The Village Council.

It is difficult to give a detailed account of the workings of the Village Council in pre-British and British times, as all the accounts left by the British writers did not throw much light on this aspect of the Garo life. John Eliot, the Commissioner of Dacca, writing about the social and political life of the Garos mentioned in 1789 "When anything particular is to be settled, they all assemble in their war dress ... , they sit in a circle, their swords fixed in the ground before them. Their resolutions are put into immediate execution if they relate to war; if to other matters, they feast, sing, dance and get drunk". The other person who threw light on this line was Francis Hamilton who wrote "The Chiefs known as Nokmas and the headmen of families assemble in a Council ....... Although every head of a family has an equal right to sit in their assemblies, the influence of the Chiefs, or of one or two wisemen usually decides everything". Except such stray references, the actual workings of the Village Council are found wanting.

The reason for this glaring omission on the part of the writers, was perhaps due to the fact that the Garos did not have any regular agency for village administrations. Neither did they have any name for that agency in their language. Therefore, it could not draw the attention of the early British writers.

However, this lack of source-materials can be compensated by deducing from the surviving elements of village polity. The

prevailing system of village administration reveals to us that the traditional Garo social system could never permit political power to concentrate in the hands of one person or a particular class of persons. On the other hand, they clearly revealed that the Garos practised democratic principles in their village administrations.

All quarrels and complaints were settled by convening the meeting of the elders of the village. Whenever necessary, local enquiries and examination of witnesses were conducted by them. The decisions were arrived at by majority opinions of the members present as well as by long established customs. These decisions were final and binding. There was no question of appeal to the higher courts as there was none.

Besides the settlement of disputes, other problems affecting the common life of the Garos were also decided at the assembly of the village elders. The allotment of plots for jhumming for every family, the regulation of jhumming, fixation of days for sacrificial offerings for vigour of crops and prosperity of their village, dates for annual socio-religious festivals, the cutting or repairing of paths, construction of bridges, and other matters of common interests were all settled at the assembly of the elders of the village. Usually these meetings were summoned by the A'king Nokma. But the Nokma himself acted only as an intermediary.

Thus, though the village council was not an active and regular machinery in running the village administration, since every village is an independent political unit, they used to manage all its affairs.
The British period witnessed an imposition of external political control over these tiny democratic villages resembling the ancient republican states in India. The British Government, being actuated with a desire to have effective control over these villages and to facilitate the collection of revenues, introduced the Office of the Laskar with limited police, Civil and Criminal powers. Accordingly, there was to be a Laskar over a circle of villages, each circle covering twelve or more villages. Therefore, though the villages concerned were left to decide their problems of common interests by mutual agreement, the right to appeal to the court of the Laskar from the decision of the Nokma or the Village Council, could be looked upon as a usurpation of their powers.

Likewise, the introduction of the Offices of the Sardar, the Mauzadar and the Mandal could be regarded as an infringement on the rights and authorities of the Nokmas and the Village Councils.
The autonomous District Council was granted to the Caros in order to enable them to manage their own affairs according to their established customs and traditions. Therefore, the Garo Hills District Council passed the Constitution of Village Council Act in 1956 in order to establish and develop local-self government in the rural areas and to make better provisions for rural administration, reconstruction and development as self-sufficient units.

Constitution of Village Councils: A Village Council has been constituted for each village or group of villages. According to the Village Council Rules, 1971, 50 Village Councils in the hill mauzas and 12 Village Councils in the plain mauzas of the Garo Hills District will be constituted.

Composition of Village Councils: The Village Council for each village or group of villages shall consist of not less than six and not more than ten members, half of whom shall be nominated by the Executive Committee, and the other half, elected on the basis of adult suffrage. The Laskar of the elaka or circle of villages shall be ex-officio member of the village Council.

Duration of Village Council: The duration of Village Councils shall be for five years unless they are dissolved earlier. The Executive Committee, however, can extend the tenure by one more year. All the members whether nominated or elected shall hold office for a period of five years.

4. Ibid. P.104.
6. Ibid.
Office Staff of Village Council: There shall be a President and a Secretary for each Village Council. The President shall be overall in charge of the office. He will be elected from among the members. The Secretary shall be appointed by the Executive Committee.

The duties of the Secretary shall be -
1. to take over charge of and maintain all records of the Village Council;
2. to keep a list of business and place before the Village Council;
3. to write and despatch all letters as the President may direct,
4. to be in-charge of the stores and furniture of the Village Council Office.

