

Geography behind History: The Garo Hills' Colonial Legacy

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On 1 July 2002, the demand for a separate state for the Garos was once again heard in the State Legislative Assembly. The member from the Garo Hills who moved the resolution seeking the separation of the Garo Hills from the state of Meghalaya pointed out that there was still no road communications between the Garo Hills and the rest of the state, the economic condition of the people had worsened and that unemployment was creating problems that were affecting traditional institutions.¹ When the issue was first raised some years ago few people saw any justification in the Garo's cry of neglect. The first Chief Minister of the state carved out of Assam during 1969–72, the immensely popular Captain Williamson Sangma, was after all a Garo. So too were two others who followed him, the now well known former Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Purno Sangma, and the gentle soft spoken Salseng Marak. What was little understood then, or is today appreciated is that the dilemma of the Garo Hills lies, as it has always lain, in her geographical situation. Indeed few districts in North eastern India have suffered more or had their development seriously undermined by locational problems. The case of the Garo Hills is perhaps historical. Ironically, they were among the first to come into contact with the East India Company and with what colonial historiography called "civilization".

I

On this part of its extensive eastern landward periphery the Company was said to have succeeded to a heritage of anarchy.

The Garo Hills form the western extremity of the Barail range and abut on the eastern Bengal districts of Mymensingh and Rangpur. The Mughals who preceded the British had left the management of the frontier to the *zamindars* of Karaibari, Kalumalapara and Habraghat in Rangpur and Susung and Sherpur in Mymensingh. The *zamindars'* control over the Garo marches was never quite effective. Their concern being essentially fiscal they were content to extort whatever they could in the form of tribute or revenue to meet the demands of the Mughal *Fauzdar* at Rangamati. In its early years the Company was equally disinterested in assuming direct administrative responsibilities and generally shrank from too close a contact with all "rude tribes".² At the close of the eighteenth century when extensive disturbances broke out in the frontier the Company felt that leaving the management of the Garos to the *zamindars* was clearly a mistake.

The direct management of the Garo frontier was in fact anticipated in 1788–89 by John Elliott, Mymensingh's magistrate and the first of a series of officers to visit the hills. Thomas Sisson in 1815 had suggested in addition the experiment of raising a militia of Garos on the lines of Augustus Cleveland's Bhagalpur Hill Rangers. It was however the report submitted in the following year by David Scott. Sisson's successor as magistrate of Rangpur, that marked the beginning of the end of *zamindari* authority over the Garos. That year, in 1816, the East India Company assumed administrative responsibility over the tracts within the *zamindari* estates cultivated by the Garos. In the succeeding years control was gradually established over the border villages paying some form of tribute to the *Zamindars*.³

A few years' experience of the Garo frontier confirmed Scott in his view that the Bengal Regulations were ill suited for these "backward areas", then administered as a part of the district of Rangpur.⁴ The result was that in 1822 these tracts under the *thanas* of Goalpara, Dhubri and Karaibari were separated from Rangpur and constituted into a separate administrative unit called North-East Parts of Rangpur under a Civil Commissioner. Instead of the existing Regulations, hence the popular term Non-regulation, a system appropriate for the management of the Garos was created. The preamble to Regulation X of 1822 which embodied these changes thus stated its objectives:

To promote the desirable object of reclaiming these tribes to habits of civilized life, it seems necessary that a special plan for the administration of justice of a kind peculiar to their customs and prejudices, should be arranged and concerted with the headmen; and that measures should at the same time be taken for freeing them from any dependence of the Zamindar of the British Province.⁵

Non-Regulation introduced for the first time in eastern Bengal the concept of the special in regard to tribal or backward tracts. It was to become the basis on which the administration of the hill areas under carefully chosen officers was to take shape in the province of Assam. In the interim, the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824–26) not only interrupted Scott's work but ushered in changes that were to undermine fundamentally that very special position of the Garo Hills on Bengal's Eastern Frontier.

II

The strategic importance to Assam of the Garo Hills began to be appreciated in the face of mounting tension with the Burmese. At the end of October 1823 when war was more or less assumed as inevitable Bengal's Commander-in-Chief, Lieutenant General Sir Edward Paget submitting his plans for the defence of the Eastern Frontier, drew the attention of the Calcutta Council to this fact:

The geographical position of the people who inhabit the Garrow hills is advantageous to us provided they are disposed to dispute the passage of their country by the Burmese and are willing to allow us a free passage thro' it, and to occupy some points of it as we think fit, but it is quite impossible to suffer them to retain their independence on any other terms, as it might be seriously inconvenient and prejudicial to our military operations if the Burmese get possession of this tract of country.⁶

When General Paget wrote this appreciation military operations beyond Gauhati was not yet contemplated. But with the outbreak of hostilities in March 1824 and the advance of the Company's troops beyond Gauhati and Nowgong British concern correspondingly moved eastward. David Scott had made his epic journey

across the Jaintia Hills in 1824 to join the advancing British columns at Raha.⁷ Some months later the shift of interest from the Garo hills became more marked when an attempt was made to establish a direct line of communications through the Khasi Hills to link Sylhet with Gauhati, the base of operations, for the post monsoon campaign in Assam. By the time the war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Yandabo (24 February 1826) the military frontier had moved to the eastern extremity of Assam. British policy now changed from denying the Burmese the control over the Brahmaputra valley to obtaining command over the hills astride the traditional routes between Upper Assam and Upper Burma.⁸ With the establishment of control over the Khasi syiemships during 1829–1834 the Garo hills, surrounded by British or British controlled territory, lost its character as a frontier. And with that interest in the region began to wane. Sir Alexander Mackenzie admirably describes this transition in the columns of the *Pioneer*:

For a time it really seemed as if this would be one of the first races to accept our rule and its attendant benefits. But David Scott died—the conquest of Assam and more important imperial claims drew off the attention of Government—the Garos of the inner hills fell away from all engagements with us, and only on the outer verge of the plateau was an uncertain control kept up and a kind of spasmodic order preserved by the darogas and burkandazes of the neighbouring thannahs. The country became a land unknown; the people were proved uncouth and dangerous.⁹

David Scott's grandiose schemes for education and development were all but forgotten. His coercive methods more remembered and followed. "Scott's plan had been to march into a village", his successor, Francis Jenkins, reminded Calcutta when proposing a small punitive expedition against certain villages guilty of raids into British territory, and "give notice that if the chief did not surrender himself in two days and pay tribute, the village would be burnt and cultivation laid waste." That local officers were often too eager to resort to this form of coercion at the slightest provocation will be borne out by a close examination of punitive expeditions. Not surprisingly the Government of India had often to restrain the ardour of local officers.¹⁰

Apparently the only interest that the British had was in the customary revenue and the hill cotton occasionally brought down to the *hats* in the foothills, and to these objects the peace of the borders. This was not exciting work and officers entrusted with Garo affairs found little incentive and fewer avenues for promotion. All eyes, it was said, were now on the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra where millions had been sunk in the tea industry or the Nagas whose raids was a matter of concern to the planters. The rude state in which the Garos were allowed to remain could only be remedied, so pleaded Francis Jenkins Agent to the Governor General and Commissioner of Assam since 1839, by taking over possession of the Garo Hills and administering it. But none in Calcutta was interested. And when this was placed before the visiting Judge Moffat Mills in 1853, he too declined to recommend, saying that:

Unless a European functionary could reside in the interior and superintendent the administration, which it was known he could not do, we should not attempt to extend our rule over unprofitable hills. All past experience showed that we cannot trust native agency in the management of wild tribes.¹¹

The sum total of the East India Company's work in the Garo Hills is brought out in a letter that Jenkins wrote weeks before he demitted his office of twenty seven years: "although the Garos have been nearly a century under our jurisdiction, it is not on record that we have ever had a single officer who could converse with them in their language". It was a remark that the Secretary of State, Sir Charles Wood, was much to regret.¹²

The creation of a Lieutenant Governorship of Bengal in 1854 and the subordination of Assam as a Commissioner's division gave the Garo Hills a more favourable hearing in Calcutta. In 1860, various schemes were put forward to extend a system of internal administration to the tributary Garos. A few of these were implemented, others like the appointment of a permanent European officer in the hills shelved on the grounds of finance. It was only five years later that Lieutenant Governor Sir Cecil Beadon was able with some success to take up "the problem so long laid by, and enunciated a policy the results of which",¹³ Mackenzie was to write, "have surprised those who hoped for most". The process he initiated with the occupation of Tura in early 1866

finally led, it is now well known, to the creation of the district in 1872-73.¹⁴

This should not lead one to the conclusion that the Garo Hills was unique and that the so called "forward policy" was the result of a desire to provide a lasting solution to the difficulty independent of Assam's frontier problem. Rather it was the continuing Angami violence on British or protected border villages and the failure of frontier defence which led to a change of policy. The Garo Hills district is to be traced to these developments. It all begun with Colonel Henry Hopkinson, Jenkins's successor as Commissioner and Agent to the Governor General, North East Frontier, questioning in 1865 whether there were any other frontiers in Assam other than that with Bhutan, Manipur or Burma.¹⁵ As far as the Naga Hills were concerned, the various tribes living in the tract between Assam's settled districts and the Patkais were therefore subjects of the Government over whom it had rights and obligations. Beadon who as Secretary to the Bengal Government before his elevation to head of the Presidency had handled the correspondence on the Assam frontier tribes and knew the Naga situation, agreed. The Nagas he said, "including the Angami Nagas, are independent only in the sense that the British refrained from reducing them to practical subjection and has left them, except at occasional intervals, entirely to themselves; but they never enjoyed or acquired political or territorial independence".¹⁶ It was this view that he was expressing when he wrote of the Garo hills:

There is no part of the Garrow Hills which is not British territory and over which the British Government has not always asserted, though it may not have actually exercised, the rights of sovereignty.¹⁷

It followed from this, as Hopkinson had explained to Beadon:

We must cease to regard them as aliens or even as enemies, but acknowledge them as subjects, seek to establish ourselves amongst them, to extend our influence over them and bring them under our control and within the pale of civilization.¹⁸

A distinction, however, needs to make between the two regions. The significance of the new policy towards the Nagas is that it marked the end of the Naga Hills frontier and a beginning of a

new political relationship with them. In the case of the Garo Hills it was merely the acceptance of the responsibility of administering a tract that had ceased to be a frontier more than three decades ago. But the structure introduced was only skeletal, though proudly described by Mackenzie as "simple and devoid of technicalities". The *zamindar* continued to be the favourite whipping boy; and the enactments that followed were either to put curbs upon them or to prevent people from the plains acquiring interests in the hills.¹⁹ The district was to be of sole preserve of the Deputy Commissioner.

As in all hill districts no efforts were directed towards development, even though one Lieutenant General was enthusiastic about the natural resources of these hills.²⁰ Education remained in the hands of missionaries.²¹ The administration of Tura and the Garo Hills not surprisingly makes a sharp contrast to that of Shillong and the Khasi Hills. It may be recalled that about this time the headquarters of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills was transferred from Cherrapunjee to Shillong. Here a scheme of roads and buildings and allotment of lands to Europeans were taken in hand; all sufficiently advanced by 1874 to make it the headquarters of the newly constituted Chief Commissionership of Assam. While under colonial rule Shillong soon became a "chip of England",²² Tura languished.

