CHAPTER II

BRITISH CONTROL OVER THE KHASI STATES AND EARLY ENQUIRIES INTO SURVIVORSHIP

SUCCESSION
BRITISH CONTROL AND EARLY ENQUIRIES INTO
SYRIEMSHIP SUCCESSION

Early contacts :-

The first contact of the British with
the Khasis must have taken place only after the British
became the 'Dewani' of the district of Sylhet by
virtue of the grant of Dewani of Bengal to the East
India Company in 1765. British authority was, however,
limited to the territory of Bengal and these hills not
being part of Bengal, the British could not interfere
in its affairs. Early British interest in the Khasi and
Jaintia Hills was limited to trade in limestone, salt,
cotton, piece goods and fruits. So important was the
trade in Chunam that two European contractors, Richardson
and Galloway were appointed by the Company to aid William
Thackeray, the Collector of Sylhet, in their limestone
trade. Khasi limestone had been worked and refined
during the rule of the later Nawabs of Bengal and its
trade flourished under the East India Company and
private enterprise. Limestone was cheaply sent down to
Calcutta for the construction of Calcutta - the City of
palaces.2

1. Syiemlieh, D.R. British administration in Meghalaya
Policy and Pattern p.11
2. Lindsay, R. 'Anecdotes of an Indian Life'
Lives of the Lindsay, Vol. III, pp.176-180
Since limestone trade was not a Company's monopoly, the trade in lime was also occupied by Armenians, Greeks and low Europeans. It is apparent that these foreign traders must have acquired rights from the Khasi chiefs to work the limestone quarries in the south-eastern part of the hills on the Sylhet frontier. During his Collectorate, Robert Lindsay had arranged for the fortification of Pandua market and a number of Sepoys were stationed there. To prevent raids, the Khasi chiefs were given rent-free lands in the plains with the sole intention that they would act as deterrents against raids by their own people. While these defensive measures to protect Pandua and other trading centres in the southern foothills were in progress, the Khasis in 1783 made a frontal assault on the market. Heavy casualties were suffered on both sides. It appeared that the real cause of the outbreak was the prohibition imposed on the custom of collection of market levy by the local authorities. Four years later, in 1787, the Khasi made another raid. When enquired, the

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3. Dutta, P.N. Impact of the West on Khasis and Jaintias
   P.35

4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
captured Khasi admitted that "a famine in the plains and the mountains forced them to commit it". The British were more concerned about the activities of Greek and French traders in Sylhet and measures were adopted such as a Regulation of 1799 by which traders were prohibited from entering into the hills and stern steps were taken to control Khasi raids into Sylhet.

So far, the Company followed a policy of non-intervention towards the entire North-east. The threats posed by the Burmese occupation of Assam forced the Company to abandon its policy of non-intervention in the affairs of Assam, Cachar, Manipur, Jaintia and Khasi States.

**Khasi resistance**

Towards the close of the 18th century, David Scott, the Agent to the Governor General, delighted by the climate of the hills, brought it to the notice of his Government that locations in the hills could be developed for sanitory stations for Europeans in the lower province. He desired to construct

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9. Ibid. p.187
a road from Ranikudam through Jirang, Nongkhlaw, Sohiong to Cherra and finally to Sylhet. To serve his purpose, he also sought to annex Bardwar, and this necessitated the violation of the territorial and ancestral right of the Nongkhlaw System. It also brought the Khasis into closer contact with the British.

