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## Relations between the Khasi Syiems (Khasi Kings) of Meghalaya and the British Government 1824 -1903

Ms Ibetlin Kharumnuid

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Seng Khasi College, Shillong 793002,  
Meghalaya State Email: [betlin70@rediffmail.com](mailto:betlin70@rediffmail.com) Mobile: 9863067625

### ABSTRACT:

The British first came into contact with the Khasis in the late eighteenth century, when the East India Company secured the Dewani of Bengal in 1765. The interest of the British then was merely in the promotion of trade and commerce especially in limestone trade. It was much later in 1824 when the Anglo-Burmese war broke out and in its aftermath, that the British had a more extensive interest in the Khasi Hills.

David Scott was the Agent of the Governor-General North East Frontier and through him the British signed treaties with Khasi and Jaintia Kings placing their country under the protection of the British Government.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> November 1826, an agreement was signed by David Scott and Tirot Sing, *Syiem* of Nongkhlaw at Gauhati in which the former was given permission of free passage for troops through Nongkhlaw territory to go and come between Assam and Sylhet. Tirot Sing also agreed to become a subject of the Company.<sup>2</sup> Later however; circumstances led him to resist further British interest in the Khasi Hills. He took the lead to form a confederacy of Khasi Himas to challenge the British in what has been called the Anglo-Khasi war of 1829-1833.

In 1831, David Scott passed away at Cherrapunji and T.C.Robertson succeeded him as the Agent to the Governor-General, North East frontier, after which Francis Jenkins took charge. On 11<sup>th</sup> February 1835, Captain Lister was appointed Political Agent in the Khasi Hills with charge of British relation with Jaintia, and headquarters of Cherra. Subsequently, the Political Agency extended to include the Jaintia Hills which was annexed in 1835.<sup>7</sup>

The Political Agency established in 1835, as a political interlude in Khasi and Jaintia Hills, created an impact not only on the subjugation of the Khasi Hills by the British but also on the administration and political sway over these Hills. With the suppression of the last Khasi Syiems, the *Syiem* of Maharam in 1839, the Government of Bengal gradually established complete control over the Khasi States.

Between 1824 and 1839, there was what may be considered the first transformation in the status of the Khasi *Syiems*. The *Syiems* (Kings) lost their sovereignty over their people, and their lands and The *Syiem*(King) was no longer in the same position as they once used to be, but he was now in some ways, a subject of the company.

An important aftermath of the Anglo-Khasi war was the erosion of the powers of the *Syiems*. Through the treaties of loyalties which some of the *Syiems* signed with

the British authorities; many of them surrendered their political power to the Government and subjected themselves to its supremacy.

**Key words:**

Khasi Syiems (Khasi Kings), Syiem Jaintia (Jaintia Kings), Syiem Sohra (Cherra Raja), Anglo-Khasi war, Sohra(Cherrapunjee), *Hima(Kingdom)*, *Sanads (Decree)*.

**EARLY RELATIONS:**

The British first came into contact with the Khasis in the late eighteenth century, when the East India Company secured the Dewani of Bengal in 1765. The interest of the British then was merely in the promotion of trade and commerce especially in limestone trade.

It was much later in 1824 when the Anglo-Burmese war broke out and in its aftermath, the British had a more extensive interest in the Khasi Hills. In 1824, a treaty was signed between Raja Ram Sing of the Jaintia *Hima (Jaintia Kingdom)* and David Scott the Agent of the Governor-General North East Frontier, whereby the former, among other things, acknowledge allegiance to the Honourable Company and places his country of Jynteah (Jaintia) under their protection.<sup>1</sup> There were also negotiations for construction of a road connecting Sylhet with Nowgong via Jaintia Hills to which the Jaintia Raja readily agreed. The road was constructed and continued for three years but it was later discontinued. However, during his stay in the Khasi hills, David Scott found the climate and land to be very suitable for construction of sanatoria (station). David Scott started bargaining for a road connection between Sylhet and Assam through Khasi Hills. On the 30<sup>th</sup> November 1826, an agreement was signed by David Scott and Tirot Sing, *Syiem(King)* of Nongkhlaw at Gauhati in which the former was given permission of free passage for troops through territory of Nongkhlaw to go and come between Assam and Sylhet. Tirot Sing also agreed to become a subject of the Company.<sup>2</sup> Later however; circumstances led him to resist further British interest in the Khasi Hills. He took the lead to form a confederacy of Khasi Himas(States) to challenge the British in what has been called the Anglo-Khasi war of 1829-1833.