Control of the Village Councils: The District Council Executive Committee has the right to make rules with regard to the -
(i) delimitations of territorial constituencies for the purpose of elections to the Village Councils;
(ii) laying down the qualifications for being elected and the preparation of electoral rolls;
(iii) laying down the qualification for voting;
(iv) the term of office of the members;
(v) any other matter relating to or connected with the elections or nominations;
(vi) the procedure and the conduct of business of the District Village Councils, and
(vii) the appointment of Staff of the Village councils.

Besides, the Executive Committee or any Officer appointed by the Executive Committee shall have power of inspection, supervision and control over the performance of the Village councils and to check any accounts of any Village council.

10. The Garo Hills District Council, acts, Rules, etc., P.185.
11. Ibid. P.188.
The following are the duties and functions of the Village Councils:

(1) Cleaning and lighting of village roads and paths;
(2) sanitation and conservancy of the village areas and prevention of public nuisance therein;
(3) construction, maintenance and improvement of public wells and tanks for the supply of water to the public;
(4) the taking of preventive measures in case of epidemic;
(5) the opening and regulation of burial and cremation grounds and regulating places for disposal of dead animals;
(6) construction and maintenance of places for the storage of cow-dung and other manures;
(7) maintenance of records relating to population census, cattle census, spinning wheel and handloom census; census of unemployed persons and landless persons and persons having no economic holdings and other statistics as may be prescribed;
(8) construction, maintenance and improvement of village communications, drains and water-ways;
(9) control of village grazing grounds, the location of bathans within the village, village common and other communal property;
(10) the relief of the poor, of the sick, or victims of famine, flood and other calamity;
(11) regulating the places of slaughter of animals;
(12) controlling and maintenance of buildings, institutions or property belonging to or vested in them or which may be transferred to them for management;
(13) regulating the construction of new buildings or houses or the extension or alteration of any such existing ones;
(14) Primary Education;
(15) opening and regulating co-operative societies and model villages;

(16) anti-malarial and anti-kala-azar measures and enforcement of vaccination;

(17) registration of births and deaths and maintenance of registers;

(18) promotion and encouragement of cottage industries and improvement of agriculture and agricultural stock and maintenance of model farms;

(19) prevention of cattle mortality and improvement of breeding;

(20) maternity and child welfare;

(21) supply of local information as required to the District Council or the State government or any other authority;

(22) anything necessary for the preservation of public health and for improving the sanitation;

(23) planting and maintaining trees at the sites of public places and village roads and paths;

(24) establishment of public radio sets for the benefit of the village population;

(25) construction and maintenance of rest-houses;

(26) establishment and maintenance of libraries, reading rooms, social and cultural clubs and games;

(27) encouragement of indigenous sports, folk-dances and music;

(28) destruction of stray dogs;

(29) disposal of unclaimed cattle;

(30) removal of encroachments on village roads, public places and property vested in the village councils, and

(31) any other functions and powers as may be delegated by the District Council from time to time.
Taxation power of the Village Councils.

The Village Councils shall have power to levy and collect all or any of the following taxes within its area -

1. taxes for the maintenance of village primary schools;
2. taxes for the maintenance of roads, bridges and paths constructed and maintained by it;
3. taxes for the maintenance of village rest-houses constructed by it;
4. taxes for the maintenance of public wells and tanks and other sources of water supply constructed and maintained by it;
5. lighting tax for lighting village roads and paths;
6. taxes for conducting anti-malarial services and other schemes of social service for the improvement of public health and sanitation in the village.

The Village Council, however, shall not be competent to levy and collect any of the taxes mentioned above without the prior approval of the Executive Committee.

Dissolution of Village Councils.

If the Village Council is not working in accordance with the rules and regulations framed for them, the Executive Committee can dissolve them at any time for a period not exceeding six months. On its dissolution, all the members shall have to vacate their office and all the properties and any balance of the fund of the village council, shall be transferred to the District Council and the Executive Committee shall make such arrangement as may be necessary till it is reconstituted.

Village administration Fund.

The Village administration fund shall be established and maintained by the District Council in order to meet the expenses in running the administration of the village councils. The sources of this fund shall be such contributions from the District Council, State government and the Central government and other sources as may be made by them.

The other sources of income of this fund will be the revenues accrued from the cattle pounds, ferries, local rates, temporary residential tolls, carts, cycles and boat tax and other vehicle taxes.

