SYIEMSHIP SUCCESSION IN THE KHASI HILLS IN THE LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURIES

INTRODUCTION:

The British control over the Khasi Hills over more than a century between 1830s to 1947, brought about a number of changes in the socio-economic and political life of the Khasi People. Many of these changes were positive and saw the development of the Khasis. However, there was an undue interference in the political structure of the Khasi states and one of its effects was that the traditional pattern of succession to Syiemship was seriously eroded in the interest of the British administration which sought to place as Syiem people who not only had a traditional right but frequently persons, who would serve British interest in the Khasi states.

This investigation has come out of the realisation that many tribal societies want to go back in some ways to these traditional past. The Khasi Hills District Council which has been given the authority today to approve and make appointments to Syiemships find itself in a difficult position in the phase of tradition in conflict with recent changes. Efforts are on to revert as far as possible to the traditional pattern of Syiemship succession, but so much time and changes have taken place that this is a difficult task.
Till date there has not been any serious research on this problem. A number of historians and other social scientists have made some investigations, but these are sketchy and take up succession problems in particular Khasi states only. However, these researches have been useful guides for me to elaborate upon. The first study was made by P.R.T. Gurdon in his The Khasis (1907) which closely followed the publication of D. Herbert's Succession to Kinsmanship in the Khasi States (1903). While Herbert's Report is an official study and not an academic investigation, it nevertheless is the most important source for my M. Phil dissertation, and of which more will be said in Chapter-V. P.R.T. Gurdon's book has a section on 'state organisation' in which the system of succession is laid down and the power and functions of the Syiems. The next important study was made by Homiwell Lyngdoh in Ki Syiem Khasi bed Synteng (1964) where-in he narrates the history of the Khasi states down to the 1930s. Hamlet Bareh's History and Culture of the Khasi People (1986) was the first serious effort to understand the problem of the powers and functions of Syiems disputed succession and so on. His article "Khasi Jaintia State Formation" in Surajit Sinha's (ed) Tribal Politics and State System in Pre-colonial Eastern and North
Eastern India, is a development of his earlier work. J.K. Choudhury's Khasi Canvas touches on the succession problems, but it lacks detail for he did not have access to official papers. D.R. Syiemlish in his British Administration in Meghalaya Policy and Pattern (1989) and Helen Giri's Khasis under British Rule 1824-1947 (1990) have used archival material and given information not available in other publications. D.R. Syiemlish's 'Colonialism and Syiemship succession: A study of Cherra State 1901-1902' in North East India History Association proceedings (1982) is the first detailed study using archival material on the Cherra Succession dispute.

OBJECTIVES:

The objectives of the dissertation is to prepare a monograph on Syiemship succession in the Khasi Hills in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The study is limited to this period as a number of reports were made on the problems and these were partly responsible for changing the traditional pattern of Syiemlish succession. The period late 19th and early 20th centuries has been chosen particularly because this period saw many disputed successions. Where tradition was resorted to in Syiemship succession and where it did not interfere with British attitudes that succession was honoured. However, where dispute came to the forefront and where more than one contestant stated their claims. The British Government
interfered and usually recognised that person, who by the traditional pattern and with the support of the local populars would be acceptable as Syiem. The study attempts first to review the traditional and time honoured method of succession to Syiemship and the early reference in official documents on Syiemship succession. It also makes a study of some of the more important succession disputes for example, the Cherra episode of 1901-1902 and finally the dissertation concludes with a discussion on an official report on Syiemship succession made by Captain D. Herbert.

**DATA COLLECTION**

The data used in writing this dissertation comes mainly from primary sources both published. Much of the data was collected in the Record Office of the Deputy Commissioner, East Khasi Hills. Here a collection was made from political files and miscellaneous files relating to appointment of Syiem. Very useful were the Foreign Proceedings 1874-1903 and the Letters issued to the Government in the Assam State Records Office, Dispur, Guwahati. Some important unpublished documents were also collected from private repositories of Bah George Chyne, Bah Thiaw and Syiem Sad of Cherrapunjee. The printed primary sources (indicated in the Bibliography enclosed) were extensively used, particularly reports of Mills, Allen and Captain Herbert.
Secondary published and unpublished material have been used to supplement the primary material indicated above.

