CHAPTER XVI

CONCLUSIONS

We have so far traced the development of local government in the Khasi Hills from 1900. What are our conclusions?

The assumption that the system of Municipal Government was developed at Shillong with a view to train people in the art of Self-Government is not true. It was brought into existence for administrative convenience. Second, although the Khasi Society is matriarchal, women's representation on the Board was largely absent. The Municipality had a nominated lady member in the early 1950s and the first elected lady member in late 1966 as well as the first lady Chairman in early 1971.

Third, the British Government did not interfere with the functioning of the Syiemship as it was not creating pressure on imperial finances and also because it was not in confrontation with their authority.

The institution of Syiemship should be maintained for administering the customary laws, settlement of village disputes, performance of conventional festivals,
and for the determination of various clans' rights. Inspite of the Governmental Control prior to early fifties of this century; and the District Council's Control since 1952, the institution still retained its basic democratic features.

Fourth, extension of the Municipal boundaries were opposed by the Syiem of Mylliem. As a result from 1939 to 1945, there was no expansion of the Municipal limits.

Since 1952, the District Council was opposed to expansion of the Shillong Municipal limits as the Council was jealous about the protection of tribal lands. Hence there was no expansion of municipal limits.

Fifth, all the members of the Shillong Municipality were nominated up to 1923. Since 1924 there was a great reduction in the strength of the nominated element. In 1924 elected members constituted about 70 percent of the total. The European element was completely eliminated in 1950.

By and large the composition of the board was satisfactory, but the term of office was unsatisfactory. The members of the District Council hold office for five years; but member of the Municipal Board hold office for four years. Therefore, the term of office should be five years for members of the Municipality.
Sixth, the Khasi Hills District Council was not a State within a State. It was created to protect the tribal political systems and institutions. But Khasi Hills District Council is functioning more or less independently of the State Government and Central Government even after the creation of Meghalaya as a predominantly tribal State in 1972.

Seventh, in the Khasi Hills District Council adult franchise was introduced since its inception - whereas the Municipal Commissioners at Shillong were elected by a restricted franchise. Hence the Municipality cannot be considered as a fully democratic body.

Moreover Elections are not held at regular intervals. In the case of the District Council sometimes elections took place after nine years. The last municipal elections were held in 1966, and the next election was due in 1971. But it was not held even in August 1977.

Eighth, party politics is conspicuous in the District Council in elections, but it is more or less only an undercurrent in Municipal elections.

Ninth, the members of the Khasi Hills District Council are getting a salary, but the municipal ward Commissioners are not getting any salary.
Tenth, theoretically, the Chairman of the Shillong Municipality is endowed with enormous powers, but actually his powers depend on his getting the support of the majority of members. In other words, he remains in office as long as he retains the support of the majority of Ward Commissioners. He can threaten, but lacks the Controlling Authority, if he has no majority support. On the other hand, the official Chairman is better educated and impartial than the non-official Chairman. The reason lies in the fact that he does not owe his position and power to the support of the members of the Municipality.

The person elected as Chairman or Deputy Chairman of the Khasi Hills District Council need not receive the approval of the Governor. Whereas Chairman of the Shillong Municipal Board requires approval of the State Government. By and large, most Chairman of the District Council adopted a strictly neutral and impartial attitude in the conduct of the business of the Council.

The Headman being the presiding officer of the village Durbar, he had to maintain the dignity of the assembly. He is also responsible for running the village administration. So, the functions entrusted to the office of the Headmanship was almost identical with the office of the Municipal Chairmanship.
Further, the Committee system is far from effective in the Municipality. There is no provision for co-option of some members from outside either in the Board or in the Committees. The policy of co-option should be extended to enable the inclusion of specialists in the deliberative wing and in the functional Committees. The system is practically absent in the District Council.

As regards functions of the Municipality there is urgent need for all-round improvement as the sanitary condition of Shillong is not satisfactory.

So far as functions of the District Council are concerned it may be observed that although the Council is entrusted with a number of functions - legislative, executive and judicial, the Council cannot function effectively due to non-utilization of its power of taxation. The main sources of income of the District Council are forests and markets. The people in the Khasi Hills did not pay land revenue or house tax. The revenues from private markets, were appropriated by the Chiefs. The District Council was not able to exercise any control over the Syiemship markets. The Council derived only a small amount from these markets.