In November 1826 on the death of Chattar Singh, Scott seized upon a fresh opportunity that presented itself over the question of succession to the Chieftainship of Nongkhlaw. Tirot Sing was a claimant to the position against Rijon Singh, who was at the time only five years old. Scott was invited to mediate over the question of succession and decided in favour of Tirot Sing.10

When Tirot Sing protested the Company's move to merge his ancestral dominion, David Scott had no relevant grounds other than pointing out that the Khasi traders had always been passing through the plains, for which something in return, for the right of passage was claimed by him. Tirot Sing was, therefore, implored to obtain for the East India Company the right of passage.11

11. Barend, H. History and Culture of the Khasi people p.114
Pemberton gave a somewhat different version of the events that led up to the conclusion of an agreement with Tirot Sing. According to him, "It was not, however, until the year 1826 that negotiations to effect this desirable object was entered upon by Mr. Scott with the Cossyiah chieftains; when Teerut Singh, the Rajah of Nongklow, having expressed a desire to rent some lands in Assam, which had once been held by his ancestors under the native princes of that country. Mr. Scott promised compliance with his request, if he would endeavour to obtain from his people permission for the unrestricted passage of British subjects through his territory from and to Sylhet and Assam.  

The agreement was signed on 30th November, 1826 by which Tirot Sing agreed to furnish material for the construction of a road on payment and bound himself to keep the road in repair after its completion. In return for British protection, Tirot Sing agreed "not to hold any intercourse or correspondence on political matters with any foreign chief without the consent of the British Government". The Raja also undertook to rule his subjects according to the laws of his country or according to ancient customs, without the interference of the British Government.  

Cordial understanding between the British and the Khasis lasted for short time only. On 4 April, 1829, two British officers, Lieutenants - Bedingfield and Burlton were brutally murdered by Tirot Sing's men. This is known as the famous "Nongkhlaw Massacre". Though it is said that the immediate cause of the dreadful massacre was the false and careless speech of a Bengalee 'Chaprasee', the flame of dissatisfaction had been already kindled by the insolent demeanour and high-handedness of the British soldiers. To sum up, "the growing British interest in the Khasi Hills, their treaty relations with those states which agreed to the road, the growing establishments at Nongkhlaw and Cherrapunji, their control of Sylhet and Assam must have created a psychosis of fear among the Khasis which burst into the massacre at Nongkhlaw." Whatever be the cause, the incident completely changed the character of the existing relationship between the British and the Khasi chiefs. The principal leaders of the insurgent forces were Tirot Sing and his servant, Monbhum, Bormanik Syiem of Mylliem and Jibor Sing Syiem of Rambrai. Not all the Khasi chiefs joined forces in the confederacy against the British interest in the hills. While leadership came from but

a few Syiem, such as Dewan Sing of Sohra (Cherra) were neutral. This situation was to have important repercussions in the British policy towards the Khasi chiefs after they suppressed what had popularly been called the Anglo-Khasi War.

In the heat of the war, a treaty was concluded between Dewan Sing Syiem of Sohra and David Scott on the 10 April, 1829, by which Dewan Sing surrendered Saitsohpun in exchange of Pundua. It became not only a base of military operations for the British, but as the Land Reform Commission for Khasi Hills 1974 States, "the conquest and occupation started from 1829.... the British treated Saitsohpun as their own territory, denied unilaterally the rights of the people over the land and obliterated their administrative and judicial system within the Elaka. They issued Pattas to the people and levied land revenue from them."16

The Khasis pressed on in their fight. Motives of humanity, if not of policy forbid the adoption of such measures17 such as burning of villages, but continued resistance from the Khasi insurgents made Scott to administer "retributive justice" by capturing and destroying the Khasi villages one after another. The

vigorous policy of reprisals including the ruthless destruction of villages, ordered by Scott, received the approval of the Supreme Government. ¹⁸

The result of Scott’s measures was speedy. By April, 1830, a vast tract had been subdued including the whole of Myliem, Rambrai, Myriaw and Nongkhlaw and certain areas on Mawmluh, Mawsmai, Suparpunji and Byrongs. Bormanik Syiem of Myliem was trapped, imprisoned though later released, entered into an agreement with the Company on 15 January, 1830 ²⁰ in which he ceded a stretch of land to the south-east of the Umiam river; renounced his sovereign jurisdiction over Desh Dumaria, agreed to pay an indemnity of Rs. 5000 and promised to apprehend and deliver to the authorities Tirot Sing and others, who were still in arms. Shella accepted a treaty on September 3, 1829, through which a sum of Rs. 4000 was to be paid to the Government, besides reserving for the Government the right to investigate into the disputes between Shella and other powers. ²¹

