

THE INGLIS AND COMPANY AND THE LIME TRADE IN KHASI HILLS

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INTRODUCTION

Standing as they do in the north east corner of India, the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, "the bluest of blue hills",¹ presently constitute three of the five districts of Meghalaya, a state in the India Union. These hills are situated between 25°5' and 26°10' North Latitude and 90°45' and 92°47' East Longitude and together cover a landmass of 14,262.00 square kilometres out of which the larger spread of 10,443.00 square kilometres is occupied by the Khasi Hills and the smaller area of 3819.00 square kilometres by the Jaintia Hills². Forming the central section of the Assam range that divides the fertile valley of the Brahmaputra from the Surma, the Khasi and Jaintia Hills are bounded on the north by Kamrup and Nowgong districts of Assam, on the south by the Sylhet Plain of Bangladesh, on the east by north Cachar Hills and on the west by the Garo Hills. The greater part of these hills constitute a highly dissected plateau commonly called Shillong Plateau where, the highest ranges are between four thousand feet and six thousand feet and, the towering Shillong Peak, the highest

1. B.C.Allen, Assam District Gazetteers, Vol.II, Sylhet,p.2.
2. Census of India 1981, Series 14, Meghalaya, pp.9-10
(Provisional figures)

peak, six thousand four hundred and forty feet above sea level dominating it.

In physical formation, the Khasi and Jaintia Hills rise gradually by a succession of low ranges from the Assam valley in the north but slope away more steeply towards the south where the descent is sharp and abrupt and where the cliffs stand majestically and almost perpendicularly like a titanic wall overlooking the Surma valley. To the south east the level falls and the Jaintia Hills slope more gently towards the plain.

The northern region of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills which, bears the local name Ri Bhoi is interspersed with narrow grassy valleys and fringed with rich tracts of timber forests. This region is climatically analogous to the neighbouring valley, perennially humid, insalubrious and malarious. At the centre of the country, stands a highly undulated tract dotted with beautiful rounded hills and valleys carved by numerous streams. Locally designated Ri Lum, the region is characterised by wholesome and salubrious climate. Vegetation of the temperate type abounds here with scattered pine groves of the pinus "Khasi"³ variety predominating. Sacred groves of mixed trees where, oaks, rhododendrons and species of schima and annamomum abound, also add rich beauty to the natural scenery of the region. Ri War, the southern region is

3. W.W.Hunter, A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol.II,p.212.

extremely precipitous, Here the cliffs "as though carved by some cyclopean mason"⁴ are decorated with beautiful cascades rolling over them. Besides, deep and narrow ravines and valleys also adorn the southern ranges and, the region though narrow possess a fertile soil which, with its sub-tropical climate clothe the slopes and deep valleys with the richest vegetation referred to by Pemberton in 1835 'as "the most luxuriant vegetation"⁵ and by Sir Hooker in 1848 as "the emerald green vegetation".⁶ The topography of the whole country is picturesque, presenting^a show of beauty beyond words. Rainfall is abundant and widespread with Cherrapunji and Mawsynram receiving rainfall^{of} 1,300 to 1,500 centimetres a year.⁷

Interestingly, the high and precipitous ranges of the southern parts of the Khasi Hills which bears distinctive traditional names were in Sylhet, styled and distinguished by different names. The south eastern ranges of the Khasi Hills comprising Cherra, Mawlong, Shella, Sohbar, Nongjri etc., group of hills surrounding Panduah were collectively called Panduah Hills.⁸ In pre-British days, Panduah constituted one of the chief entrepots of the hill and plain trade. Moreover, its commercial connections

4. B.C.Allen, Op.cit, p.3.

5. R.B.Pemberton, The Eastern Frontier of India, p.243.

6. J.D.Hooker, Himalayan Journals, p.272.

7. D.D.Mali, An Introduction to the Economy of Meghalaya, p.4.

8. W.K.Firminger, Sylhet District Records, (hereinafter S.D.R.), Vol.III, No.228.

extended as far as Calcutta. The commercial position which it enjoyed for a long period was, during the nineteenth century, taken over by Chattack. However, the south western ranges of the Khasi Hills which comprised of the Langrin, Nongstoin etc., group of hills were designated Laur Hills as they were adjacent to the Laur Pargana of Sylhet.⁹

What is clearly visible in the formation of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills' border with Sylhet Plain is the absence of the low outer ranges that is usually seen in the descent of a mountain system. However, the stretch of plain from the foot of the hills to the river Surma that runs through Sylhet, is interrupted and broken by tillas that "are probably the remains of a deposit that was once spread along the foot of the mountain".¹⁰ The sharp fall of the hills, proved a great hindrance for movement in ancient times. However, despite the deeply precipitous nature of the terrain, "breaks and openings" occur along the whole stretch of the southern ranges which favoured movement from the hills to the plains¹¹. Generally though movement from the plains into the hills was resented by the mountain dwellers yet, it appears that the denizens of the lowland were not totally debarred entrance. In this

9. B.J.C.P., 9 October 1832, No.1.

10. J.D.Hooker, Op.cit.p.268.

11. P.N.Dutta, 'Relation of the Khasis and Jaintias with their Southern Neighbours till the British Intervention', Proceedings of the North East India History Association, First session, p.72.

