Very little is known about the ancient history of the Khasis. The inadequacy or paucity of historical writings of Khasi and Jaintia Hills or any of the hill tribes of North East India, serves to be a great handicap to every student of history. As a result of racial or ethnological differences, the hill tribes were forced to occupy the hills as a refuge from well-equipped invaders and the hillmen rarely ceased to harry the plains.¹ The Khasi Chiefs, it is said, held the lands situated at the foot of their own hills both in the Assam and the Surma Valleys paying homage to the Koch and Ahom Kings who ruled the Assam Valley, when the latter were strong and throwing off their allegiance when they were weak. The first reference to them in the records of other states occurs about the middle of the 16th century in the annals of the Koch King, Nar Narayan. The two most prominent chiefs at that time were the Syiens of Jaintia and Khyrim.² Silarai, the brother of Nar Narayan is alleged to have defeated and

¹ Huttom, J.H. : Memorandum to the Indian Statutory Commission 1928.
² Lyngdoh, H : Ki Syiem Khasi bad Syteng - pp.63-64 and p.91.
Slain the Jaintia Raja. The Raja of Khyrim, profiting by his example, submitted and undertook to pay an annual tribute. The most important war between the Jaintias and the Ahoms broke out in December 1707. A big Ahom Army starting from Jagi on the Nowgong border, crushed all opposition and marched through the Jaintia Hills upon Jaintiapur. In the meanwhile, another Ahom Army proceeding by another route along the Kopili Valley and the Kachari country took the Jaintia Raja prisoner and captured Jaintiapur. This was the first time that foreign troops traversed these hills. The subsequent measures of the Ahoms, especially the annexation of their country and the carrying off of their Raja as a captive through their own hills, so greatly irritated the Jaintia people that they made common cause with the Siem of Khyrim and the people of 200 independent Khasi villages and butchered the Ahom Garrisons left in the hills. The Ahoms nevertheless succeeded in carrying off the Jaintia Syiem but the Jaintias regained their independence.

Speaking of the Anglo-Khasi relations we can refer to an Imperial Firman granted by the Nawab to the English Company which gave them the right of trading in Bengal and the Diwani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa which was granted by the Emperor to the Company on 12th August 1765, also ushered in the first Anglo-Khasi relations.

3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
With this introduction of such a relationship, the Khasis seemed to have come into contact not only with the East India Company but with the people of Sylhet as well. The Khasis seemed to have lived in a state of intermittent warfare with the local people of Sylhet and according to the British, the Khasis posed to be the worst offenders against the good order and peace of Sylhet when it came under the British in 1765. The Company also opined that the Khasis secured in their mountain retreats, they ravaged with fire and sword the fertile plains at the foot of their hills with impunity. Night was the time almost invariably chosen for these murderous assaults when neither age or sex was spared; and long before the dawn of day, the perpetrators, glutted with slaughter and loaded with plunder, were again far among the fastnesses of their mountains on their way home. To the British, the Khasis are known accordingly as "truculent and blood thirsty Khasis" and "fierce marauders".

When the East India Company first came into contact with the Khasis, they lost no time in realising the rich mineral potentialities and other items of trade that Kasi and Jaintia Hills could provide. They possessed lime-quarries which could be supplied to the whole of Bengal. Besides, there was trade in iron, silk, wax, honey, ivory and other items of trade.5

Important article of export is the famous Khasi orange which appears to be indigenous in these hills. Sir George Birdwood refers to it as having been carried by Arab traders into Syria, "whence the crusaders helped to gradually propagate it throughout Southern Europe". According to local sources available, the East India Company very much wished to penetrate these hills, as there was ample opportunity for wealth, even at the point of bayonet. The company was completely ignorant of the bad and unhealthy trade relationship between the Khasis and the local people of Sylhet and blamed the Khasis for all the discrepancies that ensued.

But in fact, as a British Missionary remarked in 1813 -

"The real Khasis possessed two characteristic virtues, viz. truth and honesty. They are, however, very revengeful and seldom forget injuries."\(^6\)

Being honest and straightforward, the Khasis could not come to any compromising attitude with the underhand means of the local people of Sylhet. Most of the time, the Khasi traders had no other alternative but to succumb to the cunningness of the Sylhet traders. Added to this, the Raja of Jaintia according to the British, was one of the most lawless and troublesome of them all. He injured the Company's trade by obstructing the Company's boats in their passage down the Surma, exacting tolls, looting their contents and causing them