Yet, comparisons are often made between pre-colonial and colonial situations to show the benefits of British rule. The comment of one progressive historian on the Garo hills in this regard deserves to be quoted *in extenso*.

The contribution of the British cannot be overestimated. Before the advent of the British not to speak of a regular system of administration and means of education, the Garos had never experienced an established form of Government nor did they possess any written language. There was no regular line of communication and the hills were infested by pestilence and diseases. The society was extremely traditional and the tribes lived in hostile situations. The introduction of education and administrative measures infused moderations and the people gave up the practices of hunting human heads, preserving the skulls, and sorcery. Relieved from the oppression of the *zamindaris*, the Garos abandoned the retaliatory feuds and raids and plunders remained only the myths of the past.²³

No colonial historian could have written better. What the British in the Garo Hills did, or rather did not do, and how developments there continued to be determined by its geographical location, the theme of this piece, is best seen in the discussions on Provincial Autonomy and the creation of Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas of Assam.

III

Section 52(A) of the Government of India Act, 1919, authorized Governor-in-Council to declare any territory to be a "Backward Tract" and to specify exceptions and modifications in the application of the Act to such territory. In January 1921, the Assam Government took advantage of this to so notify the Garo Hills, along with other hill districts and frontier tracts.²⁴ This constitutional provision was the starting point of the idea of exclusive hill or tribal administration that was to develop in the next decade. In March 1928, Neville Edward Parry, the Superintendent of the Lushai Hills, in a note to the visiting Simon Commission suggested that the hill districts should be made a separate division under a Chief Commissioner or, better still, a North Eastern Frontier Province consisting of these districts and those of Burma with headquarters at Kohima:

Either of these two alternatives would be better than condemning the hills and the plains to an unnatural union in which the hill districts would merely act as a drag in the progress of the plains districts and the latter would exercise a detrimental influence on the development of the hills. The second alternative would in many ways be far the better as it would group together a large number of tribes with more or less common origin and would ensure uniformity of administration of the hill tribes of the North Eastern Frontier.²⁵

The Garo Hills occupied little space in Parry's idea. John Henry Hutton, considered an authority on matters tribal, was later to explain why:

The case of this district was probably confused from the start owing to a suggestion that the Frontier tracts from the Lushai Hills to the Sadiya Frontier Tracts and westward to Bhutan border should form an independent administration directly

under the Government of India. The Garo Hills and the Jaintia Hills would then have to be included in Assam proper in order that the two valleys should not be territorially separated by an area administered by the Central Government.²⁶

Parry's scheme itself came to nothing. But the idea that the hill or frontier districts deserved special treatment remained firmly entrenched in the official mind in Assam. The Simon Commission recognized this when it remarked, "Nowhere in India is the contrast between the life and outlook of these wild hill men and the totally distinct civilization of the plains more manifest."²⁷ The Commission had recommended their exclusion from the Reform scheme and in August 1930 Assam submitted detailed plans towards this objective.

When it became clear from the proceedings of the First Round Table Conference and the Prime Minister's closing speech that no special provision can be made in the new Constitution for the peculiar needs of any part of India Assam wondered, "how in the absence of such a distinct form of administration these tracts with their distinctive character and particular requirements could be fitted with the general scheme of the proposed Constitution."²⁸ Assam therefore reiterated that the hill districts in their own interests and those of the province should be "definitely excluded" from a popularly elected Assembly, "in whose deliberations they cannot for generation to come take any part, and on whose decisions they can exercise no influence".²⁹ In a long and rambling letter that Assam's Chief Secretary wrote to the Reforms Secretary of the Government of India, it was *inter alia* pointed out:

The Ministers of the future would find the demand that the hill districts should be brought with the regulation districts in the plains irresistible, both on political and financial grounds. Any uncontrolled invasion of foreign officials into the Naga Hills, the frontier tracts or the Lushai Hills, would inevitably cause a serious trouble.³⁰

This, however, it was pointed out, was not necessarily the case with the Khasi and Jaintia Hills and the Garo Hills districts, "where the inhabitants are in point of fact as civilized and as educated as their neighbours in the plains districts". The exclusion

of these two districts was therefore not insisted upon, only that exclusion of central and provincial legislation needed to be restricted.³¹ Assam's recommendations were therefore that the Frontier Tracts, the Naga Hills, North Cachar Hills sub-division of Cachar and the Lushai Hills should be totally Excluded while the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the Garo Hills and the Mikir Hills should be Partially Excluded and their "administration left to the Ministers in the new Constitution, subject to certain restrictive powers which could be exercised by the Governor". These recommendations forwarded by the Government of India were incorporated into the Bill as the Sixth Schedule.*

In the House of Commons there was considerable pressure to extend the scope of the Schedule on the grounds that there were large numbers of "aboriginal and primitive" living outside the notified areas.³² This led to a reconsideration whether all the hill areas, including the Garo Hills, ought not to be made Excluded Areas. C.S. Mullan, Assam's Reforms Officer, at once discussed the new development with Hutton and G.D. Walker, Commissioner of Surma Valley and Hill Division, both of whom were emphatic that North Cachar as well as the Mikir Hills ought to be totally excluded. While he recognized that there could be many special reasons for excluding North Cachar, Mullan felt that:

Such a special case cannot however be made for the Mikir Hills and I confess that if the Mikir Hills are to be totally excluded I see no reason why the Garo Hills should not be also.³³

William Shaw, Deputy Commissioner, Garo Hills, when asked for his opinion said he had been discussing this question during the last three years he was in Tura, and that "without hesitation I have come to the conclusion that the Garo Hills should be an Excluded Area".³⁴ A member of the provincial civil service Shaw was more of a colonial, but less sophisticated, than any member of the steel frame. His long list of twenty two reasons for this conclusion indicates the working of the mind of such district officers. The first six were that the Garos were almost entirely aboriginals, except for about two per cent who are Christians.

