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**CRITICALLY ASSESSING TRADITIONS:
THE CASE OF MEGHALAYA**

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Critically Assessing Traditions: The Case of Meghalaya¹

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It could be cogently argued ...that in Meghalaya, there are not two but three competing systems of authority – each of which is seeking to ‘serve’ or represent the same constituency. The result has been confusion and confrontation especially at the local level on a number of issues.²

This observation by the experts of the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution reflects the present crisis of governance in the North East Indian state of Meghalaya. In fact, the main tussle for power and control over resources seems to be between the tribal organisations that have been designated by the Constitution of India as ‘traditional institutions’, and the constitutionally elected bodies. In this tug-of-war it is the common citizens who suffer, and this suffering varies from being deprived of access to civic amenities, to being victims of ethnic violence. In this situation the representatives of traditional institutions, such as the *dorbars*, claim historical legitimacy, and present a past that has till now remained more or less exempt from critical assessment. The representatives of the constitutional bodies, while not directly questioning the validity of the traditional institutions, talk of a situation where those institutions can contribute more effectively to governance if they are ready to accommodate change. In other words, it is recognised that the traditional institutions need to be transformed to keep pace with the democratic norms that are a part of the Indian Constitution. Such transformation might lead to a lessening of the crisis of governance, but the traditional institutions of Meghalaya seem to be resisting change that would result in making them more representative of society as a whole.

Why does this happen? We need to examine why the past and its links with the present through ‘tradition’ becomes more important in some societies than in others. Focussing on the communities of the North Eastern states of India one finds a very interesting scenario. Communities which have a historically traceable past of several centuries, with a variety of traditions and traditional institutions, are talking less in terms of traditions than communities which have had a longer pre-literate past and whose recorded history is difficult to trace. Thus in Mizoram, the new social forces that emerged as a result of that society’s exposure to British rule and Christianity were responsible for abolishing the traditional authorities in the state in the 1950s. In Meghalaya, on the other hand, looking back to the past seems to have become more prevalent in recent years. This attitude has sown the seeds of all manner of conflicts between various groups in the society. If tensions are to be diluted, it is necessary to critically assess the traditional institutions, so that vested interests do not resort to a history that may be an inverted one, and thus put spokes in the wheels of a possible transformation of these institutions. A historical approach to traditions is thus a first necessity for understanding how present day problems of governance can best be addressed.

¹ Much of the data used in this paper was collected in collaboration with Mahua Bhattacharjee and K. Robin, researchers working with the North East India Institute for Development Studies (NEIDS), Shillong. The paper presents initial findings from a project, funded by LSE’s Crisis States Development Research Centre, interrogating Khasi traditions and traditional institutions in Meghalaya.

² National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution, *A Consultation Paper*, New Delhi: Vigyan Bhawan Annexe, p.25.

A point of reference can be the history of the societies in today's states of Assam and Meghalaya. Assam has a history that can be traced as far back as the early centuries A.D. Yet in the early years of the nineteenth century, when the Ahom monarchy, which had ruled for nearly six centuries, began to weaken and decline to be finally overthrown by the British, there was a gradual adaptation to the new constitutional system introduced by the British colonisers; and then, throughout the nineteenth and better part of the twentieth century, although there was resistance to the colonisers, there was never a very strong attempt to revive earlier systems (or 'traditions'), nor to create a new system and call it 'traditional'.³

Today's state of Meghalaya was formerly a part of British Assam. The dominant peoples in this state are the Khasi and the Jaintia (often clubbed together as Khasi-Jaintia), and the Garo. These three communities have now been brought under one administration for political convenience, but the Khasi-Jaintia and the Garo have had very different historical and cultural experiences. Therefore they have to be treated as historically separate. The Khasis were a preliterate people until almost the mid-nineteenth century, when the Christian missionaries came and for the first time developed a script for them. The Jaintia, because of their longer traceable history and their accessibility to the plains of Bengal, had perhaps once used the Bengali script, but records of that are very difficult to come by. Yet we find that among these communities, at least during the last half-century or so, there has been a strong tendency of referring to their 'traditions' and their 'traditional institutions' from a historical past which can be very hazy because of the extreme paucity of reliable historical evidence. This reviving of traditions – real, imagined or invented – has been such that there is today a demand from some that the popularly-elected democratic institutions should be replaced by the hereditary institutions of their 'traditional' past.⁴

In the context of certain communities/societies laying claim to traditions more than others, one can also refer to certain African communities who sought to refer back to tradition to reiterate the fact that all that was progressive did not come with the colonisers. For instance, Jomo Kenyatta believed that among his Kikuyu people, and by extension amongst all African traditional societies, there was the existence of democracy before the advent of colonialism.⁵ He said that, "before the coming of the Europeans, the Kikuyu had a democratic regime".⁶ This view of Kenyatta has, however, been challenged by Godfrey Muriuki, an authority on Kikuyu pre-colonial history, who holds that contrary to what Kenyatta claimed, there is no historical evidence to show that there was ever a monarchy of the Kikuyu, which they overthrew to establish a democracy. Interestingly the Khasi-Jaintia also speak about a traditional 'Khasi Democracy', which is believed to have had a very ancient past.

The concept of tradition needs to be viewed not merely in terms of modernity and change, but more importantly in terms of the deeper historical experiences ensconced in that term. Do traditions always need to be very old and exist from 'time immemorial'? This paper takes a similar position to that of Hobsbawm and Ranger, and asks the question how and why

³ See, for example, K.L. Baruah, *Early History of Kamarupa*, Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 1966 [1933]; Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 1983 [1926]; H. K. Barpujari, (ed.), *A Comprehensive History of Assam, Vols. III – V*, Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, 1992, 1993, 1994; and S. K. Bhuyan, *Anglo Assamese Relations*, Gauhati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 1949.

⁴ *The Shillong Times*, a local daily of Shillong, carried news of this quite regularly in 2002.

⁵ This issue is discussed at great length in Walter O. Oyugi, *et al.* (ed.), *Democratic Theory and Practices in Africa*, Kenya: Heinemann, 1988.

⁶ Oyugi *et al.* (1988), p.50.

traditions are “invented”.⁷ In whose interests do traditions function? Why do traditions assume more importance for some communities than for others?

Traditions, Traditional Institutions: Frameworks of analysis.

Modern sociological theories have largely been formulated on the basis of the experiences of European societies. There is no doubt that there is a necessity of constructing analytical paradigms that are rooted in non-European or non-western experiences. Our understanding of authority structures perhaps needs to be rethought in the light of histories of Asian and African social development. The empirical evidence that is derived from the realities of non-western society very often belies the very fundamentals of many sociological theories. The concepts of authority relationships that derive from the western experience are based on a transformation of relations from a point when the vast majority were considered ‘subjects’, to the granting of citizenship rights to individuals. However, authority relationships in many parts of the non-western world may derive from experiences that are very different from those of the West. For instance, amongst many of the hill communities in North East India, authority relationships are primarily based on an understanding of what they call their ‘traditional institutions’, where age and wisdom are interlinked. In such situations it becomes necessary to rethink terminologies like ‘institutions’ and ‘traditions’, which have had a long association with the empirical realities of western/European conditions.

