CHAPTER III

DISPUTED SUCCESSIONS
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DISPUTED SUCCESSIONS IN THE
19TH CENTURY

The British intervention in the Khasi states took various forms, over maladministration, over discontent of a state's subjects with their chiefs, over law and order and in most cases over disputed succession. When there were more than one claimant to a vacant Syiemship, there occurred a disputed succession and something had to be done to settle the matter.

The nineteenth century saw many disputed successions and we may here mention only some cases of such occurrence revealing British intervention and frequent interference in the matter.

CHERRA:

Cherra, one of the largest of the Khasi states with extensive lands in the southern phase of the Khasi Hills had a number of disputed successions.

The earliest record was mentioned by Allen in his Report of 1858. He found on his arrival at Cherrapunji that the electors of Hima Sohra (Cherra) were not willing to have Ram Sing as their Syiem. Suba Sing died on 5 June, 1956, and Ram Sing, the eldest nephew of the deceased Syiem put his claim to the vacant Syiemship to the Principal Assistant Commissioner at Cherrapunji, who reported it to the Government. The Governor General-in-Council in 1856,
sanctioned the succession of Ram Sing to the Office of Syiemship. Ram Sing, however, had not been elected by the heads of the twelve tribes or Khadarkur (as was the Cherra custom) in whom the powers of election was vested. Consequently, many influential people refused to acknowledge him as Syiem. Besides, as the performance of funeral ceremonies of the late Syiem would confirm the succession to Syiemship, the opposition party refused to hand over the dead body of Suba Sing to Ram Sing for cremation. It was only after when Allen had given the Khadarkur the assurance that the succession of Ram Sing would not be taken as a precedent, but that in future successions, the ancient and established usages of the country would "be strictly abided and faithfully observed"; both parties withdrew their opposition and the body of the deceased, Suba Sing, was allowed to be cremated on 4 May, 1857.

An early case of interference here occurred in 1875, on the death of Ram Sing. On the 23 April, 1875, Ram Sing Syiem, Chief of the State of Cherra died and this was reported to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam by the Deputy Commissioner, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Colonel H.S. Biver.

On the death of Ram Sing, there were two candidates for the vacant Syiemship, the one U Borsing,

1. Allen, W.J. Report on the administration of Khasi and Jaintia Hills Para. 301
2. Ibid.
first cousin on the mother to the late U Ram Sing Syiem and the other Hajon Manik, cousin deriving his relationship to the deceased Syiem through his grandmother, the grandmother of the late Ram Sing and of Hajon Manik being sisters.\footnote{3}

U Borsing Syiem rested his claims to succeed entirely by virtue of his being direct in descent to the deceased, Ram Sing and he explained that he had no supporters amongst the elders and the people.

U Hajon Manik, who belonged to the family from which the Chiefs of Cherra were selected, asserted his right to succeed as Chief upon the support of the elders and the general voice of the people of the Cherra State.\footnote{4}

With regard to their candidature, Borsing by direct descent had a right to succeed to the Syiemship, but the twelve clans of communities as also the representative subjects, on being called to declare who should succeed to the Syiemship on 24 May, 1875, were unanimous in pronouncing in favour of U Hajon Manik. Tirah Nongrum, one of the representatives of the twelve clans having been selected by the people to state their objections to U Borsing stated,

"With regard to Borsing’s claim to be appointed Chief in succession to U Ram Sing,

\footnote{3} S.D.C.R. Vol.5/141, 1875, letter No.558, from Colonel Bivar to the Assistant to Chief Commissioner of Assam.

\footnote{4} S.D.C.R. Exhibit B. Proceeding of the Deputy Commissioner, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, 24 May, 1875."
we take objection to him, U Borsing, because he is no longer one of us, having become a christian religion, on two or three occasions, since the demise of U Ram Sing, we have invited U Borsing to meet us in Durbar, to discuss matters relating to the Chiefship, we cannot agree to his being appointed ruler over us ....

Although U Borsing took objection to the decision of the people and asserted his rights by direct descent, yet in face of the people being unanimous in their objection to him, his pretentions were not entertained for as Bivar understood, “to have countenance them would simply have tended to create complications”.

Consequently, the Deputy Commissioner proclaimed to the people of Cherra who were assembled, that subject to the approval of the British Government, Hajon Manik was appointed ruler in the State of Cherra in succession to U Ram Sing. The Sanad was granted to him by the Viceroy and Governor General of India on 16 October, 1877.

