major changes, if the demographic patterns of the areas in which they exist have changed the way of life for inhabitants of their *Elaka*.⁶⁷ Such changes can be expected to be more rapid in urban areas than rural ones.

Furthermore, a study of *Dorbars* in rural and urban settings needs to be carried out. A study of this kind may, on the one hand, provide us with a clearer picture of the nature of traditional institutions of the tribal people under a modern system of governance and, on the other hand, may also help us to understand how values and practises inherent in these institutions affect governance under Indian democracy. Consequently, such understanding may help resolve the conflict of values that otherwise may create a major crisis of governance.

⁶⁷ An area under jurisdiction of a *Dorbar*.

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Research Objectives

- We will assess how constellations of power at local, national and global levels drive processes of institutional change, collapse and reconstruction and in doing so will challenge simplistic paradigms about the beneficial effects of economic and political liberalisation.
- We will examine the effects of international interventions promoting democratic reform, human rights and market competition on the 'conflict management capacity' and production and distributional systems of existing polities.
- We will analyse how communities have responded to crisis, and the incentives and moral frameworks that have led either toward violent or non-violent outcomes.
- We will examine what kinds of formal and informal institutional arrangements poor communities have constructed to deal with economic survival and local order.



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