

Readings in History and Culture of the Garos

(ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF MILTON S. SANGMA)

Editor
MIGNONETTE MOMIN

The Garos are one of numerous 'tribal' groups inhabiting India's Northeast region. They were included for the first time in modern historical and ethnographical studies in the latter half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. Since then there have been sporadic writings on the Garos right up to the close of the twentieth century. However, many of them have yet to get over the colonial bias in terms of methods, approaches and even themes, despite the availability of additional source materials and of alternative, more effective research techniques. As a result, studies in the Garos' history and culture have not kept pace with the march of contemporary research.

This collection of essays aims at making a beginning to fill in some of the lacunae inherent in the existing works on the Garos. It covers a wide range of topics, from the handling of sources and interpretation of their evidence to empirical studies on pre-British, British and post-British policies and on hitherto unknown facets of Garo history even beyond the boundaries of the present-day Garo Hills to comparative studies on their culture (including customs, practices and beliefs) to matters of the origin of the Garo identity, language, etc. It is hoped that the readings will broaden perceptions of the historical experience of the Garos, stimulate interest in the local and regional studies of the Indian sub-continent and promote awareness of the roots of the composite Indian culture.

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- David R. Syiemlieh
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READINGS IN HISTORY
AND
CULTURE OF THE GAROS

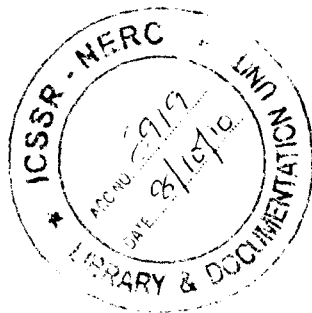
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Sources and Construction of History: The Histories of the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo

Manorama Sharma

Today's state of Meghalaya comprises the territories of the Khasi Hills, the Jaintia Hills and the Garo Hills of the erstwhile political entity of the state of Assam as organised by the British administration. Prior to the creation of the state of Assam by the British, the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo hills had some significant interactions with the most powerful of the kingdoms of the region, the Ahom Kingdom.¹ It thus has had historical and inevitable links with present day Assam and also Bangladesh, particularly the districts of Mymensingh and Sylhet in Bangladesh. It is because of these historical connections that when we talk about the sources of the history of Meghalaya we must understand that these sources are varied and may not be confined only to the present day existing territorial boundaries. For instance in many of the *Buranji* chronicles maintained by the Ahom kings there are references to the Khasi *syiems* and also to the economic transactions that took place between the hills and the Ahom kingdom.² Even earlier records as mentioned in works like those of K.L. Baruah³ and P.C. Choudhury⁴ have ample references to the economy and polity of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo societies. A truly holistic analysis of the sources of the history of Meghalaya would thus require a knowledge and also familiarity with the existing historical sources of the neighbouring areas as well. In using and assessing such sources a lot will depend on how scholars perceive and conceptualise history. But there is no doubt that a comprehensive use of all such sources will definitely enable us to understand the economic, social and political situations of the

peoples of Meghalaya through the periods of historical evolution. Over the years, beginning from the period of British occupation in the nineteenth century, more precisely from early twentieth century, a number of works have been written on the Khasis, Jaintias and the Garos, both by British anthropologists cum officers stationed in these regions and by trained, professional social scientists. These works have used various kinds of sources to focus on the history of the Khasi, Jaintia and the Garo societies. A survey of some of the major works would enable us to take stock of the status of historical writings on this region and also to make an assessment of the methods and models practised by the scholars, to facilitate filling up of gaps in the existing status of knowledge. Such an exercise would of course require some discussion on the goals of history writing to put in perspective the historiographical preferences of the major scholars of the region.

The goals of history writing have never been static, and so it becomes necessary that there is a continuous evaluation of the works in a particular subject so that the changing trends can be grasped and analysed. For instance, looking at the general development of a philosophy of History we see that it has been a long evolutionary process. In fact in the Antiquity and also during the Middle Ages the goals of history writing were very different from what they were in the 17th and 18th centuries. The concept of critical history was non-existent for the ancients, but gradually with the evolution of the process of history writing the search for truth about the past of human beings came to be accepted as one of the main tasks of History, and thus developed critical history because the avowed task of history writing was to distinguish between the truth and the untruth. With these changes, although the earlier pragmatism did not die out immediately, the ideas of assessment and interpretation emerged, and thus developed various models of history writing and historiographic approaches. From this point onwards advances in history writing kept step with the methodological and philosophical advances in other arts and sciences. History began to acquire a scientific outlook and the attempt of historians began to veer towards explaining change and thus to identify laws of social development.⁵ All historians, of course, do not believe in writing histories that could identify laws of social development. There are some who continue to argue that "academic study should be engaged

in simply 'for its own sake'.⁶ The works of such historians, no matter how informative and interesting they may be, however face certain problems particularly when it comes to the use and interpretation of sources, because they come without a philosophy of history and so give little importance to theories of history and historiography, and thus very often remain descriptive catalogues. It is necessary to keep in mind that mere descriptive efforts imply an unsubstantiable value neutrality implying a *status quoist* bias. Such bias makes social science research in general "essentially descriptive [and] devoid of meaningful theory."⁷ A historian thus needs not only to be aware of the sources available for a work and the bias of those sources and the consequent correctives and corroboration required in order to make sense of the sources, but also a certain sense of a philosophy of history. So what is required is a perception of the historian towards society and the position that the historian takes regarding the meaning, content and goal of history. The historians who claim that the task of history writing entails nothing more demanding than the presenting of information, with a slight sprinkling of analysis, have contributed to the trivialising of the discipline. The difference between chronicling and history did not dawn on them. The main reason for such developments in historiography seems to have been due to the fact that not much importance has been given by historians to theoretical and conceptual issues.⁸