Next in line came Myriaw, under the chieftainship of Lai Syiem, who entered into an agreement

¹⁸. Baruah, N.K. David Scott in North East India p.206
¹⁹. Ibid.
²¹. Ibid. p.124
with the British on October 12, 1829. In December 1831 with Ador Singh Syiem of Mawsynram, a treaty was pledged in which he promised to rebuild the villages ravaged during the war. Earlier, on October 24, 1829, Jibor Singh of Rambrai subdued by the British entered into a treaty by which an indemnity of whatever sum demanded was to be paid. On November 21, 1832, and December 11, 1832, treaties were executed with Ksan Syiem of Malai Sohmat and Phan Syiem of Bhowal respectively.

Almost alone on the scene, Tirot Singh proved to be a patriot of "a very high order" as the English called him. Realising he could not continue the fight alone, Tirot Singh surrendered on 13 January, 1833 on a single condition of his life be spared. He was taken to Guwahati and eventually passed away on 17 July, 1835.

Thus, the Anglo-Khasi treaties engaged during the war up till 1833 bound the Khasi states to Government protection and step by step the Government secured the position of paramountcy, but it was not till Sngap Singh of Maharam laid down arms in February, 1839, that the Khasi insurrection came to an end.

22. Ibid. pp.127-129
23. Ibid. p.133
24. Lyngdoh, H. KI Syiem Khasi bad Synteng p.184
With the end of the struggle, the British became the undisputed master over the hills. To holdfast to this imperial control, the British had to devise ways and means by which the Khasi rulers would be made to come under the complete control of the British. With this aim in view, the Political Agency was established on the 11 February 1835 at Cherra.  

The Political Agent at Cherra was given the power to exercise his authority over the Khasi and Jaintia Hills and the sovereign was thus transferred from the hands of the Khasi rulers to that of the English. With regard to his role as a "Political Ruler", the Government of India stated, "in those villages which have become ours by right of conquest and form of jurisdiction of the Agency, as little interference as possible should be exercised. These villages which have been restored to their former chiefs are only to be influenced politically". The Political Agent was also vested with the power to exercise "magisterial functions", while the Sayems of other states were permitted to retain the entire jurisdiction within their own limits. He was empowered to fine to the extent of Rs.500 and to imprison for two years. In cases of graver character with the aid of Panchayat, fine Rs.500 and imprison for five years.

27. Ibid. p.68
Khāsi States:

The nineteenth century, British officials believed that the Khāsi Hills was ruled by numerous independent chiefs. The first British official, who gave a more precise information on the Khāsi states before 1829 was Lieutenant Fisher, Quarter Marshall General. In his survey of the northern boundary of Sylhet, he sketched a political map in which he delineated the contemporary Khāsi states with their boundaries. Fisher had shown only eighteen states in his map. They are given below with modern names.

1. Parapoonjee (Barapoonjee)
2. Soora (Sobhar?)
3. Moosmye (Mawsmai)
4. Chirra - Surareem (Cherrapunji)
5. Kyrim - Moleem (Khyrim-Mylliem)
6. Sheyla (Shehla)
7. Chumut Myllye (Malai Sohmat)
8. Mahram and Dwara Nutaomen (Maharam and Dwara Nongtyrnem)
9. Moeyang - Noongchungwye (Nawiang)
10. Nuspung - Lawkla (Nongspung)
11. Nustung (Nongstoin)
12. Ramrye (Rambrai)
13. Osimlee (Nongkhlaw)
14. Molelleung - Matakar

