CHAPTER II

LAND AND PEOPLE

Location of Meghalaya:

The State of Meghalaya, often called the ‘Scotland of the East’, is situated between 25°2’ N and 26°6’ N latitude and 89°50’ E and 92°50’E longitude. The total area of the State is approximately 22,429 square kilometers with a total population of 2,306,069 (Pocket Statistical Handbook- Meghalaya, 2003). Meghalaya is bounded on the north by Goalpara, Kamrup and Nowgong Districts, on the east by the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills districts, of Assam, and on the south and west by Bangladesh.

Meghalaya is the twenty-first State of the Indian Union. It was declared a full fledged State on the 21st of January, 1972. Before 1970, Meghalaya was a part of the State of Assam. From April 2, 1970 to 21st January 1972, it was declared as an autonomous State.
State Administration:

The State of Meghalaya has seven administrative districts, namely, Jaintia Hills, Ri Bhoi, East Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills, East Garo Hills, West Garo Hills, and South Garo Hills. The district head-quarters of the following districts are Jowai, Nongpoh, Shillong, Nongstoin, William Nagar, Tura, and Baghmara respectively. The State has a unicameral legislature consisting of 60 members – 7 from the Jaintia Hills, 29 from Khasi Hills, and 24 from the Garo Hills. The State also has three Autonomous District Councils – the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council, the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council, and the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council, entrusted with discharging the duties and functions in accordance with the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. Besides these constitutionally recognized administrative bodies there are traditional political institutions, called dorbars (councils), right from the shnong (village) level to the hima (state) level, which function as grassroot institutions alongside the government administrative bodies.
Inhabitants of Meghalaya:

Meghalaya is predominantly inhabited by three major ethnic groups – the Garos, the Khasis and the Jaintias. The Garos inhabit the western parts of Meghalaya. Besides the Garos other smaller communities like the Rabha, Hajong, Koch, Man, Dalu and Bania inhabit this region. The Khasis and the Jaintias inhabit the eastern parts of Meghalaya. Khasi is a general name given to the sub-tribes Bhoi, War, Khynriam and Lyngngam. The Bhoi inhabit the north-western part of the Khasi Hills, which is today called the Ri-Bhoi area under Ri-Bhoi District, the War inhabit the southern part of the Khasi Hills, the Khynriam occupy the central and highest peaks of the Meghalaya plateau, while the Lyngngams inhabit the western border of the Khasi Hills. All these Khasi groups share the same language and social structure but each group tends to be exogamous (Bareh, 1985). The Khasis collectively define themselves as the children of *U Hynniew Trep* (The Seven Huts) a name derived from a myth, *Ki Khanatang u Hynniewtrep* (Tales of the Seven Huts), referring to the seven ancestral families that came from heaven to form the Khasi race on earth (Nongbri, 2003).
Majority of these population groups in Meghalaya belong to the Indo-Chinese Linguistic Family of which Mon-Khmer and Tibeto-Burman are two important sub-families. The Garos belong to the Bodo-Kachari group of the Tibeto-Burman family, while the Khasis and the Jaintias belong to the Mon-Khmer family. The Khasi, Jaintia and Garo communities use the Roman script which was first introduced in this region in 1842 by Thomas Jones, a Calvinist Missionary (Roy, 1994).

The three major ethnic groups of Meghalaya, i.e., the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos, share a common matrilineal tradition under which descent is reckoned through the female line, children belong to the clan of the mother and women have rights to property.

The Khasis – A Brief Overview:

The Khasis inhabit the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya. The Khasi Hills are located in the north eastern corner of India bounded on the south by the Sylhet District of Bangladesh, on the north by the Kamrup District of Assam, on the west by the East Garo Hills District of Meghalaya, and on the east by the Karbi Anglong District of Assam and the Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya. The Khasi Hills lie between 25°07' and 26°07'N
latitude and 90°45' and 92°16'E longitude (Simon, 1991). The Khasi Hills is divided into the East and West Khasi Hills. The East Khasi Hills covers a total area of 5196 square kilometers with a total population of 6,65,218 out of which the total population of the Scheduled Tribes is 5,21,482. The West Khasi Hills has a total population of 2,20,157 out of which 2,15,995 belong to the Scheduled Tribes (Census of India, 1991).

The Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya are a plateau interspersed with river valleys which in the southern part take the form of ravines. Altitudes vary from 1220mts. to 1830mts. above sea level (Meghalaya, Basic Facts, 1975). The mountain ranges in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills run from west to east. An important peak in the Khasi Hills is the Shillong Peak, which also happens to be the highest peak in the region. It has an altitude of 1964mts. Another peak, the Navel of Heaven, Sohpet–bneng stands at an altitude of 1350mts. and is situated about 20kms. north of Shillong.

Due to topographical features of the Khasi Hills, the highest range runs from west to east, and the main rivers flow in a northerly or southerly direction. The rivers of the State flow either to the
Brahmaputra or to the Surma river. The rivers of the Khasi Hills are fed seasonally by the monsoon rains. The main rivers that flow towards the north, that is to the Brahmaputra river, are the Umkhen, Khri, Umtrew and Umiam. Those rivers flowing towards the south to the Surma river are the Kynshi, Umiew and Um-Ngot. The terrain of the Khasi Hills lends itself to the formation of magnificent waterfalls. Some of the well known waterfalls in and around Shillong are the Bishop’s Falls, Beadon Falls, Spread Eagle Falls, Elephant’s Falls and Sweet Falls (Sten, 1977).

Physical Appearance of the Khasis:

With regard to the physical appearance of the Khasis, Gurdon (1990) gives the following description - ‘the skin of the Khasis is usually brown, varying from dark to light yellowish brown. People inhabiting the uplands were lighter in complexion.’ He further notes that the people of Cherrapunji village are fair, the Syntengs of the Jaintia Hills are darker than the Khasi uplanders, Wars living in the low valleys have swarthy skin, the Bhois have yellow skin, while the Lyngngams were considered darker than the Khasi, perhaps the darkest complexioned people in the hills. The Khasis have medium sized eyes, black or brown in colour and their eyes obliquely set though not so acutely as the Chinese and some
other Mongols. Gurdon further writes that - 'The Khasis are usually short in stature with bodies well nourished, and the males are extremely muscular. The trunk is long in proportion to the rest of the body, and broad at the waist; calves are very highly developed. The women when young are comely, of a buxom type, and, like the men, with highly developed calves, the latter always being considered a beauty.'

Religion:

With the advent of Christianity into the Khasi and Jaintia Hills the majority of the people embraced the Christian faith. In Meghalaya Christians dominate the population in respect of religion. According to the Census of India, 1991, the number of Christians in Meghalaya was 11,46,092, i.e. 64.58%. It has been estimated that there are now 17,04,584 Christians, i.e. 74.39% in 2000 out of a total estimated population of 22,91,634 (Pocket Statistical Hand Book, Meghalaya, 2003). There are still many Khasis who follow the traditional religion. Khasi religion was branded as animistic and theistic by early British writers, which however has been contradicted by many Khasi writers and others. According to a local scholar, Lyndoh (1991), the Khasi religion is monotheistic where God is known by different names and addressed in
different ways. Gurdon (1990) describes Khasi religion as animistic and spirit-worship or propitiation of spirits both good and evil on certain occasions, principally in times of troubles. For the Khasis, religion is a way of life. Chowdhury (1998) writes that the Khasis designate their religion as ‘Niam Khasi’, meaning ‘rule of conduct’ which clearly implies that Khasi customs and manners are regulated by religion and therefore sanctimonious. They have the conception of a high God whom they called ‘U Blei Nongthaw’ or ‘God the Creator’, and whom they conceived as the ultimate source of all creation, of life and of the world.

