

Traditional Institutions of Governance in the Hills of North East India : The Khasi Experience

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Introduction

Over the past several years, traditional institutions of governance in the region, and more particularly in Meghalaya, have become increasingly activated. They are finding space in contemporary governance. The Central government is giving them attention with funds for infrastructure and development. The State administrative machinery depends on the institutions for a great deal of support, which in turn has made the traditional heads of the Khasi *Himas*, *Raids*—conglomeration of villages and *Rangbahshnong* — and village headmen almost indispensable within the structure of administration. This has again increased the interaction and dependence of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council and the Shillong Municipal Board on the traditional institutions. Indeed there are situations where citizens have had, for some reason or other, to get the sanction of one, two or even all three of the traditional institutions, be it for a residential certificate, or documents of identity for opening a bank account and such requirements. And all this and more from institutions that are

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yet to get constitutional recognition. The paper will make an attempt to study in some broad detail the position of the traditional institutions in the region and bring the discussion to bear on more contemporary times. The canvas will initially be broad but will eventually be narrowed down to the Khasi situation as we see it today. Reference will be made in the historical narrative to the colonial pattern of administration and the changes that came after independence.

The North East region became part of the Indian state as a consequence of British rule and given an Indian identity through the last two centuries. This process began with the acquisition of Assam in 1826, Cachar in 1832, Jaiñtia in 1835 and the annexation of the hill periphery through the 19th century closing with the annexations of the Naga and the Lushai Hills. The Assam plain districts were regulated districts, administered just like other parts of India. The hill areas in the region that came under the direct control of the British colonial state were categorised by the Government of India Act 1935 as either Excluded Area or Partially Excluded Areas. The Excluded Areas¹ were under the executive control of the Assam Governor. The Partially Excluded Areas² were under the control of the Governor and subject to ministerial administration, but the Governor had an overriding power when it came to exercising his discretion. No act of the Assam or Indian legislatures could apply to these two hill divisions unless the Governor in his discretion so directed. He was empowered to make regulations for the hill districts, which had the force of law. The administration of these hills was his 'special responsibility'. With no representatives in the Assam Assembly (other than those from the Partially Excluded areas, which sent one legislator each), political activity above their village and local levels before 1947 appeared to have been in a nascent stage other than in some urban settings.

Within the region were the twenty-five Khasi states —*Himas*— Manipur and Tripura. The Khasi states were nominally under the administration of their traditional rulers (*Syiems, Lyngdohs, Sirdars* and *Wabadadars*) in *Dorbar* with only a supervising attention from the Deputy Commissioner of the Khasi and Jaiñtia Hills District who