29. Dutta, P.N. Impact of the West on Khāsis and Jaintias p. 19
15. Mo or Muriow (Myriaw)
16. Syung - Maflong (Sohlong-Mawphlang)
17. Jyrang - Rannegoan (Jirang-Rani-Nongwah)
18. Beyltolla (Beltola)

Of the above 18 mentioned states, some were not Khasi states such as Beltola which formed part of the Shyllong Siyemsip. Other states such as Khyrim was in reality the old undivided Shyllong State which in 1830 was bifurcated into Khyrim and Mylliem. Fisher's map was but the first attempt and it required a larger period of control for the proper enumeration of the Khasi states to be made. His map did not list the names of such well established Khasi states such as Bhowal, Langrin, Mawynram, Nobo Sohphoh. Therefore, it must not be supposed that Fisher had presented an exhaustive list of the Khasi states. The irresistible conclusion is that there were numerous states in the hills before the establishment of British supremacy. The chiefs of some bore the title of Lymphohe and others those of Siyems or Rajas.

The states mentioned by A.J.M. Mills in his Report of 1853 are twenty three in number. Four of them - Khyrim, Nongspung, Nongstoin and Langrin though they did not enter into agreement with the British

30. Allen, W.J. Report on the administration of the Cossyih and Jynteah Hill territory p.28
Government, their chiefs "have the same control over their subjects" as that of Cherra Chief, which had entered into agreement. The remaining states executed agreement with the British Government by which the Khasi rulers placed themselves under British protection and subjected to the British Government. Heinous offences committed in their jurisdiction were brought to the Cherra Court for adjudication.\(^\text{32}\)

W.J. Allen on the other hand mentioned that the British recognized twenty five Khasi states as semi-independent and dependent states. The states of Cherra, Khyrim, Nongstoin, Langrin and Nongspung were originally classed as semi-independent, having always been friendly or never having been actually coerced by a British force.\(^\text{33}\) The minor states which were twenty in numbers were known by the name of "Dependent States".\(^\text{34}\) These were actually those states which had been restored to their chiefs following the Anglo-Khasi War or in the case of the five Sirdarships were those states that were created by the British.

After making a comparative study both the reports of Mills (1853) and Allen (1858) bear the same fact as far as the power of the Khasi rulers are concerned.

\(^{32}\) Mills, A.J.M. pp. 40-41  
\(^{33}\) Allen, W.J. Op. cit., p. 27  
\(^{34}\) Ibid. p. 28
The five semi-independent states could exercise the entire judicial control over their subjects, according to their customs and usages, but in cases where the British subjects or people of other states were involved in crime and offences in civil or political matters, such cases were to be tried and decided by the Agent and his Assistant at Cherrapunji. Allen reported only one case of recusansy to a requisition of this kind. In 1848, Singh Manik Syiem of Khyrim refused to deliver up some of his people who had committed a criminal offence in the Khasi Hills. A military force was sent against him to enforce obedience after which the Syiem was compelled not only to produce the accused, but to pay the expense of the expedition sent against him. The reports of Mills and Allen differed in the names and number of the Khasi states. Allen mentioned twenty "Dependent States" while Mills gave the names of nineteen states. The chiefs of these states were permitted to investigate into and decide on all civil and criminal cases in which the parties were their own people with the exception of cases of murder, homicide and accidental death which was to be reported to the Cherra authorities for their decision. Both semi-independent and dependent states were bound to take to the Cherra Courts, cases in which
British subjects and the inhabitants of more than one state were concerned.\(^{35}\)

The number of Khasi states is finally decided before the turn of the century. By then, some Syliemships had split, others were converted to Sirdarship and the British Government itself created new states with Sirdars as their administrative heads. Fifteen states, namely - Khyrim, Mylliem, Cherra, Nongspung, Bhowal, Maharam, Nongkhlaw, Langrin, Mawlong and Malai Sohmat were Syliemships. Those states which came under Sirdar were Jirang, Mawlong, Nonglwai, Pomsannangut, Mawdon, Dwara, Nongtyrnem, Mawphlang, Lyniong and Sohlong fell under Lyngadohs. Only Shella was one confederacy under elected officers styled Wahadadars.\(^{36}\)

In practice, however, no real distinction has ever been made between the position of the semi-independent and the independent states.

