ABSTRACT

The social and political isolation, which the Khasis had maintained for centuries past, was hardly disturbed by the subtle influences of the people of the neighbouring plains, with whom the Khasis had commercial dealings. This gentle breeze of change blown from across the tribal borders, did not have enough force to introduce any dynamic change in the Khasi society. Acquisition of the Diwan of Bengal in 1765 by the British East India Company, introduced the Khasi to the British, and brought to light the lucrative lime trade between the natives of the plains and the tribes of the Khasi Hills, which the British did not loose time in taking over. This active interest in trade with the Khasis, and the need of a direct road through the hills to connect Sylhet and Assam, led the British to gradually annex the Khasi Hills in 1833. By exploiting the internecine strifes among the Khasi chiefs and by subjecting the chiefs to treaties, engagements and surnads, the British consolidated their hold on the Khasi Hills. However, inspite of the annexation, the Khasi states and tribal courts were retained and allowed to function in their
original set up, as the policy of the government was not to interfere with the tribal way of life. In fact the power and status of the Khasi chiefs were greatly raised by the British in the estimation of the people, but at the same time, their traditional status underwent transformation to the extent that they executed their function on behalf of the British power. Tribal courts too gave way to government courts of law.

It is to be noted however, that British rule was only interested in introducing changes which were imperative to their administrative needs alone. These were minor political adjustments for the smooth run of the administration, but which no doubt interfered with the traditional customs and way of life of the Khasis. The introduction of the election system, land revenue system, Pattah system, levying of other taxes and police force, were alien to the traditional Khasi society. The British government, in its quest for improvement and profit, further encroached into the traditional Khasi way of life. By making Shillong its headquarter in 1874, and by improving communication, agriculture, markets, trade and commerce, the British set the process of urbanisation rolling. And with urbanisation, Khasi
isolation was shattered as the influx of outsiders laid the Khasi society open to the influence of various religions and cultures. Yet all these changes that owe their origins to the British administration, could not by themselves produce that required force and strength to transform the Khasi society. But the British rule had also brought in its train, the western missionaries, who in their zeal and devotion to improve the living condition of the people and to draw them to their own religious faith, had made valuable contributions towards the social and moral uplift of the people. They were indeed the true instruments of social changes in the Khasi Hills. By presenting to the Khasis, the gift of a script, which they can claim to be their own, and by opening schools for formal and informal education, they sowed the seeds of civilization firmly in the Khasi soil. And by opening hospitals and extending general medical aid, they contributed greatly to the general health betterment of the Khasis. The fruits of this seed of civilization which they sowed, can be seen in the rapid growth of literature and educated people among the Khasis.

Initially, the Khasis, particularly the converts took a fancy in the western mode of life, and in their efforts to imitate it, they abandoned or changed their
own, which affected every ethos of Khasi social life. But before long, a section of the Khasi intellectuals began to inspire the people with intense pride in their culture, which ushered in an era of revitalism. Their efforts succeeded in preserving the main tenets of traditional Khasi life with the result that tradition and modernity came to co-exist in the emerging Khasi society.