Thus, the Khasi Hills District Council is far from being a vigorous body. It failed to exercise any real control over the Chiefs.
There should be no overlapping in the functions entrusted to the local authorities. The functions entrusted to a local body must be those which it is capable of performing. They ought not to be entrusted with all the development functions but only those which are municipal in character.

The machinery devised by the Shillong Municipal Board for the determination of the annual rental value of private buildings is not satisfactory. The Chairman or members of the Board should not be entrusted with this business. Efficient financial management depends on three factors. First, it must be divorced from politics because an elective executive cannot be free from popular pressure or prejudice. Impartial administrative work cannot be done by a staff which is directly dependent on the electorate and its representatives. The personnel of the fiscal department should be independent of local feelings and politics.

Second, the assessment of property has been undertaken on the basis of annual rental value of the buildings. Annual value has been defined as the rent at which the holding is expected to be let. This is more or less of arbitrary nature. Property valuation requires expert knowledge and trained valuers. At present, the valuation
of property is done by assessors appointed by the Board. Valuation done by the assessor is generally defective, and this renders property taxation inequitable. Under-assessment and general remissions have, further rendered the property tax unproductive. The defect can be rectified by placing the valuation work in the hands of independent valuers who are immune from pressure. The quinquennial revisions may also be entrusted to them. It is therefore suggested that there should be a board of assessors for the whole of Meghalaya appointed and controlled by the Government. This Board of Assessors may be entrusted with the valuation of property in the urban areas. Such a system will remove many of the defects of property taxation and make the tax more meaningful.

Third, the assessments fixed by the assessor may not always be correct. Provision ought to be made for the review of the assessments fixed by the assessor. But the power to hear appeals ought to be entrusted to a Committee consisting of not less than three persons and one of them must be a member of the Municipality. The other two must be expert officials, the Chief Executive Officer and a member of the Board of assessors. The Assessment Review Committee as at present constituted is unsatisfactory.
The collection of taxes in the Municipality was, however, good in recent years. So far as the District Council is concerned no comment can be offered as most of the records on financial matters are treated as confidential and not made available to the writer.

The Shillong Municipality derives its income from various sources which can be classified as tax revenue and non-tax revenue. Tax on property including service taxes and surcharge on transfer of immovable property is tax revenue. Non-tax revenue sources are rents, fees, license and grants-in-aid. The share of contribution to the overall municipal fund from some of these sources is small. Again, some of the taxes like the tax on trades, profession, employment and callings are not available to the Municipality. The taxes are being levied by the State Government for its own purpose. However, the District Council is getting a small share from these taxes.

Octroi terminal tax and pilgrim tax were never levied in the Khasi Hills by any local body. Therefore, they are mainly dependent upon a few sources of revenue. The income of Shillong Municipality has increased tremendously since 1900. This increase is largely due to the increase in population, and increase in grants-in-aid from the State Government. The rate of growth of income of the Municipality is not uniform and varies from period to period.
Next to property tax, grants-in-aid constitute the second major source of income of the Shillong Municipality. In giving grants-in-aid to the Board the Meghalaya Government is following a liberal policy, as is evident from the fact that in 1973-74, grants constituted about 47 per cent of the total income of the Municipality. The Assam Government used to sanction three types of grants — for general purposes, for specific purposes and grants in lieu of Board's receipts credited to the Government. But the Meghalaya Government adopted a simple policy. It gives a block grant for general purposes. Grant-in-aid is necessary to finance several works. But it should not be used liberally to support inefficient management.

In the absence of a definite policy grants in Meghalaya are not made judiciously. The Government of Meghalaya may establish a High Power Committee to review the financial position of the local bodies in general and the Shillong Municipality and the Khasi Hills District Council in particular, and to determine the principle governing the allocation of grants-in-aid to such bodies. This will free the grants-in-aid system from political pressures.

So far as Joan finance is concerned it is an obvious necessity. But the Shillong Municipal Board
should not be allowed to contract loans freely. An unrestricted borrowing by the Board may affect its financial health and endanger the interests of the rate payers. Therefore, the Government should keep a constant watch on its loan expenditure. The Government may fix a maximum limit of borrowing by the local bodies. This will compel the local authorities and specially the Khasi Hills District Council to make necessary provisions for the payment of the instalments of loans from general revenue.

Another important draw-back was that loans and Central Government assistance given during the four Five-Year-Plan periods were available only to the Metropolitan Cities. Therefore, the Government of India should adopt a rational policy to end regional inequality in the development of different areas in the State. In other words, to ensure the provision of better local services in all localities, the Central Government should extend grants-in-aid as well as loans to all local bodies.