Though the Government recognized Hajon Manik Syiem of Cherra, the right to Syiemship of Hajon Manik had not been confirmed by religion and customs of Cherra State. In paragraph 301 of Allen’s Report, it is recorded that the performance of the funeral rites of the late Syiem would be conclusive in regard to the succession. Hajon Manik, since he did not belong to that Syiem’s clan declined to perform the cremation ceremonies of the remains

5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
of U Ram Sing. Consequently, Hajon Manik was never considered Syiem by the people of Cherra, as he was never truly a Syiem. Some of the Mynries were of the opinion that succession cannot descend to his nephew, Chandra Singh, but should go back to the old branch of the family. Thus, his omission to perform the funeral rites brought about a division in the Durbar. The Cherra people considered Hajon Manik only as "U Nong Synshar" - administrator.

On the death of Hajon Manik on 1901, there occurred in Cherra, a disputed succession of a very serious in nature in the history of Syiemship succession in the Khasi Hills and this will be dealt elaborately in the next chapter.

Nongkhlaw :- Nongkhlaw was like Cherra, one of the larger Khasi States and situated towards the west between Nongpung and Jirang.

On 29 March, 1833, Rijon Singh was installed by the British as Syiem of Nongkhlaw in place of U Tirot Sing, who was taken as prisoner to Dacca. After some years, he mismanaged the affairs of the state so greatly "that the collector was obliged to deprive him of the charge" and it was made over to Jidor Sing. The pressure of his

8. Syiemlieh, D.R. "British Policy towards the Khasi States" p.150
debts and the prospect of confinement in the Civil Jail forced Rijon to make an agreement with Jidor Sing, to surrender all his claims as Syiem of Nongkhlaw, on condition of his debts being paid and he be given a stipend. The agreement was approved by Colonel Lister, the Political Agent and Jidor was proclaimed Syiem of Nongkhlaw.9

On February, 1856, the death of Jidor Sing was reported by Borsing to the Principal Assistant at Cherrapunji, Hudson, who further reported the matter to Colonel Jenkins. Borsing was the son of Kajjar Mai, who claimed himself to be the niece of the late Syiem Jidor Sing and whom together with the children, the late Syiem appeared to have nominated as his heir and successor to the Raj in a petition presented to the Political Agent, Colonel Lister, on the 9 December, 1851. The petition was found registered in Colonel Jenkins' office. Hudson forwarded a petition from Borsing, requesting to be installed as Syiem. He also added, "As far as I can learn, the woman named Kajjar Mai although perhaps the nearest blood relation of the late Jeedur is not his own niece, for he was the only child of his mother".10

Hudson suggested that Nongkhlaw which was a British conquest should be brought under the British control.

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9. Reports on the administration of Public Affairs in the Bengal Presidency 1856-57, p.199
10. Ibid. p.200
either by "limiting the power of the present applicant to that of a superior Fiscal Officer, or pensioning off Borsing and his mother and Rijon Singh with small annual stipend".11

Understanding that the measure would not be acceptable to the majority of the population, the Principal Assistant Commissioner made a personal enquiry into the matter and found that the Myntris of the Hima wished to have a Syiem again with the power of removing him if he proved to be oppressive to them. Two out of four Myntris, who were present at the consultation and about two-thirds of the assembly were in favour of re-appointment of Rijon Singh. The other two Myntris with the remaining third of the assembly noted in favour of U Borsing, but no inducement could make the meeting come to an unanimous vote in favour of either of the claimant.

Hudson was of the opinion that Rijon Singh was, "totally unfitted by his dissolute habits for so responsible a charge ...." The late Syiem Jidor Sing, a "man well-fitted" for the place, he viewed was not a Syiem in his own right; nor was he ever acknowledged as such by the people in general. Therefore, Borsing not being his nephew, but merely the great grandchild of his maternal aunt, had no positive right to the vacant

11. Ibid.
Sviamship, but since Jidor Sing had nominated him as his heir and the support of the Sviam's family had devolved entirely upon him, he was perhaps entitled to the claim on those grounds. Borsing also claimed himself legitimate to his possession of the state's jewels from the deceased, besides which he had performed the funeral ceremony of his predecessor.  

Rijon Singh's main remonstrance was that Jidor in the capacity of a de jure Sviam had no right to nominate his successor during his lifetime. This he stated was a contravention of custom leaving a bad precedent.

With a view to settle the matter, Hudson recommended that the superintendence of the Hima should be taken over by the British Indian Government and it should be divided into two portions, (i) the southern portion under the charge of Rijon Singh and (ii) the northern portion under the charge of Borsing. It was further proposed that the nominal title of Sviam be given to both the claimants, but their authority be limited to trial of civil suits occurring amongst their own people up to rupees 50 and petty criminal cases.  