Certain common ideas, like the conservative Burkean perception of society that relates tradition only to institutions of the past, which need to be preserved for the benefit of the present and future generations, need to be critically assessed in the context of traditions or institutions in late developing societies. Those views that perceive tradition as unchanging and as posed against modernity,⁸ were already being challenged in the 1960s when Reinhard Benedix argued that the idea that the more there is of modernity, the less there is of tradition, was the result of a very exclusivist perception of society. Benedix argued that these ideas resulted from looking at all societies through the prism of western (particularly European) experiences of industrial commercialisation.⁹ Schumpeter’s concept of ‘partial development’ perhaps provides a more appropriate paradigm of understanding structures, showing how a variety of forms and structures can survive even within “dominant forms of productive process”.¹⁰ Approaching the idea of tradition within such parameters negates the whole concept of tradition as always being regressive or contrary to change. The Burkean approach thus stands challenged. While it may have some ideological usefulness in justifying certain political traditions, the fact that it is devoid of the idea of change makes it lose its vitality. A fresher approach to tradition comes from Alasdair MacIntyre, who points out that a tradition that is living is always an embodiment of continuous conflicts: “indeed when a tradition becomes Burkean, it is always dying or dead”.¹¹ Tradition therefore needs to be seen not in terms of modernity and change, but in the light of certain virtues grasped which have possibilities for the future drawing upon the past.

⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, & Terence Ranger, (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

⁸ See Andrew Heywood, *Key Concepts in Politics*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, p.151.

⁹ Reinhard Benedix, *Nation – Building and Citizenship*, New Delhi: Wily Easttttern Pvt. Ltd, 1969.

¹⁰ See Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1947, pp.12-13.

¹¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘The Concept of a Tradition’, in Markate Daly (ed.), *Communitarianism - A New Public Ethics*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1994.

The specification of the past is an exercise that has not been taken up very seriously by social scientists in general. Some historians may be exceptions in this regard. For instance, a leading historian of India, Romila Thapar, has written that the present selects items from the past that are used to invent or refashion what comes to be called 'tradition'. These are generally items which the present finds attractive and which legitimise its various codes of behaviour and belief. The making of tradition becomes another dialogue with the past. It is often a perceived past which contributes to the construction of history, although in effect it may well derive from the perspectives of the present.¹² Hobsbawm has argued that traditions can actually be invented and constructed, and that what sometimes have been passed off as very ancient traditions are in fact of quite recent origin.¹³ Hobsbawm rightly laments that historians have not studied very seriously the process of the creation of rituals, customs and traditions. Delving back into history shows that in many instances societies seem to have invented or created traditions at different points of time, and we can perhaps:

expect it to occur more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which the 'old' traditions had been designed producing new ones to which they were not applicable.... Adaptation took place for old uses in new conditions and by using old models for new purposes.¹⁴

Thus traditions can be invented at any historical time according to the exigencies of the situation, and therefore not only do traditions need to be located but the process of their evolution also needs examination. Such an exercise would serve two purposes: firstly, enabling the historian to recognise certain developments, the symptoms of which are manifested through traditions; and secondly, for history to remain a legitimator for all invented traditions.¹⁵

There is much evidence that traditions can be invented in a very planned and organised manner by particular interests at particular points of time in the history of a society.¹⁶ It can be argued that exigencies such as a rising consciousness about one's identity, the influence of extraneous forces, or the needs of newly emerging elites in countries which have faced colonial experiences, can lead to the invention of a tradition.¹⁷ There is evidence in the history of India, too, that the newly emerging educated class tried to make use of the traditions invented by the British to make a place for themselves in the new 'progressive' universe.

In North Eastern India, and in particular in the case of the Khasi-Jaintia in Meghalaya, some of these facets of imperial hegemony can be observed. Since these societies were largely preliterate for a considerable period of their histories, there is a paucity of reliable evidence, which creates problems in the reconstruction of a viable picture of this society in the pre-colonial period. Therefore the methodology applied here has been to take three types of available sources (the reports left behind by the British administrators, those of travellers and ethnographers, and those of missionaries), and attempt to corroborate these with the available material from the oral traditions found in Khasi-Jaintia folk tales. The focus will be on

¹² Romila Thapar, *Sakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2000, p.4. On this idea of a perceived past leading to the invention of traditions see, for example, Hobsbawm & Ranger (1995); or V. G. Simiyu, 'The Democratic Myth in the African Traditional Societies', in Oyugi *et al.* (1988).

¹³ E. Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing traditions', in Hobsbawm & Ranger (1995), p.1.

¹⁴ Hobsbawm (1995), pp.4-5.

¹⁵ Hobsbawm (1995), p.12.

¹⁶ See contributions by Hugh Trevor-Roper, Terence Ranger and Bernard Cohn in Hobsbawm & Ranger (1995).

¹⁷ The arguments presented here have been drawn from the evidences presented and conclusions drawn by Terence Ranger in Hobsbawm & Ranger (1995), pp.237-259.

'traditions', such as the *Dorbar*, *Rangbah Shnong*,¹⁸ and such other socio-political institutions and authority structures whose interface with the other systems of authority introduced in the post-1947 period provides a veritable breeding ground for various kinds of social and political problems today. The attempt will be to see how genuinely traditional such 'traditions' are.

Traditions and the evidence of British narratives.

The British had their own prejudices about North East Indian society, based on their imperial perceptions and their ignorance about local systems. Therefore perceptions were interpolated which were the product of different socio-politico-economic situations. Despite these limitations we must acknowledge that the British writers at least tried to record, as honestly as possible, whatever they saw at the time of their observations. Since their reports concerned socio-political situations, and pre-colonial Khasi-Jaintia society did not undergo very rapid and radical transformations,¹⁹ we can fairly well accept that what the British reports recorded would hold good for a considerable period before that time. Five such British reports, covering a period of a century, are taken here, and examined to see what information they provide about the prevailing traditions in the Khasi-Jaintia society.

The earliest of these five reports dates back to 1808, when Francis Hamilton was entrusted by the Governor General in Council to undertake a survey of the territories which were under the "authority of the Presidency of Fort William".²⁰ The survey began in 1808 and continued till 1814. Hamilton's instructions, however, forbade him from entering territory that did not belong to the East India Company. He therefore could not enter the Ahom kingdom, but collected all his information by making Goalpara and Rungpoor, both under the Fort William Presidency, his headquarters. In these places he met princes and nobles from Assam and also many Bengalis who had visited Assam in various capacities. From them he collected information that was considered significant by his informants. Although he never visited Assam, his description is generally accurate because he "collected his materials from reliable eye-witnesses and spectators and whose testimony has been accepted by historians as an important source of information".²¹ However, there are some errors of perception that have crept in, mainly because of his dependence on information provided primarily by one category of informants. Nevertheless, this account provides a point of reference for historians that can be corroborated by other sources.

