CHAPTER I

PRE-COLONIAL ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM
Tucked in one corner of India's North-East is the small state of Weghalaya, situated between 25°5" and 26°10" north latitudes and between 97°41" and 98°47" east longitudes, covering an area of 22,547 square kilometres with a population of 13,35819 in 1981,¹ The state is bounded on the north by Goalpara, Kamrup and Nowgong districts of Assam, on the east by Karbi Anglong and North Cachat Hills districts of Assam, on the south by Sylhet and flymensingh districts of Bangladesh and on the west by Flymensingh and Goalpara districts*. The state primarily consists of three ranges of hills, the Garo, Khasi and Daintia Hills, named after the tribes who are its predominant inhabitants, which divides the Brahmaputra and Surma valleys. The Garo Hills forms the western extremity of the Meghalaya plateau, the Daintia Hills its eastern extremity descending into the Mikir and North Cachar Hills and the Khasi Hills form the central and highest portion of the tableland.

Of the three tribes the Khasis and the Daintias have the same origin as they are linguistically and socially linked with the larger group of Mon-Khmers who according to socio-linguists are supposed to have migrated from South-East Asia.² The Garos,

---

on the other hand, are a branch of the Tibeto-Burman Bodos who are believed to have had their original home in Tibet. The Khasis, Daintias and Garos nevertheless, have two common elements, their societies are matrilineal and they ascended to their present hills after temporary settlement in the Brahmaputra valley. The tribes lived in complete political isolation as the mountainous relief of the land with its rugged and precipitous terrain, the unfavourable climate, the linguistic and social variations prevented political union among the three groups while the plainsmen had since time immemorial maintained an attitude of indifference towards these hillmen. The tribes were governed by their own traditional tribal formation until these areas were integrated into the British colonial state in India in the nineteenth century.

The Garo system was a typically tribal formation in which the clan based territorial unit called the Machpng was the unit of social, political and economic life of the tribe. In the Khasi Hills there were many Himas or states under Sylems, Lyngdohs and Uahadadars. The Daintia Hills on the other hand was part of the historic Oaintia kingdom which besides the ZJaintia Hills included vast areas of territory in the Brahmaputra and Surma valleys, and which was a monarchy that had attained considerable maturity in the process of state formation. Some of the Khasi


4. Tradition has it that there were thirty Sylemships in pre-colonial times as is evident from the Khasi term "Ka Ri Laiphew Sylem Khadar Oolloi," or the land of 30 Sylems and 12 Dollojs. It is generally accepted that 12 Dollojs assisted the Oaintia Ra'y in governing the Daintia Hills proper. ND consensus has been reached as to how many Sylemships existed in the Khasi
states such as Cherra, Nongstoi and Sheila in the south and Rylliem in the north also extended to the plains. The Garo, Khasi and 3aintia territories thus bordered with the Mughal Subha of Bengal on the one side and the Ahora state on the other. 3aintia on the east further bordered with another well known medieval state of Heramba or Cachar which at that time included, besides Cachar and North Cachar Hill, parts of Nougong district of present Assam.

To understand the traditional administration and political organization of the Garos, it is necessary to refer to the lineage structure of the society. Every Garo is a member of one of five exogamous matrilineal phratries which is further divided into a number of sibs. The Garo household or flahari recognizes one superior Wahari from which they trace lineage, in that all the other households of the lineage are believed to have branched out from it when the non-heiress daughters left to marry. A Plahari is, therefore, a household organization whose members trace their blood relationship within the same Machong or kin group. Several Maharis are under the administration of a Nokroa or headman who is the husband of the inheritress of the oldest family in the Machong. The Nokma is, therefore, the headman while his wife is the custodian of the Machong. Since

Hills prior to British administration. Both H.Bareh and R.S. Lyngdoh, two leading Khasi historians have each enumerated 30 states but one finds that the names of these states do not tally. One tends to accept the view of S.G.Duncan who said that *Laiphew,' 30, should not be taken literally. The word could denote - many. R.T.Rymbai, Report of the Land Reforms Commission for Khasi Hills, pp.58-59, 97.
succession to No kmaship is from father-in-lau to youngest son-in-lau, the office was retained by a particular family of the flachong, more particularly since the Nokma looked to a young nephew to become his son-in-lau.