Similarly, in 1829, agreement was signed with the *Syiem(King)* of Sohra, Dewan Sing in which Saitsohpen area was ceded to the British in lieu of land at Pandua in Sylhet District of Bengal.<sup>3</sup> Dewan Sing by another agreement entered into, alongwith his ministers and the inhabitants of Cherra on 12<sup>th</sup> September 1829, acknowledge their subjection to and placing their country under the protection of the British Government, agreeing at the same time not to enter into any quarrel with other *Rajahs* without permission and to aid Government when called upon to do so.<sup>4</sup> He promised to conduct the affairs of the country according to the usages, customs and traditions and to have more concerned on any matters of the Company, but should any person come to Sohra and commit wrongful acts in the Government's territory, the *Syiem(King)* would apprehend him and deliver the person to the Company. Any disputes with other *Syiems (Kings)* would be allowed to be investigated and submit to the judgement given by the Company's officials. On the part of David Scott, he promised that the territory of Sohra (Cherrapunjee) would be properly settled, and he

also assured to give regards to the services rendered by Dewan Sing. Similar agreements were entered into with the *Syiems (Kings)* of other *Himas (States)*. In the year 1829, apart from Dewan Sing, *Syiem* of Sohra, it was the *Rajah* of Myriaw Dolar Sing, the *Rajah* of Ramrye, Zubber Sing, the Sirdars and Elders of the villages of Sopar, Nongrong, Naskin Poonjee and the *Syiem(King)* and the villagers of Byrung Poonjee who acknowledged British authority over them. In 1830, Bor Manik of Khyrin signed an agreement with the Company. In 1831, Ador Sing, *Rajah* of Maharam acknowledged his submission to the Company. In 1832, it was with the *Rajah* of Malai Poonjee and the *Rajah* of Bhowal Poonjee. In 1834, Rajun Sing, appointed *Syiem* of Nongkhlaw by the British signed an agreement with them. In 1835, the Chief of Ramrye territory entered into agreement placing them under the Company's protection. In 1839, the *Rajah* of Maharam acknowledges his dependency. In 1841, it was the *Rajah* of Jeerung who executed an agreement with the Company. However, there does not appear to have been signed any agreement between 1841-1854 with any to the Hill chiefs of these Hills.<sup>5</sup> In the agreements referred to above, nearly all the chiefs of the Khasi States both large and small, acknowledge their subjection and placing themselves under the protection of the British authorities.

In 1831, David Scott passed away at Cherrapunji and T.C.Robertson succeeded him as the Agent to the Governor-General, North East frontier, after which Francis Jenkins took charge. On 11<sup>th</sup> February 1835, Captain Lister was appointed Political Agent in the Khasi Hills with charge of British relation with Jaintia, and headquarters of Cherra. Subsequently, the Political Agency extended to include the Jaintia Hills which was annexed in 1835.<sup>6</sup>

The Political Agency established in 1835, as a political interlude in Khasi and JaintiaHills, created an impact not only on the subjugation of the Khasi Hills by the British but also on the administration and political sway over these Hills. With the suppression of the last Khasi *Syiems (Khasi Kings)*, the Government of Bengal gradually established complete control over the Khasi States.

Between 1824 and 1839, there was what may be considered the first transformation in the status of the Khasi *Syiems (Khasi Kings)*. The *Syiems (Kings)* lost their sovereignty over their people, and their lands as was seen in the case of the *Syiem (King)* of Sohra, Dewan Sing who had to give away Saitsohpen for British military use. The very fact that a Political Agency was established in the Khasi Hills also showed the dominance of the British over the *Syiem (King)* and the people. The *Syiem(King)* was no longer in the same position as he once used to be, but he was now in some ways, a subject of the company.

An important aftermath of the Anglo-Khasi war was the erosion of the powers of the *Syiems (Kings)*. Through the treaties of loyalties which some of the *Syiems(Kings)* signed with the British authorities; many of them surrendered their political power to the Government and subjected themselves to its supremacy.

#### **BRITISH SUZEREINTY**

One of the earliest rights which the Khasi *Syiems* lost to the British was their judicial power over criminal cases.<sup>7</sup> In the Report of A.J.M. Mills on the Khasi and

Jaintia Hills (1853) it states that “...the Cherra Raja has the sole civil and criminal jurisdiction of his country decreed to him by treaty, but all cases between his subjects and ours or those of any other states are investigated in our courts..”<sup>8</sup> In the case of the *Syiems* (Kings) of Khyrim, Langrin, Nongstoin, Nongspung, even though no treaty has been entered into by them with the British government, they were treated on the same footing with the Cherra Syiem (King). Studies show that cases of a serious nature were reported by the *Syiem(King)* of the different Khasi States to the British Government, and such parties involved were handed over to the Cherra Courts. In a letter written by Henry Hopkinson, agent to the governor General, North East Frontier to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, that it was mentioned that one of the conditions laid down in the *Sanad* given to the *Rajah* of Khyrim was that “the Rajah is permitted to decide all criminal cases concerning there that one beyond the jurisdiction of the police...”<sup>9</sup>

Apart from curtailing the judicial competence of the *Syiems* (Kings), there did also incidences of various *Syiems* (Kings) have to pay fines for their waging war against the British Government. For example the State of Khyrim on having been taken possession over by the Company, Bor Manik *Syiem* entered into an agreement with them whereby he agreed among other things to pay a fine of Rs. 5000/- to the Company on account of the expenses incurred by them in the subjection of his country.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Sngap Sing of Maharam craved amnesty for his past offence and agreed to pay to the Company a fine of Rs. 2000/- for the pardon of his offence.<sup>11</sup>