The main section of Hamilton's account is on the Ahom kingdom, but he included a second part on the countries adjoining Assam in which he deals with the countries to the South of the Brahmaputra. Here one would expect him to have made some mention of the Khasis who lived in this area, about which Hamilton writes:

According to a Brahman of Manipur, with whom I met at Komila in the year 1798, the only chiefs of consequence in this hilly territory are the Rajas of Bong,

¹⁸ *Rangbah* in the Khasi language means a man, an elder and *Shnong* refers to a settlement or a village (see P. R. T. Gurdon (ed.), *Khasi English Dictionary*, New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2002 [1904]). *Rangbah Shnong* would therefore mean a village elder, or a man of a village, but in practice it has come to refer to a headman.

¹⁹ Such a conclusion can be drawn from a comparison with the most developed area of the region, the Ahom kingdom. There is enough evidence to show that the process of economic and social transformation was pretty sluggish in the kingdom in the better part of the pre-colonial period. If that was the situation in the comparatively more organised and exposed region, it can be inferred that the situation in Khasi society would not be very different.

²⁰ S. K. Bhuyan, 'Preface to First Edition', in Francis Hamilton, *An Account of Assam*, Gauhati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 1963

²¹ Bhuyan (1963).

Monipur, Kachhar, Jaintia, and Tripura: all of whom carry the white umbrella as the badge of royalty, in the same manner as is done by the kings of Assam and Ava....²²

Hamilton goes on to provide a more or less viable account of Kachhar, Manipur, Jaintia and the territories which he thought were inhabited by the Garos. The only confusion that Hamilton has created here is that he seems to have confused the Jaintias and the Garos, and has used the term Garo almost as a generic term in the sense that he says that “the Raja of Jaintia is Garo by birth”.²³ This statement can, of course, be questioned, but the other information he gives about the Jaintia country can be corroborated with other sources such as the *Jaintia Buranji*.²⁴ He writes in great detail about the Garos because information on them was more easily available from the Goalpara side. However, in none of these accounts is there any mention of the Khasis or of the Khasi Hills.

The *Jaintia Buranji* gives a detailed account of the attempts of the *Khorami Raja* Bormanik not only to establish friendly relations with the Ahom monarch for the purpose of keeping trade routes open, but also to seek the protection of the monarch by paying him tribute. In this account there is mention of an embassy of the Ahom monarch to the Khyrim Rajah, where there is one reference to the *darbar* of the “*khorami rajah*”, but this mention is in connection not with what the emissaries experienced or saw in Khyrim territory, but with the queries of the envoys. One of the envoys asks what his response should be if “in the *darbar* of the *Khorami rajah* I am questioned” about the purpose of the visit. Here it is quite evident that the term ‘*darbar*’ referred to the royal courts, composed of royal officers and functionaries, for which there was no concept of the participation of the entire population. The Ahom emissaries obviously expected that they would find a situation like that which also existed in the Ahom court in the *Khorami rajah*’s land, but interestingly there is no record in the *Buranji* of what they experienced there, except that the “*Khorami*” rajah received them and then bade them farewell. It is significant to note here that this contemporary source gives no other information of the Khyrim territory other than the details of the attempts to establish friendly trade relations with the Ahom kings. The *Buranji*, which gives details of the names of the emissaries sent by the “rajah” of “Khoiram”, nowhere uses the term *siem*,²⁵ and refers only to rajah. The same source, however, gives us quite a clear picture of the Jaintia kingdom as seen through the eyes of the official envoys of the Ahom kings.²⁶

The *Buranji*, coupled with what Hamilton wrote at the beginning of the nineteenth century, can perhaps help us to infer a few things. First, the fact that at the time when Hamilton was gathering his information from his informants, the rajah of Khyrim was not mentioned as a significant chief, may have been because Khyrim, owing to its geographical situation, had more interaction on the Assam side than on the Bengal side, and so Hamilton’s informants might not have had much knowledge of the area. The other reason could have been that the Khyrim polity was not yet developed enough to make its presence felt in a big way in the surrounding region. One of the factors for this could have been that the population was not large enough to require a very widespread network of connections. According to the first census in 1872, the population of Khyrim was 32,731;²⁷ therefore a century before that it

²² Francis Hamilton, *An Account of Assam*, Guwahati, 1987, p.78.

²³ Hamilton (1987), p.88.

²⁴ *Buranji* are the official chronicles of the Ahom kings and a number of these chronicles are available today.

²⁵ *Siem* is the Khasi word used today to refer to a traditional Chief.

²⁶ For details refer to S. K. Bhuyan (ed.), *Jayantia Buranji*, Gauhati: DHAS, 1964.

²⁷ To make an assessment of the population for Khyrim in the eighteenth or early-nineteenth century, the population of Khyrim (20,504) and Myllem (12,226) have to be seen together because the two bifurcated only in

would have been even less, and such a small population is not really conducive for the sustenance of a very organised and powerful polity.

The next point of time in which we can view the Khasi-Jaintia is 1835, through the report of Captain R. B. Pemberton who was also the Joint Commissioner of Manipur.²⁸ Through his administrative and military experiences, and also by consulting a number of original documents and other works, he provides a very detailed account of the region. Unlike Hamilton, Pemberton has two very detailed reports on “Jynteeah”(Jaintia) and “Cossyah” (Khasi) Hills. This was, of course, only natural, because by 1826 the British had made their entry into the region and had gradually begun to establish direct contacts with many of the hill areas. In writing about the conduction of affairs by the Jaintia Raja, Pemberton writes:

The Rajahs of Jynteeah [sic] are under the necessity of consulting on all important occasions the queen mother, and the chief of districts, and officers of state; and although the appointment and removal of both the latter descriptions of persons rests with the Rajah himself, they are nevertheless enabled to exercise a considerable degree of control over him, as he is obliged, in confirming such appointments, to consult the wishes of the chief people in the interior, who seem to be of a very independent and rather turbulent character.²⁹

Here we find that Pemberton is talking about a few very significant things. First, about the fact that in 1835 women (as reflected in the idea of the queen mother) were considered capable of taking decisions. When, then, did the women become politically marginalized? Secondly, that the King’s powers were somewhat circumscribed. But it is important to note that Pemberton is not using any of the terms like *Doloi*, *pator*, or *Siem*. He talks of chiefs and Rajah. Moving on to the Khasi hills, Pemberton also uses the words Rajah and chiefs, but we find that he is not using terms like *dorbar* or *raid*. Even the word *Siem* is not being used. Why? Were these terms not commonly in use at that time, or is it that the British administrators and investigators were not aware of the existence of the terms? The latter proposition may be a bit improbable because even for administrative convenience the British would have tried to make use of the existing political institutions for the purposes of establishing their own authority, and they obviously must have learnt something from their experiences amongst the Kols of Chotanagpur. An examination of the Christian missionary records of the same period (see below) might throw some light on the issue.

