

REPORT ON THE
KHASI
AND
JAINTIA
HILLS
1853

A.J.M. MILLS

A.J.M. Mills' *Report on the Khasi (Coseah) and Jaintia (Jynteah) Hills, 1853* is an important document for research in modern Indian History. An officiating judge of the Sudder Court at Calcutta, Mills was on deputation in the north-east frontier region of the then Bengal Presidency to inquire mainly into judicial anomalies.

The Report begins with a brief historical note on the circumstances leading to the British occupation of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. It then describes the population of the Khasi Hills, the number of human souls, houses and villages. Cherrapunji, the headquarters of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, had a numerous European community and efforts were on for building a sanatorium there.

The major portion of the Report is of course devoted to the development of judicial administration since the appointment of Col. Lister as the Political Agent in 1833, about which the Sudder Court had received several complaints and deputed Mills specifically to enquire into these.

As an historical document its importance can hardly be over estimated. It is a primary source of information. And because it covers not only the judicial anomalies but also a wide variety of aspects of life and business there, it has been and is still being used as a source by historians, anthropologists and other scholars.

Its importance is so great that it is now being re-issued by NEHU as the first volume of the prestigious series — North-Eastern Studies.

REPORT
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KHASI AND JAINTIA HILLS
1853

by

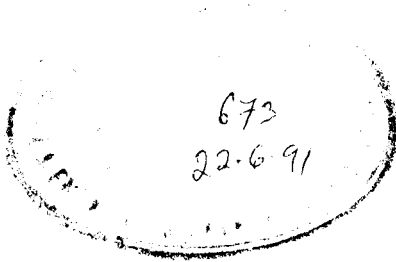
A.J.M. MILLS

Introduced and annotated
by
Dr. J.B. BHATTACHARJEE
Department of History
North-Eastern Hill University



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by A.J.M. Mills

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Introduction

A.J.M. Mills' *Report on the Khasi (Coseah) and Jaintia (Jynteah) Hills, 1853* is an important document for research in modern Indian History. An officiating judge of the Sudder Court at Calcutta, Mills was on deputation in the north-east frontier region of the then Bengal Presidency to inquire mainly into judicial anomalies. But his reports—one on the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and another on Assam—covered so many aspects as to merit consideration as a general account of the land and the people. The two reports were separately published by the Government of Bengal from Calcutta in 1854 and reprinted at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, Shillong in 1901. The *Report on Assam* has recently been reprinted by the Assam Prakasan Parishad (Gauhati, 1974) and another reprint of it has been brought out by a private concern (New Delhi, 1980). The *Report on Assam* incidentally does not include the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. We are publishing in this volume, the *Report on the Khasi and Jaintia Hills*, the original of which was collected by my colleague Dr. D.R. Syiemlieh from England. This is merely a reproduction though set afresh to give a new copy to our readers. We have kept the original report as it first appeared as any changes would amount to tampering with historical evidence. Our job here has been limited to providing some annotations in the form of explanatory notes to the main Report for the guidance of contemporary readers.

The Report begins with a brief historical note on the circumstances leading to the British occupation of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. It then describes the population of the Khasi Hills, the number of human souls, houses and villages. Cherrapunji, the headquarters of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, had a numerous European community and efforts were on for building a sanatorium there. The description of physical features is followed by remarks on agricultural, horticultural and mineral production, wherein Mills extensively quotes Col. F.G. Lister, the Political Agent at Cherrapunji. He gives details about the orange plantation and the cultivation of potatoes, cotton, cinnamon, bay-leaf, betelnut and leaf, and spices including a quantity of exports and the marketing system. Minerals like limestone, coal and iron-ore were quarried and exported in

large quantities to Bengal. The iron-ore was also locally smelted, rendered into manufactures like spades, hoes and blocks of smelted ore and then exported to Assam and Bengal. The imports comprised rice, salt, tobacco, dried fish, oil, corals, brass and copper utensils, clothes, cattle and goats. Coming to the Jaintia Hills, he admitted that the British officer still possessed very little knowledge about this territory. The cultivation, according to him, was very scanty, although ploughing was done in some places. Besides cultivation, rice, orange, potato, betel-nut, spices, etc. were grown and minerals like limestone, coal and iron-ore were procurable in abundance. The Report provides the estimated quantity and value of the various productions. It also gives the number of villages, houses and population in the Jaintia Hills and the number of families which earned a livelihood either by agriculture or garden culture, or as traders or porters respectively. He found that the Jaintias were unwisely exempted from paying taxes to the government and, therefore, recommended that some taxes should be imposed on them. Mills then makes some remarks about the character of the Khasi-Jaintias, and various other tribes that inhabited these hills, their religion, social habits, customs, and prejudices. He also noticed the work of the Welsh Mission in the field of education and proselytisation. He listed the chieftains in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills and their systems of administration.

The major portion of the Report is, of course, devoted to the development of judicial administration since the appointment of Col. Lister as the Political Agent in 1833, about which the Sudder Court had received several complaints and deputed Mills specifically to enquire into these. He studied a number of cases that were disposed of by the Cherra Court to be satisfied that the complaints of anomalies were valid and that the method of dispensing justice was most objectionable. An interesting fact that the Report mentions (and indeed corroborated by several other sources) is that Harry Inglis, the proprietor of Messrs Inglis and Co. and son-in-law of Col. Lister, was the real *agent provocateur* of most of the litigations. Inglis was appointed as an Assistant to the Political Agent on Government salary with the powers of a Magistrate, and he used this authority in his own business interest. He initiated litigation to ruin his rivals, and even indulged in physical torture and assassinations, the cases of which the Cherra Court refused to entertain. By this process Inglis secured his virtual monopoly in trade. Mills discovered that actually there was no dispute since Inglis had no rival "but from his proneness to litigation and from the extent of his dealings, they may at any time recur, . . ." Mills, therefore, made a number of recommendations to uphold "the impartial dispensation of justice."

