

# JAIINTIA HILLS

A MEGHALAYA TRIBE-  
Its Environment, Land and People

*Editors :*  
*Dr. P.M. Passah*  
*Dr. S. Sarma*



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**RELIANCE PUBLISHING HOUSE**  
**NEW DELHI**

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Call No.....900.954164

Acc. No.....8075

First Published 2002

ISBN : 81-7510-152-0

Price : Rs. 295/- \$ 57/-

*Published by :*

**Dr. S. K. Bhatia**

*(Life Member ILA, FEPI, HWF, INSA, Common Cause, ISCKON)*

**Reliance Publishing House**

3026/7H, Ranjit Nagar,

New Delhi-110008

Ph. : 5737377 / 5852605

Fax : 5786769

*Composed by :*

**Elegant Printographics**

74, Savera Apptt., Sector-13,

Plot-5, Rohini, Delhi-85

E-mail : akm\_akm@yahoo.com

*Printed by :*

**S.S.S. Printers**

**New Delhi.**

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## PREFACE

### **This book, Jaintia Hills: - A Meghalaya Tribe**

Its Environment, Land and People is dedicated to the memory of Late Professor Barrister Pakem, a former President of North East India Council for Social Science Research and a former Vice-Chancellor of North-Eastern Hill University.

From an obscure village of Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya emerged a person who was self made to shine as one of the brightest stars of Meghalaya. Professor Pakem rose from a humble beginning to the top of the academic eminence to have become the Vice Chancellor of North-Eastern Hill University, one of the Central Universities of the country. As a political scientist, he had the opportunity to show how a politician could be pragmatic and also a man of public ethics. His life and work are a great testimony to the fact that nothing is unachievable in life provided one has an iron will and a sincere aspiration. Money and wealth are not always the criteria as amply demonstrated by Barrister Pakem.

Professor Pakem was a man of varied and mixed qualities of head and heart. People all over the country who once met him appreciated his high calibre, moral character and integrity both in the academic and public life. He was an outstanding teacher, a political scientist and a liberal thinker. He was awarded the prestigious Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru Award in Social Science by Madhya Pradesh Council of Science and Technology in 1996 in recognition of his outstanding contribution to overall development studies in North East India. He was indeed one of the great sons of contemporary India. This scholar extraordinary displayed probity and rectitude in public affairs and represented values of the highest order in society.

This volume contains 23 articles by eminent social scientists and scientists belonging to agriculture, forestry, demography and life sciences. Scholars adopted a multi-disciplinary approach in their study of environment, land and people of Jaintia Hills on the international border with Bangladesh. The cultural influences are two-way traffic.

The Jaintia Hills eco-system is under heavy stress due to unscientific coal mining and systematic destruction of forest resources. The rich fertile lands are now exposed to forces of nature due to unplanned deforestation over the decades. The rich soil is now highly degraded. The unscientific opencast coal mining has caused wide-spread pollution of streams and rivers. The green valleys now look like deserted wild fields due to opencast mining. Nevertheless, the Jaintias are known for their zeal. They are waking up and there is new initiative and enterprise in reviving economic activities

to realise the economic potentialities of the Jaintia Hills. The Papers in this volume are ample testimony of the economic, cultural and social life of the Jaintias.

The North-East India Council for Social Science Research held a commemorative seminar in honour of Professor Barrister Pakem on 5 and 6 June 2000. We are grateful to the Indian Council for Social Science Research, North Eastern Regional Centre and Ms. Neiniroi Khonglah-Pakem for giving us generous support to hold the seminar. We also thank Mr. E.K. Mawlong, Chief Minister of Meghalaya for inaugurating the Seminar. Mr. Mawlong was a colleague of Professor Pakem in social and political field. We take this opportunity to thank Dr. S.K. Bhatia, Proprietor of Reliance Publishing House for publishing this book expeditiously.