We have argued elsewhere that academic and intellectual consciousness cannot be alienated from the general level of socio-economic growth.⁹ Karl Marx, while reflecting on the essence of historical materialism had pointed out that "the production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men—the language of real life."¹⁰ As K.N. Panikkar has observed, it is definitely a 'difficult and challenging task' to determine how ideas are 'directly interwoven' with material activity and not mere reflections of that activity and for that it is imperative that we evolve a methodology based on theoretical perceptions.¹¹ It is however beyond the purview of this paper to dwell on these aspects of methodological and theoretical complexities. What is sought to be emphasised is the fact that there exists a direct relationship between intellectual development (read consciousness) and material realities. The establishment of the

colonial state definitely brought about certain ideological dependencies because not only were there ideological dimensions in the institutions created by the state but “those institutions based on principles which informed an advanced polity and economy were quite over-developed in the given political and social context of the colony.”¹² Thus the colonial linkage with Britain was not confined to economic exploitation alone. A look into the development of the historiographic traditions in India during the colonial period provides ample evidence of this. For instance the nationalist historians of the pre-1947 period were “influenced by the Western liberal ideas and so their theoretical motivation was also the liberal positivist motivation.”¹³ It is interesting to note that during this period liberalism was also the dominant philosophy in England and thus history writing in India during that period clearly reflected those ideas, although many Indian historians did try to express an Indian identity albeit coloured by liberal traditions. The relationship that existed between Indian intellectual development in general and England in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century almost came to be repeated in the intellectual relationship that developed between economically more developed parts of India and its lesser developed regions. The point in question is the relationship between the less developed North-eastern states of India and the heart of the more developed parts of India. The social and consequently academic and intellectual developments of these states felt the effects of the comparative economic backwardness of the area. For instance if we look into the perceptions of such intellectual stalwarts of the region like Gunabhiram Baruah and Hemchandra Baruah we get a feel of this. Both these stalwarts were influenced to a great degree by the intellectual developments of the time in Bengal. Hemchandra Baruah was very closely associated with the ideas of Raja Ram Mohun Roy although he never became a Brahmo.¹⁴ In fact even Lakshmi Nath Bezbaruah had written that they were fully immersed in the Bengali world of knowledge.¹⁵ Another important Assamese of the late nineteenth century, Bol! Narayan Borah, although an engineer by profession, was also very much involved in the world of literature. He edited and in fact wrote most of the articles published in the magazine ‘Mou’.¹⁶ Borah was a person who was brought up entirely in Western literary and philosophical tradition. “The impact of the Indian renaissance of

the nineteenth century was specially evident in the character of Borah. There is no doubt about the fact that modern Western education had made him a believer in rationalism.”¹⁷ Thus we see that through Bengal the dominant intellectual traditions of the rest of India made their entry into the North-east and these traditions, whether in literature or in other academic pursuits like history writing continued to influence intellectual development in the region even late into the twentieth century. The trends of historical research in the region have therefore also fallen victim to this influence, and the interpretative and analytical aspects of history writing in the region still have much to be desired.

Before the onset of colonial rule the region had its own vehicles of carrying forth the historical consciousness of the people like the *Buranji* literature left behind by the Ahom, and the pre-literate societies had their own myths, legends, folk-lore, tools, weapons etc. to tell the stories of the lives of the people from very early times. But these vehicles of historical consciousness have to be interpreted and analysed, and today’s historians have models and methods available which they can use to study the historical consciousness of a people—both the embedded consciousness and the externalised consciousness as has been categorised by Romila Thapar.¹⁸ To what extent and in what way historians of the region have made use of the existing sources can be gauged by a survey of some of the important works which have been written on the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos. Such a survey will also provide us with an insight into the historiographic trends that have developed over a period of time and enable us to evaluate those trends. For this purpose a few works have been selected which cover a period of time from early twentieth century to the 1990s. The purpose is not to write a review of the works regarding the handling of historical truths or findings but to draw out the basic historiographic trends represented in them through an assessment of their handling of sources and the interpretations presented thereof.

Two of the earliest works on the Khasi and Garo are those written by P.R.T. Gurdon and Major A. Playfair.¹⁹ Both these works were the result of a proposal by Sir Bampfylde Fuller in 1903 and sanctioned by the Government of India, to prepare a series of monographs on the more important tribes and castes of the province of Assam.²⁰ Gurdon’s work *The Khasis* was the first

in this series and Playfair's *The Garos* followed. Being part of a government sponsored project these works were obviously aimed at facilitating the administrative machinery of the colonial rulers, because no people can be ruled without understanding their life patterns, customs, origins, history etc. The two books therefore have an identical organisation of chapters, and both in the same sequence describe the habitat, appearance, origins, affinities, dress, etc., domestic life, laws and customs, religion, folklore and language of the Khasis and Garos. Neither of the two writers was a trained historian, but their works are comprehensive, ethnographic works that provide historians with a wealth of empirical information albeit from the British/colonial perspective. This perspective is revealed time and again in various small instances in both the works. For instance Gurdon writes that "it would be an evil day for the Khasis if anything should occur to arrest the progress of the mission work in the Khasi Hills."²¹ On the same theme he also writes that "Khasis ... who have adopted Christianity are cleaner in their persons than the non-Christians."²² However Gurdon's work has today become almost a source book for scholars working on the Khasis, and the worrying aspect is that later historians have used Gurdon very uncritically.

The usefulness of Gurdon's work lies in the fact that it is a descriptive narrative of the dress, religion, agriculture, etc. of the Khasis. There is very little attempt at interpretations. For example Gurdon writes that Khasis possess very few agricultural sayings and proverbs and lists a few of them.²³ But there is no explanation as to why this was so. This information can be useful for anyone trying to map out a history of agriculture of the Khasis. But interestingly, or unfortunately, the ethnographic information left behind by Gurdon has not been used as it should have been. Many questions can be asked of his information, and the answers derived by using the tools of analysis available to historians today can provide very deep insights into Khasi society and economy. For example he gives a list of clan names, but since he was not a trained historian it did not occur to him that an analysis of the names of the clans could lead to the construction of a very interesting economic and social history of the Khasi-Jaintia people. But this is something that trained historians should have been able to do but the tragedy is that, that has not happened. The reason for this can be found in what has been