The relation between the British and the Khasi states was regulated by treaties and negotiations since 1824. The last treaty signed with the Khasi Syliem, however, took place in 1857 with the Cherra Syliem which confirmed the proceeding agreements. Subsequently, Khasi Syliem, Lyngadohs, Sirdars, Wahadadars were made to sign

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agreement with the paramount power for which their rulers were given Purwannahs and Sanads of recognition.

A.J.M. Mills' Report also made an enquiry into judicial anomalies in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, and submitted his report on 27 September, 1853. As the relationship between the British and the various Khasi chiefs was not formally defined, Lord Dalhousie, the Governor General of India passed a Resolution, that the paramount and direct authority of the British Government over the whole assemblage of these petty chieftainships as well as over the remainder of the territory comprised within the Agency, should be asserted and proclaimed in legal form. It is with a view therefore not to extend the interference of the British authorities in the affairs of these semi-independent chieftainships or to alter the kind or degree of subjection in which they are now placed, but rather to legalise the power which has been heretofore exercised therein by the Agent 37

After the uprising of 1857-1858, the British Government passed the Government of India Act 1858 by which the rule of the East India Company came to an end, and "India shall be governed by and in the Name of Her Majesty". Further, "all treaties made by the said Company shall be binding on Her Majesty, and all Contracts, Covenants, Liabilities and incurred or entered into before the commencement of this Act may be enforced by and against the Secretary of State-in-Council in like manner and in

the same Courts as they might have been by and against the said Company if this Act had not been passed.

Further, in the Royal Proclamation, the Queen (Victoria) proclaimed,

"We desire no extension of our present territorial possessions .... We shall respect the rights dignity and honour of Native Princes as our own; and we desire that they as well as our own subjects should enjoy the prosperity and that social advancement which can only be secured by internal peace and good government."

Inspite of the Proclamation, the Agreements made with the native rulers was not honoured to their expectation. Dr. Anup Chand Kapur, a constitutional historian, in his book Constitutional History of India 1765-1975, comments, "Proclamation, much better known to the Indian people than an Act of 1858 itself, was regarded as a charter of their rights, although actually it was more breached than observed by the bureaucracy in India." 38

The first attempt to enquire into succession was made by W.J. Allen, who in 1857 was deputed by his Government to report on the administration of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Allen had before him Mills' Report of 1853 and all the other official correspondences between the East India Company and the Khasi states. He observed,

"the chieftainships of the semi-independent and dependent states have always been considered under certain restrictions, to be

38. Quoted in Shullai, L.C. Ka Ri Shong Pdeng Pyrthei p. 7
hereditary in all the Cossyah states with the exception of Cheyla Poonjee and Mawlong Poonjee, where the Bengal custom of inheritance obtains. A deceased Cossyah chieftain is succeeded by his brother, and if he has no brother, by his eldest sister's eldest son, provided he is not considered disqualified for the office by the Village Durbar. Successions to these offices appeared to have been regularly reported to the Principal Assistant Commissioner by the claimants, the deceased chieftain's Muntrees and officer and by the Sirdars and head of villages, but only successions to the Chhera Raj have been reported to the Government. With regard to succession in the dependent states, recognition was given only after the Principal Assistant Commissioner had verified the claimant's rights and after no objection came from the state's population. If objections were raised, the people were called to vote. If the claimant obtained a majority of the votes, he was considered duly elected. If he failed to secure a majority of the votes, another election was held to elect any other person eligible for the office.

