CHAPTER IV

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE REGION

Meghalaya offers a quite interesting field of study regarding the history of its people and their settlement in the region. Being principally a tribal state, its population is composed of several tribes. The most significant among them, numerically as well as historically, as already mentioned, are the Khasis and the Garos. These two principal tribes have again some sub-tribes and sub-groups with their fairly distinctly defined traditional territories. Besides the Khasis and the Garos, there are also some indigenous as well as immigrant tribal communities. But they are much less significant both in respect of number and historical emergence compared to the above two groups. The focus of the present study is on the Urban Khasis, and therefore, a discussion on their emergence, migration, tribal organisation and settlement in the region is made below. Since the Urban Khasis are mostly concentrated in Shillong and its adjacent areas, a separate treatment on their location pattern, population growth and settlement pattern is also made here.

4.1 The Khasis: Origin, Migration, Settlement and Emergence of Villages, Tribal Organisation and Tribal States.

The Khasis and the Jaintias (also known as Syntenss or Pnars), are very much alike in their physical appearance and they speak the same language, i.e., Khasi (Gait, 1926). This particular language has its significance in being the only dialect in India (besides Burma) belonging to the 'Monkhmer' group of languages of the Austro-Asiatic sub-family (Grierson, 1967). There are a number of indigenous groups of people
belonging to different clans or 'Kurs' (as the Khasis call it) with their individual manners, customs and dialects inhabiting the Khasi and the Jaintia Hills. But they are ethnically one and the same people, and sprang from the same racial stock and share a common mythology (Lyngdoh, 1991). Authors differ in their opinion regarding the meaning of the term 'Khasi' and as such have their individual interpretation. However, the most accepted view today is that of Hamlet Bareh (Bareh, 1964), according to whom, meaning of the term Khasi is 'born of the mother' ('Kha'-born of; 'si'-ancient mother).

4.1.1. Origin, Migration and Distribution.

A probe to trace back the origin of the Khasis is quite difficult due to general dearth of written materials on them. Before the advent of the Welsh Missionaries, the Khasis possessed practically no written evidence (Chowdhury, 1978). Earliest history regarding them can be traced back only from the early part of the 16th century. According to many, they are considered to belong to one of those earliest bands of immigrants, who like other tribes of Assam region are the descendants of the great Indo-Chinese race, and whose headquarters were supposed to have been in north-western China between the upper waters of Hoang-Ho and the Yang-tse-Kiang. They are the only people in this region of India, who speak Austric Language. Besides Khasis, the other people in the country speaking the same language and thus belonging to the same Austric racial family, are the Mundaris in Central India and Nicobarese of Andaman and Nicobar islands. Also the Mans from lower Burma and the Khmers of Cambodia and
Thailand belong to this group. The language spoken by them is mono-syllabic in character (Chowdhury, 1978).

It was J.R. Logan (Logan, 1850) who first brought out the fact that there existed a relationship between the Khasis and certain isolated groups of people of other parts of India. It was later confirmed by the scholars like Prof. Ernst Kuhn of Munich in 1883 and Pater W. Schimidt of Vienna in 1906. It was also established by Gurdon that the nearest Kinsmen of the Khasis were found in the ‘Pallaung’ and war of Burma. Further he observed that the linguistic and cultural affinity of the Khasis extended to Kolarian tribes like the Mundas, Hos, Santals and Korkers of Chotonagpur in Bihar and Satpura ranges of Madhya Pradesh (Gurdon, 1914).

As a matter of fact, Gurdon (1914) was the first person to publish a definite writing on the Khasis, treating all aspects of their origin elaborately. His most significant observation regarding them was that they were not autochthons of a portion of the hills on the southern bank of Brahmaputra. Most probably they migrated into Assam and in all possibility chose the same paths as other streams of immigrants into Assam from south-east to north-west. These were the routes which were also followed later by the Ahom invaders of Assam, the other streams of Burmese invaders as well as the Khamtis and Sing-pohs from the east of Hukong Valley (Gurdon, 1914).