Vacation of Seats.

(1) If a person is elected to more than one seat in the village council, then within 21 days from the publication in the Gazette, such elected member will have to resign all but one of the seats. After he resigned, except one seat, the rest shall become vacant. Such a vacancy or vacancies shall be notified by the Executive Committee in the Gazette and fresh election shall be held to fill up the vacancy.

(2) If a member of any village council resigns his seat by writing to the Executive Committee through the President, his seat shall become vacant.

(3) If for a period of 30 days a member of the village Council is absent without the permission of the village council for three from three consecutive meetings, the Executive Committee may declare his seat as vacant.

A person shall not be qualified to be elected as member of a Village Council unless he -

(1) is a citizen of India;
(2) is not less than 25 years of age, and
(3) is entitled to vote at the election of member in any consti­tuency of that Village Council.

A person shall be disqualified from being elected and for being a member of any Village Council if -

(1) he is a salaried servant of the government of India or any State government or is an employee of the district Council or any local authority;
(2) he is of unsound mind and stands so declared by a competent court;
(3) he is an undischarged insolvent;
(4) he is not a citizen of India or has voluntarily acquired the citizenship of a foreign state;
(5) whether before or after the commencement of these rules he has been convicted by court in India of any offence and sentenced to transportation or to imprisonment for not less than two years, unless a period of 5 years has elapsed since his release;
(6) having held any office under any government or Council, he has whether before or after the commencement of these rules, been dismissed for corruptions or disloyalty to the State, unless a period of five years has elapsed since his dismissal.
Oath-taking of members: Every member of the Village Council shall before taking his seat and subscribe before the Officer appointed by the Executive Committee, an Oath or affirmation be administered according to the form set out for the purpose.

Convening of the meeting: The following procedure shall be followed:

(1) The meeting of the Village Council shall be called by the President and shall be held in the Village Council Office.

(2) An ordinary meeting of the Village Council shall be held once in every three months.

(3) Notice shall be sent to the members at least 15 days before the date fixed for the meeting of the Village Council and the nature of the business to be transacted in the meeting shall be described in the notice.

(4) The President may at any time, or shall upon a requisition in writing of not less than one-third of the members of the District Council or under the direction of the Executive Committee call a special meeting. Notice shall be sent at least 7 days before the date fixed for such special meeting in which the nature of business to be transacted shall be described.

(5) Every meeting shall be presided over by the President and in his absence, by the Vice-President, and if both are absent, by a member nominated by the President.

Quorum and Voting: (1) For any meeting of the Village Council, one-third of the total number of members shall form the quorum and the decision of the majority at a meeting shall be binding in all matters. The President of the meeting shall not be entitled to vote but he will have a casting vote. For the pur-
Pose of quorum, ex-officio members shall not be counted.

(2) The voting shall be by show of hands, except in case of election or no-confidence motion when voting shall be by secret ballot.

(3) For want of quorum, a meeting shall be adjourned to a future date appointed by the President and 48 hours notice of such meeting shall be given.

Language of the Village Council: The business of the Village Council shall be transacted in the language of the region or any recognised language of the State, but if any member desires to address the Village Council in language not intelligible to the majority of the members, he may with the permission of the President do so but shall have to make over in advance to the Secretary a copy of his speech translated in English.

Proceedings of the meeting.

(1) Minutes of proceedings of every meeting shall be recorded in the language of the region at the time of the meeting in a book and shall be signed by the President of the meeting.

(2) The Village Council Secretary shall send the copies of the proceedings of all meetings of the Village Council to the Executive Committee and the members of the Village Council within 15 days of such meeting.

Execution of resolutions.

Resolutions of the Village Council shall be carried out by the President who is the Executive Officer of the Village Council.
Speech in the meeting.

(1) A member shall rise when he speaks and shall address the President of the meeting.

(2) The matter of every speech shall be strictly relevant to the subject under discussion before the Village Council.

(3) A member while speaking shall not:
   (i) reflect upon the conduct of the President of India or the Governor of any State or any court of Law;
   (ii) utter treasonable or seditious words;
   (iii) use offensive expressions regarding the Parliament or any State Legislature or the District Council;
   (iv) refer to any matter of fact on which a judicial decision is pending;
   (v) make personal charge against the President or another member; and
   (vi) make ironical expression or defamatory statement.

Discussion on motions.

After the members who moves any motion has spoken, the President of the meeting shall read out the motion to the Council after which other members may speak on the motion in such order as the President may direct.