The Nokma assumed socio-political authority over the nachong. His office commanded authority as he was the temporal and spiritual head of the kin group, but with it came the expenses he was expected to bear for the sacrifices he performed. As a ceremonial leader he performed sacrifices and recited incantations to pray for good crops and the prosperity of the village. Such being his position, the Nokma was usually a wealthy person in terms of land, cattle and heirloom. He was the custodian of the Akhing or ancestral land in the Mahari, and where disputes arose within the Flahari, he was responsible for passing judgement. As a village headman he was also responsible for protecting the village population and property from external interference. Since it was virtually impossible for one individual to manage the affairs of a clan, the Nokma was assisted by two councils, the dela-Solbonqa and the Jigma-Changqa. All male adults from the Waharis within the Nachong comprised the former which settled inter-Flahari disputes, executed administration, distributed lands, fixed dates for festivals and decided any other matter relating to the Nachong. In an egalitarian society this assembly must have had a tremendous influence over the flachdng. For questions of war and peace decision was taken by all

male members of the Akhing in the Jioma-Chanooa which must have met frequently in an age of inter-clan feuds and raids.

It appears that the traditional Nokmaship could not develop as a definite institution and could not qualify to be recognized as chief simply from the fact that the Nbkma was a resident in the Machong, his authority being derived from his wife, and the need of the society to have a headman. Sovereignty was with the people for every flachong functioned as a cohesive social and political unit under the Nokma and the assemblies. The customs and usages that had developed through the centuries formed an elaborate and intricate code of law which met the social and political needs of the community. There was no effective social or territorial organization beyond the flachong and no political authority above the Nokma. 7

The basic unit of political organization in the Khasi-Daintia society was the village which comprised of one or more local descent groups. Village administration was by an assembly of all resident adult males under an informal headman elected by them from among their number. When new villages were formed the new community did not detach themselves from the original village but remained an integral part of the growing state or Hima. Administrative and political necessity led to the establishment of tribal leadership in the Basan and Lyngdoh. 8 The Basan was entrusted the conduct of the clan which had taken possession of land, the Lyngdoh was given both administrative and sacerdotal functions. Under them they had Pators, Sangofcs and Watebors who

7 « Ibid, PP. 17-18
8 H.Bareh, The History and Culture of the Khasi Pwani, p.49.
assisted in administration of the village and Raid, which comprised a number of villages. This rudimentary stage of stake formation evolved into the institution of Syiemship, which probably arose out of voluntary association of villages when new developments such as the opening of markets, execution of marriage laws, organization of land tenure and judicial administration brought in the need for a central and common ruler. The Basans and Lynqdohs who surrendered their powers as rulers, however, did not forfeit all their powers, as they and the founding clans, the Bakhraw retained some of their administrative and religious functions and even had a hand in the election of Syiems. Succession to Syiemship was uniform in all Himas, except Khyrim where the Syiem Sad's, the High Priestess* male relatives only are eligible for the office. Elsewhere succession passed to the eldest of the surviving uterine brothers, failing such brothers, by the eldest of his sister's sons; failing such nephews, by the eldest of the sons of his sister's daughters. There was provision for succession rights to go down to grand nephews, and in the absence of any male heirs the Syiem would be succeeded by his eldest uterine sister who in turn would be succeeded by her eldest son. The method of election of Syiems differed from state to state. There being usually more than one candidate, an electoral Durbar consisting of Lynqdohs, Basans, Bakhraws and Lynqskors exercised authority to elect or reject candidates. Syiemship was not hereditary in the ordinary sense of the word.

9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., pp.50-52
but elective, and not necessarily from one family branch of the Syiem family.