connection, lessors of lime quarries were permitted entrance solely for purposes of extracting limestone and transporting the same to the plains where, it was burnt into lime. Narrow tracks and paths through places such as Shella, Tharia, Nongjri, Mawdon, Nongstoin, Langrin and Amwi afforded communication with the plains. As a means of descent, the use of steps cut out in the precipice was common with the ancients who realised that certain necessaries of life principally rice and salt would be unobtainable if such tracks and paths were deficient. Hence tracks and paths served as trade routes. They were the main avenues for the transportation of hill products to Sylhet plain and, the hillmen undoubtedly displayed ingenuity in cutting paths claimed to be tolerable¹². However, the numerous streams and intricate waterways of the hills also provided connection with the plains. Most of the rivers flowing down south, such as the Kynshi on Jadukata, the Sohryngkew or Dhulai, the Myntdu or Hari, the Mungat or Peini, the Bogapani, the Lubha and the other numerous small streams empty into the Surma river which was the only means of communication between Sylhet and Calcutta. In the course of nearly all the rivers, rapids occur before they issue on the plains. Below the rapids they ease down to the land below to mingle with the Surma waters. Though mountain torrents, they are navigable

12. H. Walters, 'Journey Across the Pandua Hills near Silhet, in Bengal', Asiatic Researches, Vol. XVII, p. 500.

at certain stretches and near the plains. Rivers formed an important means of communication particularly for the exportation of limestone.

From the view point of geological structure, the Khasi and Jaintia Hills are mainly constituted of a great mass of gneiss which in the central region is hidden by sub-metamorphic rocks consisting of a thick series of quartzites and schists with intrusions of masses of diorite and granite in areas of highest altitude. In the northern region, the gneiss is exposed but is hidden in the south beneath cretaceous and nummulitic deposits. The rocks yield valuable mineral resources like iron, coal, limestone, glass sand, sillimanite, clay and phosphate¹³ some of which have been extensively worked. Of these, the mineral that had attracted the attention of foreign merchants since early times is limestone. The Khasi and Jaintia Hills are, in fact, endowed with "an unsurpassable deposit of high grade limestone", which occur "along a belt over the southern scarp of the plateau",¹⁴ stretching from Lubha river on the east to Maheskhali river on the west. However, some of the limestone tracts are situated in the beds and on the banks of rivers while others are located far away from water communication. It is claimed that the said mineral is

13. Geological Survey of India, Miscellaneous Publication,
No.30, 1974.

14. Ibid.

unrivalled in India for its quality and excellence and that it contains 96 percent of pure lime¹⁵. Regarding the purity of the mineral, Robert Lindsay, Collector of Sylhet observed that, "In no part of Bengal or even Hindostan, is the rock found so perfectly pure, or so free of alloy, as in this province, therefore Calcutta is chiefly supplied from hence"¹⁶.

The congeries of people inhabiting the Khasi and Jaintia Hills Indo Mongloid in race, Austric in language¹⁷ and matrilineal in custom are known by the general name Khasi. This group includes the Khyriams in the Central Plateau, the Pnars or Syntengs in the Eastern Plateau, the Bhois in the northern region, the Wars in the Southern slopes and the Lyngngams in the West. For centuries, this entire Khasi group, known to the early British administrators of Sylhet district as the "Cosseahs",¹⁸ had maintained political isolation. The rugged nature of the country had kept them in a state of seclusion and rendered external control impossible. This consequently fostered the development of an indigenous political state system which had caused traditional Khasi society to be comprised of a

15. S.Playne, Bengal and Assam, Bihar and Orissa, p.426.

16. L.Lindsay, Lives of the Lindsays, Vol.III, p.179.

17. S.K.Chatterji, Kirata-Jana-Krti, p.50; H.Bareh, A Short History of Khasi Literature, p.1.

18. S.D.R., Vol.II, No.303; S.D.R., Vol.III, No.III; S.D.R.; Vol.IV, No.272.

number of petty states, each ruled by a titular head designated Syiem. The fundamental unit of the evolution of these states was the Kur. Several Kurs grouped themselves into a village and the association of villages constituted a state¹⁹. Within the states political authority was not concentrated in a single individual but was diffused and administration was based on democratic principles. The Syiem as the democratic head looked into the state administration but lacked absolute power. Succession to Syiemship was hereditary and reckoned from the female side. Generally the sons of the eldest uterine sister, in order of seniority inherit the office of Syiem. Failing such male heirs, succession passed to the male children of the next eldest sister. However, in the absence of male heirs, the eldest sister of the deceased Syiem would be eligible and she would be succeeded by the eldest son.²⁰ Succession was strictly confined to the ruling clan i.e., the Syiem family. But while Syiemship remained with the ruling family, the appointment of the Syiem was always regulated by election, which of course, differed from state to state. In some states, election had to be approved by an electoral body of nobles; in certain others by the Durbar Hima, a

19. P.T.Gurdon, The Khasis, p.66; H.Bareh, The History and Culture of the Khasi People, p.234.

20. P.T.Gurdon, Op.cit. p.68.

council comprising of all male residents of the state. The control of succession to the Office of Syiem by the election system formed an "important basis upon which Khasi democracy stands."²¹

The Syiem was in no sense a territorial sovereign. His right to rule extended only to the inhabitants living within his area of jurisdiction and not to the land. According to Khasi polity, land whether private or public, the two main categories of land divisions designated as Ri Kynti and Ri Raid respectively, belong to the people and, as such the ruler had no right whatsoever to levy taxes on land²². Hence the relation of landlord and tenant was, since time immemorial, unknown and unheard of in these hills. As regards land and rights, the Syiem was on the same level as any other individual. Like any individual owner who, as proprietor could claim rent from private holdings, the Syiem too was entitled to demand rent only with the establishment of propriety right²³. There was no land revenue and the Syiem's main sources of income were market tolls, judicial fines and pynshok i.e., a contribution by subjects paid to the Syiem as head of state²⁴.