* The Sixth Schedule was ultimately scrapped in favour of an Order-in-Council notifying the Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas.

Even these were mostly "stomach Christians", hoping to get posts and other advantages. Second, the Garos were inimical to all "plains folk" and like all hill men were very conservative regarding tribal customs and laws. Special Administrative Rules were consequently framed to protect them. Third, the Garos were very nervous that Reforms will mean control by the few Christians, the only educated ones among them, and who will only look to the interests of the Christians. Then again, the Garos had nothing in common with the people of Assam or Surma Valley whom they used to raid only seventy five years ago the memories of which had not yet faded. Unlike the Hindus and Muslims "they eat cows and pigs and have no religious ties, being animists", "no pardah system", "no tabu" on widow remarriage, no caste prejudices. Finally, the Hindus and Muslims look upon them as "little better than animals" and so on *ad nauseum*.³⁵

Shaw's main contention was that the new Council would be dominated by the plains people who would exploit the Garos who have no experience about elections, not having local or municipal boards of their own; and no Garo leader would be able to protect the interests of his fellow tribesmen. The last three of twenty two reasons which give some details of his ideas and were intended to tilt official opinion in favour of exclusion, long though they are, deserves to be quoted in full:

Almost all the Garos have not the slightest idea what the Reforms mean and have looked up to the Government (Sahab) to support them. There are a few which (sic) can be counted on one's fingers who having passed BA and lived among Babus think they know all about Reforms but are actually thinking of themselves as Council Members than the advantages or otherwise to the Garos if given "Partial Reforms". These are Christians and the Garos who are not Christians have no faith in them. Even the Christians are doubtful.

It is admitted that they have no leaders who truly would have the whole of the Garos primarily in their minds whilst those who think they are leaders do not know what they are talking about. Such men would be valueless in any Council even supposing the Garos were considered for "partial exclusion".

The non-Christians do not want anything to do with Council of Babus. This is their view. Many of the sensible Christians are against it too. Only the persons who have a hope of getting into Council want "Partial Reform" and I am not prepared to support such persons.

Shaw ended his rather reactionary note with the conviction that "the Garos are not fit even for Partial Reforms at present and very likely for sometime to come".³⁶

In forwarding this to the Reforms Officer Commissioner Walker said that the arguments in favour of total exclusion of the Naga Hills and the Lushai Hills applied equally strongly to the Garo Hills, "It is only because the Khasi Hills cut them off from the totally excluded hill districts", he added, "that the Garo Hills are not also totally excluded".³⁷ Hutton, to whom these papers were sent for comments also agreed that the Garo Hills was in many ways more backward than such districts as the Lushai Hills which were to be totally excluded. The attempt to represent it on the Reformed Council was "almost farcical" and there was no reason to suppose that the people either understood or desired representation. Hutton therefore concluded:

The general position therefore with regard to the Garo Hills is not that there is a possible case for its exclusion but that it is quite impossible to find any other argument even for partial inclusion in the Reforms.³⁸

That the Assam Government decided not to reconsider the partial exclusion of the Garo Hills was entirely due to the stand taken by Abraham James Laine, the Executive Member when he acted for Michael Keane during the latter's leave from June to October 1935. A former Deputy Commissioner of the Garo Hills Laine, unlike Keane or Sir Robert Reid after him, had a mind of his own and was by no means prepared to go along with Hutton or Mills. He made his views known in a well reasoned note he wrote on 2 September.³⁹ Again at a meeting in Government House on 1 October he argued that "it would be anomalous and politically and administratively inconvenient to retain 'excluded' areas in the very midst of the province".⁴⁰ Mullan's letter to the Government of India conveying Assam's official position against any change in the Garo and Mikir Hills reflects Laine's views more faithfully:

There is definitely an “aboriginal” and a “progressive” view point on the matter—the “aboriginal” party (to whom the present Commissioner and Dr. Hutton would claim allegiance) considering that the interests of the local people would best be protected by complete exclusion while the other party believes that progress in such static civilizations as those in the Garo and Mikir Hills can only be brought about—as has been brought about in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills—by gradual contact with a larger world and more advanced ideas.

India was told, in tone and language very different from the earlier correspondence on the reforms, that it would certainly not be possible to exclude the Garos and Mikirs for all time from the new constitution. Further, there was no reason why, subject to the safeguards of the Act, “the indigenous tribes of the areas should not be gradually trained to take their proper place in the future development of the province to which they belong”. They were certainly backward, so were the vast majority of the people in the Khasi Hills, and indeed in the whole province. Assam, Mullan’s letter continued, could not believe that “partial exclusion” would render them liable to exploitation as Hutton had feared. The local officers would still be there to protect and frustrate any such tendency. So too would the presence in the Assembly of representatives from these areas elected by the tribal headmen and the Governor’s special responsibility in their good government be sufficient safeguards against anything like exploitation by “outsiders”. Finally, the Government of India was reminded:

The Garo Hills and the Mikir Hills are not frontier districts or districts in which armed rebellion or acute internal dissensions are to be feared. They are situated in the heart of the province and they must evolve on lines similar to the rest of the province. Change must come and all that can be provided is that such change comes gradually and in accordance with the capacity of the local tribes to adopt themselves to it.⁴¹

IV

When in early 1940 Sir Robert Reid toured the Garo Hills he “was astonished that the district had only been partially excluded”.⁴²