In the Khasi hills section of his report Pemberton provides a lot of useful information about the economy and polity of the hills. To describe the system of governance he quotes official reports written by David Scott and T. C. Robertson, who were both Agents to the Governor General in the North Eastern Frontier of Bengal. Referring to a report by David Scott, Pemberton writes that to decide whether or not to allow the unrestricted passage of British subjects through his territory, the Rajah of Nungklow, ‘Teerut’ Singh, convened a meeting of the chieftains of his own state and the neighbouring states, and Scott was present in that meeting since the proposal was given by him. Recounting his experiences, Scott wrote that there was a long “debate which lasted for two days, followed by a decision in favour” of

the 1830s. W. W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Vol. 2, Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1998 [1879], pp.248-249.

²⁸ R. B. Pemberton’s *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India*, Gauhati: DHAS, 1966, “covers a wide range of subjects, divided into sections and sub-sections bearing on the physical, anthropological, economic and political conditions of the people inhabiting a large area including Assam, Manipur....” (Preface to 2nd ed.)

²⁹Pemberton (1966), p.228.

Scott's proposal.³⁰ Pemberton later quotes Robertson's report on the other chieftains who "contribute to the formation of the confederated Cossyah [sic] states".³¹ About Khyrim Robertson wrote:

Sing Manick, the ruler of the country of Kyrim, is one of the most powerful... mountain chiefs.... Circumstances enable him to exercise an authority by far more despotic, than is enjoyed by most of the Cossyah [sic] Rajahs, who generally have a council, without whose sanction no business of importance is undertaken.... The armed force at this chieftain's command must be nearly commensurate with the adult male population of his domain....³²

Pemberton notes that there were said to be seventy villages under the authority of this chief, who had about 3,000 armed followers.³³ Even if one quadruples the adult male population of the state to get a rough idea of the population of Khyrim at the beginning of the nineteenth century we get a picture of a territory which was not very populous. Perhaps the most significant comment that we find in Robertson's note of 1832 is that which relates to the system of government:³⁴

Among the many peculiarities apparent in the form of society and government, existing among the Cossyahs [sic], the absence of any recognized organ of supreme power is very remarkable. The *nation or horde* presents the appearance of a congregation of little *Oligarchical Republics*, subject to no common superior, yet of which, each member is amenable, in some degree, to the control of his confederates.³⁵

The views of Robertson or Pemberton, one must understand, are basically from a western ideological perspective, and as in Africa, here also the British rulers gave their own terms and created their own traditions according to their understanding of the situation.³⁶ It has to be questioned whether the emergence of an oligarchical system was possible in a society with the kind of economic and social relations which were present in the Khasi hills at that point of time. How much of a surplus was being produced which could sustain a formal political order with some degree of stratification and differentiation? Have primarily trading communities in a region of scarcity been able to sustain an oligarchy? Such questions have not been addressed by scholars when they have given their opinions on the Khasi traditions. However, what emerges from the official reports discussed above is that the administrators were either unaware of the local terms (if they were used), or that terms like *Durbar* had not come into use at that time, because these were after all loan words, and that concepts like *Durbar*

³⁰ Pemberton (1966), p.231.

³¹ Pemberton (1966), p.246. It appears this idea of a confederation, which was of course familiar to Pemberton, may not have been so to the Khasis at the time, but Pemberton's words were later on repeated by Khasi scholars in a very uncritical manner.

³² Pemberton (1966), p.246.

³³ Pemberton (1966), p.246.

³⁴ This comment is significant because later social scientists seem to have repeated it without question. See, for instance, Hamlet Bareh, *History and Culture of the Khasi People*, Guwahati, 1985; Barrister Pakem, 'State Formation in Pre-Colonial Jaintia', in Surajit Sinha (ed.), *Tribal and State Formation in Pre-Colonial eastern and North Eastern India* Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi & Co., 1987; D. R. Syiemlieh, *British Administration in Meghalaya: Policy and Pattern*, New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, New Delhi, 1989.

³⁵ Pemberton (1966), p.248 – emphasis added.

³⁶ Instances of the African situation can be had from works like Terence Ranger, 'The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa', in Hobsbawm & Ranger (1995);, and Oyugi *et al.* (1988).

Shnong or *Rangbah Shnong*, or the very formal, many-tiered system that was later described, had not developed to any great extent at that time.

In 1853, an officiating judge of the *Sudder* Court of Calcutta, A. J. Moffat Mills, was deputed by the Governor General to make an inquiry into the judicial anomalies in the North East frontier of the Bengal Presidency. The reports that Mills compiled of Assam and the Khasi and Jaintia Hills were so comprehensive that they have become an important information source on the areas.³⁷ The major part of the report deals with the judicial administration, because he had been sent specifically to look into this aspect about which there had been a lot of complaints. He called for the details of a number of cases, and studied them to assess the method of dispensing justice by the British officers in the Cherra court. Mills had personally visited Cherrapunji, but whether he visited the other areas is not very clear. He had, however, written for and obtained detailed reports from the officers posted in the different British stations so that he could file a substantial report, and these were appended to his main report. Mills makes clear use of terms that were not seen earlier. Though the Khasi chiefs are still referred to as ‘Rajahs’; about the Jaintias he wrote:

There are 23 *dullais* and *sirdars* in the Jaintia Hills, who have a certain number of *poonjees* or villages under their charge, and they investigate all petty cases of a civil and criminal nature within their district.³⁸

For further information Mills refers to the account provided to him by Rev. Lewis, who had been working amongst the Khasis and Jaintias for many years. About the “Khasia Courts of Judicature” Lewis wrote that the business of the state “is transacted at *darbars*, regularly proclaimed”.³⁹ In these meetings the Chief is the sole judge, and the villagers could be equated to a jury, even though they were very “submissive” if the chief was an influential one. Regarding the Jaintia Hills, Lewis provides the information about the existence of an official hierarchy with the *Dullai* (*Doloi*) at the top followed by the *pattors*, one to each village, and below them the village priest, who is the first to deal with all suits. Regarding the Khasis, however, Mills (quoting Lewis) mentions no such hierarchy, leaving us to understand that the *darbars* were called only at the level of the chief’s state and not at the level of the village. However, as is apparent from the 1872 census figures, the population of most of the states was so small (numbering a few hundred in many cases),⁴⁰ with a very few villages under them, that it was quite possible to collect all the people in a *darbar* or Council (as called by Pemberton).⁴¹ In his note on the *Khasia* Courts of Judicature, based on the account provided by Lewis, Mills gives the details of how a *darbar* is called. The village crier goes around calling everyone to a hearing of a case. In this there is no indication that women are not allowed to attend *darbars*. However, such a meeting was called only after the private reconciliation by the Chief and his headmen had failed. In this whole process the Chief remained the sole judge. It is interesting to note that Lister, the Political Agent in the Khasi Hills, while filing his report, mentioned that in the Jaintia hills *dullais* were elected by vote in the village, and their election had to be confirmed by the Agent. Lister gives no such information about the Khasi Hills. In the detailed tabulated list that Lister gives of the chiefs and their territories, the Khasi Chiefs have been individually referred to as *rajahs*, and since these chiefs were under the political control of the British any further information about their status and nomenclature would definitely have been provided if something specific existed.

³⁷ A. J. M. Mills, *Report on the Khasi and Jaintia Hills*, Shillong: 1901 [1853].

³⁸ Mills (1901 [1853]), p. 7.