21. H. Bareh, A Short History of Khasi Literature, pp.4-5.

22. D.C.R.S., Proceedings of the Deputy Commissioner, 29 August 1874.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid, Note of J.C. Arbuthnott, 17 January 1908.

The Syiem was assisted in his duties by a Durbar Myntri or a Council of Ministers elected from the founding clans of the state, comprising of the Lyngdoh or the priest, as well as officials such as Basans or elders and Sordars or village heads. Though, he wielded both administrative and judicial powers yet, in carrying out any act of political importance, he was necessitated by custom to consult and obtain the approval of the Durbar Hima where everyone was entitled to speak and vote. The Durbar's decisions and policies were always determined by freedom of speech and majority vote²⁵. Operationally, the voice of the people was above the king and, therefore, any conflict with the Durbar Hima could weaken the Syiem's position and cost him his throne.

It was with such a freedom loving people that David Scott encountered when he conceived the plan of establishing direct communication between Assam and Sylhet via the hills. As early as 1826, Adam White, who accompanied David Scott, attended the Durbar Hima at Nongkhlaw and was highly amazed at the high degree of proficiency with which the business was conducted.

He remarked:

I was struck with astonishment at the order and decorum which characterised these debates. No shouts of exultation or indecent attempts to put down the orator of the opposite party.

25. H. Barih, Op.cit, p.5.

On the contrary, every speaker was fairly heard out. I have often witnessed the debates in St. Stephen's Chapel, but those of the Cossya Parliament appeared to me to be conducted with more dignity of manner.²⁶

It is no exaggeration that political consciousness had dawned in Khasi mind long before the idea of political freedom had emerged among most Indian communities. Like the institution of Syiemship, the institutions of Sordarships and Wahadadarships among the Khasis owe their evolution to the common will as well as to the traditions of the land.

Agriculture was the mainstay of the traditional Khasi economy. Jhumming or shifting cultivation was widely pursued though in the Jaintia Hills, terracing was not altogether unknown.²⁷ Land was cultivated till that period when recuperation of its fertility became necessary. It was then left fallow for some years during which period, cultivation shifted to fresh areas. The hillmen depended solely on the hoe for cultivating their fields. Although the use of the plough was almost unknown to the Khasis, it found an important place with Jaintia cultivators. Rice, the staple food of the hillmen formed the chief crop of cultivation. While in Jaintia Hills the production of rice was sufficient, in the Khasi Hills production was

26. A.White, A Memoir of the Late David Scott, p.35.

27. E.A.Gait, The Assam Land Revenue Manual, p.CLXXVI;
W.W.Hunter, Op.cit, p.229.

uncertain. This kept the Khasis dependent on the plains for the supply of rice. The extension of Khasi states to Sylhet Plain,²⁸ could have increased rice production had the acquired lands been cultivated by them. But the Khasis had refrained from cultivating the fertile plains. In 1789, John Willes, Collector of Sylhet stated:

A Cosseah never cultivates the soil: He employs Bengallee ryots, he comes down at the time of harvest and carries off the produce.²⁹

Besides rice, the other agricultural and horticultural products were millet, coix or Job's tears, maize, arecanuts, betel vines, bay leaves, pepper, yam and potatoe. Admittedly, potatoe cultivation was a late introduction and it is generally believed that it was ^{introduced} into the Khasi Hills in the first half of the nineteenth century. "Fruit trees of every discription peculiar to a tropical climate" grew spontaneously in the southern region.³⁰ Oranges, pineapples, plantains, sugarcane, citrons and lime, indigenous to the hills deserves mention.³¹

Side by side with agriculture, other economic activities centered round the pursuance of various arts and crafts. The art of weaving was known though it was not practiced all over the hills. The industry was concentrated mainly in the Jaintia Hills and the Northern Bhoi areas

28. W. Robinson, A Descriptive Account of Assam, p.409.

29. S.D.R., Vol.III, No.172.

30. L.Lindsay, Op.cit., p.177.

31. J.M'Cosh, Topography of Assam, p.115; J.H.Morris, The Story of Our Foreign Mission, p.16.

where, the cotton produced and the erandi and silk worms reared provided essential material for the purpose of weaving. However, both cotton and silk cloths were woven by "almost always female weavers".³² Dyeing performed with the leaves of plants as well as ferns and shrubs was also familiar to them.

The utilisation of different varieties of bamboo and cane for the manufacture of articles of daily use was generally widespread all over the hills and, the importance of this art cannot be overlooked as bamboo craft constituted an essential part of every Khasi household. With none or very little interruption from outside competition, this indigenous craft has persisted even to this day. Conical baskets, ki khoh carried on the back by a head strap, U Star; conical baskets with a seat, ki khoh kit brieu for carrying travellers; rain shields, ki knup of different sizes; sieves, ki pdung for sifting husked rice; winnowing fans ki prah for separating the husk and sleeping mats, shyllish or tlieng were crafts fashioned and woven by expert and gifted Khasi craftsmen out of bamboo and cane. The manufacture of wooden mortar U thlong and pestle U synrei for the purpose of husking rice was also known universally all over the hills.