discussed above about how trends in the development of academic scholarship evolve in different places. For instance, Gurdon writes that Myllem-ngap possibly referred to the ancestress (the sweet one); but he does not think it necessary to relate it to the occupation of bee keeping of which he himself gives a detailed description.²⁴ Or if one takes the case of the Diengdoh clan of which Gurdon gives a very detailed history based on the existing myths and legends.²⁵ There exists today, for historians, a methodology of analysing myths and legends.²⁶ Using such methodologies Gurdon's account of the Diengdoh myth could reveal very interesting developments and keeping in mind the fact that the dictionary meaning of *Dieng* is wood.²⁷ It is also only to be expected of Gurdon that he takes words like *Mantri*, *Dorbar*, etc. for granted without trying to historically date the use of these terms which are evidently loan terms. The shortcomings in Gurdon's analyses which have been highlighted above however can be explained by the fact that he was an ethnographer and British officer in the region and not a professional historian, and like Edward Gait in Assam he too facilitated research into habits and culture of the Khasi-Jaintia people for the furtherance of British colonial administrative needs in the hills. But interestingly later scholars, even from this region have also merely quoted Gurdon without attempting a historical study of the information provided by Gurdon.²⁸ There is however no doubt about the fact that Gurdon's work is a very useful and informative work, and it should have led other scholars to go to the roots of the causes of the various phenomena mentioned in the book. The necessity is therefore to go beyond Gurdon and not merely to quote or repeat him.

In 1967 Hamlet Barih wrote a history of the Khasi people entitled *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*.²⁹ This is also basically a descriptive account of the origins, culture, and society of the Khasis from the earliest to contemporary times. For the earlier part of his work he draws very largely from P.C. Choudhury's work on early Assam³⁰ and P.R.T. Gurdon's work on the Khasis. His conclusions are also those of Choudhury and Gurdon, and one must remember that many of Choudhury's conclusions have been quite controversial mainly because, as Mignonette Momin has pointed out, he was "not quite successful at offering a new historical insight because (he) subscribed to the

existing stereotypes.”³¹ About Gurdon’s historiographic preferences we have already discussed above. What strikes one in going through Bareh’s work is the lacunae in his historical sense, particularly so because he is a trained historian, and also an insider to his area of study. For instance he writes, “Mailong Rajah, the last Malngiang king, is placed about 1250 A.D. This ruler repelled one Muslim invasion that came to his borders. H. Lyngdoh thinks he survived till 1651 A.D.”³² Bareh stops at this without giving any historical evidence to substantiate his contention of the Muslim invasion, or stating his position about the dating and leaves his reader to conjecture that the “Malngniang king” lived for about 400 years. There are a number of other such ambiguities in his descriptive narrative. Besides such discrepancies one finds that Bareh is also conceptually very confused and does not distinguish between a clan leader, a tribal chief, and a king or a kingdom. The greatest historiographic problem of using his descriptions even as sources is that he gives no evidences for his statements. When he comes to the later colonial period we find that he gives us an account of what the British did, based primarily on archival materials. But in handling these archival records he does not emerge out of the bias of the archival records, i.e., he does not use other sources to balance the archival sources and therefore ends up by presenting the rulers’ perspectives of the Khasi society and does not focus upon the processes of historical development in the society.³³ So despite the fact that he is a Khasi he has not been able to go beyond Gurdon, and therefore does not give us an idea of what happened to the Khasi society as a whole with the coming of colonial rule. There is ample material today to show that with the coming of colonialism in India significant changes were wrought in the social and economic framework of the whole of the Indian society manifested through such facets as the emergence of new social force in both the rural and urban sectors.³⁴ Historically therefore the Khasi society too must have undergone many such changes with the coming of colonial rule. Analysis of such historical phenomena are absent in Bareh’s work. The main reason for this lies in the fact that Bareh falls into that group of historians who merely document empirical information without any attempt to put that information into a conceptual framework. In fact Bareh, as many other historians of the region also, seems to be quite innocent of the fact that history requires

some theoretical perceptions too in order to transform facts to history. There is no doubt that in the field of history writing there is always some importance of a pure empiricist who, following the Rankean tradition, believes in providing facts which have been properly authenticated. Bareh's work however suffers on that count also because his empirical information is not always historically validated and there is a strong chauvinistic streak in his presentation of the data. Chauvinism in a historian can never be a very productive quality although this aspect of the development of history writing in India has been a fallout of the uncritical following of the Nationalist School of historiography. The glorifying of local traditions was decried even by H.K. Barpujari when he pointed out that "there has been a general tendency in our local studies to magnify regional achievements, to exalt local heroes and to glorify local language, customs and usages out of proportion to their intrinsic value."³⁵ Namita Shadap Sen sums up Bareh's writings very succinctly when she writes that he has nothing very new to say about the earlier period of the Khasi society, and adds, "he repeats many traditional accounts which have little or no historical value. He relies too much on evidence of fanciful etymologies which are quite untrustworthy from the linguistic point of view."³⁶

Following Bareh, another insider's view of the Khasi society appears in Namita Shadap Sen's work *Origins and Early History of the Khasi Synteng People* published in 1981. Shadap Sen takes a more critical view of myths and legends, but she does not have a well worked out conceptual framework of analysing myths. Thus though begun well, towards the end of the work she falls back into descriptive accounts. But she does take a more historical approach in trying to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the earlier works on the subject. In her attitude towards Gurdon's work also she is more cautious and does not merely quote him. For instance, while discussing aspects of Khasi religion she writes, "It appears that Gurdon was quoting the opinions of Christianised Khasis who wished to make the lesser *blei* appear as similar as possible to the angels of Christianity and Islam."³⁷ Her use of sources is also wide ranging and she makes an attempt to use these different types of sources from various origins for both corroboration and information. Shadap Sen is one historian of the Khasi-Jayantia society who has tried to use sources available

in the neighbouring areas like the *Buranji* literature. The only actual translation of a *Buranji* into English is the *Tungkhungia Buranji*. Other *Buranjis* either have an introduction in English by S.K. Bhuyan or a short summary of the *Buranji* also by Bhuyan. This perhaps is what Shadap Sen refers to in page 84 of her work when she refers to the *Deodhai Asom Buranji*. But what is commendable in her account is her use of philology to try and interpret legends and not merely record them, albeit one must agree that linguistic interpretation needs to be corroborated with other historical data to be able to arrive at conclusive assertions about socio-economic and political developments. There is however no doubt about the fact that Shadap-Sen has made a very definite attempt to move away from the dominant, purely empirical, tradition and provide a more analytical handling of her material of the early history of the Khasi-Synteng people although, for the most part, it remains a descriptive and narrative account with interpretations that remains at the superficial level of the data without trying to focus on the social processes which shaped history. Her work is by and large free of chauvinistic tendencies and marks a break in the approach to the study of the Khasi-Jaintia societies. Her use of a variety of sources is commendable.