The Syiem was the head of the executive machinery of the state. He ruled over the subjects of the state and his powers were limited for in the evolution of Syiemship precaution was taken not to allow Syjems from becoming autocratic rulers. He functioned as a priest though not necessarily meaning that he was a priest, he had the power to try cases and pass sentences with the consultation of the assembly or Durbar. His was the highest court in the state. He presided over the Durbar Hlma or assembly of people and over the Durbar Flyntri or council of ministers and on their direction imposed fines, which was almost universal as a punishment, imprison offenders, collected the material wealth of a citizen of the state whose lineage had become extinct, and performed the cremation rites of those who had died without relatives. Land belonged not to the Syiem but to the clan and therefore no land revenue was collected from the subjects, though the Syiem was allotted a portion of Ri, Raid or public land. He was entitled to receive the income that arose from fines in settling cases. The principal source of income in all the Khasi states was the toll which was collected from those who opened markets in the state. Certain states in the Khasi Hills had as their leaders Lyngdohs and Uahadadars who functioned in ways similar to that of the SyJs.

The highest decision making bodies in the political and administrative set-up among the Khasis were the Durbars. There is no written law about the functions, composition and working of the Durbars, for they work according to Ka Riti.

12. P.R.T.Gurdon, op.cit.: pp.67-68
constitution which has grown out of past usages and practices. Every stage of administration from the village to the state has its own Durbar. The Khasi Durbar even today is a solemn affair. There is no walking out of a Durbar. Decisions are unanimous. Should there be a disagreement the issue is dropped.

The Daintia kingdom had a three tier system of Government, more often called Rajas, as they had converted to Hinduism, nominally ruled over the state. Succession was hereditary, passing from uncle to nephew. The Rajas left the administration of the hill territory to twelve Dollois, while they resided in their capital Daintiapur in the Sylhet plains. In pre-colonial times the Dollois were obliged to remain in attendance for about six months in the year on the Daintia Raja at Daintiapur and Pators were appointed to act as their deputies during their absence. The only symbol of their allegiance to the Raja was an annual he goat from each of the villages under their administration which was mere symbolic. The Dolloi was elected by the people within their respective Raid, and similar with the Khasi election of tribal leaders, only certain clans could elect the Dolloi. His jurisdiction was in all matters of administration with responsibility to the people in the Durbar Raid. The third tier of administration was the village under a village headman or Waheh Chnong.

The process of state formation was, therefore, in a very primitive stage in the Garo Hills and progressively more established in certain of the Khasi states ruled by Syiem. whereas the Hindu Daintia Raj had all the prerequisites of a well developed state. The three areas were not much influenced and remained aloof from the changing political constellations of Bengal and Assam. Only the Oaintia state had some influences from Bengal and Assam but these influences did not particularly affect the hill region where the traditional pattern of administration remained untouched. These societies were by and large able to live in isolation and retain their traditional way of life from the close ties that religion had on their socio-political life which in turn strengthened their traditional leadership. This primitive stage of polity formation was further due to the technological and agricultural backwardness of the areas. The alternative to this was to indulge in trade with the neighbouring plains to exchange their surplus produce to balance the deficit. The bulk of this trade was with Bengal due to geographical proximity.

The Garos were by and large an agricultural people. The rugged terrain of the land and the plentiful rainfall made the hills suitable only for jhum cultivation. Agriculture was, therefore, unscientific and unproductive. The crops that were grown were dry rice supplemented by millet and to a lesser extent by maize, manioc, squash, large pod beans, bananas, papaya and gourds. The Garos could not produce their requirement of food crops. Cotton may be considered their staple product, 16

and on it they were dependant for the other necessities of life
their hills did not yield. The vast mineral resources of coal,
lime, clay and timber were not exploited. The Garos had thus to
resort to the hats or markets in the plains to exchange their
produce for other necessities of commodities and foodstuff.
Money was but little used amongst them. All transactions were by
barter. Of the exports the more important was cotton which
the Garos carried down to the hats and bartered to Bengali
traders for rice, cattle, pigs, goats, salt, cotton cloth,
ornaments, brass work and weapons. Another export, though not
for the market was aour wood which was bought by the Choudhurys
in the plains and sent as revenue to Murshidabad from where it
was sent to Delhi as tribute. The trade of the Garos was
carried on at the hats of Bengal Khatar, Rajaballa and Pootemaree
in Goalpara, and Burradouarrah, Cote Aughar and Ramaingpore in
Mymensingh.