It is also significant to note that Gordon (1914) demonstrated a close similarity in the numerals of different Mon-
Khmer languages and certain dialects of Khasi, especially up to digit six, and dissimilarity in the numerals of higher order. His opinion was that speakers of these two groups might have relationship with each other in their formative stages. The dissimilarity in the higher order might have taken place because of the spatial dispersal of the groups over various parts resulting simultaneously in the development of new words and signs for numerals in the successive periods of time.

A number of archaeological findings and cultural evidences of different parts of India and south-east Asian countries also lend support to the view that the Khasis are immigrants into this part of the country, who migrated in an early time. Gurdon for example, mentioned about the typical Khasi hoe which he considered as an enlarged form and modern representation of the 'singular shoulder-headed celts' and a similar type of implement is also used in Malaysia, distant places of India like Chotonagpur, and in Khasi Hills, Naga Hills, Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh, etc. A further similarity of the names these hoes (Chatterjee : 1951) was also noticed. While the Burmese name of these celts is 'mogyo', the Khasi name of them is 'mok-khiew'. Thus these neolithic celts are associated with the Austric speakers, particularly with those of the Monkhmer of Indo-China, Burma, Malaysia and Assam, indicating an affinity of the Khasis of north-eastern region of India with the people of south east Asia.

The evidence of affinity is further supplemented by the discovery of megaliths which simply mean memorial stone
structures erected for the ancestors of the Khasis (Barch, 1964). Similar stone structures have been found among the Nagas and Mikirs of North East India and in Burma, Borneo, Tong Kin. According to Bareh, the presence of megaliths among the Khasis and other north eastern tribal groups and also in Burma reflects a south-east Asian origin for the Khasis.

From the above discussion, it appears that the Khasi people of the North-East India enjoys a unique position both in respect of linguistic and ethnic characteristics in comparison with other hill tribes of region. Initially, the Khasis were compared with the Basque of Europe, because it was believed that, like European Basques, they were also absolutely isolated from the neighbouring people. It is because of these types of writings that early ethnographers and linguists were at a loss about determining, with any degree of certainty, either their racial identity or dialectical origin and the place of emergence. It was confirmed only after the middle of the last century, that the Khasis who represented the earliest wave of immigration into India's north-east, were not as absolutely isolated, as they were thought to be. It may be observed that they drifted to their present abode in more recent times just as the Mikirs, Kukis, and other tribes who moved considerable distances within the short span of a hundred years time (Chowdhury, 1978).

According to Shadwell, who is considered to be an authority on the Khasis, this tribe, demands themselves as original immigrants from Burma. A similar argument is given by Gurdon stating that they came from Burma across the Patkoi Pass along
the same route which was used by the Burmese invaders to Assam in the 19th century. Dr. S.K. Chaterjee (1951), a noted scholar and versatile linguist opines that they are Indo-Mongoloids in race but Austric by language. According to him, the Khasis had a much wider distribution covering parts of plain lands of Sylhet and Kamrup before they became confined to the Khasi and Jaintia hills. Bareh (1964) again points out that there also occurs certain similarity between the Konyak Nagas and Khasis regarding their physical traits and social customs which may be taken as evidence of their trait from south-east Asia through Burma to Assam.

It is generally believed that the Khasis, initially were spread over a large areal extension of north-eastern region of India. Gradually, they were confined themselves into the Khasi-Jaintia hill districts of Assam region in such a manner that their culture changed very little during the later phases of invasions and immigration into the region. The other people who were there with the Khasis in the initial stage were left behind in the plains of Brahmaputra and to some extent in the hills of Nagaland. These people got mixed up to a considerable extent with the people of later phases of immigration and thus lost their original identity. At present, there hardly occurs any similarity between the Khasis of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and these groups of people.

4.1.2. Khasi Settlement and Its Emergence.

The original pattern of settlement of the Khasis in the Present Khasi Jaintia region gets reflected through the
vocabulary which is in practice in different parts of the region. It is again noted by Gurdon that though the principal inhabitants of the Khasi state are the Khasi-pnars, they have several divisions of sub tribes speaking dialects derived from the same Khasi root. But at the same time they are frequently dissimilar to the standard form of original language and thus becomes difficult to recognise. These different vocabularies have emerged due to local variations of the language. The most popular dialects of the Khasi-Pnars are the 'Amwi', the 'Lakadong', the 'Synteng' (spoken in the Jaintia Hills areas), and the 'Mynnar' spoken in the Jirang area of the Khasi Hills (Mathew, 1983). The 'Amwi' language among all these has, in fact, the strongest similarity with the Mon-Khmer languages and thus it can be safely stated that the Khasis migrated from the south east Asian land via Nagaland and Assam and might have settled in the present habitat of the Amwi speakers.