Mills is certainly not correct in stating that the British intercourse with the Khasi-Jaintias first commenced in the year 1826. British official records suggest that intercourse started immediately with the accession to the Diwani of Bengal in 1765. The three volumes of *Sylhet District Records*, compiled by A. Firminger (Sylhet 1905-7) contains several documents on Khasi disturbances in Surma Valley in the last quarter of the 18th century which were provoked mainly by British policy to control Khasi trade and to bring the foot-hill areas under regular assessment. In 1774 an expedition was sent against the Raja of Jaintias who was accused of obstructing trade in Surma (R.B. Pemberton, *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India*, Calcutta, 1835, Sec. 5). Guha Singh, a Chief of Shella, died in British captivity in Murshidabad in 1792; (*Bengal Judicial Consultations*, 10 August 1792, No. 12). On 10 March 1824, Ram Singh, Raja of Jaintias, acknowledged the authority of the British Government by signing a treaty (C.V. Aitchinson, *Treaties, Engagements and Sanads* Vol. IX, Calcutta, 1931 pp. 118-19). Immediately after the outbreak of the Anglo-Burmese war on 5 March, 1824, David Scott, Agent to the Governor-General in North East Frontier had realized the importance of a road from Sylhet to Assam through the Khasi Hills. He persuaded Raja Dewan Singh, the Syiem of Cherra, to agree to provide the passage in exchange for a tract of land near Pandha in Sylhet. Chatter Singh, the Syiem of Nongkhlaw, also agreed to allow the road through his territory (*Bengal Secret and Political Consultations*, 30 May 1829, No. 21). The evidences are thus abundant to prove that the British relations with the Khasi-Jaintias had started long before 1826. Mills might not have consulted these records, and this was indeed beyond the perview of his Report.

Mills had no doubt personally visited Cherrapunji. This is clear from the Report. It is, however, not known whether he toured the other parts of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. In the absence of this information a methodological question naturally arises whether the Report can be accepted as the information supplied by the 'man on the spot'. It is, however, clear that Mills had notified the British officers and other European residents to submit notes on specific issues. The replies received by him are attached to the main report in the form of appendices each of which has a strong claim to be treated as a primary source by the historian. Appendix A, for example, is a note by Dr J.W. Fletcher, the Assistant Surgeon at Cherrapunji, which gives interesting information regarding the climate of the hills, the sanitary conditions of the Cherra Station and the Jail.

The note of Col. F.G. Lister, on the history of the Political Agency

and the Return of Khasi Chiefs under his political control are given in Appendix B. Lister's description of what he calls 'statistical resources of the district' is bound to interest economic historians. He also reproduces the full texts of the treaties signed by the Khasi rulers from time to time, all of which are available in C.V. Aitchinson's *Treaties, Engagements and Sanads* (Vols. IX and XI, Calcutta, 1931). Appendix C contains two very important accounts of Rev. W. Lewis of 'the Khasi Courts of Judicature' and 'the Khasi form of Government.' Lewis was a Welsh missionary in the Khasi Hills. He worked among the Khasis for a long time and had gained intimate knowledge about the Khasi way of life, including the local language. Researchers in the early history of the Khasis or the Khasi political system shall find illuminating material in these two accounts. W.H.M. Sweetland, who was in charge of the coal mines of the Sylhet Coal Company, submitted a lengthy report regarding the administration of justice in the court of the Assistant to the Political Agent at Cherra. It refers in detail to a large number of cases arising out of lime and coal trade that came up before the Cherra and Sylhet courts, the most important being the famous case of Golucknath and Sheebchurn versus Messrs. Duncan, Gibson and others which had created great excitement among the trading community in Bengal at the time and points to the anomalies particularly when Harry Inglis held the position of the Assistant to the Agent. This report can be seen in Appendix D. Sweetland's observation provoked Mills to call for explanations from the Assistant to Political Agent in connection with the proceedings in the Golucknath and Sheebchurn case. The correspondence between Mills and Lt. G.N. Cave, then Assistant to the Political Agent, can be seen in Appendix E.

Appendix F is the translation of the judgment in this famous case. The Appendices did include a note by Rev. W. Lewis on the progress of missionary work, 'Statement of Increase and Decrease of Establishment,' and the Minutes of the Governor of Bengal on the Report submitted by A.J.M. Mills. In fact, the main report is rather shorter than it could be and the importance of the volume is primarily due to the Appendices.

The nineteenth century stands out to be crucial in the history of the Khasi-Jaintias. In the 30s of that century these hills were integrated by the British into their colonial empire. This was the end of centuries' splendid political isolation and beginning of what is called 'modernisation.' The process of change once started, became rapid, and for an understanding of this process, Mills' Report is an invaluable document. The first report for the Khasi-Jaintias was by R.B. Pemberton (*Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India*, Calcutta, 1835, section 5, sub-section 2-3) who

extensively toured this region in 1830s and his report was published by the Government in 1835. Mills visited Khasi Hills within two decades of its annexation and yet he found a lot of change not only in administration and economy but also in the character and attitude of the people. Six years after him, W.J. Allen submitted his *Report on the Cosseah and Jynteah Hills* (Calcutta, 1859). W.W. Hunter's *A Statistical Account of Assam* (for Khasi-Jaintia Hills see Vol. II) was published in London in 1879. And finally, P.R.T. Gurdon's highly acclaimed monograph, *The Khasis*, came out in 1907. These published sources even if one fails to get access to the host of archival material that are available in India and England, give a fair amount of insight into the stages and rapidity of development in that fateful century.

J.B. Bhattacharjee