Naturally, both the aspirants to the Sviamship objected to this measure. Colonel Jenkins (who was of the

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13. Reports on administration of Public Affairs in the Bengal Presidency 1856-57, p.201
opinion that Rijon Singh was entirely incapable and Borsing’s succession would not be acceptable to the leading men of the state) wished to bring the Nongkhlaw State under British administration. At this stage of affairs, Rijon Singh died leaving no heirs and this saved the division of the state. The Lieutenant Governor felt that the nomination of Borsing in 1851 (registered in Colonel Lister’s office) could not be regarded as in anyway binding upon the Government or as giving to the person nominated any right whatever to succeed to the "Raj irrespective of the pleasure of Government". In this complex situation, the British plans to assume the administration of the Hima was made possible.

With the sanction of the Supreme Government, the State of Nongkhlaw was resumed and brought under the direct administration of British officers. This measure was strongly objected to by the Hon’ble Court of Directors which recommended that a successor be appointed to the Raj according to the usage of the state. Under these circumstances, Borsing was soon restored when his appointment was officially approved by the Governor General on 7 May, 1860, and confirmed on 23 January, 1861.

14. Ibid.
15. Ibid. p. 202
16. Ibid.
17. Borthakur, H. History and Culture of the Khasi People, P. 205
Nongstoin:—Nongstoin was yet another important Khadi state more inaccessible from Shillong, the district headquarter, because it is located in the extreme west of the Khadi Hills, adjoining the Garo Hills and with extensive lands in the Sylhet plains. With regard to Nongstoin, two disputed successions may be noted. One occurred in 1890 and the other in 1897.

Jeensing, Syiem of Nongstoin, held the office of Syiemship for a few months only. He died on 6 August, 1890. On 8 September, 1890, it was reported by the headmen of Nongstoin that according to the Purwanah, they had held a durbar represented by the elders, Myntras, Lyodoons and Sirdars of the elaka Nongstoin and selected U Mudon Singh to be the new Syiem of Nongstoin in place of the deceased, Jeensing. On 16 September, 1891, the Deputy Commissioner, Colonel G. Godfrey made an announcement of the election of Mudon Singh and invited objection, if there was any.

The election of Mudon Singh was challenged by Wan Syiem, who was his cousin. On 24 September, he put forward his petition claiming that as there was no brother to succeed the late Jeensing Syiem, he being the eldest nephew and being the eldest son of the eldest sister of


19. Ibid. Petition from U Wan Syiem to the Deputy Commissioner 24 September, 1890.
Jeessing, should be elected. His petition was supported by the female members of the Syiem's clan of Kongstein, who on the 27 September, 1890, placed their objection to the appointment of the newly elected Syiem. They stated that Mudon Singh should not be appointed as he was the fifth in line among the nephews. Consequently, he had not the rightful heir to the Syiemship. Besides, he had no sister to live in the Kingseng, the house in which sacrifices were performed. Another petition came from Borsing Syiem, son of Kê Hiar Kuri Syiem. In his petition dated 17 October, 1890, he stated that U Wan was much younger than him, and he was the eldest of all the nephews of the late Jeessing, therefore, he was to be elected as Syiem as was the custom of the state.

Mention may be made here, that during the Syiemship of Jeessing, he was provided with a Purwanah asking him as to who should be the next successor. After his death, Mudon Singh on his election, produced a report to the Extra Assistant Commissioner in which Jeessing had already nominated Mudon Singh to be his successor. But the report could not be relied upon as it bore no date and signature of Jeessing.

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Accordingly, the Deputy Commissioner decided to hold an election on 28 November, 1890. An election was held with the following:

For U Mudon        ....  1021 votes
For U Wan          ....  256 votes

U Borsing retired from the election.\(^2\) Of the votes recorded for Mudon, 107 were given by the elders. The elders then constituted a durbar so that Mudon may be held to have been chosen by the durbar as well as by the large majority of male adults of the state. In accordance with the result of the election, the Deputy Commissioner proclaimed Mudon to be Syiem and a Purwannah was accordingly given to him.\(^3\)

Mudon Singh was not to be Syiem for long. He was found guilty for having been personally responsible for the murder of many of his subjects. Three cases were cited.\(^4\) This resulted in his deposition on 3 March, 1894.\(^5\) A general election was held on 13 April, 1894, by the Deputy Commissioner, Major Gray. Two candidates, Rabon and Indro, first cousins of U Mudon, stood for election and Rabon was elected obtaining 572 votes while Indro polled 559 votes.

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\(^3\) Ibid. Purwannah No.1, from the Deputy Commissioner to U Mudon Siem, Nongstoin. Dated 28 November, 1890.