It is again thought that different Khasi clans were there within their original homes in Khasi-Jaintia region who moved from the Assam plain towards west and settled down in Jirang area, and they now speak the Mynnar dialect. It was only in the later period that they spread out slowly to the other parts of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. Thus the Khasis, who settled in the hills of Khasi-Jaintia retained their linguistic identity keeping strong resemblances with their parent Mon-Khmer language, whereas those who settled in the plains of Brahmaputra, their language got mixed up with subsequent streams of migration of the Tibeto-Burman (Bodos) and Indo-Aryans (Robinson, 1941). There are
reasons to believe that the Austria people and their influences were widespread in the Brahmaputra valley and adjacent hills before the advent of the Bodos and Indo-Aryans.

There is hardly any information regarding the early condition of the Khasis in their present place of settlement. However, some ancient accounts of the nearest neighbours of the Khasis, such as the Kochs, the Ahoms, the Tripuries throw some light on the early history and culture of the Khasis. The earliest ancestors of the Khasis, as already mentioned, trace their origin even beyond the present Kopili. It, therefore, appears that the Khasis were already divided into clans even before they came and occupied their present home in the hills. Certain clans again originating for the first time in the Jaintia Hills are supposed to have migrated to the western part of the Khasi Hills, e.g., the Syiem-leih clan of the Nongkhlaw State, the founders of the Mawing State - the Nonglait Lyngdohs and the Mynnars of the Jirang area of the East Khasi Hills (Barch, 1964), following a route along the Brahmaputra valley. Similarly again, some other clans, originally settling down in Assam plain took an uphill movement to come and occupy the interior places of the hills. Examples can be cited of the Mawphlang Lyngdohs, who have come from Rani Gudam in present Kamrup district of Assam valley, these types of shiftings according to historians are thought as the result of the arrival of the Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman (Bodo) immigrants near their territories, who compelled the Khasis to change their place and move upwards.

Except for these few historical evidences, not much is known
about the early history and settlement of the Khasis. However, there are some socio-political organisations existing among the Khasis still today, which offer clue towards understanding and reconstructing their past. Two such organisations are Basanship and Lyngdohship. The system of Basanship got evolved from the basis of their land occupation prior to any other clan. Each of the clans of this system led by its respective chiefs, occupied a tract of land in the hills and established its ownership on the land. Lyngdohship, on the other hand, was not a single clan, but a number of clans together occupying a tract of land, developed a village or a hamlet sort of settlement. They entrusted a priest family from within or outside their clan to conduct the village's social, administrative and religious affairs (Bareh, 1964). The principal members of the priest family became the ruler of the village and acted as the sacredotal head. The head was assisted in the dealings of the village administration by the Basans, the land owning clans of the village.

The formation and development of such primary socio-political organisations were an important aspect in the history of the Khasis, who underwent a long transition from a culture of nomadism to partially sedentary cultivation. The subsequent periods experienced further expansion of villages and increase in population. Basans and Lyngdohs therefore appointed gradually Matebors, Kajis, Pators, etc., to assist them in the task of administration which was again subject to the approval of village ______________________ —  »

1. A clan (or 'kur') among the Khasis consists of those who trace their origin from the same ancestress.
council. The village councils were empowered to deal with various policy matters and passed important legislations, such as the allotment of land, division of labour, opening up of communication lines, establishment of barter centres, etc., while Lyngdohs chiefly dealt with the internal conflicts and quarrels among the villagers. Basanship was the oldest of all these primary socio-political organisations and it was followed latter by Lyngdohship. Most of the Basanships and Lyngdohships, however, were amalgamated later to form the so called Khasi State (Bareh, 1964), though some of these clans still exist even today.

