

Modernisation of the Tribals

It would be appropriate at this stage to point out that during the last few decades, a number of developments have taken place amongst the tribal people, resulting in a considerable change in their way of life. Changes in the social life and social notions have naturally led to a change in customs also. Various forces have been instrumental in bringing about these changes. In the first place, the impact of British rule, and, with it, the advent of Christianity, was one such force of considerable importance. The opening of a number of English schools in Gauhati and Sibsagar during the British administration naturally brought the tribals into contact with Western modes of thinking and life. This development took place during the first quarter of the 19th century.¹ Secondly, Christian missionaries became active, particularly, Welsh missionaries, in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, and their impact is evident in the social life of tribal people of the area. The Khasi Hills district has been more deeply influenced by Western culture than other areas because of the location of the headquarters of the British administration in Shillong. The third factor which should be noticed in this context is the advancement in communications between the urban areas and the tribal areas, which naturally led to more intensive and extensive developments than before.

The influence of all these developments is evident in dress, housing, music (Western hymns and dances are more popular than folk dances and music), modes of cultivation (for example, the change from *jhumming* cultivation to wet cultivation),² occupations and beliefs amongst the tribal people.

Changes in the social status of women may also be mentioned here. Restrictions on the movement of women have disappeared. Previously, the Khasi women could not attend the *durbar* or participate in political

1. H.K. Barpujari, *Assam in the days of the Company* (1826-1856) 277 (1963).

2. As to the modes of cultivation in particular, see B.N. Majumdar, *Some Cultural and Linguistic Aspects of the Garos* 23-26 (1969).

affairs. This is not the case now. Changes have also taken place in the status of the males—a factor of still greater importance for the purpose of the tribal areas where traditionally the matrilineal system is in vogue. As a matter of strict law, the son (unlike his sisters) has little or no inheritance rights. This continues to be the strictly legal position even now, but it is usual for mothers to give some property to the sons—property which the son enjoys as owner and not merely as “manager”. In the field of marriage also, old customs are gradually dying out. Marriage “by capture”, previously prevalent among the Garos, is now becoming less common. What is generally described as the “mother-in-law marriage”—the custom of the *nokrom* (the husband of the heiress daughter) marrying his widowed mother-in-law is also dying out. The pattern of residence is also gradually changing. Matrilocal residence (amongst the Khasis) and duo-local residence (amongst the Jaintias), which are the traditional patterns of conjugal residence amongst these communities, are now not adhered to with the same strictness as before. A change in the pattern of residence can be noticed among non-Christians also. The husband and wife set up their own residence as more and more men and women are taking up jobs outside their villages and homes.