In 1897, on the death of U Rabon Singh, another disputed succession occurred. During his chieftainship, because of ill-health, he had appointed Mon, his brother, to be a Regent and this had been reported to the Deputy Commissioner on 27 July, 1897. After Rabon's death, Mon put forward his claim to succeed and stated that Rabon himself had twice replied to that effect to a Purwannah given by the Deputy Commissioner. Another claim for Sıyemship came from U Suwan, brother of the deposed Mudon Singh.

Usually, when there were more than one claimant, an election used to be held to settle the matter, for instance, Borson succeeded Donsing, his brother in 1878 by defeating his rival Borsing (who was also his nephew) by a majority of 800 votes. In 1890, Borson was succeeded by his brother, Jeesing, who was unanimously nominated by the Durbar. On his death on August, 1890, his nephew, Mudon Singh succeeded him by securing the largest number of votes in an election held on November, 1890, by Major Godfrey. Mudon having been deposed, Rabon his cousin was elected by Colonel Gray as he secured the majority of votes.

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27. Ibid.
The Deputy Commissioner, J.C. Arbuthnott made full enquiries as regards the succession to the Sylemship and placed the late Sylem's brother, U Mon in charge. He also stated that Mudon Singh and his adherents had given some trouble during the time of the late Rabon Singh. Therefore, based on the principle laid down as regards the succession to Khasi Sylemships in Captain Trotter's letter No. 160 of 2 February, 1880 (that the first claim to succession may be made by the brother of the deceased Sylem, a nephew stood second and a cousin stood third) the Deputy Commissioner recommended the appointment of U Mon.

Following the recommendation, a petition to the Chief Commissioner of Assam was sent by Ramon and other Myntis, Lyndohs and Sirdars of the Sylemship of Nongstoin, stating that the Deputy Commissioner was withholding either to hold an election or invite the durbar to report and that it was his intention to deprive the people of their most cherished privilege. They longed for a general election so that they could have the freedom of selecting the person, who was to rule over them.

29. S.D.C.R., Vol. II/15/1897, (No. 31) No. 805. Dated 12 March, 1898, from J.C. Arbuthnott to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam.
30. Ibid. (No. 32). Dated 16 March, 1898.
The Chief Commissioner was not prepared to pass orders discouraging elections and desired to re-affirm the principle laid down by Colonel Clarke's that such election should be held on the demand of the durbar. If they make a nomination, a person nominated should (no reason against his appointment existing) be proclaimed syiem subject to the confirmation of the Chief Commissioner. But he also assured that there was no obligation on the Deputy Commissioner to hold an election in any case, when he was not yet prepared to recommend for confirmation the appointment of the candidates, who may receive the majority of votes.

Understanding that if an election was to be held, Suwan was to poll the majority of votes (as he was very popular) and the Deputy Commissioner was not prepared to recommend his confirmation, the Chief Commissioner confirmed the Deputy Commissioner's order appointing Mon to be Syiem of Nongstoi without any election. A sanad was granted to him on 2 August, 1898.

It may be mentioned that the petition sent by Ramon and other elders was refused. In the above

31. A.S.R., P.D.P.A., November, 1878, No. 1337, 15 October, 1878, from Colonel Clarke to the Secretary to Chief Commissioner of Assam.
33. Ibid. (No. 6), 2 August, 1898.
34. Ibid. 1474, Shillong 22 April, 1898.
circumstances, the right of the durbar, the right of the people and the usage of the state were set aside and ignored by the Government may be for good administration and well-being of the people of Nongstoin or may be for its own selfish motives.

Mylliem: We now turn our attention to Mylliem. On the death of Bormanik, Hajar Singh succeeded him. As the Chief, he was extremely unpopular, violated the customs of the country and gave himself up to habitual drunkenness and on the people's appeal, he was deposed in 1861. Mile Singh, a member of a different branch of the Syiem's family was elected by the elders and the people in place of U Hajar Singh. On the 10 December, 1863, he executed an agreement by which he ceded the lands required for the military cantonment and sanatorium of Shillong and renounced all his sovereign and personal rights over these lands.

On the death of U Mile Singh in January, 1868, two candidates contested the succession, Hain Manik, nephew and heir of the deceased Syiem and Chandra Manik, first cousin of the deposed Syiem, U Hajar Singh. Bivar, the Deputy Commissioner of the district intervened in the election and did not permit Chandra Manik to contest "on the ground

35. Herbert, D. Op cit, p.10
that the family of Hajar Singh was excluded from succession. A general election was then called for by Binar and Hain Manik was declared elected 'unanimously' as Chief of the State and he was appointed Syiem.