³⁹ Mills (1901 [1853]), p. 7.

⁴⁰ W. W. Hunter (1998 [1879]), pp.248-249.

⁴¹ The list of Chiefs with the number of villages and households under their authority is provided by Mills from the report provided by Lister, Political Agent of the Khasi Hills.

There is no mention about institutions like *Dorbar Shnong*, and the concept of the general council or *Durbar* appears to have existed at the level of the agglomeration of the villages (i.e., the state). Even in the treaties signed between the Khasi chiefs and the British, the reference is to the *rajah* and not the *Siem*.

It is only in 1879, when Hunter's *Statistical Account of Assam* was first published, that we get to hear words such as *Siem* being used to refer to the Khasi Rajahs. Hunter uses this term in his list of the nineteen semi-independent "Khasi States or Democracies", the details of which he collected from the Assam Administration Report of 1875-76.⁴² But it is clear from this that by the end of the nineteenth century local terms were being used. It will be pertinent to note here that by this time western education introduced by the Welsh Calvinistic Mission was spreading in the Khasi-Jaintia hills. From the Normal school, set up for training teachers, already 16 local teachers had qualified in 1874-75. It would therefore not be surprising if western ideas had also begun interfering with local traditions by this time. This perhaps can be seen in the Hunter's description of the Khasi States:

The Khasi dependent states consist of petty democracies, presided over by chiefs called Siems, who, though taken from one family, are appointed by election; or by head-men, such as Wahadadars, Sardars, and Lyngdohs, whose office are absolutely elective. The appointment of all these chiefs and head-men is subject to the confirmation of the British Government, which also reserves to itself the right to remove them in case of misconduct.⁴³

Hunter does not dwell on certain important aspects of the structure of the Khasi states. If they were democratic, what kind of democracy was it? Were they democracies in the participatory sense only, or were they egalitarian and liberal also? If there was an election, who was elected, and how? It can be remembered here that in 1833 Robertson had called them oligarchies, and had also said from his experience that the Chiefs were quite despotic. Mills, reporting in 1853, had also not called them democracies. It is therefore necessary to enquire how British perceptions changed so radically in a period of thirty years or so. It could be argued that as the British consolidated their rule they began to have better understanding of the ground realities. That may be so, but the possibility that the colonial masters themselves influenced the local system cannot be ruled out. One needs to remember that by this time the British had realised the practicability of introducing some semblance of representative government in India, and therefore it would not be very surprising if the educated Khasis were also influenced by those ideas and sought to invent a tradition that would have some similarity to these new ideas.⁴⁴ However, in this very intensive survey made by Hunter there is no mention of the *Durbar* or its composition. He only comments that in the independent Khasi states the chiefs had full jurisdiction in all matters that concerned their own subjects.

⁴² Hunter, (1998 [1879]), p.248. There is no explanation by Hunter why he has used the term 'democracies' for the Khasi state. Hunter's source of information was The Assam Administration reports of 1875-76. Modern concepts like 'democracy of the Khasi states', which has become a part of the present-day 'tradition', may have started from sources like these.

⁴³ Hunter (1998 [1879]), p.204. When a Khasi educated elite began to emerge, the sources with which they reconstructed their own histories began with such British accounts.

⁴⁴ Comparison can be drawn here to Colonial Africa, where what were called customary laws, land rights and political structures were in fact all invented by colonial codifications. See John Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

It was not until 1906 that the traditional structures seem to have been presented in their full form, by P. R. T. Gurdon in his book *The Khasis*.⁴⁵ Gurdon makes a very intensive study of Khasi society, acknowledging the help he received from a number of Khasi gentlemen, who perhaps represent the first group of the western educated Khasi elite. Gurdon appears to contradict Hunter when he writes that the Khasi state is a “limited monarchy”.⁴⁶ Terms such as *Durbar* and *Mantri* seem to have been institutionalised by Gurdon, whereas earlier British officers appear to have used them as general words to describe a particular phenomenon, the words obviously having been picked up from their experiences in similar situations in other parts of India. Gurdon paints the picture of quite a structured system of governance, and unlike Hunter, provides the hierarchy of officials in the Khasi states. But it is significant to note that the idea of the *Durbar* still refers to that which is summoned by the *Syiem*, and there is no mention of *Durbars* at village level. Gurdon also describes in detail the process of election of the *Syiem*, and recounts how the electoral body was constituted from amongst the heads of the Lyngdoh clans. However, he makes a very important remark that “there has been a distinct tendency towards the broadening of the elective basis”.⁴⁷ If this was happening, it is safe to infer that a participatory democracy was beginning to emerge at the time Gurdon was referring to. He cautions that “the procedure should not, however, be regarded as stereotyped, for it will no doubt be open to such revision as may on occasion be suggested by the legitimate evolution of tribal custom”.⁴⁸

A little more than two decades later, this flexibility of customs was ended by the codification of customary laws.⁴⁹ This move towards codification, and therefore inflexibility, was highly sought after by educated Khasi men in the first decades of the twentieth century, as was very clearly portrayed in the *Report of the Land Reforms Commission for Khasi Hills*.⁵⁰ Thus through a process of evolution, many of the institutional forms of the Khasi polity were gradually evolving, in which process a number of factors must have played their role, not least the colonial state and the works of the Christian missionaries.

Tradition as seen in Christian Missionary writings.

The reports of the British officers may be criticised on the grounds that they were a part of the colonial bureaucracy, and therefore always slightly removed from the people and not fully aware of the grassroots realities of such social systems. The Christian missionaries, however, had to live among the people in order to evangelise. The missionaries may therefore be expected to give much better descriptions of the villages and the customs of the people. In order to preach, they had to know the local languages well; and although the literate Jaintias seem to have previously used Bengali,⁵¹ it was the early Christian missionaries who developed a script for the Khasi-Jaintias, and thus converted their dialect into a written

⁴⁵ P. R. T. Gurdon, *The Khasis*, New Delhi: Rep. Low Price Publications, 1993 [1906]. Gurdon’s study has been used rather uncritically by scholars in the region, notably Hamlet Bareh. See Manorama Sharma, ‘Sources and Construction of History: The Histories of the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo’, in Mignonette Momin (ed.), *Readings in History and Culture of the Garos*, New Delhi: Regency Publications, 2003, pp. 7-9.

⁴⁶ Gurdon (1993 [1906]), p.66.

⁴⁷ Gurdon (1993 [1906]), p.68.

⁴⁸ Gurdon (1993 [1906]), p.75.

⁴⁹ Keith Cantlie, *Notes on Khasi Law*, Shillong: Ri Khasi Press, 1974 [1934].

⁵⁰ Land Reforms Commission, *The Report of the Land Reforms Commission for Khasi Hills*, Shillong: Government Press, 1974.