Apart from paying fines, the various *Syiems(Kings)* on their subjection agreed to part away with some of their lands for British use like establishing military and civil sanatoria, cantonments and posts etc. The successor of Dewan Sing, *Syiem(King)* of Cherra, Suba Sing by an agreement promised to give more lands in addition to that already given by his Late uncle, Dewan Sing to the Company. In 1840 a perpetual lease was signed by Suba Sing whereby he agreed that the Government could quarry coal in his territory.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the coal fields of Byrung Poonjee was given to the British Government on lease in the year 1840 by the *Surdars* of that village.<sup>13</sup>

There were also revolutionary changes in the land system of the people. The changes seen with the advent of the British control was the attempt of some chiefs to issue leases or *pattas* to non-Khasis as well as Khasis. So even if the British themselves stressed on the fact that land belonged to the people, yet, they ignored the people and recognized only the *Syiem (King)* when they needed any land and wanted use of it. The fact that the people owned the land was dishonoured by the British Government in the issue of *Sanads* to the *Syiems*.<sup>14</sup> In this case, we find the British authorities raising the status of the *Syiem(King)* because it was convenient for them. In the customs of the Khasis, is that the *Syiem(King)* is not the territorial ruler but only a custodian of the land. However, the coming of the British brought changes to this custom and we find the *Syiem(King)* being recognized as owners of the land.

### INCREASED CONTROL:

Further developments were witnessed when the British government on its assuming control over the Khasi Hills had divided the state into two categories i.e. dependent and semi-dependent. Cherra, Khyrim, Nongstoin, Nongspung and Langrin were referred to as semi-dependent states. The twenty other states were considered as dependent states, though the four Himas(Kingdoms) with the exception of Cherra did not have any written agreement with the British Government, they were regarded as under the protection and authority of the Government and found to obey without demur all the mandates of the Government opined a late historian.<sup>15</sup> In the Administration of the Cossyah and Jynteah Hills territory, the relation between the British government and the Cossyah Chiefs, village *Sirdars*, and Elders have never been formally defined.<sup>16</sup>

The *Syiems (Kings)* of the semi-dependent states were permitted to exercise with the aid of Durbars and elders, sole criminal and civil jurisdiction over their own people in all matters pertaining exclusively to them. They were however, not given any powers to try British subjects of the plains or even the inhabitants of other Khasi States. The Dependent *Syiems* were, however, deprived of the right to exercise their judicial powers on cases of murder, homicide and accidental deaths. The surrender of authority of these *Syiems(Kings)* in criminal administration tantamount to the decrease in their status.<sup>17</sup> Being mostly illiterate, the British authorities exploited the *Syiems (Kings)* and their *Durbars* by framing laws which was convenient to the British Government. In this respect, the most glaring example is the issuing of *Sanads(Decree)* in 1859 whereby terms and conditions were laid down and which was expected to be accepted by the Syiem (King).

The *Sanads (Decree)* and *Parwanas* issued to the *Syiem* were appointment letters, first signed and sealed by the Governor General of India to confirm the election or appointment of a Khasi Chief. They were later signed by the Governor of Bengal, then later by the Commissioner of Khasi and Jaintia Hills, which showed the relative decline in position of the Khasi Chiefs. The decision to issue Sanads was based on the report of W.J.Allen. Moreover, the assumption of power by the crown in 1858, brought the Khasi States into a more definite and formal relationship with the British Government. "...The succession to the chieftainship and Sirdarship of the petty states should be reported to the Governor General's Agent who might be empowered to grant *Sunnuds* to all these petty chiefs, *Sirdars* and Elders..."<sup>18</sup> wrote an officer who was making an enquiry into the British connection with the Khasi-Jaintias.

### INTERFERENCE IN SUCCESSION:

Even prior to 1859 and the issuing of *Sanads (Decree)*, the Chiefs had to turn to the Government on the subject of succession. In the case of Nongkhlaw, after the demise of Tirot Sing, Rajun Sing and Jeedur Sing claimed themselves to be legitimate successors. The Agent had examined the nature of these claims and in concurrence with the will of the State's elders, recommended the nomination of U Rajun Sing.<sup>19</sup> The ceremony of accession was performed in the presence of Francis Jenkins, Captain

Lister and Lt. Henry Inglis. However, a few years later, Rajun Sing showed his incapability to rule over his state and had fallen into debt. He therefore voluntarily resigned in favour of Jeedur Sing, who promised to pay off the debt and awarding a stipend to Rajun Sing.<sup>20</sup>

Another disputed succession occurred in Cherrapunjee in 1856, when Ram Sing, nephew of Suba Sing, succeeded his uncle. However, the *Khadur Kur* (Twelve clans) did not accept this succession because the *Syiem(King)* had straight away reported to the Government about his succession, without being customarily installed as *Syiem(King)* by them and to show their displeasure they did not allow Ram Sing to cremate the dead body of his uncle as tradition and custom demanded for every succeeding *Syiem(King)* in Sohra(Cherrapunjee). The *Khadar Kur* (Twelve clans) were willing to have Ram Sing as their *Syiem(King)* after Allen had explained that the succession of Ram Sing would not be taken as a precedent, but that in all future successions the ancient and established usages of Cherra State would be strictly abided.<sup>21</sup> Suba Sing was cremated on 4<sup>th</sup> May 1857, with full honour and without any disturbances from the opposition party.