The Garos, he said, were more backward than the Mizos and so like the Lushai Hills the Garo Hills district ought to have been totally excluded. Backwardness, it needs to be emphasized, was understood at this time in terms of the level of education of the tribal people rather than their material progress. Shaw had made much of the fact that it was the minority Christianized Garos who were the only educated persons in the district. The relative position of the Garo Hills in this regard can be seen from the figures quoted in official reports from the Census of 1921.⁴³

	Total Population	Literate	English Literate	Hindu	Muslim	Christian	Animists	Others
Lushai Hills	98406	6183	340	3908	365	27720	65689	724
Naga Hills	160960	2517	469	6277	694	8784	145165	90
Khasi Hills	243283	18603	4064	13145	1401	41122	186879	736
Garo Hills	179110	3242	410	18767	9388	7608	143100	247
North Cachar	26744	1015	286	19163	408	783	6355	35
Sadiya	29531	2482	428	19255	573	300	16548	2855
Frontier Tract								
Balipara	3819	584	34	2739	26	36	849	109
Frontier Tract								

By the next Census the number of Christians in the Garo Hills rose to 15950 or 109 percent.⁴⁴ The literacy figures are not available but from whatever information one can get on the number of pupils in schools, mission and government, it could be clear that secular education had not kept pace with the progress of Christianity.⁴⁵ And the reasons are not far to seek.

The system of education in the Garo Hills, as the Director of Public Instruction described in 1907-08, was partially state and partially missionary. As early as 1878 the Assam Government had decided to use the missionaries to educate the Garos, and to that end introduced the grant-in-aid system. The existing Government schools, mostly located in the foothills, were retained but village schools, all up to the primary level, were placed in the hands of the missionaries. These became "effective instruments in bringing people to Christianity".⁴⁶ The missionaries evidently placed more importance on the knowledge of the Bible rather than on imparting all round secular education. In April 1919, just before

Assam became a Governor's province, the Chief Commissioner Sir Nicholas Beatson Bell who visited many of these schools was dismayed at the deplorable state of education:

Taking things all round (Beatson Bell's Inspection Report stated) I was frankly disappointed. The missionaries have done some good work but one feels that it might have been better. The teachers throughout the district come from the Mission English School at Tura. The imperfect and almost slipshod teaching that prevails in that School is reflected throughout the district. The reading of the Garo textbooks is hopelessly mechanical.

The children often fail to understand what they read and the teacher apparently takes no pain to make them understand.⁴⁷

Three years later Neville Parry, who was Deputy Commissioner at Tura for a brief period had much the same to say: "Here there is no getting away from the fact that the majority of the schools both Government and Mission are very inefficient. The ignorance of the *Pundits* is appalling, many of them cannot do the simplest sums in Arithmetic. In many schools it is the case of blind leading the blind."⁴⁸ It was only under Provincial autonomy and ministerial direction that the grants-in-aid to the mission schools was gradually withdrawn and the saving utilized to open Government schools. Gerald Small, Assam's Director of Public Instruction, one of the architects of the new policy had been very critical of the educational system in the hill districts. As he had stated in a note for the Governor:

In my opinion in the past proper provision has not been made (for the development of the hill districts). The mere fact that education in the Lushai and Khasi and Jaintia Hills has been left entirely in the hands of the Missions is proof of this.

The people did not ask for the Missions; the Missions entered the Hills in pursuit of their policy of proselytizing the people; and the education they have given has been directed to one object only, conversion to Christianity.

It has been practically impossible for a boy in the Khasi or Lushai Hills to obtain education without being at least a professing Christian.

The same state of things existed till comparatively recently in the Garo and Naga Hills, though of recent years the position there has been considerably changed by the opening of a large number of Government schools.⁴⁹

A close examination of the Annual Administration Reports, however, reveals that the progress of education in the Garo Hills was not the only area to which criticism could legitimately be directed. Public health, to give one other example, had remained equally neglected as the following figures on the facilities made available to the people would show:⁵⁰

District	Number of Dispensaries in 1919		Number of Dispensaries in 1936		Total Expenditure in 1919 (Rs.)	Total Expenditure in 1936 (Rs.)
	State	Local Funds	State	Local Funds		
Khasi-Jaintia Hills	6	1	7	2	23611	82016
Garo Hills	4	-	6	-	7168	24793
North Cachar	1	-	3	1	3205	10101
Naga Hills	8	-	9	1	13418	48010
Lushai Hills	9	-	11	-	23206	47107

With the Partially Excluded districts administered under provincial autonomy the interest of the white bureaucracy shifted to the Excluded Areas. Thus in 1938 a note was prepared for the Viceroy to make a case for a larger financial allocation for the latter, particularly under "nation-building" heads. No reference was made to the Garo Hills (or any of the other Partially Excluded Areas) which only a few years ago was recommended for exclusion on the ground of its backwardness.⁵¹ In so far as the results of all this is concerned it is difficult not to agree with the assessment of British rule in the Garo Hills made by one of the early historians of the Garos:

Virtually the Garos were left to their own world of tradition and custom, cut off from the mainstream of Indian economic life and the main tenets of modernism.... British administration could never uplift the Garos to that level of living which had been much sought after by the authority for the tribe during the annexation of the hills.... Rather the segregation policy stagnated the growth of this community, weakened its

competitive spirit and strength, widened the cultural gap between them and their counterparts of the plains.⁵²

V

In the little over two decades that the Garo Hills remained as a district of Assam in free India there was no significant break with its colonial part.⁵³ Beset with its own problems of industrialization and growth in its core region, the Brahmaputra Valley, Assam left it (as indeed all the hill districts) much to itself. Nor has the situation changed in her thirty years under Meghalaya, even though her political leadership had played a decisive role in the establishment of the hill state. No attempt, for instance, has yet been made to compensate the loss of her vital economic outlet to the south as a result of partition in 1947. The lack of integration, particularly of communication, with the rest of the state, be-moaned by the member of the State Assembly, remains as glaring as ever.⁵⁴ The economy of the district is consequently still tied, if tenuously, to Assam rather than to Meghalaya. Infrastructure as it is now understood in terms of surface networking, or of institutions for the development of human and natural resources is only rudimentary.