⁵¹ See Bhuyan (1964).

language.⁵² The first missionaries in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills were from the Serampore Mission in Bengal. However, they ceased operating here in 1837, and from 1841 to the end of the nineteenth century Christian Missionary works were dominated by the Welsh Presbyterian Mission, with Catholic missionaries coming to the Khasi Hills only from around the 1870s.⁵³ In 1841, the first Welsh Presbyterian Missionary, Thomas Jones, arrived at Cherrapunji. Jones immediately began to learn the local language, and within a few months was able to preach to the people in Khasi. Before Jones, a Mr. Lish had also been putting the Khasi language into a written form, using the Bengali alphabets. But Jones resolved to introduce the Roman characters, and within a year started publishing books in Khasi written in the Roman script, with this becoming popularised through the education spread by the missionaries.⁵⁴ This acceptance of an alien script represented a first break with tradition, and exposure to new literature and ideas accelerated the change of customs. Jones went on to open the first missionary school at Mawsmai. He does not seem to have needed to obtain permission from any Chief, Rajah or *Rongbah Shnong*, in contrast to accounts from a Catholic Missionary in Manipur that the friendship of the Rajah of Manipur was important for the opening of the Catholic Mission there.⁵⁵ This may have been because the first mission buildings in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills were possibly set up in the military stations of the British. However, “for convenience of the work, permission was sought from the *Rajah* to build new premises on the Nongsawlia Hill lying mid-way between the military station and the Cherra village”.⁵⁶

It is necessary to examine why words like *syiem* or *Sardar* were not used by the missionaries at this time. Being conversant with local language and customs, the missionaries would have known such terms if they were locally used. It is striking that in the accounts of the trials and travails of the missionaries, facing opposition to Christian teachings by those who wanted to protect their old customs and beliefs, there is no mention of any kind of a village *durbar* or other such influential organisation, taking an organised stand against them. If the kind of official hierarchy we find mentioned at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century were present at that earlier time as an organised traditional body, why was its presence never felt by the missionaries in their close associations with the people? If nothing else, the missionaries would have tried to influence them with their ideas for their own convenience. Yet there is no mention of any such organised hierarchical system, or popular resistance exercised through such a system. In fact, the only resistance was individual or at most at the level of family and friends in a village getting together. There is also no evidence to show that the villagers went to any organised authority to try and stop missionary activities.

The missionaries seem to have faced more problems from their internal organisational complications than from any serious organised resistance from the local population. The story of Ka Nabon is very revealing in this context. This young girl had started attending the mission school at Nongsawlia in 1848, and was a very bright student. When she decided to convert to Christianity her family objected violently and tried to stop her. The girl’s mother and her relatives tried to take the girl away from the mission, but nothing worked, and finally the girl became a Christian. In this entire story of resistance by the family there is no mention of them trying to get the help of any authority in the village to rescue the girl from the

⁵² D. R. Syiemlieh, ‘Thomas Jones’ “Injudicious marriage”?, *Proceedings of North East India History Association, XIV Session*, 1994, p.240.

⁵³ Hugh Morris, *The History of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists’ Foreign Mission, to the end of the year 1904*, New Delhi: Indus Publishers, 1996 [1910].

⁵⁴ Morris (1996 [1910]), p.91.

⁵⁵ See M. C. George (ed.), *Centenary of the Catholic Church in North East India, 1890-1990: A Souvenir*, Shillong, 1990.

⁵⁶ Morris (1996 [1910]), pp. 93-94.

missionaries. All the resistance was organised by the relatives. The only mention is that of the Rajah of Cherra, who intervened when the missionary and his wife were in danger of facing violence from the Ka Nabon's relatives. The Rajah pacified the crowd by promising to bring about a compromise between the family and the missionaries. But the Rajah failed to pacify the relatives, some of whom continued to threaten the missionaries. It thus appears that the Rajah was not approached by the people to lead their resistance, but in fact seems to have tried to intercede on behalf of the missionaries, but the villagers were not ready to accept his decision.⁵⁷ What, then, was the 'tradition' in 1848? If there were *Dorbars*, why were these not observed by the missionaries who were otherwise so close to the lives of the people?

The early works of the missionaries were confined to areas around Cherrapunji. However, in 1866 the official headquarters of the British was shifted to Shillong, and in 1871, the Welsh Missionaries likewise moved there. It is in the record of the following period that we see the use of terms like 'Siim' or 'siimship'. It can be seen that from the late 1860s, reference is made not only to a more formalised polity, but also to an organised formal resistance that was not mentioned in the 1840s:

From the commencement of missionary operations in this village, the head-men of Shangpoong had shown the most bitter and determined opposition. Permission to open school was frequently sought and as frequently refused.... The *dolloi* further prohibited the renting or leasing of land to any Christian....⁵⁸

The opposition to the Christians seems to have been more organised in areas like Nartiang in the Jaintia Hills, where the *dollois* (mostly Hindus) resisted the influence of the Christians.⁵⁹ But these cases of opposition seem to be the exception rather than the rule, and the 'traditional' authorities, such as the *Syiems* and *Sardars*, were not really opposing the change of tradition that Christianity was bringing about in collaboration with the colonial government. Nor is any mention made of an institution of a village *darbar*. Where *darbar* is mentioned, it refers to the Chief's *darbar*. If small village level *darbars* were there, then people would have definitely taken their problems to it when they wanted to resist the missionaries changing their customary beliefs.

Tradition as seen in folk tales⁶⁰

Khasi folk tales can be categorised into two groups: the early ones, which seem to depict situations before significant exposure to alien influences; and the later ones, which clearly show the impact of other folk traditions and even of western fairy tales. Of the early tales, a large number relate to the Jaintia society, and these, when historically analysed, provide information about the society and economy of the area not found in conventional sources. But in all these apparently pre-colonial, or at least pre-Christian, stories, there is practically no reference to village organisations. Many of them refer to the Jaintia King, but do not mention anything like the existence of a *darbar shnong* or a *Rongbah Shnong*. In the later tales the influence of western can clearly be seen. There are stories that remind one of the fairy tales about Rapunzel, or the eagle princess, or even Sleeping Beauty. There are also some that are very similar to Assamese tales. In such folk tales, which can be dated to post-colonial times

⁵⁷ Morris (1996 [1910]).

⁵⁸ Morris (1996 [1910]), p.179.

⁵⁹ Morris (1996 [1910]) pp.184-185.