In 1982 P.N. Dutta's *Impact of West on the Khasis and Jaintias* was published.³⁸ This work begins with an account of the traditional Khasi society, and gives a lucid description of the trade, economy, social customs etc. of the Khasis and Jaintias but makes no attempt at linking these developments to reconstruct the historical evolution of the people and the society. One of his major sources for this information is P.R.T. Gurdon,³⁹ and he uses Gurdon in the same uncritical way as he uses the other British sources. In dealing with the colonial penetration Dutta gives us a lot of useful information, but all from the British perspective because his sources are British and archival sources. He writes about the Khasi chiefs' attacks on the market in Pandua in 1783 and the destruction of Lindsay's lime works,⁴⁰ but there is no attempt to view these raids from the Khasi perspective. Was it just the prohibition of the collection of the *Khrong* (market levy) that led to the raids or were there deeper disturbances in the Khasi socio-economic milieu created by Lindsay's and other European's activities? These questions can be answered only if the use and handling of sources become more wide based and

critical. In this case as in many other instances in the rest of the work Dutta accepts the British records uncritically. For instance, in assessing the reasons for the Pandua incident of 1783 he writes, "Lindsay traced this development however to the conduct of the 'low Europeans' who, he said, in their bid to win the favour of the chiefs encouraged them to 'adopt a spirit of independence which they had before no idea of.'"⁴¹ This assertion of Lindsay, Dutta takes to be a satisfactory explanation though in the very next paragraphs he recounts more raids by the Khasis and he looks at all these as administrative mismanagements as recounted in the British records. There is a lot of empirical information no doubt, as we get also in P.R.T. Gurdon's work, but analysis is restricted at a very superficial level. An example of this superficiality is reflected in Dutta's assessment of the material progress of the society, and the society in transition when he concludes with the following observations:

"Thus the impact of the West or more precisely the British impact impinged on the broad spectrum of the life of the tribe. Their ancient political institutions have been greatly transformed; their economy of subsistence developed into one of surplus: a higher value system had been introduced: and the very introduction of education among them raised the level of their culture and civilisation."⁴²

His conclusions about the economy becoming a surplus economy remain problematic because the necessary hard data is not available in his book. Also the idea about the "higher value system" seems to be a view found in the British records. But the work is silent on what happened to the Khasi Jaintia society, polity and institutions due to colonial penetration. Whether there was a distinct change in the social processes, like for example, the emergence of new social forces as a result of material changes, are not issues that disturb Dutta. As he himself writes, his aim was to "present an exhaustive account of the British policy towards the Khasis and Jaintias and the political, economic and social changes that had taken place in their society as a result..."⁴³ His perception of these changes however does not go beyond what is apparent from the British records because historiographically he remains within that fold of colonial historiography which bases itself entirely on an uncritical acceptance

of the archival records. There is thus even in 1982 no major shift in usage of sources.

David Syiemlieh's *British Administration In Meghalaya*⁴⁴ published in 1989 is a very well documented and painstaking, elaborate account of the workings of British policy in the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills. The work has only an introductory chapter on pre-colonial Khasi, Jaintia, Garo society and for the information on this he depends primarily on secondary sources.⁴⁵ Here however it will be pertinent to refer back to a point made earlier about using Gurdon or Playfair uncritically. Gurdon while writing about the traditional Khasi-Jaintia political system had used the terms *Dorbar* and *Myntri* without questioning the origin of the words. Interestingly Syiemlieh also uses these terms almost as Gurdon did⁴⁶ without raising the issue that these being obviously loan words. A look into the period of their usage would have revealed a lot about the development of political processes in the hills. The rest of the work which deals with the introduction and implementation of British administrative policy in the hills is based primarily on archival sources. Syiemlieh's collection and familiarity with archival materials is remarkable and his book therefore provides a wealth of information drawn from British records. While there is no doubt that his use of the British archival sources and other colonial sources provide a lot of insight into some of the developments in the region during British rule, yet his over dependence on these sources does leave some questions unanswered. For instance while writing about the disturbances in the Garo Hills in 1901 under Sonaram Sangma's leadership Syiemlieh refers to Assam Secretariat records and states that Sonaram Sangma "worked up three claims by the Garos, first to the whole of the *Nazarana* lands as proprietors, and further to the whole of the *Habraghat pargana* up to the *Brahmaputra*."⁴⁷ Here one would have definitely liked to learn from other sources whether these demands were legitimate, that is, whether the Garos traditionally owned those lands and therefore lost their rights either due to British intervention or Zamindari interference backed by British support. Answers to questions like these cannot however be satisfactorily or convincingly found from the colonial sources, although, interestingly in this case even the British records admitted that some injustice had been done to the Garos. Syiemlieh writes that "As regards the alleged encroachments of the Bijnri

Zamindar, the Government accepted that the Garos had suffered a loss of some territory under British rule,"⁴⁸ but having said that he seems to accept the view of the British Government because the British source to the effect that "if injustice had been done it was impossible to rectify it, since whatever rights the Garos might have originally possessed over the areas now forming part of the Bijni Zamindari, the title of the Zamindar was now good, and the Garos have no legal claim."⁴⁹ This may have been a good enough justification for the British rulers to give in their files but how acceptable is it? To know that it is necessary to look into other sources which throw some light on the perceptions of the Garo people who were affected by this. Further is it enough to accept what the *Eastern Bengal and Assam Administration Reports, 1906–1907* said about Sonaram Sangma, that he "lost influence among the Garos generally and the movement slowly petered out?"⁵⁰ What appears to be necessary here is an external criticism of the sources.