Marriage:

The most remarkable feature of the Khasi marriage is that it is usually the husband who goes and lives with his wife in his mother-in-law’s house and not for him to take his bride home. The Khasis practice the matrilocal pattern of residence after marriage. According to Nakane (1967) both Khasi and Garo societies combine matrilocal (uxorilocal) residence with unigeniture in respect of inheritance but the method of nominating the heiress is completely different by reason of the structural difference of organization. Khasis have numerous prohibitions of marriage between near-relations both on the paternal as well as on the
maternal side. The Khasis practice and observe strict rules of exogamy. The first and second parallel cousins are avoided and also those related to the father within three generations are avoided. Marrying within one's own 'kur' or clan was and still is regarded as taboo. Further Gurdon (1990) observes that marrying the daughter of one's maternal uncle during his lifetime is forbidden as the maternal 'kuri' or uncle is regarded as a father rather than an uncle. A Khasi cannot marry two sisters but can marry his deceased wife's sister after a year by giving payment of 'jing sang' or price of taboo, to the wife's clan. A widow is not debarred from marrying though she usually has to wait for a year after her husband's death. Nakane (1967) observes that sororate only of the junior kind is known among the Khasis and that too only in case of marriage with a non-heiress. A man can stay on with his children after his wife's death but has to return to his 'jing' or youngest sister's house, if he was married to a heiress. A man married to a heiress cannot marry his death wife's elder sister. Levirate is another form of marriage for which no social sanction or approval seems to exist among the Khasis. The Khasis do not have the custom of bride-price or dowry nor is polygyny or polyandry practiced by the people. A non-Khasi woman marrying a Khasi man was not only accepted but becomes the progenitress of a new
clan. In the Khasi society there are no illegitimate children (Lyngdoh, 1991). Divorce, observes Gurdon (1990), is common among the Khasis and occurs for a variety of reasons such as adultery, barreness, incompatibility of temperament—etc. In the event of a divorce the mother is always allowed the custody of the children.

Descent and Inheritance:

The social structure of the Khasi originated from the kur or clan which formed the nucleus of all Khasi social organisation. According to Nongbri (2003), the Khasi clan is a matrilineally-related and exogamous unit that provided group identity to its members. Nongbri (2003:233) further states that — ‘For women, particularly, the clan has special significance. As perpetuation of the clan is effected through the female, it is vital that women get married, produce children and incorporate them into the clan to ensure its continuity. Failure to produce children is a matter of serious concern not only to the woman in question but to the whole family, so much so that barrenness and sterility are valid grounds for divorce’. According to Gurdon (1990) many clans trace their descent from ancestresses, ‘ki kia’ (grandmothers) who are styled ‘ki lawbei Tynrai’ (grandmothers or the root of the tree of the clan). The
descendants of one ancestress of the clan, 'ka lawbei-Tynrai' are called 'shi kur' or one clan. Next in order comes 'ka lawbei-Tymmen' or the great grandmother of a sub-clan or a 'kpoh' (womb), and then comes 'ka lawbei Kynraw', the youngest grandmother, who is the ancestress of the family or 'iing' (house). There is a Khasi saying 'long jaid na ka kynthei' meaning - from the woman sprang the clan. The Khasis when reckoning descent count from the mother's clan. According to Bareh (1985) traditionally a man is 'U Nongda' (protector) and a woman 'Ka Nongri iing' (keeper of the house), the custodian of the family property.

From birth a Khasi belongs to the 'kur' or clan of his or her mother and the stigma of illegitimacy is rarely recognized (Simon, 1991). Khongphai (1974:75) quotes Cantlie "A woman cannot have a child who is illegitimate in the meaning of the word under other systems of law. The child is the heir of its mother, whoever may be the father". He further states that the youngest daughter of a traditional Khasi family is only a custodian of the ancestral property, including heirlooms, as also of the religious duties that go with it. While the eldest daughter may have a share in acquired property, ancestral property is the youngest daughter's by customary usage. The 'Khatchuh', that is, the youngest
daughter, enjoys the privileges of the lion’s share of the property including the residential house of her parents. Her house is called ‘ka iing khatduh’ or the youngest daughter’s house, which has special sanctity; it is the ancestral house of generations of youngest daughters which provide refuge and shelter to the poor members of the family (Lyngdoh, 1991). The youngest daughter cannot dispose off the ancestral house without the unanimous consent of her sisters. If the youngest daughter dies she is succeeded by the next youngest daughter and so on (Gurdon, 1990).