Shillong,  
November 24, 2001

**B. Datta Ray**  
Secretary  
North East Council for Social Science Research



## INTRODUCTION

*P.M. Passah*

*S. Sarma*

The North East India Council for Social Science Research, Shillong held a Commemorative Seminar on , 5 and 6 of June 2000 in honour of Professor Barrister Pakem on the theme Jaintia Hills: A Meghalaya Tribe: Environment, Land and People. Many scholars from different parts of the North Eastern Region and beyond, participated in the Seminar and 22 of them submitted their Papers on various aspects of the theme. The- economic development of Jaintia Hills needs to be focussed prominently and holding of the Seminar in honour of late Professor Pakem who loved Jaintia Hills to the core of his heart, is the right step that was taken by the Council in spite of financial constraint.

The district of Jaintia Hills lies between Latitudes 20°58' and 26°3'N and Longitudes 91°59' and 92°51'E and covers an area of 3295.5 sq. kms. approximately. It is surrounded on the north, the east and the south east by Assam; on the south by Bangladesh and on the west by Khasi Hills. It is populated mostly by the Jaintias or Syntengs with a small group of Biates and Hmars occupying the southeast corner of the district. The late Suniti Kumar Chatterjee; an international philologist must be correct in suggesting that the name Jaintia could be an Aryanized form of the name *Synteng* by which the people of Jaintia Hills used to be called even today. From the word *Synteng* we get *Syntein*, *Syntiang*, *Zontain*, *Zontia*, and ultimately "Jaintia". Again the name "Synteng" could also be an Aryanized form of the name "Sutong", the original clan of the Jaintia royal dynasty from which was also derived the names "Suteng" and "Sutnga".

It is very wrong to say that the name "Jaintia" has now been largely replaced by the term "Pnar".<sup>1</sup> In fact, the people residing in the central region of Jaintia Hills are called "Pnars" by those living in the southern and northern regions and who are in turn being called as "Wars" and "Bhois" respectively by the Pnars. But all the three are collectively known by a generic name "Jaintias" or "Syntengs".

The present day Jaintia Hills district is but a remnant of the erstwhile Jaintia Kingdom which had been subjected to repeated divisions and partitions since the advent of the British in the North Eastern region and immediately after India's Independence. The Jaintia state was one of the oldest states in the region (see accompanying Map). It was mentioned in the Puranic and Tantrik literature. Its genesis is very obscure but mythologies and legends help in gleaning some facts relating to its state formation. It was computed by scholars that U Chyngklein Am, the eldest son of Ka Li Dakha and U Luh Ryndi, ruled the Jaintia state in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century B.C.<sup>2</sup>





It is true that the present Jaintia Hills district constituted the nucleus from which the erstwhile Jaintia Kingdom eventually emerged. The Kingdom began to play an increasingly important role in the history of the North-Eastern region from the 17th Century onwards till the British appeared in the scene at the beginning of the 19th Century. It had generally peaceful relationships with the neighbouring kingdoms of the Ahoms and the Kacharis but occasionally these relationships were marred by conflicts. But the British had, in the late 18th Century (immediately after they had taken possession of Eastern Bengal), been involved in armed conflict with the Jaintia Kingdom in the plains to the south, ostensibly over the question of navigation rights in the Surma Valley which formed the boundary between the British possession and the Jaintia Kingdom. These conflicts continued until a treaty of alliance was concluded on the 10th March 1824 between Ram Singh Rajah of Jaintiapur and David Scott, the Agent to the Governor General on behalf of the British East India Company. Ram Singh Rajah undertook to help the British in the conflict with the Burmese.<sup>6</sup>

On the death of Rajah Ram Singh, his young nephew Rajendra Singh succeeded to the throne. The British took advantage of the young age of the king and in spite of the good friendly relations, the former decided to annex in March 1835, the plains areas of the Jaintia kingdom. Meanwhile, the British had already gained a foothold in the Khasi Hills. As the richest part of his kingdom was taken away, the Rajah felt unnecessary to hold on to a poor hilly part of his kingdom. Hence he relinquished this remaining part of the Jaintia kingdom also to the British. Captain Lister, the then Political Agent to the British Governor-General in Khasi Hills; was placed in charge of the Jaintia Hills also. Thus began the close link between the Jaintia Hills and Khasi Hills under the British administration with the exception that the Khasi Chiefs were left in control of their respective territories while the Dolois in Jaintia Hills were allowed to continue as the Company's agents.<sup>7</sup>