Though Hain Manik was unanimously elected as Chief of the State, his rule was not a happy one. The administration was not running smoothly and for twenty-five years, the elders of the state continously fought against him and tried to depose him. Fortunately, for the elders, Hain Manik died in November, 1896. His brother, Mur Manik temporarily took over the administration till the new Syiem was elected. Four candidates contested the succession;

1. Mur Manik, brother and heir apparent of Hain Manik
2. Ron Singh of the line of Hajar Singh
3. Mani Singh, a cousin of Hain Manik
4. Shon Singh of the line of Hajar Singh

The Deputy Commissioner held an election on 11 March, 1897, and Ron Singh polled the majority of votes. Ron Singh was the son of Sottimai, sister of Hajar Singh. It should be noted here that in the previous election, Chandra Manik was not permitted to contest.

36. Ibid.
37. Lyngdoh, H. *Ki Syiem Khasi bad Synteng*, p.114
the election on the ground that the family of Hajar Manik was excluded from succession.

In spite of the election being held and Ron Singh being elected, the Deputy Commissioner recommended that Mur Manik should be appointed Syiem notwithstanding that he polled a smaller number of votes than Ron Singh.\textsuperscript{38} The Chief Commissioner ordered, however, that as an election had been held and Ron Singh had been duly elected by a decisive majority of votes, his election was to be confirmed. As there was nothing to indicate whether the constitutional electors of the Syiem had nominated Ron Singh or Mur Singh, it is impossible, therefore, to ascertain that they were in favour of Ron Singh, but our record showed that Ron Singh was confirmed Syiem of Mylliem.\textsuperscript{39}

Mawiang: Mawiang, our record tells us had one case of a disputed succession. On the death of U Jit Singh Syiem on 26 October, 1898, the members of the durbar reported that they had held a durbar on 7 November, 1898, and had unanimously agreed that Moising, first cousin of Jit Singh, be nominated Syiem. Ram Singh, the son of Ka Sanglar, fourth cousin of Moi Singh, also came forward.

\textsuperscript{38} Herbert, D. \textit{Report on succession to Siemship in the Khasi states}. p.11

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
with a claim to succeed to the Syiemship. The Deputy Commissioner ordered an election. Before the election was held, certain people of the state filed a petition stating that the durbar had agreed that whoever was appointed syiem should either support or give a share of the state revenue to the family of ka Phan Syiem of the Pariong family (grandmother of Ram Singh) and that Moi Singh having agreed to this was acting contrary to the will of the people and contrary to the customs, and refused to give any share of the revenue. The petitioners, therefore, prayed that Ram Singh should be appointed syiem.

On 22 February, 1899, the Deputy Commissioner, Captain Howell held an election at Umkrem when the durbar in the presence of 200 or 300 people of the state unanimously elected Moi Singh to the Syiemship. There were 16 myntris, who voted for Moi Singh on condition that he should give four anna share of the state revenue to Ram Singh. The election of Moi Singh was later confirmed by the Deputy Commissioner.

Nongspung: — We concluded this chapter with a brief

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40. On 6 June, 1867, an agreement was executed by U Jit Singh of the Umkrems family and U Borsing of the Pariong family, by which they acknowledged that they had equal right to succeed to the Syiemship and to share the revenue of the state.
discussion on a disputed succession in Nongspung. Him. Step Singh Syiem of Nongspung died on 10 December, 1876 and the Deputy Commissioner brought the matter to the notice of the Chief Commissioner on 22 December and also recommended the appointment of Syntiew, the brother of the deceased, Step Singh. But this was challenged by Kam, who also belonged to the Syiem's family. Kam sent to the Chief Commissioner an appeal against the order of the Deputy Commissioner, appointing Syntiew as Syiem and overlooking his claim for the same. Therefore, an election was held in which Syntiew secured 223 votes and Kam polled only 94 votes. It may be mentioned that Kam was the same rival candidate of Step Singh in the previous election. The Deputy Commissioner in a proceeding to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner on 7 March, 1877, ordered that a Purwannah be given to Syntiew, appointing him Syiem of the State of Nongspung. This was confirmed by the Chief Commissioner on 20 March, 1877.

At the time of Step Singh, there existed no lease of state products granted by the Syiem which had not come under the terms of the previous agreements.

41. A.S.R., F.D.P., March, 1877. No. 14
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid. No. 15
or Sanad. Understanding that there were some feasible forest areas which can be set aside for the growth of trees, the Deputy Commissioner felt it desirable that the system was to be specifically instructed not to alienate, rent or mortgage any plot of land to alien residents without first securing the Government permission. 44

44. A.S.R., F.D.P., December, 1877, No.24