The Khasis were a pastoral people rearing cattle, goats
and poultry. In the higher hills, particularly on the northern
slopes, agriculture was by .humming. The chief crops were rice,

17. C.S.Reynolds, 'A narrative of our connexions with the
Ousanee and Cheannee Garrous, with a short account of their
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. B.R.P., 30 September 1789, No.27.
22. B.R.P., 30 September 1789, No.27.
24. B.R.P., 30 September 1789, to.27.
maize, yam and kuchoo. The Siangtias having more plain lands used the plough and terraced land for wet rice cultivation and were self sufficient in food crops. The Khasis had therefore to depend on the Sylhet plains for their rice. Though they owned certain tracts of land in the Sylhet plains the "Cosseah never cultivates the soil. She employs Bengallee ryots, he comes down at the time of harvest and carries off the produce." Fruits grew extremely well on the southern slopes of the hills. The Sylhet oranges, which really came from the Khasi Hills "have long been famous throughout India," while the Khasi pineapple was far superior to any grown in Bengal. The hemp of the pineapple was used by the Khasis for the net pouches in which they carried their tobacco, betel nut and pan. The limes were excellent and they likewise grew the betel nut, pan leaf, tezpat leaf and pepper, all of which was exported except the last item. Trees of Indian rubber grew wild, but there is no indication that its sap was used.

29. T.C.Uatson, op.cit., p.28.
31. Ibid.
The southern fringe of the hills has vast deposits of coal, limestone and iron ore. Despite the relatively easy manner of extracting the surface coal, there is no reference to its exportation to Bengal till the colonial period, though it might have been used for the smelting of iron. Of the limestone deposits and trade Robert Lindsay, Collector of Sylhet wrote:

the only great staple and ready article of commerce is chunam, or lime, In no part of Bengal, or even Hindostan, is the rock found so perfectly pure, so free of alloy, as in this province, therefore Calcutta is chiefly supplied from hence.\textsuperscript{32}

Iron of a very superior quality was brought down from the hills in lumps of adhesive sand and

being put into the forge, produces excellent malleable iron without ever undergoing the process of fusion, the hammer and fire discharging the dross and coarser particles at once, thus producing what is called virgin iron, superior to any made in Europe by charcoal.\textsuperscript{33}

The only money transactions were kattra rupee in the Daintia state\textsuperscript{34} and the cowries in circulation in Sylhet.\textsuperscript{35} These crude money could have not been used extensively as the mode of transaction was by barter. The principal imports were rice, fish, cotton, silk cloth and salt.\textsuperscript{36}

Under Mughul and Ahom rule the plains areas surrounding these hills were exposed to all the inconveniences of adjusting

\textsuperscript{32} Lord Lindsay, \textit{Lives of the Lindsays}, p.176.; 'Chirra Punji', \textit{op.cit.}, p.20.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., p.174.
\textsuperscript{34} U.Robinson, \textit{A Descriptive Account of Assam}, p.251.
\textsuperscript{35} Lord Lindsay, \textit{op.cit.}, p.175.
\textsuperscript{36} U.Robinson, \textit{op.cit.}, p.412.
to societies which could not be brought under their control. Inroads were frequent, particularly towards the latter years of their rule. The Ahoms pursued a policy of non-interference towards the Khasi Syiems, even granting certain of them the Nauduar - the nine passes on the foothills adjoining Assam to be administered by the Syiems under nominal allegiance to the Ahom monarch. 37 Vast tracts of land was likewise taken control in the Sylhet plains. 38 The frontier Garos who also made occasional raids into Coalpara and flymensingh were kept in check by the armed barkandaz of the frontier Choudhurys. 39 These disturbances were occasioned not from the desire to extend their territory to the plains, but to have access to the country from where their essential commodities could be procurred.

Such was the socio-economic, political and administrative condition in the areas under study in the pre-colonial period. In an area where the people were not united by strong ties of state, where the political structure was primitive and backward and which was rich in natural resources and crfcps, the East India Company found every opportunity to first exploit the economic resources followed by the imposition of their rule.