Pineapple fibre obtained from the leaves of the delicious pineapple plant was highly valued by the Khasis.

The traditional method of manufacturing the fibre was simple and was undertaken by individual families according to their respective requirements. The leaves, usually gathered before the rainy season were soaked in water for sometime, after which they were beaten till the fibre was separated. The fibre thus obtained was chiefly used for the making of net bags "which formed part of the equipment of every inhabitant of the hills".³³

The manufacture of pottery, actively pursued at Larnai and Nongstoin³⁴ supported a small portion of the population in former days. Pots and vessels were manufactured from two varieties of clay viz., Khyndew long and Khyndew khluit, the former of black colour and the latter of a greyish colour. The potter's wheel was unknown. However, in the field of pottery too, women played a prominent role in fashioning the pots by hand.³⁵ Moreover, in villages like Thieddieng, Mawphu, Nongwar, Mawlong, Tyrna, Kongthong and most of the War villages apiculture formed a regular activity. Honey of excellent quality and flavour was obtained from domesticated bee called U ngap and wild bee, U lywai alike.³⁶

However, the chief and biggest industry of the Khasis

33. F.C.Watson, 'Cherrapunji, and its eligibility for the erection of an Iron and Steel Manufactory,' Asiatic Journal, New Series, Vol.III, 1834, p.28.

34. P.T.Gurdon, Op.cit., p.61; H.Bareh, The History and Culture of the Khasi people, p.434.

35. P.T.Gurdon, Op.cit.,

36. Ibid, p.29.

was the mining, washing and manufacture of iron, which was carried out in an intensive scale. While providing employment to many, the industry also formed an important source of Khasi wealth.³⁷ The workers obtained iron, by the simple method of washing the excavated earth after which smelting was carried on in hot charcoal fires. W. Cracroft, who in 1834 succeeded David Scott as the Officiating Agent to the Governor-General, has left an interesting description of the Khasi method of smelting iron. He wrote:

There are large huts at least twenty five feet high, the thatch of which reaches down to the ground on all sides. The interior, of an oval form 15 by 30 feet, in two diametres, is divided into three apartments; the central one being the smelting room.

Two large double bellows, with the nozzles pointed downwards, are set upon one side of the apartment, on the upper part of which a man stands with one foot on each, his back supported by two planks. He holds a stick in his left hand, which is suspended from the roof, and has two strings attached to it below, connected with the two bellows: these are worked quickly by a wriggling motion of the loins and the strength of the leg.

The nozzles of the bellows unite in a tube which leads under ground, from a sort of wind chest, to the hearth about four feet in front of them. Over the hearth is a chimney of pipe-clay braced with iron hoops, two feet in diameter at the bottom, and about six feet high. The mouth at bottom is on the side away from the bellows, and the chimney inclined from them to direct the heated air from the smelter towards an opening in the roof. At the right side of the bellows and even with the top of the chimney, is a trough containing damp charcoal and iron-sand; at every motion of his body, the operator with a long spoon tumbles a piece of his charcoal with the

37. T.O. Watson, Op.cit., p.29.



iron-sand adhering to it, down the funnel of the furnace, and when a mass of melted or rather softened iron is formed on the hearth, it is taken out with tongs, and beaten with a large wooden mallet on a large stone by way of anvil.³⁸

The Khasi technique of smelting iron appeared to have had no parallel in early times. In their iron forges, claimed to be superior and far better constructed than the small clay furnaces of their neighbours in the north, the energetic iron workers³⁹ mastered the art of manufacturing implements like hoes, doas, spades, knives, chisels, hammers and spears some of which enjoyed high appreciation in the plains. Myllem, Laitlyngkot, Sohrarim, Laitdom, Mongkrem, Nongspung and Nartiang, being places with the largest deposits of iron were the centres of the iron industry. The industry which was at one time of considerable importance, died down in the face of competition of the superior iron imported from England and disposed of in the plains at lesser rate.⁴⁰

The Khasis also indulged in limestone quarrying particularly in the southern region where extensive beds of lime occur. In fact, working in this mineral has had a long standing and if tradition is to be believed, it dates back to the period when excavations for iron-sands started. But limestone excavations were undertaken on a small scale for meeting local requirements only. Lime formed an essential item and its prime utility was connected with a habit

38. W.Cracroft, 'Smelting of Iron in the Kasya Hills',
Asiatic Journal, Vol.I, 1832, pp.150-151.

39. W.Robinson, *Op.cit.*, p.35.

40. W.W.Hunter, *Op.cit.*, p.235.

which developed among the Khasis since time immemorial viz., the incessant chewing of kwai and tympew together with lime. However, lime was also utilised as medicine for ailments, as adhesive for masonry as well as "for marking things for the purpose of accounting".⁴¹ It is interesting to note that, Tirot Singh, the great freedom fighter was acquainted with limestone quarrying. In 1826, it is said that he was summoned from Shella limestone quarries to be crowned the king of Nongkhlaw.⁴²

It is probable that the Khasis never excavated coal. The utilisation of charcoal for the smelting of iron, speaks much of the hillmen's ignorance of the abundant existence of the mineral in the hills. Coal remained an unused mineral resource for a long period and its commercial value was realised only with its discovery.