In the last but one Chapter of the book entitled "Backward Tract to Partial Exclusion", Syiemlieh provides a very useful descriptive narrative of changes that take place in his area of study. He dwells upon issues like 'education and the middle class', 'Revivalist Movement', 'Electoral Politics' and the big debate on the 'Constitutional Question'. Here his use of sources is more varied because he refers to a number of works in the vernacular and even to a Khasi newspaper although the balance is still tilted heavily in favour of the official sources. In reading this last section although one's mind is titillated by glimpses of very crucial socio-political changes provided by some of Syiemlieh's sources and comments but the reader is left unsatisfied in the end because the account reverts back to how the British ruled the Hills. Here if the author had moved out of the almost Dodwellian framework of how the British ruled India and enquired into issues like what happened to society and economy because of the introduction of colonial rule, many other questions would perhaps have occurred to him. The work therefore remains primarily an account of how the British ruled the hills, and this account Syiemlieh has presented very lucidly and exhaustively, with some insights, in the passing, to some of the social and political changes that occurred in these areas as a result of British intervention. However, historical perceptions like the colonial state vis-à-vis the

people go unexamined. The work therefore does not set any new historiographic trend in the study of these societies and more or less follows the trend set by H.K. Barpujari in the 1960s of recording official documents and arguments.⁵¹ Historiographically therefore it remains within the folds of the colonial official traditions providing a descriptive narrative with a lot of very useful empirical data, but the analysis gets restricted to the level of internal criticism of the documents.

Moving on from the historical writings on the Khasi and Jaintia to a few major works on the Garos one has to begin with the work of Major A. Playfair.⁵² As mentioned earlier Playfair's work was a part of the project undertaken in 1903 to prepare monographs on the important tribes and castes of Assam for colonial administrative convenience. In that light "Major Playfair's monograph stands out as the earliest systematic account of the Garos and any discourse on the subject can hardly proceed without reference to the abiding stock source this treatise has proved to be."⁵³ The organisation of Playfair's treatise on the Garos follows the same format as Gurdon's work on the Khasis, and he provides us with a wealth of information on the origin, habitat, domestic life, laws and customs etc. of the people of the then Garo Hills district of Assam. As with Gurdon, in Playfair also we see the British/colonial perspectives in his attitudes to the Garos. For instance like Gurdon he also writes that the "Garos are not a clean people. This remark applies to *the uncivilized Garos only, for the efforts of the American Baptist Mission have resulted in a higher standard of living among the converts. Christian villages show a considerable improvement.*"⁵⁴ (Italics mine). However, despite such colonial biases Playfair has attempted to collect from his personal experiences and enterprise, a lot of very original material on the society and polity of the Garos. Though mainly ethnographic in nature this could always be the starting point for historians writing on the historical processes of development of the Garo society. The point however to emphasise is like Gurdon's work Playfair has also to be studied critically and not taken for granted.

A few important works on the Garo history and society have been published in the 1970s and 1980s, in the line of comprehensive histories of the Garos with an emphasis on the British contacts. In 1978 was published J.B. Bhattacharjee's book, *The*

Garos and the English 1765–1874.⁵⁵ The work deals primarily with the advent of the British to the Garo Hills, although an introductory chapter does give a history of the Garos in the pre-colonial period. This account of the traditional society is based largely on accounts of British writers like W.W. Hunter, Francis Hamilton, Playfair and other British ethnographers and officers posted in the region. Sources like Raj Mohun Nath⁵⁶ are also quoted though it would be pertinent to remember here that Nath is not a historian as such and many of his contentions have come under a lot of scrutiny today. From these various sources Bhattacharjee has collated a lot of information about traditional Garo society and culture and has therefore been able to present a very well organised descriptive account as can be derived from these sources. Certain value judgments like “Garo society was intensely democratic. It was classless and casteless”⁵⁷ have been provided, but with the kind of information available in his account it is difficult to ascertain whether such statements can be properly substantiated. In order to talk in terms of class and democracy more specific data on social differentiation, power sharing and gender relations would have to be obtained. In this context it is necessary to recognise the position of the *Nokma* or ‘chief’⁵⁸ who had certain powers and some amount of authority and the fact that there was also the *Chra-pante* which “consisted of all the brothers, their maternal uncles and great uncles. It was practically a tribunal which took upon itself the responsibility of initiating and carrying through all suits connected with civil, criminal and religious laws as well as regulating marriages and inheritance.”⁵⁹ The existence of such institutions in the society can provide a lot of insight into prevailing conditions of power equations and democratic norms in the society if the aim is to analyse social processes rather than provide descriptive narratives. Information like the above can also be compared with other recordings which Bhattacharjee himself has provided in the book. He gives a quotation from John Elliot’s observations on the Garos. Elliot, as Bhattacharjee writes, was the first British officer to visit the Garos in the late eighteenth century and he wrote accounts of his visits to the villages of the Garos and of his interactions with the people during these tours. In the extract from Elliot’s accounts provided by Bhattacharjee Elliot writes: “The chiefs debate the subject of deliberation, and their wives on those occasions have

as much authority as the chiefs. This I had an opportunity of seeing..."⁶⁰ Now this could be a very interesting starting point for looking into the question of the working of democratic norms in the society if this perception of an English officer is compared with other existing traditions, etc. Bhattacharjee's account of the English-Garo relations thus contain a lot of very interesting and useful information of the kind mentioned above and therefore can always be used for further interpretation. In the major part of the work Bhattacharjee focuses on the gradual development of relationships between the English and the Garos from 1765 onwards. For this part of the study the sources are almost entirely British official records. For instance, the account of the Garos under Zamindars is based almost entirely either on British official records or writings of British officers, and that is the reason that a perception of the British, found in the Bengal Judicial consultations, that "raids and hunting were customary to the Garos" is stated as a fact and not assessed historically by Bhattacharjee.⁶¹ The fact of depending too heavily on one kind of source, primarily British official sources, has also coloured the perceptions of Bhattacharjee regarding the Garos. While giving an account of the relationship between the Garos and the neighbouring Zamindaries of Machpara, Karaibari, etc. he innocently reproduces colonial perceptions regarding the events when he writes: "...the Garos continued to react in the traditional method. Karaibari was worst affected ... Saftaka, situated at the foot of the hills, was attacked in the evening by a party of Garos who set fire to eleven huts. On 6 May 1813, at about noon, a large body of Garos suddenly rushed upon some poor villagers and cut off the heads of three of them..."⁶² Or further on he states that "In Kalumalupara the situation was more or less the same. Therein ... a party of ryots was attacked by a body of Garos who killed and carried away to the hills the heads of two persons..."⁶³ Here one does not question the authenticity of Bhattacharjee's sources because he is very meticulous in the use and examination of his data. But what one tends to ask is are there no other sources which would give the Garo or *Zamindary* side of the story? For the Garos to have undertaken such desperate acts, knowing perhaps that they might have to face the wrath of British forces coming to the aid of the *Zamindars*, there may have been deeper reasons embedded in feelings of social and economic injustice. To get to

the roots of such feelings or historical realities it is necessary to corroborate or add to British official records the information available from other kinds of contemporary sources. Empiricism needs to transcend the Rankean traditions of empiricism.