#### **CONSOLIDATION:**

Further developments took place in British administration in the hills when the Agreements from 1859 to 1867 were revised in 1875, thus giving way for more additions in its provisions. The Chiefs were now expected not to alienate to any person any property of the State. Also he had to set aside some area for the purpose of planting trees, to supply building timber and firewood to the inhabitants of the State, and to take efficient measures to secure these areas against destruction by fire and by jhumming.<sup>22</sup> The existing rules mentioned in the Agreements of 1867 and also in the Agreement of 1875 were that the Chiefs were required to consider themselves under the orders and control of the Deputy Commissioner of the district of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. They would adjudicate and decide all civil cases and criminal cases, not of a heinous kind, which may arise within the limits of their States. They would be subjected to removal from Chief ship by the Chief Commissioner of Assam if the people were dissatisfied with them. They agreed to surrender to the Deputy Commissioner of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, all civil and political offenders coming to their territory. Further, they agreed that they would give aid and protection to the British officers and to facilitate free intercourse and trade between the people of their State and that of others. They acknowledged the right of the British Government to establish civil and military sanatoria, cantonments and posts in any part of the country under their control and to occupy the lands necessary for that purpose rent-free. Fines and penalties would be imposed for misconduct by the *Syiems(Kings)*. Further, they agreed to the cession of the natural products such as limestone, coal and other minerals on condition that they would receive half the profits arising from the sale, lease or other disposal of such natural products, waste lands would be given to the British Government by the Chiefs. This was a violation on the part of the *Syiem* to give away lands to the British. Lands especially the ones which were collectively

owned by the people or the inhabitants would not be passed on to any new owners other than the people of the *Hima(Kingdom)*.

These agreements resulted in the extension of authority of the Government. The Agreements were now signed only by the Deputy Commissioner of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Thus, while there was a gradual erosion of the Chief's authority, there was an increase of power and influence of the British Government.

The changed position of the Khasi Chiefs was clearly brought out in a communication from Hopkinson who observed:<sup>23</sup> "A Cossyah chief is certainly in part an officer of the British Government appointed to and maintained in his position by that Government and responsible to it for the purpose discharge of his duties and liable to removal when he does not discharge them properly".

The motive behind the revision of Agreements might be because the British Government wanted to have complete control of the Khasi States in an indirect manner. In other words, indirect rule was what the British wanted. As in other Indian States, the Indian princes had delegated certain specified rights to the British through treaties and other engagements. The British had also concluded many similar worded treaties with some of the Indian Rulers between 1867 to 1870. However, within twenty years (1887-88) each of these treaties was modified to apply only in the British favour.<sup>24</sup>

Thus while the British at times recognised the sovereign authority of some rulers, they were also reducing that authorities towards others. This was the case with the Khasi *Syiems* (Khasi Kings), though the *Syiems (Kings)* were not sovereigns. However, they were given a higher status by the British and were considered to be higher than the authority of the Durbar, this was a departure to the traditional custom of the Khasi polity.

#### **FURTHER CHANGES:**

The British followed a new polity in the 1870s, when by then, the earlier categorizing of the States had ceased and all *Syiemship(Kingship)* came under the control of the Political Agent who was also the Deputy Commissioner of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. In 1877, the Agreements were abolished altogether and *Sanads (Decree)* were retained in the case of a *Syiem(Kings)* and *Parwanas* in the case of a *Lyngdoh* and a *Sirdar*. By then there was a more elaborate interference and intervention in the internal affairs of the Khasi States by the British. Intervention took various forms, over maladministration, and discontentment of the Hima's(Kingdom) subjects with the *Syiem(King)*, over question of law and order and in most cases of disputed succession of the chieftainship.<sup>25</sup>

There were not much differences in the terms and conditions laid down in the *Sanads(Decree)* and *Parwanas* except for the fact that the *Sanads(Decree)* were imposed on the *Syiems*, whereas it appears that in the Agreements signed with the *Sirdars*, the latter puts himself under the orders and control of the Deputy Commissioner. In the case of one of these, the Agreements signed by the Chief (Sirdar) of Jirang in 1883, the statements runs thus, "...I, U Bang of Jirang having been appointed by the Deputy Commissioner of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills to be the

*Sirdar* of the State of Jirang, in the district of Khasi and Jaintia Hills, do hereby agree and promise that I will, in the administration of the said State, conduct myself to the given rules...<sup>26</sup> This was the only agreement signed by the British with a *Sirdar* of a Khasi State. The provision of the Agreement is the same as in the *Sanads* signed with the *Syiems*. However, this *Parwana* was signed by the Deputy Commissioner whereas the *Sanads* were signed and issued by the Chief Commissioner of Assam. This distinction between *Syiems* who received *Sanads* and *Sirdars* who received *Parwanas* sought to distinguish the Khasi States with *Syiems* and those governed by *Sirdars* and *Lyngdohs*. The implication that arises is that *Syiemship* were considered by the British a higher status to that of the *Lyngdohs* and *Sirdars*.