A considerable portion of the people of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills earned their living through trade. In fact, trade formed an essential part of Khasi economy. It was conducted on an internal and external scale on the basis of barter and exchange. While internal trade enhanced the flow of goods and balanced requirements and surplus among the petty hill states, that with the neighbouring plains was vital for the procurement of essential commodities and for the disposal of surplus hill products.

41. H. Barih, *Op.cit.*, p.429.

42. E.W. Dkhar, 'Economic situation during Tirot Singh's Time', 150th Anniversary of U Tirot Singh, Souvernair, p.6.

The partial production of rice and the scarcity of salt,⁴³ had kept the Khasis dependent on the plains for the supply of these items. However, since every other object of commerce was with the hills, its essential requirements from the plains was counter balanced by the entire dependence of the plains on the hills for the supply of commodities like iron, oranges and limestone found in abundance in the hills but still scarce in other parts of India. This interdependence consequently influenced the development of a two way trade which was conducted to the mutual benefit of both sides. Since the chief articles of commerce were mostly found near the Sylhet border, they were transported to the Sylhet Plain and hence trade with the said plain was much more regular, important and voluminous in character than that conducted with the Assam valley.

Realising the immense importance of trade, Khasi Chiefs left no stone unturned in promoting it. They established markets and saw to their proper management. They encouraged improvement in the production system and signed trade pacts which provided inter-state communication.⁴⁴ The hillmen found the markets advantageous since their economy was to a great extent tied up with trade. Besides, markets also served as venues for social intercourse.

43. S.D.R., Vol.III, No.172.

44. H.Bareh, Op.cit., p.437.

Larger markets such as the Lewduh of Shillong, were also used as centres of religious ceremonies.⁴⁵

For the enhancement of the hill and plain trade, border weekly markets called hats were set up, to which essential articles from the plains were conveyed by boats and, to which surplus hill products were taken down in conical baskets fastened by straps on porter's back. Of the hats on the southern foothills Tharia, Phara, Majai, Lakhat, Shella and Tyllap figured out prominently. Those on the northern border were situated at Bardwar, Sonapur, Boka and Rani.⁴⁶ No restrictions were imposed to punctuate attendance to the border hats. Without doubt, they attracted a large gathering of hill people from far and near and a great number of plain traders too. The latter, of course, never ventured beyond the border hats and so, the bulk of the trade between them and the hill's interior was entirely in the hands of the hillmen, who continued to hold that position till the last quarter of the nineteenth century.⁴⁷

45. "The Bara-Bazaar of Shillong known as Lewduh (meaning the market day of the eighth day week) is admittedly the biggest market of the hills. It was established by the Chief or Syiem of the erstwhile Shillong state from time immemorial. The Shillong state was subsequently divided into Khyrim and Myllem states. It was the venue for the performance of religious ceremonies and rites pertaining to the traditional religion of the chiefs. Almost a century ago, the venue was shifted firstly to the village of Nongkrem and subsequently to the village of Smit in the Khyrim Syiemship. And it is at this place that the popular Nongkrem dance is held. Nevertheless, Lewduh never lost its sanctity. Some earth or soil is taken every year from Lewduh to the place where the rights and ceremonies are performed." E.M.Roy, 'The Bara Bazaar (Lewduh) of Shillong' (manuscript) pp.1-2.

46. P.N.Dutta, Impact of the West on Khasis and Jaintias, p.14; H.Bareh, Op.cit., p.436; E.W.Dkhar, Op.cit., p.6.

47. W.W.Hunter, Op.cit., p.241.

Adventurous Khasi traders even resorted to markets located in the marshy but fertile Sylhet Plain for trade; the most important being Panduah and Jaintiapur. In the hats and plainsmarkets, the hillmen sold their products directly to the consumer as well as to middlemen.

On the market day, large and properly armed trade parties descended to the southern foothills for purposes of trade. In consideration of the rugged nature of the country, the distance to the foothills was indeed long and tedious. However, this was no stumbling block. Equal enthusiasm was shown by all and while women participated as porters, armed men accompanied and defended them from dangers and insults during the trade journeys.⁴⁸ The sight of Khasi girls carrying heavy loads of iron to Pandua, struck Lindsay with awe. He remarked:

I asked one of the girls to allow me to lift her burden of iron - from its weight I could not accomplish it. This, I need not say, occasioned a laugh in the line of march to my prejudice.⁴⁹

Khasi women, in their role as excellent porters, had contributed in no small measure towards the furtherance of Khasi trade. Articles such as copper bars, iron, coarse silks called 'Moongadutties', oranges, honey, gums and drugs were taken down to the Sylhet Plain in considerable quantities⁵⁰ and were exchanged for salt, rice, dry fish

48. L.Lindsay, Op.cit., p.179; H.Walters, op.cit.

49. Ibid, p.180.

50. Ibid, pp.174, 176.

and other necessaries of life.⁵¹ Perhaps, it would not be improbable to state that it was the Khasi and Jaintia Hills which backed the native boat industry of Sylhet through its steady supply of iron which was of "a superior quality and description" and which generally went down to Sylhet in circular lumps.⁵² Nails and fastenings, essential for boat building were manufactured from it. The malleable qualities of Khasi iron indeed, found for it a foremost placé with Sylhet blacksmiths⁵³ and opened to the hillmen a lucrative trade with their neighbours. During the fruit season, orange formed an important item of export of the hills.