The rest of the work of Bhattacharjee is an account of how the British penetrated the Garo Hills, the problems the British faced and how they overcame them and how they finally consolidated their rule. The gist of all this can best be put in the words of the author:

“The success of the triangular expedition under Williamson, Dally and Davis ushered in complete British paramountcy in the Garo Hills which had begun with David Scott’s appointment as the Civil Commissioner of North-east Rangpur in 1822. The policy of slow but steady penetration had achieved the escheatment of the territory to the British Dominion in several instalments over the years, while a desperate forward policy effected the final annexation of a vast chunk of hills in less than a month.”⁶⁴

In addition to narrating the phases of the political relations between the English and the Garos Bhattacharjee has also thrown some light on the economic interests of the British in entering the Garo hills. The British official sources are very well documented in this account also.⁶⁵ The point is that one does not have anything to complain about the sources used by Bhattacharjee and the way he has used them. The problem lies more with what is not there in his work because of his lopsided empiricism. The Garo side of the story is totally neglected as is to be expected in a work based on British records and archival sources, because the common people do not leave their records in archives. Archives have always contained the voice of the rulers and the rulers’ bias is deeply felt in works which confine themselves primarily to archival sources. Thus we find that even in the last decades of the twentieth century the official colonial historiography is still very much present in the works of historians of the North-east. Here one must not forget that Bhattacharjee got his formative training in historical research under the guidance of H.K. Barpujari and therefore the trend of history writing that Barpujari had set in this region definitely influenced Bhattacharjee too.

Milton Sangma's work, *History and Culture of the Garos*⁶⁶ published in 1981 aims at providing a complete history of the Garos tapping, as Sangma himself writes, "all the original sources available in the whole of north-east India."⁶⁷ He clarifies this further and says, "I have consulted all the published and unpublished works, gazettes, journals, periodicals both local and others which were amply supplemented by consultations with the oldest persons of the tribe."⁶⁸ While historiographically it is questionable whether it is possible for any historian to say so assertively that he/she has consulted *all the sources available in a whole region*, yet one can argue that what Sangma means to state is that he has used a wide range of sources. The importance of the work lies in the fact that it is a work which provides a comprehensive account of the Garos from the traditional to modern times. Sangma too has depended on Playfair considerably for a lot of information on the traditional Garo society and the early contacts with the British. In fact sections like those on stories of creation and socio-religious festivals contain information and perceptions almost identical with Playfair's.⁶⁹ For instance in his discussion on the sub-clan or *Ma'chong* Sangma writes that "Col. Dalton, Playfair and others preferred *Ma'chong* to be translated as 'Motherhood', as all members of a *Ma'chong* claim to have descended from a common mother."⁷⁰ Having said this Sangma makes no other observations leaving the reader to believe that Sangma too upholds what the British ethnographers had written almost a century back. Is there no difference in the insight which an insider has? The uncritical use of the early European sources is further evinced when he refers to Fr. Pianazzi to say that the history of the Garos "before the British occupation is a sickening series of raids on the plains and feuds among themselves; of bloodshed, misery and muddle. They had an evil reputation for numerous raids."⁷¹ Such a view of a European definitely needs to be critiqued against the backdrop of the internal conflicts and contradictions of development in Garo society which led to these raids and which may have been perhaps a consequence of economic exigencies rather than something "sickening"(!). Sangma has of course also used sources other than official colonial sources. For instance a number of myths regarding the origin of clans etc. have been related by him and these myths have been mainly collected from Rongmuthu's collection of Garo folk tales.⁷² These myths, as narrated by Sangma,

can be used by other scholars for analysing them in a historical perspective to get further insights into Garo life and society. His account of the British advent is however very well documented and exhaustive, although the handling of the subject is basically archival. Using a number of primary and also secondary sources he has provided a very wide survey of developments in the Garo society from early times to the present. Although many of the contradictions that are present in the various sources he has used have also crept into his work, yet one must laud the attempt that has been made by him to put a lot of information, of various qualities, regarding Garo history and culture into one comprehensive work. However one point needs to be raised here that some problems of a conceptual nature are created by Sangma when he talks of the existence of a Garo feudal system in the hills while at the same time referring to the existence of the tribal chiefs as well. He writes, for example, that "the culture of the plains could not penetrate into the interior of the hills, and the Garos had all along maintained complete independence ruling their own areas in their own feudal system."⁷³ [*Italics mine*] He does not give us to understand whether he has a different definition of feudalism which can incorporate a tribal economy and tribal relations. In the absence of such clarifications, acceptance of many of his assertions remains historiographically problematic. Conceptual innocence and empirical problems notwithstanding there is no doubt that Sangma's work is a pioneering work in the history of the Garos even though there may not be any major change in the handling of sources.

