Chapter VI

Deputation of an Enquiry Commissioner:
His Report and Government of India's Reactions.

The growing unrest being created by the Garos under the leadership of Sonaram R. Sangma and the submission of a series of memorials to the concerned authorities necessitated the Hon'ble Government of India to contemplate deeply on the case and to depute an enquiry Commissioner conferring full and independent powers to report on the matter. The authorities found that Mr. J.C Arbuthnott, the Commissioner of Surma Valley and Hill Districts of Assam, would be the fittest person for the task. The Government of India's orders to be carried out by the Special Commissioner include the following.

1. To relay the boundary line between the Garo Hills and the Goalpara districts which was fixed by Mr. Beckett. The boundary should accurately be surveyed and demarcated by permanent marks so as to obviate any doubt in future as to its
exact position on the ground. The Special Commissioner was to
enquire what complaints were made by the Garos with
reference to the disputed boundary and whether there was any
reason for changing it. If strong grounds could be shown, the
Special Commissioner was to consider whether special
legislation should be initiated in order to modify it.

2. Taking next to the land to the north of Mr. Beckett’s
boundary, the Commissioner was to investigate and set forth
the exact claims being made to the areas by the Garos or to any
part of it.

3. When it has been ascertained that the Garos made some claim
with reference to such lands, the Commissioner is to survey and
prepare a record of rights for the whole area so as to exactly
know what were the existing rights under the present law of the
zamindars and the Garos respectively. When it is completed, it is
to report whether the claims of the Garos are reasonable or the
action be taken up by the Government to meet them.

4. Turning next to the land south of Mr. Beckett’s boundary, a
survey and record of rights were to be drawn up for all lands
which had been adjudged to be belonging to the permanently
settled estates, fair rents being settled for those areas. The
boundaries of the zamindari areas thus ascertained were to be
accurately surveyed and demarcated on the ground.
5. It is to consider whether the Garos had rights of which they were deprived by the agreements made in 1878 and whether seeing that the action of Government in making the agreements without them deprived them of such rights, Government should now compensate them for the loss.

6. As to the nazara\textit{n}a lands from which Government realizes land revenue assessment but to which the \textit{zamindars} have no claim or in which at any rate they have no rights, it is suggested that a survey and record of rights should also be drawn up and that the question of the ownership of these lands should be fully investigated. If it is found that the Garos can reasonably claim rights of proprietorship, the Government is directed to admit those rights irrespective of questions of prescription and to reconsider the revenue assessment in accordance with such decision.

7. A full enquiry is to be made as to the rights held by the Garos as regards the reserved forest of their justifiable claims in respect to them, and it is to represent whether any compensation should be paid for these rights and whether the grant of forest privileges should be made to reconcile the Garos to the loss of them.

Although nothing was said in the letter of instructions of the proposed enquiry as to the question of \textit{begar} it is taken note of and decided to clearly enquire into the grievances which are alleged and to the best method of remedying them. Since the matters to be dealt with are great and required careful, accurate and
vast knowledge of survey and settlement work, P.C.Lyon and H. Hare were of the opinion that Mr. Arbuthnott may not be the fit person to be entrusted with the work and that in case he was appointed for the post, an assistant of an officer having knowledge of the Garos be required to enquire and ascertain what the Garos really want and meet their objections from time to time in the course of their inquiry.\(^1\)

An allowance at the usual rate of Rupees 10/- a day was also proposed and an order for the formal announcement of Arbuthnott’s appointment as Special Inquiry Commissioner was asked.\(^2\) The proposals were accordingly approved by His Honour, the Lt. Governor of Bengal.\(^3\)

The deputation of Mr J.C.Arbuthnott was finally gazetted by the appointment department and copies of certain printed letters on the subject were sent unofficially to him on 29\(^{th}\) September 1906 which were returned by him after perusal. To make detail discussion on the issues concerning his appointment and the works to be carried out, Arbuthnott was informed to meet P. C. Lyon and L. Hare at Silchar, after he was given over charge to Mr. Henniker to decide how far he is to remain incharge of the enquiry on special deputation and how far, after initiating the survey and settlement work, he would be able to carry on the further supervision of the proceedings in addition to his duties as Commissioner.

The area for the settlement and survey was jungly and is said to be feverish and it will be impossible for any of the officers to do much

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\(^1\) Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam Files: Revenue Department, Revenue A, April 1907, Nos. 26-69.
\(^2\) Letter Dated 3\(^{rd}\) December 1906 from P. C. Lyon to His Honour, The Lt. Governor of Bengal.
\(^3\) Letter dated 3\(^{rd}\) December 1906 from P.C.Lyon to Under Secretary.
work in it except during the best part of the winter season. Arbuthnott was informed that no time should be lost in getting together the establishment that would be required for the demarcation. Handing over the charge, he informed the Chief Secretary by wire mentioning the following establishments—professional surveyor, European preferred for laying survey of Beckett’s line and the lands for which a record of rights has to be prepared for laying down Beckett’s line and traverse of nazaranā areas, extra assistant Commissioner or Sub-Deputy Collector for the settlement. P. C. Lyon then wired to the superintendent of the Provincial Surveys, Bengal, Dinajpur whether he could provide an experienced subordinate preferably European to relay the northern boundary line of the Garo Hills district and make a traverse survey of about 100 sq. miles or more of disputed land near that boundary. Arbuthnott proposed the name of Sri Radhakanta Handiqui as assistant Settlement Officer, Garo Hills. He asked whether he could be ordered to meet him at Gauhati. The Superintendent of Provincial Surveys, Bengal communicated his inability to spare suitable officer at his disposal but suggested an application to Surveyor General, who was expected to recommend retired provincial officer. P. C. Lyon thereupon, requested the Surveyor General, Calcutta to nominate a survey officer of some experience to relay the boundary and traverse the area in dispute and expressed his inability to spare

4 Copy of Telegraphic message of Arbuthnott to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal And Assam dated 22nd November 1906. Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam. Revenue Department; Revenue A. April 1907, Nos. 26-69.
5 Copy of Telegram from P.C Lyon to the Superintendent, Provincial Surveys, Bengal, Dinajpur, Dated 35th November 1906.
6 Copy of Telegram dated 25th November 1906 from Arbuthnott to the Chief Secretary, Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam.
7 Copy of Telegram dated 25th November 1906 from Provincial Surveys, Bengal to the Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal And Assam.
8 Copy of Telegram Dated 26th November 1906 from P. C. Lyon to the Surveyor General, Calcutta.
Radhakanta Handiqui and asked Arbuthnott to suggest another. He himself suggested a good Sub-Deputy or a Bengalimani for the task.\(^9\)

Arbuthnott was not satisfied with the suggestion as he found that none of the Sub-Deputies are suitable. He thought of employing a man, in the Director of Land Records Office whom Henniker recommended to him who used to be a Kanungo under Henniker and was receiving Rupees 75/-. He thought of employing him for Rupees 75+25 allowance as a clerk and Kanungo.\(^10\) In another letter dated 17\(^{th}\) November 1906, Arbuthnott asked Lyon to arrange four Government elephants for his Garo Hills tour during an enquiry\(^11\) who in turn asked Commissioner to arrange the same.\(^12\) The four elephants were accordingly arranged and were sent to Damra.\(^13\) Further he proposed for one head and other four constables from the Garo Hills and Khasi Hills Police along with two or three chaprasies. Certain tents from the Elgin Mills and the services of Anley, who had much experienced with hillmen in the Naga, Lushai and North Cachar Hills, were asked to be placed at his disposal.\(^14\)

A notification was then, issued for general information which was as follows.