4.1.3 Socio-Political Organisations and Their Distribution.

The highest order of socio-political system among the Khasis today is known as 'Syiemship'. It is, however, not known very clearly regarding the exact time of formation of these institutions. The oldest Syiemship (of medieval period), namely 'Sutnga' or 'Jaintia', which is now extinct, is said to have originated in the 13th century A.D. (Barch 1964). It is suggested that the evolution of Syiemship took place by voluntary association of independent Basans, Lyngdohs and other petty chiefs of a particular contiguous area with Syiemship at the top of their Union. It is further held that, Syiems were appointed on the basis of election from the ruling families. The selection was made by the male adults of those families or by the whole population of the area. The system is still continuing in its earliest form and is observed with all sincerity. It is worth noting here that the Khasis call their Syiems 'u Syiem u Kmei', meaning literally the 'mother' (Barch 1964).
The creation of syiemship is considered an important landmark in the history of the Khasi socio-political evolution. The oldest Syiemship Sutgna was followed by the Khyrim Syiemship which developed in the 14th century in the Khasi Hills area. The Khasis attribute mythological origin to the rulers of these two primeval states and regard them as 'Syiem-Biei' or God Sent Rulers as opposed to the 'Syiem-Briew' or Man-Made Rulers of other Syiemships, who came to rule in the later periods (Barch, 1964).

In the subsequent periods fifteen native states with Syiemship were formed beginning with Khyrim and then followed by Mylliem, Nongkhlaw, Cherra, Rambri, Myriaw, Nongstoin, Nobosohpoh, Mawing, Nongspung, Mawsynram, Maharam, Mawialsohmt, Langrin and Jirang. (Allen, ). Five native states with Sirdarships were Dawra Nongtynrem, Mawdon, Mowlong, Nongliawai and Pam-sanngut. There were three states, namely Mawphlang, Sohiong and Lyniong with Lyngdohs as their heads and the only Wadadarship state was Shella. Besides, there were also a few non-states in Khasi Hills as well as in Jaintia Hills which were ruled by Sirdars as agents of the Government. Population in each of these native states as enumerated in 1901 varied from a mere 150 to more than 15,000, the highest being recorded in Mylliem (17863) and the least in Nonglwai (1969). Almost all these native states had agricultural economy producing a wide variety of crops from cereals (rice, millet) and other food crops (maize) to cash and industrial crops (Lac, Tabacco, Cotton, betelnuts, oranges.
With the introduction of the Autonomous District Council, which was assigned to the six hills districts of Assam (including the hill areas of Khasis and Jaintias), the native states ruled by Syiems, Sirdars, Lyngdohs and Wadadars as well as any other form of administrative units existing till that time in both Khasi and Jaintia Hills came under the administrative control of the District Council. The Autonomous District Councils were formed under the Sixth Schedule of the present Indian Constitution and this was the basis for the emergence of united district of Khasi and Jaintia Hills (Roy Burmon, 1970). The District Council is empowered to act as an autonomous body both in the district's internal affairs as well as an intermediary body in determining the relations between the Hill Areas, on one hand, and the State or Union Government, on the other.

Comprising the two separate hill districts of the Garo Hills and the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya was declared as an Autonomous State within Assam on 2nd April, 1970 and then was given a full fledged statehood with effect from 21st January, 1972. The United Khasi and Jaintia Hills district was later divided into two separate districts as the Khasi Hills and the Jaintia Hills, wherein the Khasi Hills became the abode predominantly of the Khasis and Jaintia Hills of Jaintias.

3. The district of Jaintia Hills was inaugurated on 21st February, 1972.
Shillong which was the district headquarters of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, continued to serve as the same for the new district of the Khasi Hills. Jowai, on the other hand, gained the status of district headquarters of the Jaintia Hills. At present, the State has five districts of Jaintia Hills, East and West Khasi Hills, and East and West Garo Hills. These five districts have been recognised in the 1981 census with the districts headquarters respectively as Jowai, Shillong, Nongstoin, William-Nagar and Tura.

4.2 Shillong: Its Emergence as the Urban Settlement of the Khasis.

Shillong, being a hill station at an altitude of about 1500m. above sea level, separates (as already mentioned in Chapter III) the two socio-economically and socio-culturally important valleys of north-eastern India, namely the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley. Thus, the plateau itself enjoys a unique position from socio-economic and cultural point of view. People have travelled through these two valleys and then settled down in the plateau in general and in the Shillong region in particular from historical past and the trend still continues today. Thus imprints of different socio-cultural and political waves are not very difficult to identify in the town. The emergence of the town, therefore owes considerably to these waves of immigration of people in different point of time.