There must have been some resentment by the Khasi Chiefs of the changed Agreements and the *Sanads*. However, the Khasi *Syiem* could not organise a counter reaction to these changes as they were illiterate and had not organised themselves into any kind of Federation. Therefore, during the first promulgation of the *Sanads*, even though many *Syiems* and their Durbar were prone to reject outright the enforcement of the new terms not mentioned in any of the original treaties executed during David Scott's time, thirty years ago, yet many were impelled to accept lest they would be subject to further humiliating terms.<sup>27</sup> The general form of *Sanad* prescribed by the government of India in 1877 stated that the *Syiem* who was elected would be given a *Sanad* to ratify his election and appointment as *Syiem* and thereby, the *Syiem* had to abide by the given conditions. Traditionally there was no election as such in the Khasi States and *Syiems* were nominated only on the line of hereditary and by the approval of the *Myntris* and the *Durbars*. Elections were an innovation of the British in the Khasi States. The *Syiem* would be subjected to the orders and controls of the Deputy Commissioner of the district of Khasi and Jaintia Hills who would decide any dispute that might arise between the *Syiems* of the different States. The *Syiem* would have to obey any lawful orders which the Deputy Commissioner or any officer authorized on that behalf by the Government of India might issue. Next the *Syiem* was given the power to adjudicate and decide all civil cases and all criminal offences, except those punishable under the Indian Penal Code; with death, transportation or imprisonment for five years and upwards which might arise within the limits of the States, in which the *Hima's* subject alone are concerned. In cases where subjects or other Khasi States, or in which Europeans or native of the plains were involved, then the Deputy commissioner of the *Khasi-Jaintia Hills* or any other Officer appointed by the Deputy Commissioner may adjudicate. The *Syiem* was also not to alienate or mortgage to any person any property of the State, which he possessed as Chief of the State. The *Syiem* (*s*) would be required to set aside such areas as defined by the British Government for purpose of growing trees to supply timber and firewood to the inhabitants of the States. The Khasi *Syiem* was required to accord his assent and to sit together with the Deputy Commissioner for the trials of suits for divorce and other matrimonial cases arising between native Christians, who had been married in accordance with the provisions of the Indian Christian Marriage Act XV of 1872. This clause was retained, modified or excluded in each case in accordance with the agreements made

with the *Syiem* on the subject. Finally a clause prescribed that if the *Syiem* would violate any of the condition of the *Sanad*, and if the *Syiem* acted against the established custom of the people, or if the people were dissatisfied with him, then he would be subjected to suffer any punishment which the Chief Commissioner of Assam thought proper to inflict. Thus having given the above condition to be followed, the *Syiem* would be confirmed as *Syiem* of the State.<sup>28</sup> The Sanads which were conferred upon the Khasi *Syiems* thus place them under the complete subjection of the British Government

These new Agreements and Sanads were criticised by the Khasi Chiefs. Many of them agreed that by signing such agreements the Chiefs was placed in such a position by the British Government which would enable them to remove at will if they so desired.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, the Chief was given the upgraded position in the case of land holdings and minerals etc. This was very much against the traditional customs of the Khasis. The criticism would be considered in the examination of the Sanads clause by clause.

#### **FEEBLE REACTION:**

The Sanads of 1877 placed the Chiefs under the orders and control of the Deputy Commissioner and thereby were bound to obey all lawful orders issued by the Deputy Commissioners or other officers authorized on the behalf by the Government of Assam, the criticism against the word lawful order which first appeared in the Sanad of 1877, was that it gave the Deputy Commissioners the right to compel the Chiefs and Durbars to act properly according to the existing laws and custom of the state but he could not give order which where new laws for the state without the consent of the Durbar.<sup>30</sup>

Clause II, relating to judicial powers was criticised because the Chief were denied the powers to try cases under the Indian Penal Code and had no right to try persons who were not residing within the Hima(Kingdom). In pre-British day, a Chief could not compel the attendance before his Durbar of a defendant non-resident unless with the aid of a Chief of another State. In all probability such aid was not readily given.<sup>31</sup> Seeing that no person liked to attend the Durbar of another State, the government by law of Sanad, confined the power of a Chief to his own Hima (Kingdom).

A criticism against Clause III was that the right of establishing Civil and Military sanatoria, cantonment and post on land rent free was unfair to private owners of the land.<sup>32</sup> Clause IV dealt with cession of wastelands as well as mineral and mines. The contention was that the Chief without consulting the Durbar had given away the wasteland to the British which were a violation on their part. On the other hand, the consent of the Durbar and the people even if given was due to their ignorance.

Criticism against Clause V was that the Government was empowered to impose upon the *Syiem* not to alienate nor mortgage any private as well as Raid land to Foreigners, while he still held Office of *Syiem*. With regard to Clause VI, it should be remembered that the Khasis were known to have sacred groves whereby such kind

of destruction to trees were not allowed. These sacred groves somehow began to disappear with the people themselves having no respect for what their ancestors had provided them. In consequence, forest reserves were made, mostly by Col. Bivar and continued to exist to the present day.<sup>33</sup>

According to Clause VII, the *Syiem* was to agree to sit together with the Deputy Commissioner for the trial of suits of divorce or other matrimonial case. Some of the Chief had given a written agreement to sit together with the Deputy Commissioner to consult such cases of divorce and await his decision. In practice the mixed court had been found very difficult to hold, as the Deputy Commissioner and the *Durbar* of the Chief could not meet except at very long intervals as the Deputy Commissioner undertook a tour of the Khasi Hills only in the winter months and justice was therefore delayed. So the Chief and his *Durbar* heard the cases and sent their decisions to the Deputy Commissioner for confirmation.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, the Deputy Commissioner was given power to remove, after reporting to his higher authority any Chief if he acted improperly or if his subjects had just cause for dissatisfaction with their Chief. This power relegated traditional person of election and even after all traditional requirements were met, the Deputy Commissioner in the new dispensation would override the power of the electors over the matter of election and removal of the *Syiem(King)*.