A work of a slightly different nature on the Garos is P.C. Kar's *Garos in Transition* published in 1982.⁷⁴ In contrast to the earlier mentioned works this is a work written "from the point of view of Economic Anthropology,"⁷⁵ because the author feels that "the earlier studies made on the changes of these people, being primarily either ethnographic or politico-historical in nature, have been relatively inattentive to the mutual interactions of economic and non-economic forces responding to and resulting in societal changes."⁷⁶ Kar had earlier written a book on Garo-British relations,⁷⁷ but as he himself says, that work did not make a systematic study of socio-economic changes in the Garo hills. Since books by other authors on Garo-British relations have been taken up for discussion in the course of this paper this work by Kar on

the "economic anthropology" of the area may be of interest here to see if it has set any new trend in using sources which can add to the existing trends in the historical approach to the study of Garo hills. It can also be noted here that although, like Sangma, Kar has a very wide canvas but unlike Sangma he has a definite theme that he wants to pursue and so the expanse of his canvas does not seem to create very big problems for him. Although Kar has gone into a very detailed discussion regarding the concept of 'economic' and the "association of Economics with Anthropology"⁷⁸ and has made a successful attempt to conceptualise the term 'economic', yet problems remain with his use of the term transition. One is not able to understand how he distinguishes between the concepts transition, transformation and change. From Kar's discussion mentioned above it appears that he uses the terms change and transition almost interchangeably. For instance after a thorough reading of his book one comes to realise that the factors which he considers as being responsible for bringing about transition in Garo society are also responsible for social change because he writes: "New productive enterprises have come up with change of technology, and the horizontal extension of economic relations have thinned out the kinship obligations, and b o t h finally contributed to the changes in the socio-economic structure of the tribes."⁷⁹

For his sources Kar has used a number of secondary works, particularly monographs and articles written by historians and anthropologists, which throw light on various aspects of the life and social institutions of the Garos. He has also used a lot of British official records of the kind that he had used for his earlier work on the Garos. Based on "early reports and present personal investigations"⁸⁰ Kar has opened his work with a very detailed description of the Garo traditional society and economy in the style of Anthropological investigations. However sources like Playfair, Elliot or Hamilton constitute a very major source of information,⁸¹ although he has also used other ethnographic and anthropological sources. The traditional picture he describes is then sought to be compared with the changes that exogenous forces brought into the society. Among the important forces that Kar delineates are the exposure to Moghuls, the British annexation, and the Christian Missionaries. He also refers to the devel-

opment of transport and communication and the growth of urban centres as the harbingers of change not only in the colonial period but also in the period after 1947 till the 1970s. The narration in this section, particularly about the colonial period has an Occidental bias because of the nature of his sources. The rest of the work which brings the story up to the developments, both political and economic, in the post 1947 period is based both on personal case studies and information from existing official sources as well as other secondary commentaries. There is no doubt that in this work Kar has made an attempt to branch out on a slightly different line of enquiry and the results are also quite impressive. But because of the dominant empiricist traditions existing in social research in this region, in which the lead has been provided by history, he finally ends up by providing descriptive narratives backed up by a lot of very solid data. Narratives are always welcome but one does look for some indications of the historical processes that must have gone on in a society over various phases and levels of development, within the lines of those narratives. Kar does provide a lot of food for thought and that can definitely be translated into wholesome history by the discerning historian. But even in Kar we find that the task of breaking free from the colonial historiographic traditions is a very difficult task.

This survey of some of the major works done on present day Meghalaya spanning about eight decades, bring to light some important historiographical issues regarding the handling and interpretation of sources. The works surveyed here definitely have a lot of positive angles and one of the most important, from the historical perspective, is the accumulation of empirical data. But this accumulation has been lop sided in the sense that more emphasis has been laid on British and archival sources than on sources which would enable the construction of a people's history by throwing light on material cultures of the societies. Because of this empirical shortcoming there have also been limitations of interpretations, where analysis and interpretation have not delved down into the roots of social change. This creates problems for historiographic advancements. One of the major methods of historical or all social science research, adopted universally has been stock taking—that is taking cognizance of the status of research on a particular theme at a particular point of time and taking a position on it. This type of stock taking allows knowledge on a

particular subject to go ahead and restricts repetitive writings. However, in most of the works under review here, except to a certain extent the work of Namita Shadap Sen, there has been very little substantive discussion on the works already existing on the societies in present day Meghalaya, and thus there has been no indication of the point of departure. The result is that the methods, and sometimes even the subject has been repetitive. For instance a work on the Khasis written in the 1960s, if it started with an assessment of P.R.T. Gurdon and stated what are the gaps in his work which required filling up and what correctives were needed and to what extent it was acceptable, then the later work would definitely have been an advance in historical research in filling up gaps or bringing in correctives. This is a methodology that has somehow been disregarded in historical and other social science researches, not only in Meghalaya, but also in other parts of the North-eastern States of India. Thus use of sources and methods of interpretation have gone in cycles without really taking our knowledge to higher levels. What is of utmost importance at this point is not only clarifying conceptual issues and using frameworks of historical research which can explain change and not just describe change, but more importantly taking cognizance of the works done so far, so that their methodological strengths and weaknesses can be assessed, and the information and interpretation gaps can be identified and this would pave the way for future scholars to work at filling the gaps—in both information and interpretation.

In the survey made so far we find that there has not been much change in the trends of history writing over the period that we have covered. If in the beginning of the twentieth century the trend was basically descriptive and empirical, at the end of the 1980s also it has remained primarily so with some attempts at interpretation coming in, though the interpretation has been restricted. The Anglo-centric approach still remains very prominent. In the case of the writings on Assam also, there have not been much basic change in the trends of historiography from Edward Gait to H.K. Barpujari. But since the 1960s scholars like Amalendu Guha and Hiren Gohain and younger scholars in the 1980s have tried to introduce a new trend which can lead to more interpretative constructions of the material cultures of the people. This type of a new trend is essential in the future development in the

writing of the histories of the societies of Meghalaya. An encouraging phenomenon however is that in the last few years younger scholars working for their doctorates are trying to delve deeper into history by using a variety of sources, whether in dealing with early history or modern developments and thus attempting to show some amount of continuity in historical evolution. These attempts have to be encouraged—so that they can be completed and published leading to the popularisation of a new historiographic trend. Such a trend would be able to free history of the region not only from the British colonial biases but also from ethnic biases and that would be the first major advancement in historiography of Meghalaya.