"It is hereby notified for general information that the Hon’ble Mr. J. C. Arbuthnott, CIE, ICS has been deputed

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\(^9\) Copy of Telegram dated 25\(^{th}\) November 1906 from P. C. Lyon, Chief Secretary to Arbuthnott.

\(^10\) Letter dated 25\(^{th}\) November 1906, from Arbuthnott to P. C. Lyon.

\(^11\) Letter dated 17\(^{th}\) November 1906 from Arbuthnott to P. C. Lyon.

\(^12\) Lyon’s Note dated 26\(^{th}\) November 1906.

\(^13\) Copy of Telegram from F. J. Monahan to Under Secretary, dated 19\(^{th}\) December 1906.

\(^14\) Letter from Arbuthnott to Chief Secretary, Dated 2\(^{nd}\) December 1906.
to conduct the enquiry ordered by Government into the claims of
the Garos with reference to certain lands situated on the Garo
Hills–Goalpara border and certain lands within the Garo Hills
district as set forth in the memorial recently submitted to the
local Government and the Government of India by Sonaram R.
Sangma."\(^\text{15}\)

When all the necessary arrangements were made to start the survey
operations, the Garo Hills enquiry has to be stopped for some time due
to non availability of the previous survey records. A. C. Bose was
thereupon called on to Calcutta for all the records he required for his
survey. Arbuthnott informed Mr. Tindal about the required relevant
documents which included the following.

1. The original traverse records of Beckett's demarcated district
boundary between the districts of Garo Hills and Goalpara
surveyed in season 1873–74.
2. The original traverse records of Kelso's demarcated district
boundary surveyed in season 1849–50.
3. The original traverse records of O'Donel's demarcated district
boundary surveyed in seasons 1899, 1900 and 1901.\(^\text{16}\)

Along with it, a list of villages transferred to the Garo Hills published
in Assam Gazette, vide Deputy Commissioner, Goalpara's No. 390 of
16\(^\text{th}\) July 1875, was asked for by Arbuthnott on 9\(^\text{th}\) January 1907.\(^\text{17}\)

In accordance with Government notification No. 11438 C, dated 7\(^\text{th}\) November 1906, Arbuthnott made over charge of the

\(^{15}\) Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Revenue Department, Revenue A; April 1907, Nos. 26-69.
\(^{16}\) Letter dated 18\(^\text{th}\) December 1906, from Mr. Arbuthnott to Tindal.
\(^{17}\) Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Revenue Department, Revenue A, April 1907, Nos. 26-69.
office of Commissioner of the Surma Valley and Hill districts on the 21st November and under subsequent orders remained at Silchar until December 3rd to receive instructions and discuss the case with His Honour the Lieutenant Governor. From December 6th to December 20th inclusive was spent in obtaining and studying somewhat voluminous records and correspondence on the subject at Shillong. Damra which may be regarded as the headquarters of the agitation, was reached on December 23rd 1906. The interval pending the arrival of the counsel engaged by Sonaram and his adherents, was spent in visiting the border villages some 30 miles to the west and east of Damra. During Christmas holidays, Arbuthnott spent in recording evidence on the forest and begar questions. He returned to Damra on the 28th December and again on 2nd January 1907 he expected to find Sonaram's counsel there, but Mr. Jacob, Sonaram's counsel and his pleader Surendranath Ghosal did not arrive till January 3rd 1907. He saw Jacob on the 3rd January who asked to be heard on January 5th Saturday. On the 3rd January Mr. Jacob opened on the forest and impressed labour question precisely as he did when he interviewed Sir Bamfylde Fuller in Gauhati in December 1902. On the 4th January 1907, Mr. Jacob came and met Arbuthnott and said that he has not received full instructions from his clients and therefore requested him to adjourn till Monday the 7th January 1907. Arbuthnott told him that he would not allow any more time and that without fail he would commence proceedings at 9 a.m on Monday morning. He informed Mr. Jacob that on consideration he decided to hear him on all the three memorials, including

18 No. 164. From J.C. Arbuthnott to Chief Secretary, Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam. Dated 11/30th May 1907.
the forest and begar questions in order that the Garos could have no
grounds for alleging afterwards that they had not been heard on all points.
The hearing of the case was commenced accordingly on the 7th and
Arbuthnott examined 16 witnesses, Sonaram being the 17th. He sat from
9 a.m till 5, or 6 p.m with one hour interval for lunch. The Bijni
superintendent was present from the commencement of the hearing and
was allowed to cross examine all the witnesses if he wishes to do so.
Since the 10th, Bijni has been represented by a Counsel. On Monday, the
14th January 1907, when Sonaram’s cross examination has began, he put
in a list of some 130 witnesses, but Arbuthnott found them unnecessary
to examine them all. Sonaram filed some 30 documents of which he had
600 copies printed out of which some 50 or 60 have been sold for Rupees
50 each to his constituents.20 Besides, Sonaram prepared a pedigree of his
wife’s ancestors in support of his claim for the Habragat pargana. The
pedigree was as follows.

Dhansing --------- married Phatse.

| Jalmi, daughter ----- married Sonaram.

| Alimi, daughter ----- married Shamsing.

| Thokje, daughter ---- married Sonaram R.Sangma.21

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20 Letter Dated 13th January 1907, from Arbuthnott to P. C. Lyon.
21 J.C. Arbuthnott’s Inquiry Report.
On 3rd January Mr. Bose arrived at Damra and went to Manikganj, some 8 or 9 miles west of Damra to inspect the work done by two sub-surveyors who were deputed to mark out 5 villages for Mr. Bardoloi’s cadastral party. Altogether Arbuthnott recorded the evidence of over 100 witnesses. 65 of these were examined in what may be called Sonaram’s case. Sonaram bases his claim on the alleged descent of his wife Thokje from Dhansing lasker who according to them was the descendent of the eponymous Garo raja Habra. Dhansing himself was alive in 1849, the year when Kelso commenced his survey and purwanas addressed to him between 1825 and 1849 were in existence. About 60 witnesses had been examined and the case was about to be closed, Arbuthnott directed the production of the woman Thokje in order to have her statement recorded in order to form some idea of her age which was of importance in view of some of the statements made by witnesses. It seemed strange that the heiress on whose descent such ambitious claims were based should not have been tendered as a witness in what was practically her own case. The lady was accordingly brought to Damra by her husband Sonaram on Saturday morning, the 19th January 1907. She was interviewed and her statements were recorded.

In the course of Arbuthnott’s deposition of the Garo witnesses, Mr. Jacob wished to limit the claims in Pargana Habraghat to certain villages and an application to have the Bibhagnama plots surveyed, demarcated and assigned was put in by Mr. Jacob on behalf of Danon, Dingshin, Thorin, Adak Lasker and others claiming possession and right to lakhiraj lands granted by Mr. David Scott in his resumption proceeding dated the 10th.

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22 Letter dated 13th January 1907, from Arbuthnott to P.C. Lyon; Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Revenue Department, Revenue A, April 1907, Nos. 26-67.
23 Letter dated 28th January 1907, from Arbuthnott to P.C. Lyon.
24 Inquiry Report of J.C. Arbuthnott; Deposition of Thokje.
May 1831. The land consist of 21 plots scattered at intervals along the Habraghat boundary from Khokul near pillar No. 62 to the boundary of the Kamrup district. But his client refused to assent to any such limitation and repeatedly asserted that he claimed the whole estate of Pargana Habraghat. Regarding the frictional relations with the Bijni people and the degree of influence that Sonaram had upon his people Arbuthnott remarked.