#### **SUCCESSION DISPUTES:**

By the *Sanad* of 1877, the internal affairs of the Khasi States were interfered and intervened into by the British. The Chiefs apart from the fact that they had to abide by all the conditions set to by the Government had to also go to the Government for help in cases of succession dispute.

The first Khasi Chief to be conferred by the *Sanad* of 1877 was the *Syiem* of Cherra, U Hajon Manik. On 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1875, Ram Sing, *Syiem* of Cherra expired. According to the Hima's established custom, the Khadar Kur (Twelve clans) were the electors of the new *Syiem*,, but on this occasion, a popular election was held at Cherra. Two candidates appeared for election, Bor Sing, first cousin of the deceased *Syiem*, and Hajon Manik.<sup>35</sup> The Deputy commissioner, Col. H.S. Bivar, called upon the headmen and elders to declare, according to

Established custom and the consent of the people of the State, who should be nominated Chief in succession to Ram Sing *Syiem*.<sup>36</sup> The headmen and elders were unanimous in electing Hajon Manik as successor because Bor Sing, even though, he was the direct line of succession, yet he was not given the right to be *Syiem* of Cherra as he had converted to Christinity.<sup>37</sup> Hajon Manik was then appointed *Syiem* of Cherra with a confirmation from the British Government on the 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1875, it was only till 1877, that Hajon Manik was given a *Sanad*, signed and sealed by Lord Lytton, Viceroy and Governor General of India. Other *Syiem*s who were given *Sanads* by the Government were among others, U Klur Sing, *Syiem* of Khyrim and U Kine Sing *Syiem* of Nongkhlaw who also happened to be the first Christian *Syiem* in the Nongkhlaw *Syiemship*. He was conferred the title of "Rajah" by the British for his

service to his people. The people of Cherra however, did not consider Hajon Manik as their *Syiem* but as an administrator.

The then Deputy Commissioner Col. Bivar was of the opinion that *syiems* were elected on popular basis. He had studied the succession case of Cherra and following on that line, *Syiemship* was accorded to the candidate who has the largest number of votes. He therefore, did not follow the hereditary custom of succession. Bivar's proceeding was not uniform or consistent.<sup>38</sup> In this respect, the chief Commissioners of Assam, had to revise the process in which elections was held. Contemplating for a new possibility of election, he directed the next Deputy Commissioner Col. Clarke to make an extensive study on the pattern of *Syiemship* succession. Exhaustive enquiries were made by Clarke who arrived at a conclusion that the office of the *Syiem* was not elective but hereditary, going on regular succession to the *Syiem's* nearest relative from female line; that the candidate must be blood relation of a *Syiem* and that on the death of a *Syiem*, the next heir in regular line came forward and proclaimed himself *Syiem* with the consent of the family and the Durbar.<sup>39</sup> Clarke suggested that where dispute arose, and "election" should only be held on the demand of the Durbar.<sup>40</sup> What was necessary though, was that the decision of the Durbar should be unanimous so that it would not promote any cause for resentment or bitterness among the people.

The Chief commissioner, Stewart Bayley approved of the proposal, but the next Deputy Commissioner, J.C. Arbuthnot was of the opinion that elections only leads to bribery and generates party feelings and is adverse to the interests of the people...also elections are an innovation consequent on our rule and contrary to Khasi custom".<sup>41</sup> As a result of the disapproval of Arbuthnot, the next Chief Commissioner, Sir Henry Cotton was reluctant to give confirmation or *Sanads* to the candidates with majority votes. He therefore called for enquiry into the matter of *Syiemship* succession.

This enquiry followed when another disputed succession case occurred in Cherra. On the death of Hajon Manik on 25<sup>th</sup> May 1901, the inhabitants of that state has in a Durbar chose Roba Sing to be their next *Syiem*. However, Roba Sing's claim was contested by Chandra Sing the nephew of Hajon Manik. But the people were not in favour of Chandra Singh, as he had no females relatives and also because he belonged to the house of Hajon Manik who was not given the right to cremate the death body of his predecessor. On the part of the British, they felt that Chandra Sing should be nominated as *Syiem*, since he was a direct descendent of Hajon Manik. The Chief Commissioner therefore directed the Deputy Commissioner to convene the Khadar Kur (Twelve clans) and to call them to state whether they would consent to the succession of Chandra Sing.<sup>42</sup> In the Durbar of the head of the twelve clans, eight consented to the election of Chandra Sing, while four were for Roba Sing. As there was no unanimity among the Khadar Kur, an election by the inhabitants of Cherra was called for. The Deputy Commissioner's order for an election by the people of the state was set aside and Chandra Sing was appointed as *Syiem*.<sup>43</sup> The State of Charra witnessed a third Durbar in succession for a re-election and on this occasion Roba Sing was made *Syiem* of Cherra. He cremated the dead body of U *Syiem* Ram Sing

and the Hima confirmed his position as *Syiem* on 6<sup>th</sup> March 1908.<sup>44</sup> On the part of the British, Roba Sing was duly appointed *Syiem* of Cherra by a *Sanad* of appointment and his position was made more firm when Chandra Sing was called upon to return the *Sanad* granted to him.<sup>45</sup>