⁶⁰ The folk tales referred to in this section are those included in Mrs. Raby, *Folk Tales of the Khasis*, London: Macmillan & Co., 1920; I. M. Simon, *Khasi and Jaintia Tales and Beliefs*, Gauhati, 1966; and H. Bareh, *Khasi Fables and Folk Tales*, Calcutta: Firma K. L. M., 1971.

because of references to the use of guns or the existence of religious ideas which show a definite influence of Christian ideas, there are many direct presentations of more institutionalised authority structures. For example, in the folk tale called ‘U Sing Tanat and U Don Tanat’, which is very much like the story of the Eagle Princess, there is definite mention of the *darbar*, though here also the *darbar* appears to be more at the level of the state. Significantly, the story ends with the following words: “Not long after the Syiem passed away. The state *darbar* delegated kingly powers to Don Tanat.... He ruled the kingdom for many years”.⁶¹

It is very necessary here to examine how the concept of kingship emerged in Khasi society, and whether the level of economic development of that society was such that could have sustained the kind of system that was called a kingdom. The difference between a king and a chief has to be grasped. One can perhaps see the ideological preferences of the compilers and translators of such tales. For example, in a tale in Mrs. Rafy’s work there is mention of the practice of *Suttee* (a Hindu practice of burning the widow on the funeral pyre of the husband). In this folk tale called “The Legend of U Raitong: The Khasi Orpheus”, Mrs. Rafy’s account closes with the following narration:

The news of the unparalleled devotion of Mahadei to her lover spread abroad throughout the land and stirred the minds of men and women in all countries. The chaste wives of India, when they heard of it said ‘... Henceforth we will offer our bodies on the alter of death, on the pyre of our husbands, to prove our devotion and fidelity.’ Thus originated the custom of *Suttee* in many parts of India.⁶²

These ideas were obviously inspired by the consciousness about this widow–burning practice, which was being highly debated and also condemned by a section of the educated elite in other parts of India in the nineteenth century.⁶³ It would not be too far fetched to assume that the Khasi educated elite knew of these developments, and such views must have influenced the Mrs. Rafy’s informants. The references to the ‘state’, the Siem’s *Durbar*, which are found in this tale, also has to be analysed in the light of this perception, particularly because there was a mention of ‘India’.

The early folk tales of the Khasi part of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills deal more with nature, animals and the supernatural elements than with social organisation and institutions.⁶⁴ The folk tales based on Jaintia society, however, have more reference to human society and institutions. An analysis of these tales therefore tells us not only about the values of early Khasi society, but also about the level of development of that society. These folk tales, when used as points of further clarification or even corroboration of the other sources discussed above, give us some insight into the existing and emerging traditions (or invented traditions) of Khasi-Jaintia society.

Some Plausible Conclusions

Traditions are not ‘age old’, nor do they need to be. Sometimes even quite recently created traditions have served the interests of a society very well. It is in this context that we felt the

⁶¹ Bareh (1971), p.47.

⁶² Rafy (1920), p.35.

⁶³ One can refer here to the views Raja Ram Mohun Roy and the work of the Brahma Samaj on the issue of *Suttee*.

⁶⁴ See, for instance, the folk tales grouped under the category of ‘The Ancient World’ in Simon (1966).

need to critically assess traditions in Meghalaya. In the writings of historians and other scholars from the first decades of the twentieth century we find the construction of a narrative of an organised Khasi-Jaintia polity. The first rough structure we find taking shape in the work of P. R. T. Gurdon, followed by the widely quoted work by the Khasi scholar Homiwell Lyngdoh and later in the writings of Khasi scholars such as Hamlet Bareh, Helen Giri, Barrister Pakem and L. S. Gassah.⁶⁵ These scholars, along with others, seem to have repeated either P. R. T. Gurdon's or Homiwell Lyngdoh's works, or each others' writings, without much criticism. Lyngdoh's book, although referred to as an authority by most indigenous scholars, actually provides no evidence for what he writes.⁶⁶ Bareh's work also has the same problem, and he often makes a number of statements without much evidence. The ethnocentrism of their methodology becomes quite apparent at times. However, through uncritical repetition, a picture of 'tradition' has emerged of a pyramid-like structure, with the State, or *Hima*, of the *Syiem* with his *Dorbar* at the apex. Below this there comes the *Dorbar raid*, where several villages joined together to form the *raid*,⁶⁷ "with the *Dorbar raid* to take care of disputes between the villages."⁶⁸ Below the *Dorbar raid* was the *Dorbar Shnong*, which was the village *Dorbar* and which looked after the social affairs of the village. A *Rangbah Shnong* headed the *Dorbar Shnong*, *Lyngdohs* or *Basans* headed the *Dorbar Raid*, and the *Syiem* was the head of the *Dorbar Hima*. According to Helen Giri, "the *Syiem* can do nothing without the *Dorbar Hima*. This *Dorbar Hima* elects or dethrones the *Syiem*, it promulgates laws and bye-laws, it gives the assent to the appointment of *Myntris*, *Lyngdohs* or *Basans*...."⁶⁹ In the Jaintia hills, the three tier system consisted of the *Syiem* or *Raja*, the twelve *Dollois* (*Khadar Dolloi*), who were in charge of the hill areas of the Jaintia kingdom, and the village administration under the village headman (*Waheh Chnong*). Taking as his source Hamlet Bareh's work, Syiemlieh writes that in Khasi-Jaintia hills "village administration was by an assembly of all resident adult males under an informal headman elected by them from among their number".⁷⁰

In all these narratives there are assertions that need to be scrutinised. For instance, in the three major sources we have examined, as late as the 1850s there is no direct evidence to show that women were not allowed to take part in decision making. In fact, the Queen mother in the Jaintia kingdom seems to have played an important political role. So when did the very patriarchal tradition of only adult males being allowed in public affairs begin to be invented? An obvious conjecture would be that when the Christian missionaries came they brought along with them their own ideas and value preferences. Drawing upon the social reality of their home countries, they introduced various ideas to the countries to which they went. For instance, the Basel missionaries (a product of Wurttemberg pietism) carried with them to Africa their concept of an ideal rural society, which they had developed through their attempts to defend pre-industrial German peasant life.⁷¹ Similarly, the Welsh Presbyterian missionaries brought with them the ideas that a good life must begin with education. So they introduced to

⁶⁵ See Bareh (1971); Pakem (1987); Helen Giri, *Khasis under British Rule; 1824-1947*, New Delhi: Regency Publications, 1998; L. S. Gassah, *Traditional Institutions of Meghalaya: A Study of Doloi and his Administration*, New Delhi: Regency Publications, 1998.

⁶⁶ Homiwell Lyngdoh, *Ka Niam Khasi*, 1937.

⁶⁷ It is of interest to note that in the *Khasi-English Dictionary* compiled by U Nissor Singh (1904), the word *raid* does not exist. The word found is *raj* - jurisdiction or state; the people, the constituency; and *ri raj*- a *rajor* public land. This latter word was written as *ri raid* in Land Reforms Commission (1974). The word *raid* can be found in Bareh (1985) and Giri (1998).

⁶⁸ Giri (1998), p.19.

⁶⁹ Giri (1998), p.19.

⁷⁰ Syiemlieh (1989), p.6.

⁷¹ Ranger (1995), p.213.

the Khasi and Jaintia Hills patterns of education as developed in England and Wales, with the values of liberalism and individualism, and created a group of western educated individuals with views and values that were perhaps alien to their traditional value systems. With the new ideas came ideas of patriarchy, which was the dominant social system from where the missionaries came. Women in western countries were still to fight for their right to vote, and the prevailing ideas regarding women were implanted into the Khasi society too. Thus with Christianity came a male-oriented value system, and the new education and British rule further strengthened that system. The tradition of keeping women out of public bodies therefore seems to be a new tradition that was perhaps invented as recently as the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. In fact, in a folk tale named “The Goddess who came to live with mankind”, there is an interesting reference to the fact that early chiefs (*syiems*) were indeed women,⁷² although patriarchal influences have led to this being interpreted as meaning the *Syiems* were descended from that divine woman.