"There is no doubt that the Garos are very much in earnest and that they have the greatest repugnance to any relations with the Bijni zamindari authorities. Otherwise, it is difficult to understand the enormous influence which is undoubtedly possessed by Sonaram or the success with which he has organized a regular combination among the Garo ryots of the zamindar in Goalpara, to refuse and withhold the payment of rent. He has apparently, five principal agents, but minor agents and collector for the cause exist in every village along this border and in Pargana Habraghat."  

The enquiry on the nazarana and Habraghat question lasted from January 7th till 22nd January 1907 when Jacob left. On 24th January 1907, this was communicated to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam by Arbuthnott and informed his proposed visit to the hills to enquire into forest questions also.

Arrangements had been made to proceed into the Garo Hills to institute the enquiries on the subject of the reserved forests and the impressments

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25 Letter dated 12th February 1907, from Arbuthnott to the Chief Secretary.
26 Letter dated 28th January 1907, from Arbuthnott to P.C.Lyon
27 No. 164, from Arbuthnott to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Shillong, the 11/30th May 1907.
28 Copy of Telegram No. 58, dated 24th January 1907, from Special Commissioner Mr. J.C.Arubhnot to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam.
of labour, but as the presence of Arbuthnott was required at Dacca, his tour had to be deferred. On return from Dacca on February 12th 1907, he proceeded into the hills on tour, during the course of which the more important reserves were visited, enquiries made into the general question of begar or impressment of labour and notes of evidence recorded. In March 1907, after crossing and recrossing the main range of mountains by different routes, Damra and the camp of the survey then in progress were revisited. Along with the enquiry, a survey work of the boundaries was also started in January.29

The survey party led by Mr. Bose, Survey assistant and Mr. Bardoloi, the settlement assistant lay out the village boundaries by theodolite. Mr. Bose relaid about one third of Beckett’s line from pillar No. 25 to 63 and fixed the theodolite stations.30 Meanwhile the progress of the survey operations had to be stopped in the month of April on account of excessive rains and the unhealthiness of the tract of Terai country. Mr. Bardalai, the Extra Assistant Commissioner in charge of the cadastral survey was invalidated at the end of March and had since been compelled to take leave on medical certificate. Laterly, there was much sickness among all ranks and two deaths occurred among the provincial survey staff under Mr. Bose.31

On completion of the enquiry, Arbuthnott proceeded to Shillong to write his report. The submission of the report was delayed by his another month visit to Damra in the month of April and his resumption of his duties as Commissioner of the Surma valley and Hill districts. He finally

29 No. 164. From Arbuthnott to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, dated 11/30th May 1907.
30 Letter dated 28th January 1907, from Arbuthnott to P.C.Lyon.
31 No. 164. From J.C. Arbuthnott to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Shillong, 11/30th May 1907.
submitted his voluminous report of enquiry on the 30th May 1907 to the Chief Secretary to the Government of eastern Bengal and Assam.\textsuperscript{32}

\textbf{Enquiry Commissioner's Report on the Habraghat and the Nazarana.}

The report of the enquiry Commissioner Mr. J. C. Arbuthnott stated as follows.

\textit{Pargana} Habraghat is and always has been the property of the Bijni Raj. It can not be said, for there are no records to show this exactly when it was permanently settled, but that it has been so settled has been admitted time and again, and the settlement presumably took place before the passing of the Resolution of the 25\textsuperscript{th} July 1822 and of Regulation X of 1822. The boundaries of \textit{Pargana} Habraghat seem to have been very ill defined, and in particular, the southern boundary appears to have been simply “The Garo Hills”. To keep the Garos from the raiding down upon the plains the \textit{zamindars} appear to have made some sort of arrangement with the Garos of the foot hills, who in return for keeping out the wild hillmen behind them, used to levy various tolls, more or less of the nature of blackmail, upon the villagers of the plains. But this arrangement had altogether broken down before 1816, when Mr. David Scott was deputed to enquire into the grievances of the Garos, in consequence of persistent and violent raids by the hillmen.\textsuperscript{33}

The boundaries still remained undefined, until 1849-51. The southern boundary of \textit{Pargana} Habraghat was laid for the first time by Mr. Kelso and his assistant Mr. Bedford during the years 1949-54 as the revenue survey boundary of \textit{Pargana} Habraghat. There is reason to believe that

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{J.C. Arbuthnott's Inquiry Report.}
the work was indifferently done, and no record exist as to the principle which it followed. It may be assumed, however, that they drew the best line they could along the foot of the hills, but owing to the nature of the country left out a number of inlets and valleys which were in possession of the Garos who have since accused the Habraghat raiyats of encroaching on the land at that time. In any case, Kelso’s boundary remains the definite and undisputable southern boundary of Pargana Habraghat: everything north of it belongs to the zamindars, and everything south of it belongs to Government and is part of the nazarana Mahal or the annexed Garo Hills. There appears to be no formal record of the southern boundary of the original nazarana Mahal. Every village which can be proved to have paid Nokpante tax to Government is a nazarana village and its boundaries will be those of the Mahal. This survey has yet to be made, but the boundary can probably be taken direct from the map.34

The serious Garo claim was that Habraghat Pargana originally belonged to them and that they should hold it direct under Government, paying more or less land revenue to Government, but collecting for themselves the rents of the Rabha, Cachari, Koch and other non Garo tenants who cultivate the land. How far exactly they imagine the extend of the Habraghat pargana is very uncertain. Perhaps, however, they only mean the country which they actually occupy, but claims have been put forward to villages, extending up to the Brahmaputra. Mr. Arbuthnott showed that this claim is utterly unfounded, and that whatever rights the plains Garos may have had, by prescription or acquiescence, to levy dasturies from the plains raiyats in the old days, these rights were finally and solemnly

34 Ibid.
relinquished by the Bibhagnama executed at Mr. Scott’s instance, and the acceptance of the 21 plots of rent free land. This agreement disposes of the claim to the land north of Beckett’s line, and also of the Bijni A Mahal south of it. 

As to the nazarana land, it has been shown by the Special Commissioner that the laskars as such have had not any rights in it all. As Nokmas they appear to have had a claim to levy awil or haul (quit rent) from foreigners and outside Garos cultivating the plains lands but the Lieutenant Governor considers that it can not, with any show of reason, be contended that Government is not entitled to levy land revenue on plains land within the Garo hills border which is not assessed to house tax.

The special Commissioner Mr. J. C. Arbuthnott after giving a detail report on the Habraghat pargana and Nazarana lands, however declared that the causes and demands of the Garo agitators were not genuine and based on personal interest of the leader Sonaram R.Sangma. For he invented that his wife Thokje was the descendent of the eponymous Garo Raja and Chief of Habraghat Pargana, and the villages paid salami to her. He claimed the lands on her behalf which however had no reliable evidence.

Further in the course of trial under Section 110 Criminal Procedure Code held on February 1903, Sonaram Sangma stated that he had been representing the twelve Laskers as amukhter in their case against the Rani of Bijni for the Habraghat pargana and nazarana Mahals. The inquiry Commissioner, in the end recommended the following for the consideration of the Lieutenant Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam.