#### ENQUIRY INTO SYIEMSHIP SUCCESSION:

In Cherra succession procedure was not welcomed by other Khasi *Syiem*. By doing away with the traditional usage of nominating a *Syiem* in open durbar, the government brought in its make all the evils associated with secret voting.<sup>46</sup> In order that no problem would arise were the system used in Cherra be applied to other *Syiemship*, the Government of India ordered for an enquiry by Captain D. Herbert, the then Deputy Commissioner of the division. The information which Captain Herbert had collected would be of great use in deciding any question which might arise in future relating to succession. According to Captain Herbert, neither W.B.Allen nor Lt. Col. Clarke was able to go into detail in making their enquiries and thereby they missed the important variations in the procedure which prevail in several Khasi State.<sup>47</sup> Herbert found out that there are ...”difference” and in the principle in procedure in almost every state and that no general rule suits the circumstances of the state.

The report of Captain Herbert on *Syiemship* succession revealed to the British that succession was hereditary under certain restrictions, that there was a custom in certain states to recognised as their apparent; that a successor descends directly from the mother of the deceased *Syiem* though, in certain states, a first cousin has equal rights with the brothers to succeed to *Syiemship*.

The heirs for *Syiemship* could be disqualified from succeeding for any good reason in accordance with the Khasi religion and custom. It may be noted that some Khasi *Syiem* had converted to Christianity. Bor Sing, for instance could not become *Syiem* of Cherra on his conversion to Christianity. In course of time however, when larger number of Hima’s population became Christian, it did not debar Christiana from becoming *Syiem* as per instance in Nongkhlaw *Syiemship*. On the other hand tradition was maintained in a Hima such as Khyrim which till today hold firm to their traditional religion and its rites and ceremonies. By the 1900, many *Syiem* had become Christians and therefore they would have certain reservation about performing the traditional religious rites and customs. This shows that the religious role of a *Syiem* was not accounted very necessary in those states and religion played a small part in the succession ceremony.

Captain Herbert concluded his enquiry and submitted his report on 28<sup>th</sup> January 1903. He recommended that when a *Syiemship* becomes vacant, the Deputy Commissioner should call upon the electors to nominate the next *Syiem*. Such nomination was to be widely announced in the state and if there were to be any objection it should be brought forward before the day of appointment. The Deputy Commissioner also was to be part of the election procedure whereby he was empowered to summon the electors and record their notes for a new *Syiem*. However,

Captain Herbert stressed on the point that under no circumstances should a popular election be held for all the Khasi States.

The recommendation of Captain Herbert was implemented by the British Government in later succession cases.

#### **MORE CHANGES:**

The Khasi *Syiems* had gradually lost their important position in the Hima and the people of the Hima had begun to question the administration of the *Syiem*. As in the case of Khyrim *Syiemship*, there was a time when the people of the twenty five villages under Khyrim *Syiemship* objected to make their contribution in aid of the construction of the Ing sad Ing sunon (the house of the *Syiem Sad*)<sup>48</sup> and even wanted to remain independent from the *Syiem's Hima*. Thereupon, the *Syiem*, U Klur Sing, called on the Deputy Commissioner to assist him in realising the dues from the recusants.<sup>49</sup> This in itself showed that due to misunderstandings, the people were ready to break away from their *Syiem*.

In another case under Myllem *Syiemship* a quarrel arose in 1872-73 over the village of Marbisu. The *Syiem* claimed the village as appertaining to his State while the villagers claimed to be an independent community.<sup>50</sup> Three years time was given to the villagers to decide whether they would return to their *Syiem* or remain independent. Being aware that being independent meant that they would become British subjects and thus liable to the payment of house tax, after three years the villagers opted to remain independent and thus came under British management. This break away of the Marbisu village is another instance of the erosion of the *Syiem's* rule over the Hima's subjects.

By another innovation of the British, a Dewan (Regent) was appointed for some months to look after the public affairs in Khyrim. This followed when U Klur Sing, *Syiem* of Khyrim applied that due to ill-health, he wanted to entrust his two nephews to attend to public affairs. However, the Deputy Commissioner, Captain D.Herbert was reluctant to allow the request. He therefore proposed the appointment of Babu Hajom Kissor Sing, a head clerk in the sub-divisional office of Jowai, "äs minently fit" for the office of Dewan and to temporarily exercise all power of the *Syiem*. This was accepted by Sir J.B.Fuller, the officiating Chief Commissioner and thus emerged the office of Dewan for the first time (and only once) in the history of Khasi States. However, towards the close of 1903 Klur Sing was restored as it was thought desirable for political reasons to further extend the stop-gap arrangement.<sup>51</sup>