In the absence of any formal relations with the Khasi chiefs, W.J. Allen made a number of suggestions for Government to consider. Succession to the chieftainships of the four principal dependent states of Mylliem, Maharam, Myriaw and Nongkhlaw should be reported to the Government for its confirmation. He said "Each of these chiefs in succeeding to their Raj should execute an "Ikranamah" and a "Sunnad" of appointment should be given to them by the Government after they had presented the

40. Ibid. pp.29-30
usual "Khilut". The successions to the chieftainship and sirdership of the petty states was to be reported to the Governor General's Agent, who might be empowered to grant Sannads of succession.

It has been stated earlier in a Resolution passed by the Governor of Bengal, that it was not the intention of the British to demand any payment of tribute or revenue from the Khasi states. Allen suggested that the Government could be fully justified to call upon them to contribute, according to their means, towards the payment of expenses in maintaining order and security to life and property.

The Khasi states were thus expected to pay a tribute, but in the post mutiny period and in a general change of policy towards the Indian states, it was not found expedient that the new imperial power should collect any tribute from the Indian states. However, the payment to the British by certain of the Khasi states for having taken up arms against the British continued.

Growing Control:

From 1859, the relation between the Khasi states and the British Government was regulated by Sannads and Parwannahs which were appointment letters confirming the election or appointment of the Khasi rulers. The terms

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41. Ibid. p.79
and conditions of the Sanads placed the Khasi rulers completely at the mercy of a foreign power.

On Allen’s recommendation, succession to the five dependent states or petty states was formalised. Besides, the Sanad provided for the extension of control and authority of the Deputy Commissioner of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills District, who also functioned as Political Agent, over a particular state; that the Syiem should reside in his village and not elsewhere; that he would comply with all the special orders of the Deputy Commissioner from time to time; that he would furnish adequate information on the condition of his people, who so when required; that he should be allowed half the dividend of profit obtaining from the excavation of minerals and cede some plots of land for the purpose of raising military and civil sanitoria. The Sanad was signed in 1859 by all the Syiem except those of Norchkhaw, Nobo Sohphoh and Pomsannugut.43

The paramount power determined all successions. It was the right and duty of the British Government to settle succession in subordinate native states. Every succession was to be recognized and confirmed by the British Government. Then only a Sanad was issued.

In 1867, a general form of agreement was

prescribed which incorporated all the clauses and provisions of the previous agreement. In 1877, a revised form of Sanad was prescribed in which little modifications were made. There were altogether eight clauses. The Sanads were conferred upon the Syiem on the following conditions—

I. "You shall be subject to the order and control of the Deputy Commissioner of the District of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, who will decide any dispute that may arise between yourself and the chief of any other Khasi state. You shall obey implicitly any lawful orders which the Deputy Commissioner or other officer authorised on that behalf by the Government of India may issue to you.

II. You are hereby empowered and required to adjudicate and decide all civil cases and all criminal offenders, except those punishable under the Indian Penal Code with death, transportation or imprisonment for five years and upwards which may arise within the limits of the state in which your subjects alone are concerned. In regard to the offences above excepted, you shall submit an immediate report to the Deputy Commissioner of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills and faithfully carry out the orders he may give concerning their disposal. And you shall refer all civil and criminal cases arising within the limits of your state in which the subjects of other Khasi states or Europeans or natives of the plains may be concerned for adjudication by the Deputy Commissioner of the Khasi
and Jaintia Hills or by any officer appointed by him for that purpose.

III. The Government of India shall be at liberty to establish civil and military sanitaria, cantonments and posts in any part of the country under your control and to occupy the lands necessary for that purpose rent free.

IV. You hereby confirm to the British Government by your predecessors of all the lime, coal and other mines, metals and minerals found in the soil of your state, and of the right to hunt and capture elephants within your state, on condition that you shall receive half the profits arising from the sale, lease or other disposal of such lime, coal or other minerals or of such right. On the same condition you confirm the cession to the British Government of all waste lands being lands at the time of cession unoccupied by villages, cultivation, plantation, orchards etc., which the British Government may wish to sell or lease as waste lands.