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35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
i) That the boundary of jurisdiction—Beckettt’s line be retained, but that a settlement be made with the Garo villages in *pargana* Habraghat through their headmen on the *mouzadari* system, the appointment of *mouzadars* to be made by Government.

ii) That the *Bibahgnama* grants in Habraghat be surveyed and demarcated.

iii) That the propriety of the purchase by Government of the Bijni A *Mahal* might receive consideration.

iv) That should Government still consider the grant of any concession in respect of the *nazarana* lands advisable as a matter of grace, a settlement with the *nazarana Nokmas* on the lines of Scott’s settlement of the *Bibhagnama* grants would be a preferable arrangement to an assignment of a share in the revenues such as was contemplated by the abortive compromise of 1903.37

The Hon’ble Arbuthnott further remarked:

“As regards the *nazarana* lands, therefore the wisdom of granting any concession at this stage is at least open to question, nor is it by any means certain that any terms short of complete surrender will now satisfy the claimants or contribute to abate an agitation which is kept alive by unscrupulous adventurers to serve their own ends”

**Report on the Reserved Forest and Impressment of Labour.**

On the question of reserved forest, Arbuthnott, the enquiry Commissioner made an elaborate report and stated as follows.

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The land on which the forest stood was the property of the Government. This was true only in so far that Government had annexed the Garo hills and with it all the rights of the state. Therefore, the Government has the right to reserve the forests, if it thinks necessary, to regulate the cutting of wood wherein, and to impose revenue, but that these rights are subject to the extinction of existing rights of the village communities represented by the Nokmas, and these were not sufficiently considered by giving Rupees 15 for the cost of removing each of the houses that had to be demolished for the reservation.

Deputy Commissioner of the Garo Hills and a forest officer should be associated to examine carefully the existing reserved forests to exclude and give back to the villagers all areas manifestly unfit for the purpose, and to consider anew the arguments for and against the further reservations or surrender to cultivation of those blocks of forests which though otherwise suitable for reservation are so remote and inaccessible or of such doubtful value as to make it an open question whether they are worth retaining in the interest of revenue. Failing surrender, various privileges might be given to them. It is, therefore, simply a question of examining each case carefully on its merit. When it was decided what must be reserved, the Government should give the villagers concerned a fair sum of money in compensation, representing roughly the approximate value of the land so lost.

It is quite incorrect to assert that jhuming is not recognized as a right, but is practiced under the control of the Deputy Commissioner. As a matter of fact, there is no interference whatever and no attempt has
ever been made to interfere with villages’ *jhuming* within their recognized boundaries. Outside the reserves the Garos are at liberty to cut down any trees, including *sal*, for the purposes of cultivation, though they were not allowed to sell them.

It is also impossible in the case of forest situated in the center of the hills such as the Songsak and Rongrenggiri Reserves, which have never been worked on account of their inaccessibility, to constitute the areas as protected forests. Wholesale disforestation is out of the question. Should such an order be promulgated, there would be rush for the spoil by the villages concerned, and an absolute destruction would result. In any case, only temporary relief would be afforded. The work of 25 years would be thrown away, and the areas hitherto reserved would in a year or two become as worthless as the hill sides habitually subjected to the wasteful processes of *jhuming*. Should the decision be taken to allow shifting cultivation within certain areas or to restore portions of the reserves containing valueless jungle, grass, and bamboo, the restoration or concession would have to be effected with due care and circumspection.

It is unfortunate that compensation was not given as proposed in some cases in the first instance for the lands included in the reserves. There seems to have been a fear that if given in cash, the money would have been squandered. The proposal for the purchase of lands from other villages was perhaps the better arrangement, though it is strange that the consistency of annexing the land of one village without compensation, while proposing to purchase land from another should not have attracted attention. This is however, what actually occurred.
The lands were taken and neither compensation in money or land awarded.

From enquiries made, it appears that villages whose lands have been reserved are paying haul or quit rent for cultivating rights to others. The purchase of land would not have cost an extravagant sum. It would certainly be equitable to pay compensation even now as a belated measure of justice for the reserves such portions as it may be decided to retain. There can be no question, however, that in future village lands should not be taken up for reserves except on payment of full compensation for the extinction of cultivating rights.

Arbuthnott, therefore recommended with the following conclusions.

1. That total disforestation is impracticable and would be a retrograde step.
2. That the exclusion of worthless areas from some of the existing reserves is feasible and advisable.
3. That the duty on lac might appropriately be devoted to the award of compensation for such areas as it is decided to retain.
4. That encouragement be given to plough cultivation where suitable land is available by the provision of plough cattle and a substantial rent free period.
5. The acknowledgment that compensation will be paid in future for the extinction of cultivating rights.\(^{38}\)

On the question of the exaction of impressed labour in Garo Hills, the enquiry commissioner Mr. J. C. Arbuthnott toured to different

\(^{38}\) J.C. Arbuthnott's Inquiry Report.
localities of the Garo Hills, and conducted interviews on the subject amongst the Garo people. His report on the subject stated.

The only impressed labour or begar exacted now is of two descriptions “Work on the bridle paths and carriage of touring officers’ baggage”. That there are only four roads in the Garo Hills district, two cart roads and two bridle paths. These are the Tura Dalu road, 35.05 miles and the Tura–Mankarchar cart road, 31 miles. The bridle paths are from Tura to Pulbari (40.75 miles) and from Tura to Damra via Rongrenggiri (72.05 miles).

The system as regards the maintenance of the two bridle paths, aggregating 113 miles in length which are the only roads which the Garos are now required to keep up.

In consultation with the laskars certain lengths of the bridle paths are assigned by the Deputy Commissioner to the nearest villages along the route. These are held responsible for the upkeep of the paths and bamboo bridges and for the repair of the inspection bungalows. The Chief Commissioner in 1903 saw no objection to the continuance of the practice of looking to the village headmen for the execution of ordinary annual repairs on payment of the mileage allowance. The work on the bridle paths consists of jungle clearing twice a year, surface dressing, and the construction and repair of bamboo bridges which, if of any size, are separately paid for.

Previous to 1905 the cart roads and these bridle paths were under the Public Works Department. The rates were low, and as payment often delayed, the result was considerable dissatisfaction. In 1905 the charge of the Tura–Dalu cart road, 35.05 miles, to the Mymensingh border, with the two bridle paths through the northern and the north
eastern hills to the plains of Goalpara, was made over to the Deputy Commissioner. The remaining cart road, Tura to Mankachar, 31 miles, the most important communication in the district, is still under the Public Works Department. The rates of payment for work done on the cart road and the paths under the control of the Deputy Commissioner are as follows:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Route</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Rate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tura - Dalu cart road</td>
<td>35 ½ miles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jungle clearing</td>
<td>Rs 15 per mile</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual repairs</td>
<td>Rs 45 per mile</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tura - Damra bridle path</td>
<td>72 ½ miles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jungle clearing</td>
<td>Rs 12 per mile</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual repairs</td>
<td>Rs 19 per mile</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The rates on the other bridle path from Tura through the northern hills to Pulbari opposite, 40.75 miles, are the same. Arbuthnott stated in his report that before 1903 all work in Tura station and on the roads was done by impressed labour, and in some instances coolies were brought in 4 or 5 days' journey from their homes to work at Tura. This was a great hardship. The Public Works Department, Forest Department and the police were also supplied with begar on parwanas. In 1903 the Chief Commissioner prohibited the employment of begar by the Police Department, except for the carriage of kit and supplies on expedition or for the escort accompanying a Government officer on tour. The enquiry Commissioner in the end of his report said that there had been a substantial reduction in the demand for impressed labour for the last four years and that as matters stand, the Garos have not much to complaint of now. He further admitted that there were real grievances in connection with the enforcement of the begar system, which was in...
full swing till the beginning of 1903. It has been observed with truth that it is not so much the system that is open to objection as the abuses which are inseparable from it. These are evident from the old parwanas, which, if genuine, show that subordinates took it on themselves to issue orders for the supply of begar on their own account without reference to superior authority. All these, however, have been stopped.