Such of course was the legacy bequeathed to one of the poorest provinces in India.⁵⁵ Where Assam, and after her Meghalaya, failed in allowing geography to continue to determine their relationship with the district. The lessons of the past were clearly lost on them. The importance of the Garo Hills, as this essay has sought to show, was immediately reduced once it lost its frontier character after the First Anglo-Burmese war. It was the Bengal Government more than the local administration in Assam that showed greater concern for its affairs. This was largely because her eastern districts of Mymensingh and Rangpur and the *zamindars* located within them marched with the Garo Hills. The problem of regulating this part of her frontier remained an abiding one. Not surprisingly, in 1911 when the partition of Bengal was annulled there was some hesitation in Dacca about re-transferring the Garo Hills to the Chief Commissioner's province. Assam's treatment of the Garo Hills, whether under colonial government or under independent India, was much in the nature of a centre with its periphery. It is precisely for this attitude that Shillong

seems to have lost the confidence of a sizable section of the Garos.

ENDNOTES

1. Since the member belonged to the Garo National Council, the oldest and most important political organization of the Garo Hills, this can be taken as the official position of that organization. This is significant as the Council was one of the most important factors behind the Hill State Movement. For details, V. Venkata Rao, *A Century of Tribal Politics in North East India, 1874-1974* (New Delhi, 1975) Ch. I, *passim*.
2. Cf. L.S.S. O'Malley, *Eastern Bengal District Gazetteer*, Chittagong (Calcutta, 1908), pp. 37ff, on early relations with the tribes on the Chittagong frontier. For other parts of the Eastern Frontier, B.C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteer*, Vol. II (Sylhet, Calcutta, 1905), ch II, pp. 21-60; also P.N. Dutt, *Impact of the West on the Khasis and Jaintia* (New Delhi, 1982), pp. 28-43.
3. For details, Jayanta Bhusan Bhattacharjee, *The Garos and the English* (New Delhi, 1978), pp. 23-86; Nirode K. Barooah, *David Scott in North-East India 1802-1831* (New Delhi, 1970), pp. 37-62.
4. The Bengal Regulations, some forty in number, were a code of laws enacted by Lord Cornwallis for the administration of Bengal, as the East India Company was transforming itself from a purely commercial concern to a territorial power. John Kaye, *Administration of the East India Company* (c), p. 458.
5. R. Clarke, *The Regulations of the Government of Fort William in Bengal, 1793-1858* (London, 1854), p. 659.
6. Foreign Secret Proceedings, National Archives of India, New Delhi, 24 December 1823, No. 2, Adjutant General to Secretary, Bengal, 24 November.
7. Nirode Barooah, *op. cit.*, pp. 83-84.
8. For early British military policy in the Eastern Frontier see Imdad Hussain, "Frontier Defence: Development of Local Forces", in H.K. Barpujari, *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol. IV (Guwahati, 1992), pp. 184-219.
9. *Pioneer*, 16 March 1870, in his *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes on the North-East Frontier of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1884), Appendix K, p. 553. Mackenzie continues in that article, "Protected by deadly and all but impenetrable thickets the Garos' fastnesses were for long years inviolate; their outrages unchecked and for the most part unpunished. When now and again some more than ordinarily ferocious raid had desolated whole villages, and filled each little frontier mart with horror, a Company of Sepoys or Police would perhaps struggle up into the hills, and after burning the first village they could find, hurry down again, half of them silly with fever, and the rest halt and maimed from stumbling over the pitfalls of an enemy they had never seen."

10. Foreign Political—A Consultations, National Archives of India, 27 April 1840: No. 143; Captain Jenkins was told in April 1840 that the “indiscriminate use of military force on these distressing occasions may inspire the barbarian inhabitants with the dread of the British Government but its exhibition should be reserved for great and rare occasion which may justify the adoption of measures of general retribution.”
11. A.J.M. Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam* (Calcutta, 1854 [Reprint Guwahati, 1984]), pp. 45f.
12. Sir Alexander Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, p. 260.
13. *Ibid.*, vide *Pioneer*, 16 March 1870, Appendix K, p. 553.
14. For details see Bhattacharjee, *op. cit.*, pp. 155ff.
15. Foreign Political—A Progs, National Archives of India, June 1866: Nos. 37–39, Hopkinson to Eden, 30 October 1865.
16. *Ibid.*, Secretary, Bengal to Foreign Department, Government of India, 24 April 1866.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, Hopkinson to Eden, 4 November 1865.
19. The *Bengal Administration Report*, for the year 1870–71 had thus recommended: “The cause of many bloody raids committed by the Garo mountaineers, which had often disturbed the peace of the country, had been traced to the interference of the zamindars of the plains with those rude and savage tribes, and it was absolutely necessary, on grounds of public policy, that the zamindars and their agents should be strictly prohibited from having any direct relations with the Garos and the whole of the Garo Hills, including all such parts of it as were claimed by the Mymensingh Zamindars, should be administered by the officers of Government, and the revenue be collected by them”.
20. “Instead of having to burn large quantities of cotton in punishment of outrages, as was unhappily necessary for a few instances” said Sir George Campbell, “we may find here a new source of supply to Manchester.... The timber of the hills is also expected to prove valuable, and while preserving all reasonable jungle rights of the Garos, Government may expect a fair return of judicious forest operation. Wild elephants are said to be very numerous, and probably Kheddah operations would be profitable at an early date”, *Bengal Administration Report, 1872–73*, quoted in Bhattacharjee, *op. cit.*, p. 202. The comment is actually from a letter written by Captain Williamson.
21. Alexander Mackenzie thus wrote approvingly in the *Pioneer*, of 18 August 1870: “we are glad to see that the Government has resolved to give every encouragement to the American Missionaries in their efforts to educate the Garos. The Government schools at the foot of the hills only reach the half breeds. The missionaries by entering into the interior will secure the real hill men. In the course of a few years we may hope to find the Garos as peaceful as the Kols; and if Christianity should interpose to prevent their falling into the gross superstition and caste absurdies of Hinduism that surely is only matter of gratification. A good work will have been well done”.
22. For origin and growth of Shillong, see Imdad Hussain, “Shillong: From British Enclave to Tribal City” in A.C. Sinha *et al* (eds.) *Hill Cities of*