V. You shall not alienate or mortgage to any person any property of the state, movable or immovable which you possess or of which you may become possessed as Chief of the State.

VI. You shall cause such areas as may be defined by the British Government for that purpose to be set aside for the growth of trees to supply building timber and
firewood to the inhabitants of the state. You shall take efficient measures to secure those areas against destruction by fire and by jhumming.

VII. If you violate any of the conditions of this sanad or in case of your using any oppression or of your acting in a manner opposed to established custom or in the event of your people having just cause for dissatisfaction with you, you shall be liable to suffer such punishment as the Chief Commissioner of Assam, subject to the orders of the Government of India may think proper to inflict.

VIII. According to the conditions above enjoined, you are hereby confirmed Syiem of the State of .... in the Khasi Hills.\(^44\)

It may be noted here that in 1878, in a letter from the Under Secretary to the Government of India to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, it is stated that, "Sanad signed by His Excellency the Viceroy to certain chiefs shall cease and that in future Sanad signed by the Chief Commissioner shall be sufficient.\(^45\)

The sanad indicates that the Government assumed to itself the right to appoint Syiem and not merely


\(^{45}\) A.S.R., F.D.P., Nov. 1878, No.874, dated 3 May, 1878
to ratify his election. Some of the clauses of the sanad were confiscatory in nature, for instance, mines, minerals, waste lands and forest were taken over by the paramount power. The administration of criminal justice was taken away by the British from the Khasi chiefs. The sanad also gave the right to the British to remove an undesirable syiem or to fine or impose any punishment on the chiefs in certain contingencies. The Government of India was not debarred from interfering in the internal affairs of the state. The sanad brought the succession, removal and judicial authority of the chiefs under the complete control of the Government. It is clear by now that over half a century of British control of the Khasi states, the powers and functions of the Khasi rulers were regulated by the conditions imposed on them, for instance, they were to part with waste lands, minerals; they could not adjudicate in criminal cases and were left only with the responsibility of criminal and civil proceedings. Whereas earlier, their appointments to syiemships had come by trational rights and usages, this still continued, but it only became applicable when syiems were conferred sanads. The position of the Khasi syiems therefore, was best explained in the writing of Henry Hopkinson when
he admitted,

A Cosseeah 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 proper discharge of his duties and liable to removal .... when he does not discharge them properly.46

Clarke's studies in Sylieship Succession

The most significant change in British relations with the Khasi states, however, was that succession rights to the Sylieship change over a period of time and this was by far the most perplexing problem. Some of the early policies were guided by H.E. Bivar, the Deputy Commissioner, Khasi and Jaintia Hills District, who was of the opinion that Sylies were elected by the states' adult population and Keatinge, the Chief Commissioner of Assam relying on the Deputy Commissioner's local knowledge and long residence in the hills, accepted his views. Bivar's proceeding was not, however, uniform or consistent. Since the formation of the Chief Commissionership, every election which had been made on the basis of an election had been appealed against. This revealed that the Khasis were not always satisfied and agreed to Bivar's decision. Therefore, Keatinge had to revise his views on the manner of succession to the Khasi Sylieships. The Chief Commissioner directed

46. A.S.R., Letters issued to Government. 1868, Vol.36,1868, Hopkinson to Secretary, Bengal Government; 8 June : No.160
that full enquiries should be made for the purpose of ascertaining more explicitly what grounds existed for the adoption of the principle of election and on certain other points in connection with the custom of succession to the Syiemships. 47

Biver's successor, W.S. Clarke made an exhaustive enquiry and submitted for the consideration of the local Government, a detailed report of the result of his enquiries. Clarke received reports from all the Syiems (except Rambrai) in connection with the subject under enquiry and from them he gathered that the office of the Syiem was not 'elective' but hereditary, going in regular succession to the senior nearest male relative not being a son or a nephew, the son of a brother or a cousin on the father's side, but the brother by the same mother or failing brothers to a son of mother's sister or son of a sister or failing male heirs to the senior nearest female relative on the mother's or sister's side. 48 The candidate, therefore, was to be a native of the state for which he stood, and must be a blood relation of the late Syiem. Clarke further reported that females were also eligible for the office of the Syiem. However