4.2.1 Emergence of Shillong to Its Present Status.

Shillong, in its history of emergence, first became a Civil Station in 1864. Prior to 1864 Cherrapunji served the same
purpose but because of heavy incessant rainfall and difficulties in communication arising out of that, the then British administrators were compelled to change the site from Cherra to Shillong. In 1874 following the formation of separate Assam Province Shillong was upgraded as the headquarters of this new administrative unit (Cajee in B. Pakem, 1984). Shillong, however, in spite of being the only urban centre of the State recorded quite a low urban growth for over almost one hundred years. It is only during the last two decades it grew somewhat rapidly and turned into a class I city. Although, the capital of Assam has been shifted to Dispur in Guwahati, the Status of Shillong has changed but little. It is because, Shillong continued being the capital of Meghalaya, which was created almost at the same time of shifting of capital of Assam.

Shillong serves as the State’s capital and also as the headquarters of the East Khasi Hills district. It was the district headquarters of the then United Khasi and Jaintia Hills and afterwards continued as the administrative headquarters of the Khasi Hills district. At present, besides being the headquarters of the East Khasi Hills district, it also acts as the administrative centre of the Autonomous Khasi Hill District Council. Shillong also act as the administrative centre of the Syiem of Mylliem and its court.

Shillong during last two decades has grown and expanded so much so that it should no longer be called a reminiscent of the colonial outpost as was described by E.M. Forster (Cajee, 1984). The growth of town is highly significant along the main traffic
arteries. The spread the National Highway in Shillong is such that there has been quite longitudinal development of fringes. With a steady continuation of this process of fringe development, it can be safely suggested that, in course of time, it might engulf the outlying villages like Umshing, Laitkor, Mawphlang and Upper Shillong.

A very recent trend in the urban growth of Shillong has been an intra-city movement of population from the core of the city to the peripheral villages. This has been the result of very high prices of land and buildings in the core region. Again, a good number of commuters takes a daily back and forth movement from the city to quite far off villages like Laitkor, Myiliem, Smit, Mawphlang, Lait-Lyngkot etc. These groups of commuting population as well as the migrants from inner city are bringing immense change in the traditional rural societies of the peripheral villages of the town. This, according to scholars studying urban growth and morphology, is aptly called a second specialised urban impact which is specially carried along the principal traffic lines of the town. As a result, the traditional socio-economic setup of the local inhabitants of peripheral region is considerably disrupted by superimposition of an urban oriented land use like market gardening, dairy farming etc.

The above reflect an increasing degree of rural-urban interaction in a wide spatial framework, and based on these developments with Shillong may be said to have three annular zones. The innermost one is the core city, obviously showing the
maximum urbanisation; this is followed by the Sub-urban zone (the Greater Shillong) and then the outer transition zone. The outermost zone takes an elongated shape along the National Highway towards Guwahati, since this is the direction of fastest growth.

4.2.2. Phases of Expansion and Associated Socio-Cultural Conditions.

The history of development of Shillong reveals that it was primarily the creation of British Administration and thus its growth was related to the changing importance of the place. During the British period, original settlements at the centre were those of administrative Personnel and surrounding them grew up settlements of trading communities and civic services, who took care of everyday needs of the central part. Population composition of the core region comprised mainly the Bengalis in ministerial level, Biharis and Nepalis in grade IV level and Europeans in the top official level (Hussain in A.C. Sinha, et al., 1993). The local and indigenous people, peculiarly enough, took very little interest in the administrative services. With gradual expansion of administrative establishments, the town also grew but at a very slow pace. The slow growth of the town was responsible for a slow mixing up of ethnic communities, who their colonies in different areas of the town. These settlement colonies or units maintained distinction with each other.