Eastern Himalaya: Ethnicity, Land Relations and Urbanization (New Delhi, 1997).

23. Bhattacharjee, *op. cit.*, p. 241.
24. These were the Naga, Lushai, North Cachar and Mikir Hills, and the British portion of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills other than the Shillong Municipal area and the Cantonment. The Assam Government had obviously taken advantage of Section 52(A) to classify all hill districts as "Backward". The Montford Report had recognized "certain backward areas where the people are *primitive* and there is as yet no material on which to found political institutions." The definition of these areas and the arrangements to be made for them was left for future and further consideration, but "the typically backward tracts should be excluded from the jurisdiction of the reformed provincial governments and administered by the head of the province", *Report on Indian Constitutional Reforms* (Calcutta, 1918), p. 129. Cf. Parry's observation in his March 1928 Note to the Simon Commission, "The (Lushai) hills are already far ahead of the plains in Self Government. Each village manages its own affairs, cases are tried by the chief and his elders ... cases that do not come to court are cases between (Lushai) living in separate villages or appeals from the orders of chiefs. All cases whether tried by the court or by the chiefs are dealt with according to Lushai customs by which the people have been governed for ages past. This, I believe, applies to other hill districts being governed by their own customs".
25. *Report of the Indian Statutory Commission*, XVI (London, 1930), Note by N.E. Parry, 3 March.
26. Political A Progs, Assam State Archives, Guwahati, December 1936: Nos. 1-30; Note by J.H. Hutton, 18 September 1935.
27. *Report of the Indian Strategy Commission*, Vol. I, para 94, p. 75.
28. Political B Progs, Governors Secretariat, Assam State Archives, March 1937: Nos. 714-748; Cosgrave to Reforms offices, 29 July 1931.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.* It was thus observed, "For example, at present in criminal cases arising in the Garo Hills, the 'Spirit of the Code of Criminal Procedure' is observed. Civil and criminal appeals go to the Commissioner. Cases which are considered to have political aspect are finally heard by the Governor, who also hears appeals in cases involving death. Pleaders in cases where only Garos are parties are not allowed to appear as of right but only with the permission of the Government". Further, "similarly, the power of restricting the undesirable exploitation should continue to rest in the hands of Government. It will be necessary in a country known to possess minerals to have special powers to prevent entrance by undesirables and to enforce their expulsion under the Chin Hills Regulations, which is in enforce in the Garo Hills and in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills outside Shillong."
32. Political A Progs, Assam State Archives, December 1936: No. 2; Telegram, Secretary of State to Viceroy, 5 April 1935.
33. *Ibid.* Note, C.S. Mullan, 9 April 1935.
34. *Ibid.* W. Shaw to Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, 21 August 1935.
35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.* He however recommended that Mauzas, VI, VII and VIII which contained more Muslims and Hindus than Garos should vote in the adjacent constituencies of Goalpara.
37. *Ibid.* G.D. Walker to Reforms Officer, 26 August 1935.
38. *Ibid.* Note by J.H. Hutton, 18 September 1935.
39. *Ibid.* See Notes, "we ... have now received their (the district officers) views which have been supplemented by our two present Commissioners who have both had considerable hill district and 'aboriginal' experience", Laine had noted, and, "we have also on record the interesting views of Dr. Hutton who has had a longer hill district experience than anyone else in the Province and is an acknowledged authority on the character and habits of aboriginal people. The general tendency of this body of opinion (the existence of which we obviously cannot suppress!) is towards throwing the whole of the hitherto accepted arrangements regarding 'totally excluded and partially excluded areas' into the melting pot and the consequential upsetting of the entire balance of the scheme of seats provided under the Government of India Act. While admitting that there is a good deal of force in many of our Hill District Officers', the Commissioners', and Dr. Hutton's observations, I am—on general grounds—definitely opposed to the general reopening of the whole question which their recommendations as a whole contemplate, and would certainly deprecate the general recasting of district boundaries which some of their recommendations would involve. In my opinion therefore we should 'stick to our guns' and oppose any radical change in the arrangements which the Government of Assam have hitherto supported. Any change at this stage would have a very upsetting effect, as the general trend of our recommendations has long been known to the general public and we would, with justice, be accused of having raised false hopes. The Governor under the new Constitution will after all have very special responsibilities in regard to 'partially excluded areas' and there is no reason why we should go out of our way to assume that these safeguards will prove illusory or ineffective in practice."
40. *Ibid.*, *Proceedings of a Meeting of the Assam Government held on 1 October 1935.*
41. *Ibid.*, C.S. Mullan to Joint Secretary, Reforms, 9 October 1935.
42. D.R. Syiemlieh, *British Administration in Meghalaya: Policy and Pattern* (New Delhi, 1989), p. 186.
43. Political B. Progs. Governor's Secretariat, Assam State Archives, March 1937; Nos. 714–748; Cosgrave to Secretary, Government of India, Reforms, 29 July 1931. See Appendix, A *Description and History of the Backward Tracts.*
44. Excluded B Progs. Governors' Secretariat, Assam State Archives, June 1938; Nos. 730–758; Note on Excluded Areas for Viceroy. The 1931 Census shows that out of a total population in the Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas of 709012 persons 160255 or 22.6 percent were Christians. In the Naga Hills the figure rose by 1931 to 22908 or by 162 percent; in the Lushai Hills to 59123 or by 113 percent; North Cachar to 1970 by 152 percent; in the Sadiya and Balipara Frontier Tracts to 438 or 46 percent and 293 or 205 percent; while in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills it was to 59573 or by 45 percent. The Note had welcomed

this development because "These facts seem to point to the possibility that when the day comes that all excluded and partially excluded areas are included in the full constitution the whole Christian body might form themselves into one group, and a powerful group at that."