However, what is more surprising was the dependence of Bengal on the Khasi Hills for the supply of limestone which, unlike other hill products went down to the plains by way of intricate watercourses. In fact rivers were the main outlets in the case of limestone transportation. Barkis or "little flat-bottomed boats of very shallow draught"⁵⁴ claimed "to descend the rapids with the rapidity of lightning" were used for transporting limestone from the hills during the summer months when the hill streams rise. Limestone transportation formed an activity which "was often attended with danger and loss of life, when

51. S.D.R., Vol.II, No.303.

52. L.Lindsay, Op.cit., p.174.

53. W.G.Allen, Report on the Administration of the Cossyah and Jynteah Hills Territory, p.48.

54. B.C.Allen, Op.cit., p.155.

bringing down the stone."⁵⁵ Trade in limestone flourished because lime in those days had very little demand in the hills but a limitless demand in the plains. Indeed, the Khasis possessed quarries which could supply lime to the whole of Bengal where it was popularly known as chunan.⁵⁶ While writing about the articles of commerce that went down from the hills to Pandua market, Lindsay stated that chunan was "the only great staple and steady article of commerce."⁵⁷

In early times, the trade in Khasi lime was in the hands of foreigners. The scarcity of labour and the want of capital had prevented commercial trafficking of the same by the hillmen. However, it should be noted that, the hill chiefs who owned the lime quarries generally resorted to the method of leasing them out to enterprising foreign merchants for which, they in turn received a paltry sum.⁵⁸ In the leasing of the quarries, no direct engagement was contracted between the hill chiefs and the foreign merchants. Arrangements for leases of quarries were, however, carried out through a system called Bereeh. According to this system, the Doarahdars i.e., the agents of the hill chiefs acted as intermediaries between the lessor and the lessee. The

55. L.Lindsay, Op.cit., p.179.

56. F.B.Bradley Birt, Sylhet Thackeray, p.128.

57. L.Lindsay, Op.cit., p.176.

58. S.D.R., Vol.III, No.73,74.

Doarahdars were Bengalis and their main duty was to interpret the wishes of the chiefs on the basis of which contracts and agreements were concluded. Moreover, it was also their responsibility of keeping accounts of the rents and revenues collected.⁵⁹ In the year 1823, H. Moore, Acting Magistrate of Sylhet observed:

By this Bereeh one or more were responsible for the payment of the duties, and under their responsibility collected from the merchants and paid the collections to the Doarahdars or agents of the Hill Chiefs. No engagements was ever made with ^{the} chiefs themselves, the whole business was acted through the Doarahdars and the merchants who contracted for the bereeh, gave no written deed of contract. The Doarahdars, however, gave engagements that they would look after and take care of the limestone and furnish security to the contract.⁶⁰

The merchants taking leases of the quarries were obliged to work the same and to carry on the trade by employing a large number of workmen who were mostly natives of Sylhet. These include stone cutters for the purpose of extracting and cutting the limestone, barki men for transporting the stone from the quarries to the plains, tawatdars for burning and manufacturing the stone into lime, ghat manglees and dandees for working the boats and bhurdars for taking care of the chunam and the boats.⁶¹ Lime business, therefore, involved large capital and merchants had to bear the cost of labour, manufacture as well as transport. But

59. B.J.C.P., 5 June 1823, No.39.

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid., 20 May 1824, No.57.

enterprising merchants took the risk without hesitation probably knowing well that the lime trade would pay rich dividends especially when demand for the said commodity was high in Bengal. It is essential to note that merchants i.e., lessees of lime quarries resorted to the practice of burning the extracted stone into lime⁶² on the banks of the Surma. Manufacturing operations were never undertaken by them in the hills. However, burning operations like that of quarrying took place during the dry months.⁶³

The lime trade of the region dated back to the Mughal days. The Khasi and Jaintia Hills were brought on a direct frontier with the Mughals when Sylhet became part of the Bengal Subah consequent upon the defeat of Bayizid Khan, the Afghan chief in the hands of Islam Khan, the Mughal viceroy in the first quarter of the seventeenth century.⁶⁴ The establishment of Mughal power in Sylhet did not destroy the age-old commercial connections between the hills and the plains. Trade between the Khasis and Mughal Bengal continued *to flourish; the economic interdependence playing an important role in cementing commercial relations between the two.* Though the main motive of the North-East policy of the Mughal Government had been "to control and monopolise

62. Details of the system of lime manufacture will be given in Chapter III.

63. B.C.Allen, Gazetteer of/^{the} Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Garo Hills and Jushai Hills, p.22.