ENDNOTES

1. See for details of the interaction, besides other sources, L. Devi, *Ahom Tribal Relations (A Political Study)* (Guwahati, 1992[2nd edition]).
2. For instance, see *Deodhai Asom Buranji* (Gauhati, 1962[2nd edition]). In this *Buranji* (pp. 183–192) there is a narration of very interesting legend relating to the origins of Jayantipur. An interpretation of this legend could reveal very important information about matrilineal lineage and could even throw some light on tracing the lineage of Khasi-Jayantia people. Interestingly Gurdon also gives a version of a part of this legend as the origin of the *syiems* of Sutunga.
3. K.L. Baruah, *Early History of Kamarupa* (Gauhati, 1988[3rd edition]). For instance, amongst other references he makes a reference to the iron-smelting tradition of the Khasis (pp. 120–121).
4. P.C. Choudhury, *The History of Civilisation of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century* (Gauhati, 1959).
5. For a more exhaustive discussion on this issue see, Manorama Sharma, *History and History Writing in North East India* (New Delhi, 1998), Ch. I.
6. Beverely Southgate, *History: What and Why?. Ancient, Modern and Postmodern Perspectives* (London, 1996), p. ix.
7. A.K. Baruah, "Mainstream Political Science and its Pitfalls", in *Proceedings of North East India Political Science Association* (Guwahati, 1992), p. 52.
8. These aspects of historiography have been discussed in detail in Manorama Sharma, *History and History Writing*, *op. cit.*
9. Manorama Sharma and J.B. Bhattacharjee, "Historical Research in North East India: Trends and Directions", in Tarashankar Banerjee (ed.), *Indian Historical Research Since Independence* (Calcutta, 1986), pp. 1–8.
10. Karl Marx and Frederich Engels, *The German Ideology* (Moscow, 1976), p. 42.
11. K.N. Panikkar, "The Intellectual History of Colonial India", in Sabyasachi Bhattacharjee and Romila Thapar (eds.), *Situating Indian History* (New

- Delhi, 1986), p. 404. In this essay K.N. Panikkar has not only developed a critique of the existing works on the intellectual history of colonial India but has attempted to present a conceptual framework for the study of intellectual history of colonial India.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 421.
 13. Manorama Sharma, *History and History Writing in North East India*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
 14. Jatindranath Goswami, *Hemchandra Baruah* (New Delhi, 1987).
 15. L.N. Bezbaruah, *Mor Jibon Suworon* (Gauhati, 1973), pp. 73-74.
 16. See S.N. Sharma (ed. & comp.), *Mou* (Gauhati, 1980).
 17. *Ibid.*, Introduction by S.N. Sharma, p. 6. (translation mine).
 18. Romila Thapar, *Interpreting Early India* (New Delhi, 1993).
 19. P.R.T. Gurdon, *The Khasis* (reproduced Delhi, 1993); Major A. Playfair, *The Garos* (Rep. Gauhati, 1975).
 20. Gurdon, *op. cit.*, Introduction.
 21. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
 22. *Ibid.*
 23. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
 24. See, *ibid.*, pp. 28-30.
 25. *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.
 26. See for instance, D.D. Kosambi, *Myth and Reality* (Bombay, 1962), where he interprets a number of myths and shows how myths can be a source of history particularly for pre-literate societies. For instance, his interpretation of the prayer "Give us this day our daily bread" to show that the prayer was of the late stone age origin.
 27. See U. Nissor Singh, *English Khasi Dictionary* (New Delhi, 2001[rep.]).
 28. The works of such scholars will be discussed later on in this paper.
 29. Hamlet Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People* (Guwahati, 1985).
 30. P.C. Choudhury, *op. cit.*
 31. Mignonette Momin, "Studies in the Political and Socio-economic History of Pre-Ahom Assam: Perspectives and Prospects," in *North Eastern Hill University Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* (Vol. I, No. 1, January-June 1998), p. 5.
 32. H. Bareh, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
 33. For a discussion on the bias of official records see, Manorama Sharma, *History and History Writing in North East India*, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-35.
 34. There are a number of works which have dealt with this aspect of colonial rule in India. For a very general review of such developments in India one can refer to works like, Bipan Chandra, *Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India* (New Delhi, 1969); Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885-1947* (Madras, 1983); Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century* (New Delhi, 1982[rep.]). For a study of emergence of new forces in the North East see Manorama Sharma, *Social and Economic Change in Assam: Middle Class Hegemony* (Delhi, 1991).
 35. H.K. Barpujari, Presidential Address, First Session of North East India History Association, Shillong, 1980.
 36. Namita Shadap Sen, *The Origins and Early History of the Khasi Synteng People* (Calcutta, 1981), p. 9.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 208.
38. P.N. Dutta, *Impact of the West on the Khasis and Jaintias (A Survey of Political, Economic and Social Change)* [New Delhi, 1982].
39. Gurdon, *op. cit.*
40. P.N. Dutta, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
41. *Loc. cit.*
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 207-208.
43. *Ibid.*, p. vii.
44. David R. Syiemlieh, *British Administration in Meghalaya: Policy and Pattern* (New Delhi, 1989).
45. See *Ibid.*, pp. 2-9.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 165.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
49. *Loc. cit.*
50. *Loc. cit.*
51. For an assessment of Barpujari's historiographical preferences see Manorama Sharma and J.B. Bhattacharjee, *op. cit.*
52. Playfair, *op. cit.*
53. *Ibid.*, New Introduction by P.C. Kar, p. xxi.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
55. J.B. Bhattacharjee, *The Garos and the English 1765-1874* (New Delhi, 1978).
56. R.M. Nath, *The Background of Assamese Culture* (Shillong, 1949).
57. J.B. Bhattacharjee, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
61. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
63. *Loc. cit.*
64. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
65. See, *ibid.*, pp. 202-228.
66. Milton S. Sangma, *History and Culture of the Garos* (New Delhi, 1981).
67. *Ibid.*, Preface.
68. *Loc. cit.*
69. *Ibid.*, pp. 231-233, 237-246.
70. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
71. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
72. On the origin of the Sangma clan a folk tale from D.S. Rongmuthu's work has been related and if this folk tale is interpreted in the historical perspective very interesting ideas about Garo society and economy can emerge. For the related folk tale see *Ibid.* p. 138.
73. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
74. P.C. Kar, *Garos in Transition* (New Delhi, 1982).
75. *Ibid.*, Preface.
76. *Loc. cit.*
77. P.C. Kar, *British Annexation of Garo Hills* (Calcutta, 1970).
78. For the details of this discussion see P.C. Kar, *Garos in Transition*, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-20.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

80. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

81. See John Elliot, "Observations on the Inhabitants of the Garrow Hills, made during a Publik Deputation in the Years 1788 and 1789", in *Asiatic Researches*, III, 17-37, 1792; Playfair, *op. cit.*; Francis Hamilton, *An Account of Assam 1807-1814* (Gauhati, 1814).