47. A.S.R., F.P., March 1902, No.15
48. A.S.R., F.D.P., Nov. 1878, No.1337. Dt. Shillong the 15th of October, 1878, from Deputy Commissioner, Khasi and Jaintia Hills to Secretary to Chief Commissioner of Assam.
female Syiem was not permitted to rule, but merely held
the office to preserve it in the regular line. The
state was administered by the Durbar or Council in her
name.

According to the custom, 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 (the Myntris and headmen who constituted
the Durbar). The formal consent of the family and the
Durbar was necessary as they appeared to have the power
of disqualifying the next in regular line, if he be, by
reason of tender age, physical defect or other reasonable
causes unfit to rule. To support the above findings,
Clarke cited the case of Hajar Singh of Myliem, who was
dethroned by the people of the state. Further, the Durbar
had disqualified all members of his family for succession.
Mile Sing, a distant relative of the family was brought
forward, an election was held, and he was confirmed as
Syiem, thus breaking the regular line of succession. At
the time of Clarke's enquiry, the Syiems of Nongkhlaw,
Maharam, Nongspung, Nongstoin, Langrin and Myliem were
appointed by their respective Durbars owing to no other
candidates contesting their claims.49

49. Ibid.
With regard to the right of cousin to succeed failing brothers or nephews, a few of the Syiem 
differed in their opinion. However, Clarke was of the opinion that 
this difference arose from confusion as to the term 'cousin', for cousins are usually called brothers by the 
Khasi states which admitted cousin to succeed, as 
mentioned by Clarke were Malai Sohmat, Nongspung, Maharam, 
Cherra and Mariaw. Mention may be made here, that in 1880 
under the order of the Chief Commissioner, the Officiating 
Deputy Commissioner, Captain W.F. Trotter, made another 
enquiry, and after a careful consultation with the autho-
rities and leading men in each community prepared a tabular 
statement showing the admitted line of succession in 
several dependent states in the Khasi Hills. According to 
him, states which admitted cousin to succeed failing 
brothers or nephews were Bhowal, Cherra, Khyrim, Langrin, 
Malai Sohmat, Maharam, Myriaw, Mawiang, Nawsynram, Nongspung 
and Nongstoin.

In the case of Monckklaw, cousin's right to 
succession was recognized only in the absence of brothers, 
nephews or sister or niece. In the State of Rambrai, a 
brother stood first, a cousin stood second and a nephew 
stood third in line as long as succession to Syiemship 
was concerned.

50. Ibid.

the 27 Feb., 1880, from Captain W.F. 
Trotter to Secretary C.C. of Assam.
With regard to election, Clarke came to the conclusion that election had from time to time been upheld where the right to succeed had been contested. He was of the opinion that "election conduces towards division in the communities and to much bitter feelings". He proposed that an election should be held on the demand of the Durbar, who should on the death of siem, be summoned with the members of the siem's family and be called on to nominate the new siem. The fact of the nomination should be formally recorded and the person nominated should no reason against his appointment existing be forthwith proclaimed siem.

The Chief Commissioner approved this proposal which was then and later accepted as an authoritative rule on the subject. We shall presently see how wrong this proposal and its acceptance was to the traditional and customary succession laws.

Inspite of the many inquiries that were made on the Sylieship succession and inspite of the recommendations made and implemented, many disputed successions occurred. It was, therefore, required that an elaborate study be made on this important issue. A final enquiry into the Sylieship succession in the Khasi Hills was made by Captain D. Herbert, the Deputy Commissioner, Khasi and Jaintia Hills in 1903. It will be given elaborate treatment in chapter IV "Cherra Episode" and it will be analysed in chapter V.

53. Ibid.