\(^6\) Ibid.
endless delay and annoyance and further raided the revenue paying lands of the company. Accordingly in March 1772, the company sent a small expedition to Jaintiapur, the capital of Sutnga in those days, as a warning to the Khasis for their raids and plunders. As a retaliation, the Khasi traders plundered all English boats on the Surma Valley laden with merchandise. In 1774, a punitive expedition was sent under Major Henniker and the struggle was however localised in Jaintiapur. Pemberton, however, attributed the spark of the conflict to some aggressions against the inhabitants of the adjacent plains of Sylhet which had rendered the chastisement necessary. Captain Henniker defeated the Raja and took Jaintiapur. The country was, however, restored to Chettra Singh, Syiem of Sutnga on payment of a war indemnity of Rs. 15,000 and guarantees being given that there would be no further interference in any respect with whatever might concern the company. This was the first time that the Khasis came into collision with the British. The outcome of this invasion is important in as much as it led to the survey and demarcation of the boundaries between Sylhet and Sutnga State. But this work was done entirely by the officials of the East India Company at their own discretion without having the courtesy of consulting the Syiem of Sutnga.

9. Ibid.
result of this, the Company had frontier troubles with the Khasis when Lindsay leased some lime quarries about 1779. In 1783, the Khasis of Shella attacked Pandua to avenge an insult offered to one of them by a Havildar of Lindsay, the collector. Much blood was shed. The servants of Lindsay were killed and his lime kilns were destroyed. The prisoners taken, were killed and scalped.

In 1817, another incident occurred regarding the lease of limestone by the Syiem of Langrin to Inglis and Company at an area called Lour which is situated between Boglee Churrah on the west and Punatit on the east for a term of ten years.

In June 1821, a dispute occurred when the Syiem of Nongstoin (probably Rangnch Syiem) who had feats of courage and wit to extend the boundaries of his kingdom disputed and questioned the authority and sovereign right of the Langrin Syiem over the quarries and began to quarrel with the Company of Inglis. In September of that year the Khasi traders raided the area and carried off seven men of the Company. The Agent of the Nongstoin Syiem brought a letter from the Syiem, a copy

11. (a) Ibid - pp 122-123.
   (b) Volume of letters received from Misc. Officers - 1820-28.
of which was handed over to Inglis, the lime merchant. The Nongstoin Chief afterwards intrigued and granted a lease to a French businessman, Refauchy, suspending Inglis from the area of work. The matter was however reported to the East India Company at Sylhet to help him restore the quarries leased to him by the Sylhet of Langrin but it seems the Company did not interfere.13 It is to be noted that the relations between the Khasis and the East India Company continued till 1821, when the Company detected some emissaries sent by the State of Sutnga to carry off certain British subjects from the Sylhet district for the purpose of immolating them, the circumstances were brought to the notice of the Supreme Government and a warning was given to the Jaintia Raja that any repetition of such atrocious acts would be followed by the immediate confiscation of his territory.14

Viewed from another angle, the need for postal service across the hills from Sylhet to Assam engaged the attention of David Scott to fish the friendship of the Khasis in 1820's. The Company was also impressed with "the cool and salubrious climate of these hills." In the meantime, the third Burmese invasion of the North Eastern India thwarted the safety of the Sutnga State,

13. Ibid.
with the imminent war at hand. When the Burmese garrisons had gained ground in Jaintia, David Scott managed to bring Sutnga state within the ambit of the Company's power by a stroke of diplomacy. David Scott entered into an agreement with the Jaintia Raja on March 10th 1824 by which Ram Singh acknowledged allegiance to the Company and promised to aid in the military operations then commenced against the Burmese in Assam. He was promised the assistance of the Government troops, if his own resources were actively employed in repulsing the enemy, and threatened with punishment if he admitted the Burmese into his territory. In the same year, David Scott marched from Sylhet into the Brahmaputra Valley across the Jaintia Hills. This is the second time that foreign troops traversed through the hills. The Syiem of Sutnga also agreed to allow the construction of a road through the State, that is from Jaintiapur to Nowgong. David Scott had the fortune of travelling on this road. Apart from bringing the Khasis under the Company through military strength, David Scott also planned an economic blockade, that is to exclude the Khasi traders from the frontier markets to which they habitually resorted for the sale of their produce and purchase of grain. This hit the

15. Aitchison, C.U. : Treaties, Engagements and Treaties relating to India and neighbouring countries - Vol. XXIII.
Khasi traders and thus brought the "fierce marauders" as the British called them into immediate contact with a super power which they in vain attempted to resist.\textsuperscript{18}

Thus after the cession of the Brahmaputra valley to the British by the Treaty of Yandeboo (24th February 1826) the question of linking up the two valleys by a road across the hills engaged the serious attention of the authorities. With the end of the Burmese inroad and incursion into Jaintia, it ultimately led to the real starting point of the establishment of British supremacy and paramouncy in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills.

\textsuperscript{18} Pemberton, P.B. » Report in the Eastern Frontier of British India, p.230.