**ORGANISATION**

The dissertation has been divided into five chapters. Chapter-I entitled "Syiemship in Pre-colonial time" discusses the origin of the Khasi states drawn from Khasi oral tradition and the theories related to the development. It then takes up a further development into *Syiemship* in some of the Khasi states. As an introduction to the succeeding chapter, this chapter also makes a study of the traditional system of *Syiemship* succession and the powers and functions of the Khasi Syiems.

Chapter-II is entitled "British control over the Khasi states and early enquiries into *Syiemship* succession". This chapter briefly discusses how the British took control of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills and made it a district under their direct and indirect control through a Deputy Commissioner stationed at Shillong. The same official also functioned as Political Agent in British relations with the Khasi states. This chapter makes an attempts to study the various treaties, engagements and *Sanads*, which the British entered into with the Khasi *Syiems*, particularly those relating to law and order, minerals exploitation and their succession.
It discusses how many Khasi states existed in the early years of the British rule and the powers and functions these Sylams enjoyed. This chapter also discusses the control imposed by the British on the Khasi Sylams and it concludes with a discussion on some of the early British reports on Sylamship succession.

Given the changing times and the imposition of British authority over the Khasi states, a number of disputed succession occurred in the second half of the 19th century. These disputes are discussed in Chapter-III "Disputed successions in the 19th century". It discusses some cases, such as, in Nongkhlaw in 1850, in Nongstein in 1890 and 1897, in Mylliem in 1869, and 1895 in Hoiwang in 1889 and Cherra in 1875.

The "Cherra Episode" forms Chapter-IV. The whole chapter is devoted to the Cherra succession case 1901-1902. It merits close attention. This case took two years to settle. It involved various levels of Government decision, from the Deputy Commissioner to the Chief Commissioner to the Governor General and finally the House of Commons. It divided the Cherra population into two camps, supporting either Chandra Singh or Roba Singh and the entire episode is narrated in detail.

The conclusion is a "Critical analysis of Herbert's Report 1903". The Deputy Commissioner in his capacity as Political Agent was required by the Chief
Commissioner of Assam to make a report on *Syiemship* succession in each of the fifteen Khasi states ruled by *Syiem* in *Dorbar*. Herbert made extensively tours to each of the Khasi states, recorded evidence, received objections from *Syiem*, their relatives, member of the State *Dorbar* and other prominent persons, and reviewed statements of contesting parties. He made his recommendation at the end of each State's enquiry. Herbert's Report was the first detailed attempt to study the various patterns of *Syiemship* succession. Herbert's Report was hard to come by since there was only a limited number of copies printed in the first edition. The Government of Meghalaya must be commended for reprinting this valuable document.

British control over the Khasi Hills over more than a century, brought about many changes in the socio-economic and political life of the Khasi people. Politically, the British Government had effected drastic changes in the powers and functions of the *Syiem*. Though the *Syiem* and his *Myntris* and other officials remained in their offices, they were divested of their real power. Conversion to Christianity created intricate problems of succession to some *Syiemships*. The population of the state, or the electoral body, would never recognise the right of a Christian convert to claim the office, no matter how
direct in descent he was. In many such cases a distant relative was brought in the office, thus breaking the regular line of succession. To support this, we can cite the case of Cherra succession dispute of 1875, in which Borsing, who was direct in descent was not elected and his claim was set aside, because of the fact that he was a Christian. Instead Majon Manik, who was only a distant cousin was appointed for the office.

Our enquiry also shows that each Khasi state, even today has its own customs and traditions. Each state has a unique form of succession. The composition of the electoral varies from one state to another. The British very clearly showed its authority where the electors were equally divided in a vote. It stated that Government should decide as to which candidate had the strongest claim. But the appointment of a person as Syiem solely rested with the British Government which could refuse to accept a person as Syiem, whose appointment would be undesirable for any serious reason.