64. B.C.Dutta, The North East and the Mughals, p.19.

all the trade and commercial routes and centres so as to fill up the gap of both provincial exchequer of Bengal subah and the tottering Imperial treasury with booty and revenues,"⁶⁵ there is no indication in the available records of any form of direct participation of that Government in the lime trade. However, it was the Nawabs, the nominees of the Mughals in Bengal, who noticed the mineral potentialities of the Khasi Hills and in all probability commenced commercial intercourse with the Khasis. It may be presumed that like other native traders, they resorted to the method of taking leases of lime quarries from the Chiefs and in the process obtained the monopoly of the Laur Hills quarries.⁶⁶ The supervision of the manufacture and the trade in lime was placed in the hands of the Nawab's fouzdar at Sylhet⁶⁷ and it appears that lime despatched from thence formed an essential material in the construction of the Nawab's city of Morshidabad.⁶⁸

65. Ibid., p.52.

66. P.N.Dutta, 'Relations of the Khasis and Jaintias with their Southern Neighbours till the British Intervention', Proceedings of the North East India History Association, First session, p.77.

67. C.U.Aitchison, A Collection of Treaties, Engagements and Sanads, Vol.II, (1930), p.234.

68. S.Bhattacharya, 'Regional Economy(1757-1857) Eastern India', in Dharna Kumar (ed), The Cambridge Economic History of India, Vol.II, pp.280-281.

The arrival of the English in Bengal was destined to cut short the Nawab's hold of the highly profitable Khasi line trade. By the beginning of the eighteenth century the English East India Company had secured an advantage over other European rivals in that province. Under the 1717 farman of Farrukh Siyar, the Mughal Emperor, it obtained certain commercial privileges of which the right to trade in Bengal free of duties was the most pertinent. However, very soon, Bengal witnessed a great political change when in 1740 Nawab Ali Vardi Khan asserted his independence and freed Bengal from Mughal control. With the change of the political status of the Nawab of Bengal, it became necessary for the East India Company to enter into agreement with that authority regarding its commercial activities in Bengal. The Nawab exercised firm control over the English traders and by his exceptional ability prevented them from misusing the privileges granted by the said farman. But in 1756, the English who had earlier been compelled to accept the authority of the Nawab became adamant that the farman of 1717 had exempted both the East India Company and Company's servants private trade from the ordinary internal

tolls. It is well known that many Company servants had resorted to private trade which was bringing in for them far more returns than their salary as Company men. These officials had always been looking for fresh avenues to indulge in trade enterprises. Many of them had also been responsible for bringing to the notice of the Company the resources and trade potentials around their places of postings. The officers in South East Bengal must not have, therefore, failed to bring home to the notice of the Calcutta authorities the coveted source of lime in the Khasi Hills which for a long time had been in great demand and supply in Bengal. Their desire to safeguard their Company and private trade in Bengal irrespective of the orders of Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah against any such commercial participation was in part responsible for the battle of Plassey of 1757, the outcome of which bestowed on them the undisputed privilege to trade freely in Bengal, Bihar and Orrisa, besides other privileges. This provided the East India Company with an excellent opportunity to enter into the Khasi lime trade. It was the great demand

for lime at headquarters that had prompted the Company to strive towards the inclusion of favourable commercial terms regarding the said trade, in its subsequent treaties with the Nawabs of Bengal. In 1760, the Company acquired a share of the Khasi lime trade through an agreement with Nawab Mir Kasim which, settled for it "one half of the chunas produced at Sylhet for three years."⁶⁹ However, the urge for acquiring a greater share of the lime trade was reinforced in 1763, when, Mir Jafar was restored to the Nawabship of Bengal. The fifth article of the treaty signed between the Company and Mir Jafar in 1763 represents a dictation of more advantageous commercial terms on the part of the former. The said article appropriated not only "one half" of the prepared lime to the Company but also the right on the part of the Company's gomastha to jointly manufacture lime with the Nawab's fouzdar at Sylhet, "of which each shall defray half the expenses."⁷⁰ Two years later, by virtue of the grant of Diwani by Shah Alam II, the titular head of the Mughal Empire, the Company obtained a direct control of the revenues and an indirect control of the administration in Bengal. With the grant of diwani, Sylhet came under the control of the authorities at Calcutta and gradually, the Company acquired the monopoly of

69. C.U.Aitchison, *Op.cit.*, p.231; H.Vansittart, A Narrative of the Transactions in Bengal, p.44; F.S.C.P., 27 September, 1760, p.91.

70. *Ibid.*, p.234; *Ibid.*, p.510.

the lime trade from the Nawabs of Bengal.

The acquisition of the monopoly proved a great boon to the English. It gained for them the needed supply of Khasi lime which constituted an essential material in the construction of the "new fortress and city of Calcutta."⁷¹ At this juncture it is important to note that in the second half of the eighteenth century, British motives became distinctly imperial, which motive was being reflected in the architecture of the period.⁷² The Khasi and Jaintia Hills by their boundless contribution of lime had played a distinct role in determining the architecture of Calcutta and in transforming it from a mere trading centre to an elegant city. Perhaps, it is no exaggeration to state that much of Calcutta was constructed on Khasi lime. But in those early days, the Khasi and Jaintia Hills were outside the sphere of British control. Nothing much was known of its inhabitants except that they were a tribe of fierce marauders. Hence, the products that went down from the hills to Calcutta and the other parts of Bengal via Sylhet district were classed as the products of that remote district. In fact, even after the British occupation of the hills the trade name adopted for Khasi lime was "Sylhet lime."⁷³

71. W.W.Hunter, The Thackerays in India and some Calcutta Graves, p.86.

72. Fort William, Warren Hastings House, Belvedere and the famous Writers Building were some of the constructions which sprang up during the period. Weekend Telegraph, Calcutta, 10 August 1985, p.9.