President to maintain orders in the meeting.

(1) The President of the meeting shall decide all points of order which may arise and his decision shall be final;

(2) any member may, at any time, submit a point of order for the decision of the President, but in doing so, shall confine himself
(3) The President after having drawn the attention of the Village Council to the conduct of a member who persists in irrelevance either of his own arguments or of the arguments used by other members in debate may direct him to discontinue the speech;

(4) The President shall preserve order and have all powers necessary for the purpose of enforcing his decisions on all points;

(5) The President may direct any member whose conduct is in his opinion disorderly to withdraw immediately from the Village Council session and any member so ordered to withdraw shall do so forthwith and shall absent himself during the remainder of the day's meeting. If any member is ordered to withdraw a second time in the session, the President may direct the member to absent himself from the meeting for any period not longer than the remainder of the session and the member so directed shall absent himself accordingly, and

(6) The President may in case of grave disorder arising in the Village Council suspend any sitting for such time as may be determined by him.

[Members absence in the meeting.]

(1) If a member finds that at any time he is unable to attend the meeting of the Village Council, he shall apply to the President for permission of the Village Council to be absent;

(2) If a member is absent without permission from three consecutive meetings of the Village Council, the President or any member shall bring that fact to the notice of the Village Council. The Village Council shall then decide as to whether the seat of the member absent shall be declared vacant, and

(3) If the Village Council declared the seat of the member to be
vacant, the Secretary shall communicate such declaration to the Executive Committee and to the member concerned.

**Attendance Register.**

The Secretary shall keep a Register showing the attendance of the members and such Register shall be made available for inspection of members.

**Election of Resident and Vice-President.**

1. When at the beginning of the new Village Council or owing to the vacancy in the office of the President, the election of the President is necessary, the Executive Committee shall fix the date for holding the election and shall send to every member notice of the date so fixed;

2. At any time before noon on the day preceding the date so fixed any member may nominate another member for election as a President by delivering in the manner provided to the Officer authorised by the Executive Committee, a nomination paper signed by himself as proposer and third member as seconder and stating the name of the candidate and the proposer, after which the nomination paper shall be delivered to the Officer authorised by the Executive Committee in person by the candidate, his proposer or seconder; and when two or more candidates obtain equal number of votes the Officer shall decide the same by drawing lots.

3. When either at the beginning of the Village Council or owing to the vacancy in the office of the Vice-President at any time during the life of the Village Council, the election of the
Vice-President is necessary, the President shall fix the date for the holding of the election and the secretary of the Village Council shall send to every member notice of the date so fixed;

(4) The procedure for election of vice-President shall be the same as that for election of the President.

(5) At the commencement of every session, the President shall nominate from amongst the members of the Village Council, a panel of not more than two Presidents any one of whom may, in the order in which he had been nominated, preside over any meeting of the Village Council in the absence of the President and the Vice-President.

(6) The Vice-President and any temporary President when presiding over the Village Council meeting shall have the same powers as the President.

The first general election to the sixty-two Village Councils was held in 1972. The main political parties which took part in the election were the APHLC, Congress, HSPDP and Independents. Except a few independent candidates, all the Seats have been captured by the APHLC.

After these elections, the Presidents and the Vice-Presidents have been also elected by all the Village Councils and the Secretaries have been appointed by the Executive Committee of the District Council.

The Village Council was inaugurated by the Chief Minister of Meghalaya in 1973, when almost all the Presidents, Secretaries and other members of the Village Councils were present.

In his inaugural address, the Chief Minister exhorted the members to work honestly for the well-being of their people in their respective areas and promised financial assistance for the smooth running of the Councils. But the State government has not been able to fulfil its promise. As a result, the Village Councils have not started functioning till today.

**Conclusions:** The Village Council, along with the Nokma, was the earliest political system of the Garos. Each A'kingland or jurisdiction of a Nokma had a Village Council which enjoyed supreme authority. It decided on everything and the decisions were final and binding on all people living within the Nokmaland. However, the British government has greatly curbed the power and the authority of the Village Councils by the creation of many new offices like that of a Laskar, Sardar, Hauzadar and Bandal.

The Garo Hills District Council raised the position and importance of the Village Council by entrusting them with full responsibilities in administering their own areas but the paucity of funds still stands in the proper functioning of the Village Councils. Thus, though well-intentioned, the Village Councils have not functioned so far.