There is no reason why the system of begar for road making except in exceptional emergencies, should not be superseded by a system of contracts with professional contractors. This system would be slightly more costly but the advantages to be derived therefrom would amply compensate for the extra outlay. As regards the carriage of officers' baggage, it seems that for the present, it is impossible to devise any other system than that of carriage by the village people. Therefore, the daily wages of the labourers may be increased to a minimum of six annas and a careful regulation of stages over which baggage has to be carried may be determined; it may be possible to arrange with the Nokmas or with those of the Garos who have worked as daffadars on tea gardens in the plains to find the men without having recourse to quasi criminal process. With regard to the upkeep of the bridle paths, a contract system through local Garo daffadar contractors be substituted for the existing arrangements.

It is also stated that the present system of employing forced labour, is certainly cheaper, but any system which may at any time necessitate the employment of Military Police to compel villagers to turn out to work is out of date in the Garo Hills and can not be continued. It appeared that there should be no difficulty in arranging for contract
work under Garo *daffadars* in the northern hills. The experiment should at any rate be given a trial when the success which has attended the introduction of the contract system on the Tura–Dalu road, which now attracts voluntary local labour, will no doubt be repeated.\textsuperscript{39}

Mr. J. C. Arbuthnott submitted his findings and recommendations to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam on the 11\textsuperscript{th} May 1907.\textsuperscript{40} The Officiating Chief Secretary in turn submitted the same with the recommendations of the Lieutenant Governor, to the Secretary to the Government of India on the 26\textsuperscript{th} November 1907.\textsuperscript{41}

Mr. R. W. Carlyle, Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Revenue and Agriculture, in his letter No. 358-507-2, dated 20\textsuperscript{th} March 1908, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, communicated the orders of the Government of India.

The following were the abstracts of the orders.

1. It appears that the dispute between the Garos and the Bijni *zamindar* has been going on for over a century and that the Garos object to any part of their rents being paid to the *zamindar*. In their memorial of 1904 the Garos asked for a rectification of the boundary between the *zamindari* and the *nazarana* lands and the exclusion of certain tracts from the *zamindari* area. They have now, however, gone beyond their original memorial and set up a claim to the whole of the

\textsuperscript{39} I b i d .  
\textsuperscript{40} N o . 1 6 4 . F r o m  th e  H o n ' b le  M r . J .C .A r b u th n o tt, C o m m is s io n e r , S u r m a  V a lle y a n d  H ill D istric ts to  th e  C h ie f S e c re ta ry  to  th e  G o v e r n m e n t of E a s te r n  B e n g a l a n d  A s s a m . C a m p  S h illo n ...  H o n ' b le  M r . H  L e  M e s u r ie r , O ffic ia tin g  C h ief S e c re ta ry  to  th e  G o v e r n m e n t of E a s te r n  B e n g a l a n d  A ssa m  to  th e  S e c re ta ry  to  th e  G o v e r n m e n t of I n d ia , D e p a r tm e n t of R e v e n u e  a n d  A g r ic u ltu r e .

\textsuperscript{41} N o . 1 2 9 7 4 C . F r o m  th e  H o n ' b le  M r . H . L e  M e s u r ie r , O ffic ia tin g  C h ief S e c re ta ry  to  th e  G o v e r n m e n t of E a s te r n  B e n g a l a n d  A ssa m  to  th e  S e c re ta ry  to  th e  G o v e r n m e n t of I n d ia , D e p a r tm e n t of R e v e n u e  a n d  A g r ic u ltu r e .
Habraghat pargana. The decision of this claim is a matter for the Civil Courts, but Mr. Arbuthnott has examined the evidence brought forward in support of it, and the Government of India see no reason to differ from the opinion which the Lieutenant Governor has formed, that the Garos have failed to establish any title whatever to this area. It is for the Lieutenant Governor to decide whether the circumstances are such as to make it desirable to take steps to dissociate Government formally from any claim of this description that may be brought forward in the Courts.

2. The relations between the Bijni and the Garos are, however, capable of improvement and the Government of India cordially approve of the Lieutenant Governor's proposal that endeavors should be made to induce the zamindar to withdraw the foreign servants from the administration of the Garo villages in Habraghat and to allow them to be managed by headmen on the mouzadari system, the mouzadars being appointed by Government. The question whether the estate should be brought under the Court of wards is one for the decision of the local Government.

3. As regards the alleged encroachments of the Bijni zamindar, Sir Bamfylde Fuller was of opinion that the Garos had suffered a loss of some territory under British rule, but that any injustice had been done it was impossible to rectify it, since whatever rights the Garos might have originally possessed over the areas now forming part of the Bijni zamindari, the title of the zamindar was now good, and the Garos had no legal claim. He considered
that it was impossible to reopen the question of the formation of
the forest reserves but stated that no new areas would be added
in future to the forest reserves except on payment of full
proprietary compensation.

4. It further appears eminently desirable that Government should
acquire the rights of the zamindar in the area known as the Bijni
A mahal, so as to be able to deal direct with the Garos in that
tract. It appears that this property is already under Government
management, though a percentage of the rents collected by
Government is made over to the zamindar. The Government of
India approve of the Lieutenant Governor's proposal to instruct
the Board Of Revenue to enter into negotiations with the
representatives of the zamindar for the purchase of the Mahal. It
is understood that the financial considerations involved are not
of serious importance.

5. It is hoped that another source of dispute between the Bijni
zamindar and the Garos will be removed by the completion of
the survey and record of rights for the areas covered by the
Bibhagnama grants, for the remaining blocks of the Bijni A Mahal
between Beckett's and Kelso's lines and for the Government
nazaranay lands south of Kelso's line cultivated by Garos and non
Garo immigrants from across the border of Goalpara. The
Government of India trust that these measures will be completed
at an early date. They will not press for the extension of survey
and record of rights to other areas if the Lieutenant Governor
does not consider this advisable.
6. The position in respect of the nazara lands has been complicated by a claim advanced by the Nokmas and laskars to full proprietary rights in this area. The custom of collecting haul or quit rent from foreigners, has been nominally stopped, and it is not proposed at present to make any concessions to the Nokmas and laskars in respect of its abolition. The Government of India recognize that the fact that the Nokmas and laskars have put forward an untenable claim to full proprietary rights makes it difficult to treat with them. But the deprivation of the half allotment of land revenue which the Nokmas and laskars previously enjoyed, has evidently left them with a sense of grievance for which there appears to be some foundation, and considering the importance of doing all that is reasonably possible to conciliate the men who may be regarded as the natural leaders of the community, the Government of India would be prepared to agree to any reasonable concessions which the Lieutenant Governor may consider it advisable to make in respect of this matter.