**Traditional Political Institutions:**

The Khasis have distinct traditional political institutions, which have evolved from clan based units into village based units and finally to the apex level of polity evolution, that is, hima or state. According to Nongbri (2003) the Khasis never owed allegiance to a single authority and that it was not till colonialism came on the scene that the society comprised of independent principalities, each under the rule of a syiem (chief). Khasi polity consisted of a three-tier democratic system of governance with dorbar shnongs or village councils at the bottom, raids or communes (which are composed of several federated villages) in the
middle and *dorbar hima* or state council (composed of several federated villages and communes) at the top. The village council looks after the immediate needs of the village and is headed by a village headman (*rangbah shnong*/*tymmen shnong*), the *raid* or commune is headed by a commune representative designated in different communes by various names (*syiem raid*/*lyngdoh raid*/*basan raid* and *bongthai raid*) and the *dorbar hima* or state council is headed by a representative designated in different states (*hima*) by different names, *syiem, lyngdoh, sirdar and wahadadar* (as in the solitary case of the Shella confederacy). In these traditional political institutions and systems of governance, women were not allowed to be members of the councils nor were they even allowed to attend dorbars. Nongbri (2003:241) comments on this aspect –

"Despite the fact that the Khasi society is characterized by the matrilineal system of kinship in which descent, inheritance and residence are focused on the woman, Khasi women have no role at all in the political domain. Not only are women traditionally excluded from politics, the Khasis also make a sharp distinction between the domestic and the politico-jural domains. Both, in structural and functional terms, these domains are clearly demarcated: the former belongs to the sphere of the family and kinship and the latter to the public realm. While men wield
power in both domains, women have been kept fully out of the latter as politics has always been regarded as men’s sole prerogative." The reason that it is a taboo, against tradition and customary practice of the Khasi, that women be allowed to attend dorbar, is still argued by the proponents of these traditional political institutions. Today, there are some localities in Shillong that allow women to attend meetings of the local, village councils and a few also have women as members of these local councils.

Shillong – The Study Area:

Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya is situated in the East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya. It is the home of the Khasis. Shillong is located at 25°34’ North Latitude and 91°53’ East Longitude, the altitude varying between 1400mts to 1900mts above sea level. Prior to British occupation, Shillong existed in the form of a few cluster of scattered hamlets under the jurisdiction of the Syiem of Mylliem. With the separation of Assam from Bengal in 1874 Shillong became the provincial headquarter of Assam. However with the attainment of Statehood of Meghalaya in 1972, Shillong became the capital of the State (Master Plan, 1991-2011).
Shillong is characterized by moderate warm wet summers and cool dry winters, with temperatures ranging between a minimum of 4.8 degrees in January to a maximum of 24.5 degrees in the month of August (Pocket Statistical Hand Book, Meghalaya, 2003).

Shillong has an area of 21.27 sq. km. and comprises of the following urban areas: Mawlai, Nongthymmai, Madanrting, Shillong Municipality, Shillong Cantonment, Pynthorumkhrah and Nongmynsong (District Level Statistics, 2002). These urban areas fall under the Greater Shillong Area. For electoral purposes, the Greater Shillong Area is divided into the following constituencies:

1. 15-Mylliem Constituency
2. 16-Malki-Nongthymmai Constituency
3. 17-Laithumkhrah Constituency
4. 18-Pynthorumkhrah Constituency
5. 19-Jaiaw Constituency
6. 20-Mawkhar Constituency
7. 21-Mawprem Constituency
8. 22-Laban Constituency and
9. 23-Mawlai Constituency.
These constituencies are inhabited by the Khasis, Jaintias, Bengalis, Assamese, Nepalis, Marwaris, Punjabis, Biharis···etc. The voting populace of these constituencies is mixed, especially in the Laban, Pynthorumkhrah and Mawprem constituencies, which have a high percentage of non-tribal voters (Sources: Fieldwork). Besides these groups there are other smaller tribal groups, other than the Khasis, residing in the capital like the Mizos, Nagas, Garos, Bodos and Bhutias (Census of India, 1981).

Today, Shillong is a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic city, a product of over 130 years of development. A few years after Shillong (then a town) was made the Headquarters of British Administration, it became obvious that the population would not be a homogenous one comprising only the Khasi stock. The reason for the cosmopolitan nature of Shillong has been due to settlement of outsiders within Shillong for business enterprises or due to jobs opportunities (Nongrum, 1998).