The British policy in the Khasi States from 1875 to 1903 reveals that certain changes were made which would suit British administration in the Khasi Hills. The abolition of Agreements was intended to indicate that the *Syiems* were not parties to the contract. The issuance of *Sanads* and *Parwanas* brought confusion to the position of the *Syiems*, *Sirdars*, *Lyngdohs* who were otherwise equal in status, but distinctions were now shown by the British. So wide were the powers of the Government under the *Sanads* and *Parwanas* that the *Syiems* became actually part of the British Empire. In short, the Deputy Commissioner control the native rulers in every respect.<sup>52</sup> The *Syiems* were so much under the control of British officials that in every internal affairs

of the States, they had to approach the Government for help. It was also because of this, that the British got a chance to change the traditional political system and to apply whatever rules that benefitted their wants. Thus the status of the *Syiems* was also affected and they became inferior in position, to the extent that the British Government had the right not only to ratify the election of the *Syiem* but also to appoint him to his position as *Syiem* and also to dismiss the *Syiem* at will.

#### CONCLUSION:

The study has shown that over the years, the status and position of the Khasi *Syiems* (Khasi Kings) of Meghalaya underwent tremendous changes. In the earliest period of their inception the *Syiems* (*Kings*), were greatly revered by the people. However, as the British embedded their rule, changes made by them led the people to also change their attitude towards their *Syiems* (*Kings*).

When the institution of *Syiemship* (*Kingship*) was started, the *Syiem* (*King*), to his people in the hills, was a symbol of their unity. This was shattered by the coming of the British to these hills. The year 1824 was and is important as it paved the way for the British extension of inference into these hills. From 1824 to 1839, there was an erosion of the status of the *Syiems* (*Kings*) when some of them had to surrender their political and judicial powers and subject themselves to the supremacy of the British Government. This was further strengthened by the issue of *Sanads* (decree) and *Parwanas*.

Curiously enough, though the British had brought the Khasi *Syiems* (*Khasi Kings*) under their control, yet when it was favourable for them, they raised the position of the *Syiems* (*Kings*) and recognized them, disregarding the traditional customs. For instance, in one of the clauses of the *Sanads* (*decree*), the *Syiems* (*Kings*) were made to hand over any land desirable by the British, which was contrary to traditional custom of land ownership.

An innovation brought about by the British was mainly the issuance of *Sanads* (*decree*) and the elections for *Syiemship* (*Kingship*) succession. The British Government greatly utilised the illiteracy and ignorance of the Khasi Chiefs by framing laws which was convenient to them. They had even started interfering in the process of succession, *Syiems* (*Kings*) were then required to get the confirmation and seal of the British Government to strengthen their appointment.

In 1835, the establishment of the Political Agency meant further the loss of independence of the Khasi *Syiems*. They were now under the control of the Political Agency and later the Deputy Commissioner who incidentally was the only link between them and the British authorities. However, the only difference between the *Syiems* (*Kings*) and other native princes of India was that the latter had a Resident in their territory, while this official was absent in the Khasi Hills. Further, the Khasi *Syiems* were not awarded with any gun salute unlike the other larger Indian States.

The British had brought far-reaching changes in Khasi society. Realising the needs of the tribals they gave them security and allowed them to have only that amount of autonomy that was needed<sup>53</sup>. Particularly in the Khasi Hills, the *Syiemsc*(*Kings*) were allowed to rule over their States almost without interference, the

administration being left to be conducted according to the traditional customs. On the other hand, much of the aspirations of the Khasi *Syiems* were disregarded by the British authorities.

However, it is to the credit of the Khasis that in spite of being under the powers of the British Empire for quite a long period of time, they could still hold their identity. Even though with time, there had been a continuity of change both in traditions and political institutions, yet the presence of some of the age old institutions shows the resilience of the people. The British authorities had, to some extent, made the *Syiems (Kings)*, a puppet or a tool to further their own ambitions. The motive of the colonial power was to achieve what they wanted and their most suitable means was through the Agreements and *Sanads (decree)*.

As regards the relations between the British authorities and the Khasi *Syiems (Khasi Kings)*, one can say that there must have been some sort of a different attitude towards Himas (States) which are more economically resourceful. The distinction between Semi-independent states and Dependent states may be cited as an example to show the different position of the *Syiem (King)* and their *Hima (States)*. The five Semi-independent States were larger than the other twenty minor states, which in some ways shows that the British wanted the five larger *Himas (States)* to be on friendly terms with them by giving them higher status.

The coming of the British administration had important repercussions. Apart from the Anglo-Khasi war which had brought much destruction and mistrust among the Khasis, the other reaction was the partition of Hima Shillong (State of Shillong) into Khyrim and Myllem which soon after took up respective spheres of jurisdiction since the partition.<sup>54</sup> Further, the Anglo-Khasi war had an important impact on the social life of the Khasis. For the first time the Khasis came into direct contact with a foreign culture, and along with it the propagation of Christianity. Christianity brought with it, western education which accelerated the pace of modernisation among the Khasis. In spite of so many changes, the political activity among the Khasis, have not shown much change. The Khasi States continue to have *Syiems (Kings) and Durbars*, no matter in what position they were placed Khasi Society have adapted themselves so much to their traditional institution.

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