7. As regards the complaint of the Garos that the formation of the forest reserves deprived them of valuable privileges, it seems clear that the reserves in the Garo Hills were constituted in the same way as in many other parts of the country. The waste land was reared as being at the disposal of government and no compensation was given for such lands when taken up. It is now proposed that a careful examination of the existing reserves should be made, and that any areas which it is not found worthwhile to retain should be surrendered to the villagers. It is
recommended that compensation representing roughly the approximate value of the land should be paid as an act of grace, for the reserves which are retained, the amount being treated as a forest charge. The Government of India is prepared to accept these proposals. The diminution of the reserves is *prima facie* undesirable, but there need be no objection to the surrender of worthless portions. The proposal to give compensation now is unusual, but the political reasons in favour of liberality are strong, and the Government of India do not think that merely technical objections should be allowed to stand in the way of giving fair compensation.

As regards the system of begar, it was stated that the demands for forced labour had been reduced very greatly and were not oppressive. It was explained that as the Garos paid no road cess, it was not unreasonable to require them to assist in maintaining the district roads. The Government of India agree that the time has come to abolish impressments of labour for road making, replacing it by a contract system, and this change should be given effect to at once. The Lieutenant Governor considers that it may still be necessary to resort to impressments of labour for the carriage of officers' baggage. The Government of India will not object to this, and they are confident that the Lieutenant Governor will see that impressments of labour for this purpose is strictly regulated so as to cause as little hardship as possible, and that full payment is
Third arrest of Sonaram. As mentioned earlier under instructions from the Chief Commissioner, Sonaram was ordered to be released from the Garo Hills district jail and before that he was taken out of the boundary jurisdiction of the Garo Hills District under police escort and set him free there on the 15th July 1905, with a strong warning that should he enter the district, he would be rearrested and proceedings under section under Section 110 Cr.P.C revived. Since then, Sonaram R. Sangma, himself did not enter into the boundary of the Garo Hills and mobilised his people in the Garo Hills through the services of his faithful followers. In Goalpara district also he did the same and in most of the times, he himself stayed at Calcutta consulting learned counsels and lawyers about the cases concerning the protection and safeguard of the interest of the Garo people and to find out possible ways and means to get back the claimed lands.

On 12th September 1908, Jongnal Sangma, Tahsildar, Bijni estate sent a telegraph to the Deputy Commissioner, Garo Hills informing that Sonaram had entered the Garo Hills with 600 followers.

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42 No. 358-507-2. From R.W.Carlyle, Secretary to the Government of India to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam. Department of Revenue and Agriculture, dated the 20th March 1908.

43 Judicial Proceedings, Judicial A, January 1909, Nos. 2-17.
collected from the persons named Salom, Patang and others and that he would remain at Jontha’s house at Nalbari.  

At this time, Major A. Playfair, the Deputy Commissioner of the Garo Hills, was not in the station and Boerman was in charge of the Deputy Commissioner. Playfair was away to Mahendraganj. On receiving the report, the D.C in charge, directed Shri Haranath Marak, mouzadar of Damra to report him the facts immediately and an order given to arrest Sonaram if found disturbing the peace in the Garo Hills with the assistance of Havildar, Dhepa Guard. Havildar of Dhepa Guard was also informed to render assistance if call upon by mouzadar Haranath in arresting Sonaram.

On the 14th September 1908, at about 3 p.m, while Sonaram was inspecting at a spot of the disputed land along with Jontha Laskar about 150 paces (100 yards) from the boundary of Goalpara District, Sonaram was accosted by Haranath mouzadar and Chanang Laskar along with two subordinate officers of the Deputy Commissioner, Garo Hills, Major Playfair. Haranath Mouzadar, then taking a pocket book from his pocket appeared to read something aloud to the following effect in the Garo language— “A Telegram was received here this morning authorizing me and havildar to arrest you. I arrest you. Havildar is coming” He then told Chanang Laskar to arrest Sonaram and he accordingly did so, saying “this is

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44 Copy of Telegram dated Damra, the 12th September 1908, from Jongnal Sangma, Thasildar, Bijni Estate to the Deputy Commissioner, Garo Hills.
45 Letter from Playfair to P.C. Lyon, dated the 17th September 1908.
46 Copy of Telegram dated 13th September 1908, from Deputy Commissioner, Garo Hills to Haranath Mouzadar, Damra.
47 Telegram dated 13th September 1908, from Deputy commissioner, Garo Hills to Havildar, Dhepa Guard.
the order of the Sarkar Bahadur meaning presumably the Deputy Commissioner Major Playfair.

Sonaram offered no resistance and he was at once taken to the house of one Tilok and detained there in custody till 3 p.m., on Tuesday, the 15th instance when the havildar and five constables came and removed him in custody.48

Later Sonaram was sent to Tura where he arrived on the 20th September 1908. On seeing the report that accompanied Sonaram, the Deputy Commissioner found that only a technical breach of the order of the 15th July 1905 had been committed, in that Sonaram had only advance a few hundred yards inside the district boundary of the Garo Hills. The Deputy Commissioner, accordingly released him from custody and had him escorted by a police constable out of the Garo Hills district boundary and released on the 21st September 190849 in the neighbourhood of Rangapani.50

After passing through some stages of Court’s procedural Code, the case was at last heard by Holmood and Ryves, Judicial Judge on the 27th November 1908 with the result that the case was finally discharged without argument on the report of the Deputy Commissioner, Garo Hills that there being no case pending against Sonaram.51

When the final verdict of the Government of India on what may be called as the Sonaram’s case was communicated to the Chief

50 No. 94 J, dated Tura, the 26th September 1908, from Major A. Playfair, Deputy Commissioner, Garo Hills to the Assistant Registrar of the High Court, Calcutta.
51 No. 2524, dated Calcutta, the 15th December 1908, from the Hon’ble Mr. E.P. Chapman, Officiating Superintendent and Remembrancer of Legal Affairs to the Legal Remembrancer, Eastern Bengal and Assam. File No. Judicial A, January 1909. Nos. 2-17.
Secretary to the Government of Bengal and Assam in 1908, and the same was in turn intimated to the Garos, Sonaram was greatly perturbed. Certain Garos including the Nokmas and Laskars greatly dissatisfied with the performance of Sonaram. Some of them wanted him to drag to the court to recover the amount of money that they had contributed to him in the course of his movement.\textsuperscript{52}

Having been greatly aggrieved with the failure of his mission, he shifted his residence temporarily to the Goalpara town where he took a rented house. By staying there he continued shuttling to Calcutta, Dhubri and Gauhati and never ceased to consult the learned counsels at Bar about the possibility of getting the grievances of the Garos redressed. Yet, the lady luck did not favour him and he had to take maximum trouble than before as the Garo people did no longer subscribe him with money to further his movement.\textsuperscript{53}

As already referred earlier that that in 1906–07 Mr. A. C. Bose, Extra Assistant Superintendent Survey of India redemarcated the northern boundary of the Garo Hills district laid down by Mr. Beckett in 1873–74 from pillar No. 25 to 62. A survey to test Mr. Bose’s demarcation was commenced by the Assam Traverse Party under Mr. O. E. Judd in 1911\textsuperscript{54} which completed in the next year. Thus the Garo Hills boundary fixed in 1912 has been officially accepted as final and the true boundary of the district till today.

Certain important things may be noted here that the local Government authorities seemed to have neglected to survey and to

\textsuperscript{52} Interview with Smt. Hupoti R. Sangma, Village Bakrapur, P.O: Damra, Goalpara, Assam. date 17.07.2000.