The British later introduced certain regulations pertaining to taxation that were normally operative in their fully administered areas. This provoked the Jaintias to revolt against the British and thus Anglo-Jaintia wars had to be fought which ended with the capture of Kiang Nangbah, the Jaintia hero who was hanged on 30<sup>th</sup> December 1863. This led to the composition of Jaintia Hills into a separate subdivision and the posting of a British Officer as the Subdivisional Officer in time brought about the pacification of the Jaintia Hills.<sup>8</sup>

The administration of the Jaintia Hills was more direct than that on the Khasi Hills where only 31 villages and the administered areas of Cherrapunji and Shillong were under direct British control. But the same Deputy Commissioner was in overall control of the entire Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills. Again unlike the Khasi Hills, the whole of Jaintia Hills was enfranchised under the Government of India Act 1835 and elected its own representative to the Assam Legislative Assembly.<sup>9</sup> The adoption of the Sixth Schedule a to the Constitution of India in 1950 saw the creation of

one district council known as the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council. But in 1964 a separate district council for the Jaintia Hills was created and after the new State of Meghalaya was carved out of Assam in 1972, the new District of Jaintia Hills was also created immediately in the same year.

During the last 28 years, much had been invested through plan allocation for the socio-economic development of the district. But the State has much still to do to build and raise the capability of the people and the district itself. The infrastructure development in the district is still too weak to sustain any vigorous programme for its economic development. There are still serious bottlenecks particularly in the fields of inter-state transport, power, entrepreneurial manpower and technical manpower and in the field of social services like health and education. Thus both the human capability and the capability of the district have to be strongly built and raised to the level that can properly exploit and utilize the rich natural resources of the district for the economic welfare of the people.

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# 1

## ENVIRONMENT, LAND AND PEOPLE OF JAINTIA HILLS

*N N Bhattacharyya*

### INTRODUCTION

The Jaintia Hills is the eastern part of the Meghalaya Plateau abode of clouds named by Professor S.P.Chatterjee in 1932. This plateau studied in detail by him and published in the name and style as *Le Plateau de Meghalaya* in 1936, Paris. Geologically the whole Meghalaya plateau including the Karbi Anglong region of Assam is a detached part of the Reminsular India. It is separated by the Malda gap which resulted of river erosion of the Ganga and the Brahmaputra.<sup>1</sup> Thus the landscape evolution of the plateau is closely linked with the Indian deminsula and its landscape story consists of different types of erosion, sedimentation, folding, intrusions, movements of land and sea and emissions. The core of the plateau is an ancient mass of gneiss, schists and granite which have been exposed in the north but hidden in the south beneath cretaceous and Tertiary depositis and a Mesozoic trap known as sylhet traps. The whole plateau was under sub-aerial erosion from the cambrian to the Jurassic period. It contains within its face the marks peneplaination which ranges from pre-cambrian to recent and sub-recent periods. The peneplains are at varying altitudes of 1860- 1920 m around Shillong, Latkor peaks 1440-1500m and 1410 m in Unkhrah valley.

### ENVIRONMENT AND LAND :

The Jaintia Hills forms a oontiguous part of the Khasi Hills consisting of northern undulating hills, Jowai upland and the southern escarpment. There are more flat lands in the Jaintia Hills than that of the Khasi Hills. The general height of the district is in between 1250 metres and 1750 metres. The Jowai upland acts as a water shed between the Brahmaputra valley and the Surma Valley.

The central part of the study area is mainly constituted by the rocks of the pre-cambrian age. The pre-Tertiary and Tertiary rocks occur above these rocks which form the basement for the younger formation. The Jaintia

series of rocks is predominantly composed of sandstones with clay, coal seams and fossiliferous limestones. These are all Tertiary formations and belong to the shelf facies. The Jaintia series can be geologically sub-divided into three stages, namely Kopili stage, Sylhet Limestone stage and Theria stage.

The Jaintia Hills is formed of various rock types with varying lithological characters. Different agents of denudation like rainfall, surface water and temperature conditions have played an important role on the rock types in moulding the landforms of the area.