It was in 1878, that a town committee was established in Shillong and also a station 'there for civil administration. To fulfill the requirements of a station, Mawkhar and Laban were
included for the first time within the town limit of Shillong (Datta Ray in B.B. Goswami, 1979). Concurrently, traders from Cherrapunjee were forced to come and settle down in the present Police Bazar area. Barabazar, however, was spared for a long time from being included within the town limit and continued much as a trading place of the local inhabitants (Hussain, 1993). Gradually Kenche's Trace and La Chau miere were also engulfed by the town limit i.e., in 1883 and 1896 respectively.

Subsequent flows of immigration from Eastern Bengal and Assam Province provided scope for further expansion of the town limit and thus Heneng Umkhrrah, Laitumkhrah including Priest's Hill, Block XII, Malki, Mawprem and a section of land beyond Laban were included within Shillong town. By 1930, there were altogether eleven wards in Shillong Municipality with the original European wards of Police Bazar and Jail Road.

Population structure and composition of these newly expanded units excluding the oldest ones, were quite distinct in nature. Each of them had a particular pattern of development in response to the particular need of colonial settlement in the core city. Thus, ethnically and also professionally, each unit developed its individual identity. While the old Mawkhar was predominantly a Khasi settlement unit, Laban became a Bengali dominated area. Gorkhas in Jalupara, Barpathar, Mawprem and Paltanbazar areas settled down to provide army recruitments to the contiguous cantonment and also for providing transport labour.

The urban growth of Shillong was maximum during British
period, i.e., 1930s, when the distinct character of the town was identified as an European settlement. Even then, similar to the segregated developments of units in the town, social life was also highly restricted within each unit and there was little scope of social interaction between different communities. The communities like Bengalis, Khasis, Biharis, Nepalis and of course the British maintained their own social code of conduct. Though inter-community marriages were not infrequent, they left very little impact on the society (Datta Ray in B.B. Goswami, 1979).

Even after the Independence, Shillong maintained for quite long time its position as a small administrative outpost with only added attraction of being a lovely and quiet hill-station. Gradually, following the departure of a good number of British settlers, large land areas were procured by the State Government and there were given to Government employees of various state and central Government services. The land was given on loan to be recouped on very easy terms. this initiated a rapid growth of Shillong Urban Agglomeration (Saha in B.B. Goswami, 1979).

A marked increase in population since 1941 put pressure on land and consequently all the vacant plots within the Shillong Municipality as well as outside started being filled up by human settlements. During 1951-61 new settlement colonies grew up as Motinagar, Bhagyakul, New Colony, Forest Colony, Umpling, etc. Nongthymmai and Mawlai areas were declared as towns and there were also a significant continuation of sub-urban expansion of the town. Increased urban impact took place in Pynthor Umkhrah Upper Shillong and Madanrting areas (Dutta Ray, 1979).
A rapid growth of various administration and industrial units led to the expansion of the market and trading institutions. New colonies of settlements occupied mostly by the people from Assam and to a lesser number by displaced persons from Bangladesh (East-Bengal) grew up in the core region of the city. There were however, very few tribal colonies from other tribal states of North-East India. The interesting feature of new developments in the city was that the local tribal people were not interested in the housing and settlement schemes of the core areas. It is because they had their land and residences in the old town area, and thus they preferred to stay away from the heart of township in the initial and later phases of expansion of the town (Hussain, 1993).

A return drive by the indigenous tribals for land holdings in the city core and also in the peripheral areas is being noticed lately, specially after the creation of the State. A growing reassertion of rights on land along with a plight for reservation of tribal identity in the town which in fact got rooted within the movement for a separate state, is also markedly apparent at present. A deeper look into the gradually transforming socio-economic conditions of the town explore such plights of assertion of rights by indigenous people.

At present, as per 1991 census, Shillong urban area engulfs within its territory six urban units such as Shillong Municipality, Shillong Cantonment, Mawlai, Nongthymmai, Pynthorumkhrah and Madanrting. The Municipal town has fifteen
major words being divided again within themselves and thus, altogether twenty seven wards can be identified at present. Besides the urban units, there are also a few contiguous rural components as Lowsothun, Nongkseh, Upper Shillong, Nongmynsong, Rynjah-lapalang and Pokseh, Mokotok etc., which are also growing fast and one would come across a considerable urban impact in these areas. It is expected that within a span of 10 to 15 years these areas will also be included within the town limit of Shillong urban agglomeration.
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