\textsuperscript{53} Interview with Demin Marak, Village Bapujinagar, Goalpara, Assam. date 03.08.1999.

\textsuperscript{54} F.C.Hirst and A.B.Smart, A Brief Surveys of the Goalpara District, p 95.
prepare a record of rights in regard to the *Bibhaganma* grants in *Pargana* Habraghat in the district of Goalpara as instructed in the Secretary to the Government of India Mr. R. W. Carlyle's letter dated 20th March 1908, paragraph 9, addressed to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam. Other than this, the Lt. Governor's proposal that endeavours should be made to induce the *zamindar* to withdraw her foreign servants from the administration of the Garo villages in Habraghat and to allow them to be managed by headmen on the *mouzadari* system, the *mouzadars* being appointed by Government, was also not fully carried out. The Bijni people, became more aggressive than they were before following the Government of India's verdict in favour of them. Thus a spontaneous but strong enmity continued to occupy the minds of the Garo people against the Bijni which often brought them for a conflict in the court of law.

Reactions from other quarters. The movement of Sonaram invited lots of criticisms and jealousies from certain sections of the people including the American Baptist Missionaries stationed at Tura. The Assam Government officials and the Bijni *zamindars* were strongly against the move and on many a time because of their harassments, had to withdraw subscriptions for Sonaram's case and some Garo people abandoned and stayed away from participating in the movement.55 Along with it, the deputation of J.C. Arbuthnott, the Inquiry Commissioner, greatly relieved the agitation

55 *Memorial of Sonaram R.Sangma and thousand others to His Excellency, the Right Hon'ble Sir Gilbert John Elliot Murray Kynynmound, Earl of Minto, Viceroy and Governor General of India, dated 23rd day of November 1905.*
and the disturbances were reduced to a great extent. Yet, Sonaram continued to organize his people and keep alive the spirit of agitation amongst his people. He asked his people to subscribe more money for the case and appealed not to stop their subscriptions till they achieved their target. One laskar was imprisoned for making over to Sonaram some money which he received from the Government for the distribution to his raiyats for the upkeep of a road. He was however released after a year in 1908. Certain Nokmas even sold their property to provide Sonaram with money for the cause. The Deputy of the Garo Hills once reported.

"People seem to be in terror of Sonaram, and give money for that reason, even when they feel no enthusiasm for the agitation. They have been told and believed that Sonaram will eventually win and that when he does so those who withheld their assistance will be deprived of their land"

One of the first educated Garos named Jobang Marak, who was at Granville, Ohio in America at the time of Sonaram's agitation in Goalpara and Garo Hills areas, wrote a letter to the Garos which was published in the September 1907 issue of the monthly Garo journal the A'Chikni Ripeng. In his letter Mr. Jobang Marak warned the Garo people not to take part in Sonaram's case, as he had the apprehensions of fear that Government might close down all

57 Annual Report on the Frontier Tribes of Eastern Bengal and Assam for the year 1907-08.
schools as penalties. He called the leaders as liars and asked the Garo people not to contribute to Sonaram.

As expected by Mr. Jobang Marak, Sonaram’s agitation for the time being, disturbed the progress of education among the Garo people and it directly or indirectly affected the Garo teachers serving under the Mission Schools. In Goalpara some of the pundits gave vent to their feelings in very offensive letters to the Missionaries. However, by the close of the year 1907, the discontent had abated and more healthy spirit prevailed in the Mission Schools. In February 1908, a training school for the pundits was opened at Tura.

The British authorities in the meantime popularised their counter propaganda among the Garos about the alleged intrigues of Sonaram. Some of the laskars were set against the agitating Nokmas of the Sonaram’s group. One laskar who had been imprisoned for handing over money to Sonaram from out of the money given by the Government for repair of the roads and released after a year from jail, was pursuaded to institute a civil suit against Kamansingh for the recovery of the money he paid to Sonaram. Thorin G. Momin, Mondol G. Momin and Ramsingh B. Sangma of Amjonga opposed Sonaram’s claimed to lands as the successors of the leading laskars like Dhansing and Gandi Laskars.

In spite of his continued efforts to keep up the tempo of the agitation, Sonaram began to lose his popularity and the people

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58 A’chikri Ripong, September 1907.
59 Annual Report on the Frontier Tribes of Eastern Bengal and Assam for the year 1907-08.
60 P.C.Kar, Glimpses of the Garos, p 239-240.
became tired of the way in which Sonaram spent the public money. Although he had not yet been fully deserted by his people, a Garo person named Kaman Sing, former Havildar of Salpara village and Geloram of Rongjuli were appointed to watch the expenditure. The Garos however, even if they gradually lose their belief on their faithful leader, continued to press hard upon the Government, independently of Sonaram against the begar or forced labour system. But the Deputy Commissioner, Garo Hills took advantage of the way they agitated and impressed upon them that had there been no agitation, there would have been no demarcation or begar. The system of begar was thus continued to be imposed upon the Garos as a sort of punishment for their agitation. The supporters of Sonaram severed connections with him and thus commenced to loss his influence upon his people. In February 1910, steps were taken against certain people who fraudulently collected funds on Sonaram’s behalf and since then no report of such further collections was heard or received.

Between the years 1910-11, the Garos were reported to be quiet and well behaved. The Government sanctioned the deforestation of certain reserved areas and the grant to house tax paying Garos of certain privileges in the matter of extracting timber for home consumption was acceded.

Meanwhile Geloram Sangma from Rangjuli and certain Garo Nokmas brought a civil suit for the declaration of their title to and recovery of possession with mesne profits of Pargana Habraghat

61 Annual Report on the Frontier Tribes of Eastern Bengal and Assam for the year 1908-09, p 5.
and a portion of Nazarana Mahals against the Rani of Bijni as defendant in the court of Subordinate Judge of Dhubri. The said suit was registered as Suit No. 5 of 1910 and the defendants have been directed to appear on the 30th March 1910. They also submitted a memorial saying that they have dispensed with the services of Sonaram R.Sangma whom they said that was not a Nokma and has no right to the lands in Nazarana mahals and Reserved Forests. It is also mentioned that Sonaram did not then mention their interest. It may be mentioned here that Geloram Sangma was the son of Genzan Nokma of Rongjuli. His mother's name was Baji. Geloram's father was the Talukdar of Rongjuli, Darrangiri, Moskhuli, Koinkuchi, Ghilamara,Siksajuli, Ipilla, Jugipara and Madang. He collected rents from all these villages for Dhansing.

However, no action seemed to have been taken by the concerned authorities to their requests through prayers and petitions and as such it often generated dissatisfaction among the minds of the successive Garo leaders who frequented their mental unrest through repeated submission of memorials for necessary action and dispensation of justice.

As already stated earlier, the popularity of Sonaram, in the last part of his life began to be eclipsed considerably from his people and the successive leaders after Sonaram independently tried to place the grievances before the authorities by their own. Yet, Sonaram R. Sangma tried to institute a suit against the begar system by collecting money from the interior hills while persuading the villagers on both sides of the Tura_ Damra and Tura Phulbari bridle

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64 Memorial submitted by Geloram Sangma and other Garo Nokmas in the year 1910-11.
path not to allow the use of impressed labour. But he failed in his attempts.