In the narratives regarding the Khasi-Jaintia political structure mentioned above there is no reference to the *Dong*. But in our recent surveys in the city of Shillong there has emerged a tier of administration at the lowest rung called the *Dong*, or block. This appears to be the bottom level of today’s pyramid. A number of *Dongs* together form one *Dorbar Shnong*. In a *Dong*, the *Rangbah Dong* heads the *Dorbar*. Here, therefore, we find additions to a tradition as new requirements arose. The tradition of the *Rangbah Shnong* does not seem to be very ancient, because we do not come across that term in the earlier accounts. In a Catholic missionary account of 1911, relating the experiences of Father Chrysostom in the Bhoi area, we find the following information:

On the eve of my departure all the men of the new Christian community came to me with a serious problem. It was that of choosing two ‘Rangbah’ (elders), for without such village leaders nothing could go well in the village, they said. If troubles arise everyone will want to act as ‘Rangbah’ and there will be nobody who can speak and act with authority. I gave my consent and then left them to choose the manner of electing the ‘Rangbah’. They were all of the opinion that the ‘Phadar’ (Father) should appoint two men whom he considered fit for this office and all would accept his decision. Well I appointed two elderly men whom I thought would be most fit, and they were all satisfied....⁷³

This account requires us to examine the historicity of the hierarchical structure, and the idea that participatory democracy was age-old. The kind of consciousness that is required to give rise to the concept of an elected system of authority needs a particular type of socio-economic reality. What were the levels of consciousness in Khasi society at various phases of its evolution? From an analysis of the data currently in our hands we can say, with a certain amount of certainty, that a new social force was beginning to emerge in Khasi-Jaintia society, at least from the second half of the nineteenth century. This was wrought through the western education introduced and spread by the Christian missionaries with the tacit support of the colonial government. Figures from the missionary records, showing the number of students enrolled in their schools, demonstrates this (Table 1).

⁷² Ruffy (1920), p. 23.

⁷³ *Salvatorian News*, 3 (1912), p.54.

Table 1 – Number of Khasi-Jaintia students enrolled in Christian missionary schools (1861-1891)

Source: Morris (1996 [1910]), p.192

| Year | Number of Students |
|------|--------------------|
| 1861 | 290 |
| 1871 | 1,250 |
| 1881 | 2,666 |
| 1891 | 4,625 |

These same records also show that large numbers of men who were educated in the mission schools began to hold positions of influence and responsibility in government offices and other places; and there were an increasing number of educated Khasi men and women. The first Khasi university graduate was Babu Dohori, who graduated from Calcutta University in 1898. He was followed by his friend U Solomon. In 1904, Ka Aannamon became the first Khasi girl to pass her First Arts examination. As the educated elite began to enter government service, we can see the emergence of collaboration between the government and this new social force, which had more progressive ideas than their uneducated kinsmen. It would not be surprising if they in many ways strengthened some of the perceptions that the colonial government was trying to foster.

Here we see a similar pattern of evolution to that of colonial Africa, where the colonial masters first tried to suppress any already existing authority. But soon they realised that it would be convenient for them to rule if the traditional authority was vested with powers under colonial supervision, and where such powers were not present the colonial rulers created them. A similar sequence of events can be seen in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. For instance, when in the 1830s the Khasi chiefs resisted the entry of the British there was a process of suppressing the two most significant chiefs, those of Khyrim and Nongkhlaw, and allowing the less significant ones to remain on their own with the understanding that they would accept British supremacy. Do we perhaps see a change in the attitude of the Government after the Jaintia rebellion of 1861? This rebellion was a serious challenge to British power, and there perhaps was a subtle pacification of the people after the rebellion was suppressed. It is in this phase that an attempt was made to organise systems that would not only help the British, but also inaugurate an era of new ideas in the polity. The chiefs who had been described as being despotic by many British officers had their powers circumscribed by the councils, now formally called *darbars*. It is interesting to see that the treaties, which the chiefs had concluded with the British in the period before 1853, all begin with the words “I chief of ...”, and there is no mention of the *darbar* when the chief is ceding land and rights to the British. But in 1926, when the *Syiem* of Myllem reached an agreement with the British to grant them some lands in Shillong, this began with the words “on behalf of the Myllem state Durbar, I hereby agree....”⁷⁴ A system of checks and balances seems to have set in. Here one can see the influence of the newly emerging social force that was beginning to acquire hegemony over the society in the absence of any other organised, articulate force. Here again we can see a parallel with colonial Africa. There seems to have emerged a very close relation between the newly educated elite and the chiefs; and from the missionary records it appears that many *Syiems* had also become Christians. What happened in Tanganyika may perhaps have also happened here when the western-educated Khasis, imbued with new ideas, joined hands with

⁷⁴ See C. U. Aitchison (ed.), *A Collection of Treaties, Engagements and Sanads relating to India and Neighbouring Countries, Vol. XII*, Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1983, pp.118-195.

the chiefs in what John Iliffe describes as “Progressive Chiefs and mission educated [Africans] combining in a programme of ‘progressive traditionalism’”.⁷⁵ We can infer here that by the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, such a programme of progressive traditionalism began and innovations, such as the institution of *Dong*, were introduced as and when the situation required. Evidence of this can be seen in the views expressed by important churchmen, and other educated men in the early years of the twentieth century. They stressed tradition, but at the same time wanted codification of customary laws (which brought an end to the flexibility of customs), and also introduction of systems very much in consonance with the liberal values of the west.⁷⁶ Terence Ranger’s quote from Leroy Vail is very pertinent for understanding the situation here also:

For the well-educated elite to accept traditional values and a hierarchical arrangement of society under chiefs is *not* to be wondered at, given the nature of the Victorian education they had received in the [mission] schools.⁷⁷

Thus, traditions came to be strengthened, but with the interpolation of a lot of new ideas and practices. On the one hand, this helped in the maintenance of their ethnic identity; while on the other, new social requirements were also met. For instance, the *dorbar*, which appears to have originally functioned at the level of the Clan (*jait*) or the *Kur* (extended clan), because of the nature of village settlements was later introduced into the urban cosmopolitan areas too.

The root of the tensions and conflicts that today hamper governance in Meghalaya can be partly traced back to this reframing of traditions. But the historical data points to another important fact. If today there is a rigid stand taken by the traditional authorities, and if that rigidity is leading to problems of governance, then it is necessary to go back to tradition and understand how that tradition came into being. A dispassionate historical enquiry would perhaps reveal that the traditional institutions became structured under the influence of the new ideas that came into Khasi society on exposure to the ideas of representative government that were promoted by the British in India. This aspect is clearly evident from the role played by the western-educated, mainly Christian, elite, which became a very important social force from the end of the nineteenth century. In fact, it is this section that seems to have upheld the idea of ‘traditional institutions’. Thus a proper critical and historical reading of traditional institutions may well prepare the ground for their transformation in Meghalaya, and this would be a great step forward in easing the crisis in urban governance.

⁷⁵ Iliffe (1979), p.253.

⁷⁶ See, for example, Land Reforms Commission (1974).

⁷⁷ Ranger (1995), p.242.

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