45. The figures for 1929-30 were:

District	Number			Percentage		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Khasi Hills	9737	6640	16377	8.1	5.3	6.9
Naga Hills	3096	671	3767	3.8	0.8	2.3
Lushai Hills	8147	542	3689	6.7	1.0	3.9
Garro Hills	4029	1412	5441	4.2	1.6	3.0
	Provincial Average			7.2	1.4	4.4

Expenditure on Education during 1936-37 per head of population was, Khasi Hills, 5 annas 2 paise; Naga Hills 2 an 9 p; North Lushai Hills, 1 an, and South Lushai Hills, 1 an 7 p; North Cachar 11 p; while in the Garo Hills it was 6 an.

46. Milton Sangma, *History of Education in Garo Hills* (Guwahati, 1985), p. 39.
47. *Ibid.*, pp. 51f. About textbooks, Beatson Bell said, "The textbooks which I have found in use were the book of Genesis, the Gospel of St. John, Garo Reader (largely composed of Bible extracts) and a translation of the 'Peep of Day'. These textbooks are used indiscriminately in Christian and non-Christian, Mission and Government schools. In the circumstances, I do not object to this. The Book of Genesis is a fascinating book for children, but I was disappointed to find that in a large class who had read the book, not a single one could tell me the story of Abraham and Isaac and the ram caught in the thicket. In another school—a Christian School—no boy or girl could repeat the Ten Commandments or the Lord's Prayer, or had ever heard of Noah or King David. The training School is doing something to finish the incomplete education of the pupils of the Mission Middle English School. What is really wanted is that the Mission Middle English School should become a Government institution (at least so far as the boys are concerned), and that it should ultimately be worked up to the High School standard.... The mofussil schools, except in Christian villages, should also be converted into Government Schools...."
48. *Ibid.* Basil Allen, the Commissioner, while forwarding Parry's report added: "Before you can have schools, you must have teachers; and the Deputy Commissioner informs us that the supply of teachers is not sufficient for the existing demand. So long as this remains the case, it would seem mere waste of money to encourage the opening of new schools. I think that the Deputy Commissioner who has a considerable practical acquaintance with the subject shares my view that the Garos are not deriving full benefit from the Rs. 36000 which we now spend on education in their district...."
49. Excluded B Progs. Governor's Secretariat, June 1938, No. 745; Note by Gerald Small, 4 February 1938. The number of Primary and Secondary Schools in Assam 1936-37 was:

	Primary	Secondary
Assam	6795	620
Partially Excluded Areas	479	15
Excluded Areas	397	7

The annual expenditure on Education in Assam during the same year was Rs. 34,03,215, of which Rs. 63,566 was on the excluded Areas.

50. *Ibid.* Figures provided by Colonel E.S. Phipson, Inspector-General of Civil Hospitals and Prisons, Assam, to J.P. Mills, 2 February 1938. Sylhet had the highest number of dispensaries 1936 at 61, Kamrup 22, Darrang 15, Goalpara 21, Nowgong 13, Sibsagar 16 and Lakhimpur 10.
51. *Ibid.* See notes in file. This is not to suggest that great efforts were made to develop the Excluded Areas. The only concern of certain officers was to see them under British rule as a Crown Colony.
52. P.C. Kar, *British Annexation of Garo Hills* (Calcutta, 1970), p. 77.
53. See D.R. Syiemlieh, *op. cit.*, who writes that "there was little development other than what Shillong benefited as the capital of the state. The Sixth Schedule failed to satisfy the political, social and economic aspirations of the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos. What did benefit the tribals though, was the election for the councils created a consciousness that the Assam tribals should come together, and this they did in the Eastern India Tribal Union and the All Party Hill Leaders Conference." His conclusion, however, about the creation of the state of Meghalaya, was that the "policy of the Assam Government of not taking head (sic) of the policy to leave the tribals uninterfered that resulted in the movement for separation" is simplistic and contradicts the tribals' claim of neglect by the Government of Assam. See also S. K. Chaube, *Hill Politics in North-East India* (Revd. Ed., 1999), p. 109, *passim*.
54. One Mikat Sangma, a product of Calcutta University, is said to have advocated at the time of the Radcliffe Award that the frontier of the Garo Hills should be pushed thirty miles south into Mymensingh: Gabrielle Bertrand, *Secret Lands Where Women Reign*, p. 114f, cited in Syiemlieh, *op. cit.*, p. 209.
55. Arguing Assam's case for a greater control over her resources, Sir Muhammad Saadulla told the Constitutional Assembly on 8 August 1949 that "Assam now is the poorest province in the Dominion of India, poor not in resources, but poor in numbers, poor in its financial position, and poor in the economic condition of her population. But this poverty has been forced upon her by man-made laws and the inequity of the (Central) Government". For a study of the financial relations between Assam and the Government of India see Katoni (unpublished *Ph.D. Thesis*, Department of History, North-Eastern Hill University, 2001).