Considering that Sonaram's presence in the area posed a constant threat to law and order, his entry into Garo Hills was prohibited. Sonaram defied the order and entered the district in 1911. He was prosecuted against and convicted under Section 118 of the Indian Penal Code, and sentenced to two months' rigorous imprisonment but was ultimately acquitted on a point of law by the Chief Commissioner on appeal. When he again entered into the district without permission of the Deputy Commissioner, Garo Hills, in 1912 he was tried and sentenced to six months' rigorous imprisonment, and a fine of Rupees 500/- was also inflicted on him. He was turned out of the district in 1913.

On the 3rd of May 1913, Songjing Sangma of Bakrapur, Shokan Shira of Boksial Nisangram and 2000 other Garo tenants of Pargana Habraghat under Goalpara district approached Mr. A. W. Botham, ICS, Second Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam and submitted a memorial to him praying that the recommendation and the intention of the Government communicated to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, the copy of which was given to the Garos by R. W. Carlyle, Secretary to the Government of India dated 20th March 1908, might be given effect to and that they might be placed under separate administration. The memorialists urged upon the Government to introduce the Mouzadari system and to administer their villages by

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their respective headmen as *mauzadars* in place of the officers of the Bijni Raj.\textsuperscript{68}

The demands of the memorialists were however, refused in a communication by Mr. A. W. Botham, second Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam on 4\textsuperscript{th} July 1913 and stated in substance that they were to have no redress of their said grievances.\textsuperscript{69}

In 1915, the Garo tenants of the Habragaht *Pargana* headed by a Garo man named Mangal Sing and others petitioned the Government demanding Garo tenants' right to collect fuel, straw etc. to cut down sal trees for building houses and making ploughs, to cut down trees grown on own holdings and to graze cows in the *zamindary* forests. It is worth noting that they claimed those rights on the basis of local custom which was recognized by the former Rajas of Bijni.\textsuperscript{70}

Reactions from the American Baptist Missionaries. The American Baptist Missionaries turned a green eye to Sonaram's Movement and the way the Garo people subscribed money for his case. Through the medium of a Garo monthly journal, the *A'Chikni Ripeng* they expressed their disfavourable views and opinions on the movement of the Garo people led by Sonaram R. Sangma. This vernacular journal played an adverse role in shaping the minds of the Garo people towards Sonaram's agitation and it adversely

\textsuperscript{68} Memorial submitted to Mr. A.W. Botham, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam by Songjing Sangma of Bakrapur, Shokan Shira of Boksial and 2000 other Garo tenants, dated 3\textsuperscript{rd} May 1913; Memorial to His Excellency the Hon'ble Sir John Henry Kerr, Governor of Assam in Council submitted by Shubaram Nokma of Chatchalja, Sakra Nokma of Darrangre and 25 other Garos in the month of June 1924.

\textsuperscript{69} Memorial to His Excellency, The Hon'ble Sir John Henry Kerr, Governor of Assam in Council submitted by Subharam Nokma of Chatchalja, Sakra Nokma of Darrangre and 25 others, June 1924.

\textsuperscript{70} Santo Burman, *Zamindary System in Assam During British Rule*, p 153.
affected his popularity and brought down the tempo of the agitation to a standstill. At last Sonaram was left with only a few of his faithful followers who continued the legacies left by their leader. In July 1906 issue of the *A'chikni Ripeng*, E. G. Phillips, the editor of the magazine and the person who ordained the marriage of Thokje and Sonaram in 1889 wrote.

“I heard that the case between Sonaram and the Bijni has been heard and a verdict given in favour of the Bijni. Garo people had spent lots of money and thereby lost much wealth. Now the Garos are expected to cease their movement”\(^71\)

The missionaries criticized the leaders that they were crooked and simply wasted the public money for their selfish ends. The leaders made the public believed that those who buy the book that cost around Rupees 50 or 60/- shall escape out of the enforcement of *begar* system upon them. They sold the book by cheating on this pretext. The book has no power to save them or to free themselves out of enforcement of *begar*. They even persuaded the Garos to file a case against those who sold the books.

It is said that during Sonaram’s movement, the Nokmas collected the subscriptions in a big bamboo basket and brought the collected amount in a bullock cart as it were too heavy to carry as the money was of coin. It would be deposited into Sonaram’s treasurer Jontha.\(^72\) Seeing the Garos still continuing their agitation, E. G.

\(^71\) *A'chikni Ripeng*, July 1906.
\(^72\) *Interview with Demin Marak, Village Bapujinagar, Goalpara, Assam, date 03.08.1999.*
Phillips, further wrote in the October 1910 issue of the _A’chikni Ripeng_.

"If the Garos thought that the case will be fought for long time to come, they will have to suffer a lot and lose much. Their wealth would go and the time to do other good things would be lost and if they still retain the spirit of anger, or fight, it would be unpleasant. Therefore, let God guide to complete the case in a right way."\(^{73}\)

In its another issue, the movement was sharply reacted with the following words.

"The Garos filed case from 1901 and spent lakhs of rupees and the people were reduced to poverty on account of subscriptions to this case; others were in debt, and the case had been going on for the last nine years, yet it bore no fruit, it is learnt. The leader formerly called himself a good _mukhtear_ but later on, called himself a Raja. It is said that the leaders have spent money recklessly and various allegations have been made against the former leaders. However, though the new leaders now filed the case, it is learnt that the old leaders are again going to raise funds from the people.\(^{74}\)

**Influence of Sonaram.** Sonaram possessed an extraordinary influence over the Garos.\(^{75}\) In the course of his movement, Sonaram had such a powerful and overwhelming influence upon his people

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\(^{73}\) _A’chikni Ripeng, October 1910_.

\(^{74}\) _A’chikni Ripeng, February 1911_.

\(^{75}\) _A’chikni Ripeng, October 1910_.
that Major Playfair, the Deputy Commissioner of the Garo Hills once remarked.

“At one place 27 miles from Tura and 47 miles from the plains, the laskars told me that the two Nokmas or headmen, had refused to pay him their Government house rent saying that they were going to pay to Sonaram. At the same place another Nokma sent word that he would not supply me with begar. The incidence was of no importance in itself, but it is a sign of Sonaram’s influence with the people.”

The villagers on both sides of the Tura-Rongchugri-Phulbari road denied to contribute labour for clearing the road then existing only as a bridle path. The same course was followed with greater vigour in the northern hills. There was virtually a breakdown of authority in the hills, and land litigations against the estate holders increased enourmously. The people got so much interested in the struggle organised by Sonaram that the Baptist Mission had to excommunicate him from the church and report with regret that “during 1904 there manifested a widespread spirit of trade among the Garos with lamentable tendency to worldly practices, and Christian communities were damaged by a great law suit with the Raja of Bijni carried on for over two years previously, and not ended yet in 1911.”

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72 P.C.Kar, Glimpses of the Garos, p 229.
For strengthening and furthering the movement, large sums were collected by Sonaram's emissaries and his influence has been felt throughout the whole of the northern half of the district.\textsuperscript{78} Even the people of Baghmara in the south of the Garo hills district subscribed to Sonaram's case with the hope that the forest reserves would be thrown open and that the land would belong to them and practically, would be independent of Government as before. Sonaram had an emissary at Baghmara named Reran. He was imprisoned for six months in the Dolgoma case and afterwards died at Baghmara. When labour was demanded from them, they had to go to Tura to work.\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{78} Administrative Report of Eastern Bengal and Assam for 1906-07, p 6.\textsuperscript{79} J.C.Arbuthnott's Inquiry Report: Deposition of Bong Lasker, p 74.