The climate of Meghalaya differs from the plains of North East India mainly due to its elevation. At the foot hills of the plateau the climate is humid and warm. The central upland experiences very cold night during the winter where the temperature goes down to 1.7°C. The temperature never rises above 26°C in any part of the year. But there is a great variation of rainfall in the plateau from south to north due to a rain shadow effect on the areas lying to the north. For example, Cherrapunji which is located on the high ridge has a rainfall over 1200 cm, while Shillong being located 50 km to the north of it gets only 230 cm. The average minimum rainfall is 251 cm and maximum is 367 at Jowai and this station does not experience any rain shadow effect. Because of high rainfall the top soils in the upland is very thin and in some places rocks like granite, slate, limestone, sandstone, coal etc. lie bare in patches. The major parts of the Jaintia Hills consists of red loamy soil, red yellow soil and laterite soil. These soils are usually acidic, rich in organic matter and nitrogen but deficient phosphate and Potash. Such soils are good for the cultivation of fruits, potatoes, arecanut, betelvine and hill rice in hill slopes and terraces. Depending on rainfall and altitude, the Jaintia Hills is clad with varieties of tropical and temperate vegetations. These can be divided into three types : mixed evergreen forests, grass lands and pine forests. The mixed evergreen type consists of many broad leafed trees and shrubs with scattered bamboos, timber trees like *Shorea robusta*, *Shorea assamica*, *Vatica lanceifolia*, *Tetrameles nudiflora*, *Mesua ferrea* etc. All these vegetation predominate the hill slopes of the lower part in the district. Plants like banana, Araceae, Marantaceae herbs grow on the valley bottoms and water plants like *Monochoria*, *Ottelia*, *Vallisneria* and *Salvinia* etc. are found in the broad sluggish streams. The hill tops with shallow subsoil support grasses and herbs like *Gentians*, *Swertia*, *Osbeckia* and *Lamiaceae* herbs. Temperate vegetation like *Pinus insularis*, *Elaeocarpus*, *Manglietia* Sp. etc are predominant in the Jowai upland. Besides, there are sacred groves in the district. The dominating plants of such groves are *Rhododendron arborea* and *Quercus* Spp., Broad leafed trees like *Cinnamomum*, *Bucklandia*, *Carpinus* *Schima* etc. are also found in different sacred groves of the Jaintia Hills. In the coal mining areas are now devoid of trees and scrubs. The unscientific mining of coal in the Jaintia Hills has caused deforestation besides other problems of soil erosion, water and air pollution and general environmental degradation.

**PEOPLE OF JAINTIA HILLS**

The original residents of the Jaintia Hills were known as Syntengs and later they became Jaintias. According to historians the ancient Jaintias were immigrants somewhere from the Cambodian region and from the banks of the Mekong river. They came into ancient Assam via Patkoi range and finally occupied the Jaintia Hills. The Jaintias seem to have been an Aryanization of the original Austric word synteng which developed into Jaintia. The exact date of arrival of the Jaintias and Khasis is very much uncertain. Some neolithic findings tell that they belong to an antediluvian race.

Generally the Jaintias are known as Syntengs but they prefer to be called Pnars. They are inhabitants of the Jaintia Hills. The war Syntengs are concentrated in the south of the Jaintia Hills. Besides, Mikirs (Karbies) Lalungs (Tiwas), Hadems, Kholtangas, Khelmas etc and nontribals are inhabiting in different parts of the Jaintia Hills.

It is said that at one period the whole Meghalaya state formed one kingdom which comprised both hill and plain of Assam and Bangladesh. Then it became split up into two kingdoms, namely Jaintia and Khyrim. The whole of Jaintia Hills including the adjacent plains was ruled by Sutnga Syiems. Lying in the southeast of Jowai town Sutnga served as the political headquarters of Sutnga Syiems during the early times. One of the kings of Sutnga was tempted to invade and annex Jaintiapur to his kingdom in the medieval period. It was perhaps during the reign of U Pyrvat Roy, Sutnga Kingdom was extended to Jaintiapur, a plainland south of the Jaintia Hills which became a part of the Sutnga Syiemship in about 1500 A.D. Sir Edward Gait also made a remark: "The dominions of the Rajahs of Jaintia included two entirely distinct tracts of country, namely the Jaintia Hills, which are inhabited by a Khasi tribe called Synteng and the plain country. South of these Hills and North of the Barak River, in the Sylhet District now known as the Jaintia Parganahs, the inhabitants of which are the Bengalee Hindus and Muhammadans. The former tract was the original home of the dynasty. The latter was a later annexation, but it was the area which bore the name of Jaintia and which is mentioned in Pauranic and Tantrik literature as containing one of the 51 famous shrines sacred to Durga". Sutnga Syiems adopted Hindu names and symbols, observing tantrik rites at the Shrine of goddess. The Jaintias have no recorded history of their own like the Khasis till the advent of the British. During the British period the British administrators considered both the Jaintias and the Khasis as one tribe. But some ritual events like the Behdienkhlam festival among the Jaintias play a very important role in enhancing separate ethnic identity. Prior to 1826 the whole of Jaintia Hills formed a single Syiemship which was split into 12 administrative units called the Doloiships is its internal Political organisation. In 1835 the Jaintia Syiemship lapsed and the whole of Jaintia Hills including the Brahmaputra and the Surma valley became an integral part of the company's territory.