73. W.W.Hunter, A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol.II, p.238.

EPILOGUE

The rise and decline of the Inglis & Co. makes a fascinating study. Apart from the fact that from a small beginning as individual traders, the proprietors of the Inglis & Co. had a meteoric growth and came to control the entire volume of export trade of the Khasis. The impact that the role of the Company generated for the Khasi economy is a theme of immense significance in the context of British colonial rule in India and the consequent monetization of economy in the specific tribal situation. The tribals as they were, the Khasis were rooted to their traditional agricultural occupations as the mainstay of their economy, besides resorting to barter trade to balance the deficit in their manufactures for all their surplus produce. The export items from the Khasi and Jaintia Hills were, of course, its great gift of minerals viz., lime and iron which they had been supplying to neighbouring Bengal for centuries. In fact, Bengal had been greatly dependent on the Khasi and Jaintia Hills for its requirement of lime. In the pre-colonial days, however, the exchange of this item was limited to small scale trade between individual traders. The betel leaf and orange which the Khasis grew in a large scale and supplied to Bengal were also individual agro-commercial enterprises.

The emergence of the Inglis & Co. institutionalised the

export trade of the Khasis in all such spheres that the Company took interest. The process was augmented by the accomplishment of the British colonization of these hills. Although, at times the attitude of the Government was hostile to the growing prospects of the Company, in the ultimate analysis they proved to be mutually supportive, Henry Inglis giving hands to the first Political Agent in the Khasi Hills, in reconstructing the administration in colonial lines as his deputy and at the same time utilising his position with the Government to the benefit of his Company. In fact, the traditional mode of individualistic free trade was for the first time tampered with by the Government, when it introduced the auction system for the Khasi trade. The policy of the Government, no doubt, initially brought in a large number of European speculators in the field, but the redoubtable Inglis & Co. ruthlessly manipulated the situation to see all competitors off the scene and thereby established its monopoly.

The traditional lime trade of the Khasis was the first attraction of the Inglis & Co. The consolidation of British administration in Eastern India and the growth of Calcutta as British India's capital city requiring huge quantity of lime for the emerging buildings provided the Company a solid market. In course of time, a cement factory came up at Chattack and another at Mawmluh-Cherrapunji. Chattack is in Bangladesh due to the partition of the country, but the Mawmluh-Cherrapunji Cement Factory thrives on the Khasi

limestone. Even Bangladesh occasionally imports Khasi limestone from India to feed its cement plant at Chattack. The Inglis & Co. did not take any interest in iron ore, perhaps because there was not much commercial prospect for the particular mineral or because the deposits had already been exhausted by prolonged extraction before the emergence of the Company. But the Company was attracted by the huge deposits of another mineral viz., coal which the Khasis did not commercially utilise earlier. This coal trade could pay considerable dividend to the Inglis & Co. but the Government refused to allow any lease of the coal mines to the Company. The almost inexhaustible coal deposits in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills are under massive extraction these days. However, an important cultivation that really paid huge dividends to the Inglis & Co. were the orange groves. The Company encouraged commercial cultivation of orange and carried on this trade on a virtually monopolistic line for which they had enthusiastic buyers outside the hills.

The limestone and orange trade of the Inglis & Co. provided a fillip to the process of monetization of the Khasi economy that had commenced as a consequence of the East India Company's rule in Bengal and perpetuated when the Khasi and Jaintia Hills passed under the British rule. The Inglis & Co. pumped in its capital in these hills in the form of payment of the rent to the owners of the quarries and the groves and as wages that it paid to a large number of its workers for extraction, collection and transportation. In

the context of the status of the Khasi economy in that phase of its history the amount pushed in by the Inglis & Co., by no means can be considered as insignificant.

The infiltration of foreign capital and the commercialisation of limestone and orange apart, the role of the Company hardly proved to be of any benefit to the local society. A few bridle paths might have come up for the transportation of export items, the traditional river traffic no doubt became brisk, the Company's commercial activities made no noticeable impact on the development of the lines of communication. The local people gained no monetary advantage other than those engaged in manual labourers. There had been on the other hand, several complaints of exploitation of the local people by the Company in various forms which provoked even a missionary like Thomas Jones to petition the Government.

In its heydays, the Inglis & Co. managed to overcome all the odds that came on its way. The complaints were piled up in the law courts, and the highest authorities in the Government even conducted enquiries through senior officials but the Company for a long time survived the stresses and strains. Nevertheless, its fast rise to its glory could not sustain its assumed monopolistic status for good. Decline set in not only due to the inherent weaknesses in the structure of the Company and the hostile attitude of the latter Government officials but also to the initiative of the emerging Khasi traders who took the queue from the Inglis & Co. and a few of them successfully endeavoured to set

themselves up as individual miners and limestone traders. The incompetence and erratic nature of the scion of the Inglis family viz., Leonel Arthur Lister Inglis led to the winding up of the Company.

Be that as it may, the fact of the Inglis & Company's existence in the history of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills is by now a matter of historical research. But the position it had once assumed in the economy of the area and the role it played in the years of colonisation and consolidation of the British authority in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills is in fact a significant chapter in the economic history of Modern India. It is a living history too. Several legends are still extant in the memory of the local people about the Company. Its role in the commercialisation of indigenous resources on an institutionalised scale left behind several legacies that influenced various aspects of economic development in the region coming to our own times.