There has been a tremendous growth in expenditures of both the District Council and the Shillong Municipal Board over the past few decades. But the rate of growth is not uniform and varies from period to period. Expenditure growth is a healthy symptom which implies expansion of local activities. But in spite of this growth there
is very little improvement either in the quantity or quality of local services at Shillong. The increase of expenditure is due to mismanagement or due to an increase in the cost of materials and high salary bills.

In spending public money, the Shillong Municipal Board and the District Council have not followed a prudent policy. A disproportionately high expenditure under Salary bills and contingencies implied inefficiency and poor administration. Public expenditure should maximize social good at minimum cost. The growing demand for better municipal services cannot be met without developmental expenditures. Such expenditures will strengthen the base of property tax by increasing property values, and will ensure better amenities to the rate payers of Shillong.

In certain States like Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, appointments to posts carrying a salary of Rs. 150 and Rs. 200 respectively have to be made in consultation with State Public Service Commissions. Thus the trend is towards the selection of officers on grounds of merit. So it is suggested that the Meghalaya Public Service Commission should select candidates for the Shillong Municipality by examination and prepare a list of candidates. The Board shall select candidates from the list furnished by the Commission. That will be the only remedy to cure the evils of favouritism.
The principle of probation ought to be enforced strictly. Otherwise persons without aptitude for civic service may be condemned for life in the service.

There should be uniformity in the pay scale of the Shillong Civic Staff. Variations will bring into existence discontent. Further, provision should be made for the periodic readjustment of the salary structure with the rise in the Consumers' price index. This observation is equally applicable in the case of the Khasi Hills District Council.

There should be periodical transfer of staff from one department to another. Such type of transfer not involving promotion will help for neutralisation of periodical fluctuations in the work load of individual incumbents. It will also help the incumbent to overcome the monotony of serving in the same assignment for a number of years. At present the system of periodical transfer is absent in the Shillong Municipality and in the District Council. As a result some posts in these bodies become seats of corruption. Hence the periodical transfer is a must for fair administration. For stopping favouritism in recruitment local personnel should be recruited by the State Public Service Commission. There should be pension and general provident fund scheme for
Municipal employees at Shillong - whereas the District Council employees should be covered by the Provident Fund Scheme immediately.

The Executive Officer should be non-political and a professional. He must be recruited by the State Public Service Commission for special aptitude in municipal works and appointed by the Government.

The Executive Officer should have some independence within the limits of law. The State Government may formulate some rules in this regard. The municipal personnel should be given some kind of in-service training and for this purpose, Government should establish a training institute.

Although Government was endowed with enough powers of Control, in actual practice there was no effective control over the Municipality. The reasons are simple. The machinery provided for this purpose was inadequate. The Commissioner and the Deputy Commissioner had little interest in the supervision of the Board. So the Municipality was left to itself to a great extent. It may be suggested that a special machinery should be brought into existence, well organized for the effective supervision of Civic Affairs. With this end in view a separate Directorate of Municipalities may be created by the Government.
Distinction ought to be made between dissolution and supersession. The consequences of dissolution and supersession ought to be the same, namely, that the existing Board ought to go out of office immediately with this difference: in the case of supersession the Board should be placed under a special officer for a specific period. The period of supersession should not exceed three years.

Although the Governor had statutory power of suspension and to some extent dissolution of the Khasi Hills District Council - he did not exercise these powers. However, in July 1977, the District Council has been suspended for the first time.¹

As most of the records of financial matters were not made available to research workers,² it is difficult to assess the performance of the Khasi Hills District Council in these years.

To conclude, no local body is absolutely free from misgovernment - even in London local government administration is unsatisfactory as regards its organisation and administration.

¹ Secretary, H. Bathew, interviewed on 6.3.1977.
functioning. The local government organisation in the Khasi Hills also is far from perfect.

Local Self-Government can succeed only in so far as the general public is educated in the art of taking active interest in public affairs. Sincerity and honesty are the sine qua non of any successful democratic body. The Khasis as a group have excellent traditions of Self-Government, and this natural aptitude ought to be tapped and channelised into the sphere of modern democratic local institutions. It is to be hoped that local self-government in the Khasi Hills will set an example of excellence and efficiency to the rest of the country if the principles of honesty and public spirit are properly tapped by the administration. Instead of discouraging or superseding the tribal institutions of the Khasis like the Darbars and Rangbah Shnongs, these institutions can very well be made to serve as the foundation of Local Self-Government in the Khasi Hills.