The Jaintias speak the language of the Mon-Khmer origin which belongs to the Austro-Asiatic linguistic group. The important feature of this linguistic group is monosyllabic in form. The Jaintias had only one religion named Niamtre earlier in which beefeating was prohibited. Perhaps they shared Hindu beliefs in showing reverence to a cow. During the British period a large section of Jaintias became Christian and at present they have two religious groups, namely Niamtre (traditional) and Christian. The traditional rites and ritual performances of Niamtres are resembling Hinduism. The Jaintias belong to matrilineal society and their social, cultural and economic set up is based on matrilineal and matrilocal traits.

The total area of the Jaintia Hills is 3819 Sq.Km. with a population of 2,20,473 (1991). Out of these 119872 persons live in 459 villages and 20601 persons live in only urban centre i.e. Jowai. The general density of population was 58 per sq.km. in the year 1991 which was quite high because of hilly nature of the terrain with primary sector of economy comprising agriculture forest and coal mining. The sex ratio of the district was 973 which was higher than that of Meghalaya (955) and the country as a whole (929) as per 1991 census. The literacy percentage of the Jaintia Hill was 35.32 which was lower than that of the Meghalaya state (49.10). The percentage of literates among the females was higher 36.31 per cent compared to that of males (34.3%). In the urban area, the literacy percentage was 81.37 and in the rural areas it was 30.35%. The percentage of total working population was 49.36 in 1991. The percentage of male workers (56%) was found to be higher than the female workers (43%) and the majority of the workers were found in rural areas (51%) than in urban areas (35%). This is because of the children and young men and women were the students in urban areas but in rural areas most of this section of population are participating in agriculture and household jobs.

The Jaintias live in 459 village and only 20,601 persons are found to live in the lone town Jowai, the headquarters of the district. In 1971 the population of Jowai was 8,927 and the same increased to 12,908 in 1981 which meant Jowai town had shown an increase of 7693 persons over the decade 1971-1981. Jowai is linked with the rural areas of the district and acts as an important centre of trade, commerce, education, health, recreation etc. for the south eastern region of Meghalaya.

### CONCLUSION

The geographical frame work including climate as discussed earlier has direct bearing on the distribution of population, settlements and linkage pattern of the district. In the past the Jaintias enjoyed the advantage of a well balanced ecology with available natural resources including foodstuffs. They had like other tribals a non exploitative socio-economic structure, freedom from indebtedness and other forms of dependence on non-tribals. But now their traditional style of life has been disrupted by disaster effect of

modern civilization and materially by non-tribals who invaded their habitat. The subsistence tribal structure of the economy has now been broken down and the entire Jaintia Hills is now in a state of socio-economic transition warranting socio-economic development without disrupting the traditional setup of the region.

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This volume, Jaintia Hills: A Meghalaya Tribe – its Environment, Land and People is an important study of a tribal population in transition. They are on international border with Bangladesh. A trans-border culture is a two way traffic. Jaintia Hills, a part of the State of Meghalaya, have immense possibility of development. It has growing trans-border trade relations with neighbouring Bangladesh in respect of rich mineral resources, particularly of coal and lime stone.

The volume containing twenty three articles by eminent social scientists and scientists belonging to agriculture, demography and environmental science adopting a multi – disciplinary approach, is an important contribution to tribal study.

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ISBN: 81-7510-152-0

Rs.295/- \$57/



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