

# British Colonialism and the Hill Tribes of Composite Assam

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## Introduction

Colonialism has contributed immensely to the development of human progress and civilization. By giving impetus to the development of science, technology and modern industry and by encouraging hard work, creativity and an adventurous spirit, European colonialism changed the face of the world as never before. The colonization of the backward regions of the world produced enormous wealth and helped the colonial countries emerge as powerful nations in the world. However, while taking note of its positive contributions, one cannot overlook the contradictory impact that the colonial rule had on the native communities in the countries and continents that the Europeans had colonized. Colonialism destroyed the traditional economic base of the native communities and replaced the age-old political and social structures by new institutions and practices compatible with the interests of the new rulers. Although the more advanced among the native communities did take advantage of the new opportunities that the colonial rule had thrown open, the backward tribal communities inhabiting the colonies found it difficult to adapt to the changes introduced by the colonizers. To put it the other way, the impact of colonialism on the native communities had not been uniform—it differed from colony to colony and from community to

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community. Naturally the strategies that the native communities adopted to deal with changes pioneered by the colonial rule also varied from community to community and from country to country. Since colonialism had created new trajectories in the development of native communities, one needs to study the effects of colonialism on each of the communities separately and compare them with the experiences of others. Keeping this in mind, an attempt is made in the paper to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the impact of British colonialism on tribal communities inhabiting the hills of composite Assam. At the end, to get a comparative picture of diverse ways in which British colonialism operated in two different regions of the world, the colonial experience of the hill communities of Assam is compared with that of the Native Indian communities in British Columbia in Canada.

### **British Colonialism in India**

The native communities that the European traders had encountered in mainland India in the sixteenth and seventeenth century were no primitive tribes depending on hunting, fishing and food gathering for their livelihood. The indigenous people living there were economically and culturally far more advanced than the communities that the European colonizers had encountered in Africa and North America. The natives were already surplus-producing agricultural communities who had also made sufficient progress in handicrafts and trade.<sup>1</sup> The British East India Company that entered the Indian subcontinent in 1600 had to deal primarily with kings and emperors, not with tribal chiefs. In a way, the medieval India was in no way inferior to the medieval Europe in material or spiritual development. However, subsequent developments in Europe such as the Renaissance, the Reformation, the development of science and technology, the expansion of mercantile capitalism, the acquisition of modern arms and ammunition and finally the Industrial Revolution placed the European nations ahead of the feudal kingdoms and empires in the Indian subcontinent. Taking advantage of the weakening of the Mughal Empire after the death of Aurangzeb, different European powers –

the Portuguese, the French, the Dutch and the British – began to compete with one another for economic and political control over mainland India. Although the British East India Company came later than the others, yet because of its superior economic strength and political acumen, it was able to move ahead of other European competitors.<sup>2</sup> The Battle of Plassey fought in 1757 in Bengal marked the beginnings of British colonial rule in India. By playing off one native ruler against other, the British gradually acquired control over all the territories in mainland India.<sup>3</sup>

By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the British had established their control over the whole of Bengal up to Goalpara and Mymensingh in the east. The territory beyond this part of Bengal comprised of several valleys and hill ranges, which were still under the control of different native rulers and tribal chiefs. Racially the native people of the region were very different from the people of mainland India. Although the traditional life of the natives in some parts of the region was influenced by the dominant religious and cultural traditions prevalent in the mainland, the native kingdoms and communities in the region never came under the political control of the empires that ruled India. For a long time the British did not evince any interest in extending their control beyond Bengal. As they were then merely keen on consolidating their authority over mainland India, initially they followed the policy of non-interference with regards to the region, which they named as the North Eastern Frontier of Bengal.<sup>4</sup> Despite the fact that the Company did intervene on behalf of the Ahom ruler of Brahmaputra valley at the time of the Moamaria revolt and later entered into a commercial treaty with the Ahom king in 1793, the British were then apparently not keen on extending their control over the region.

### **The Native Hill Tribes of the North East Frontier of Bengal**

At the time of British contact, the Brahmaputra valley, inhabited by different communities like the Bodos, the Koches, the Chutias, the Moamarias etc., was under the Ahom rule. The hills surrounding the Brahmaputra valley and also the hills adjoining the Surma valley in

Bengal were inhabited by several indigenous hill communities.<sup>5</sup> The Bhutias, the Akas, the Duflas, the Hill Miris and the Abors inhabited the foothills of the Himalayas, north of the River Brahmaputra. The hills located on the north-eastern side of the Brahmaputra River surrounding Sadiya were occupied by the Khamtis, the Mishmis and the Singphos. On the eastern side bordering Burma are the Naga Hills peopled by different Naga communities. On the west of the Naga Hills are the Mikir and North Cachar Hills populated by the Karbis, the Dimasas, the Hmars and other hill communities. The southern hill ranges adjoining the Naga Hills were occupied by the Thangkhul Nagas and the Kukis. The hills to the south of Goalpara and north of the Surma valley were inhabited by the Garos, and the Khasi-Pnars. South of the Cachar plains are the Hills of Tipperah and the Lushai Hills where communities like the Tripuris, the Lushais, the Pawis, the Lakhers etc., lived:

In view of certain common attributes that the British perceived among them, like the lack of a marked internal class differentiation, the seeming absence of advanced notions of private property, incidences of animistic practices and endogamous relations, the British termed the hill communities of Assam as tribes. Racially the hill communities were referred to as mongoloid, but culturally and linguistically they belonged to different groups. Each tribe had its own language, culture, political institutions and religious practices.<sup>6</sup> While a few of them were indeed animists, some like some of the Pnars in Jaiñtia Hills and the Dimasas were Hinduised, while tribes like the Bhutias, the Monpas and the Khamtis followed Buddhism.<sup>7</sup> Except for the Garos, and the Khasi-Pnars, who were matrilineal communities,<sup>8</sup> all other hill tribes were patrilineal and patriarchal. Almost all tribal communities had supposedly migrated to the region from the east or South East Asian countries at some point of time in history. Politically these communities were at different stages of development. One could see state formation among certain hill communities such as the Khasi-Pnars and the Dimasas. Some tribes like the Akas, the Khamtis, the Singphos etc., had powerful chieftainships and they used to exercise control over other weaker

tribes. The Lushai chiefs were oppressive and despotic. Comparatively the Naga chiefs were more democratic.<sup>10</sup> The Khasis had their own democratic political institutions known as the *Himas* and commonly referred to as Khasi States. The *Himas* were headed by the Syiems, who were elected from among certain privileged clans among the Khasis. The powers of the Syiems were not absolute and there existed an aristocracy of a native type, working together with the *Dorbar Hima* or Council of State, controlling and monitoring the Syiems.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the fact that some of the tribes relied on hunting, fishing and food gathering for their livelihood, most of the hill communities had a great deal of knowledge about agriculture. While most communities practiced shifting cultivation, a few like the Khasi-Pnars, the Aos and the Angamis had knowledge of wet cultivation as well.<sup>12</sup> Although they ate fish and meat, rice remained their staple food. Since what was produced in the hills was not sufficient to meet all their material requirements, the hill tribes had to find outlets in the plains either for trade or for cultivable lands. The hill tribes used to go down to *bats*, the village markets situated near *duars*, the mountain passages to sell their forest and mineral products and exchanged required goods with the cultivators and traders of the plains. Such trading and business activities were necessary for the hill communities and were very profitable for the traders in the plains.<sup>13</sup> The hill people were often cheated and exploited by the traders and landlords in the plains. As retaliation, the hill tribes used to plunder the villages and take away men and materials from the plains. Some tribes such as the Mizos and Khamptis used to engage the persons kidnapped from the plains as slaves and using them for agriculture and other productive activities.<sup>14</sup> The slave trade was prevalent among certain hill tribes. Unless ransomed, they would sell the kidnapped persons to merchants from neighbouring districts. To prevent tribal attacks, the Ahom rulers used to allocate some cultivable lands in the plains to tribes inhabiting the hills adjoining the Ahom kingdom. The people in some plain areas used to pay 'posa', a kind of ransom or blackmail, to the hill tribes every year, in the form of food stuffs, cloths, ornaments, slaves and other requirements. While the hill tribes

considered *posa* as their right, the people in the plains looked at it as an inescapable obligation. Nevertheless there used to be disputes between the hill tribes and the people in the plains over the issue of *posa*.<sup>15</sup>

Apart from such frictions between the hill tribes and the plains people, there were also inter-tribal, intra-tribal and inter-village conflicts among the hill tribes. Memories of old animosities, competition for control of resources, fear of outsiders and their wish to protect the community interests at any cost engendered several bloody conflicts in the region. The practice of head hunting and human sacrifice was prevalent among the Garos, the Nagas and the Lushais. Like the Nootkas of British Columbia,<sup>16</sup> the wild tribes of north-east India also took pride in collecting and exhibiting the severed heads of their enemies. The tribal conflicts used to cause considerable bloodshed, destruction and forced displacement of the communities.

### **British Colonial Expansion in India's North East**

Initially the British had no knowledge of the different hill communities inhabiting the region. It was only in the second decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Company sent David Scott, the magistrate of Rangpur, to investigate the causes for the tribal revolt against the *zamindars* (landlords) of Goalpara that the British came in touch with the hill tribes. At about this period, taking advantage of the political contradictions and anarchy prevailing in the region, the Burmese ruler invaded the Ahom kingdom and also took control of the Manipuri and Cachari kingdoms. The Burmese Governor warned the British against intervention on behalf of the Ahoms. Realizing the vulnerability of the eastern frontier of Bengal, the British gave up their policy of non-interference and decided to take on the Burmese troops. In the war they had decided to wage, the British needed the support of all the native kings and tribal chiefs within the region. David Scott, who by then had become the Agent to the Governor General for the North East Frontier of Bengal, gave a public proclamation to all the inhabitants of the region requesting them to join their fight against the Burmese invaders.<sup>17</sup> The proclamation

stated that the British were not led into Assam by the thirst for conquest, but were forced into the war for self-defence. The Company assured that after defeating the common foe, it would re-establish a government suited to the needs and interests of the native people of the region. In 1824 Scott entered into treaties with the king of Jaiñtiapur and the Khasi *Syiem* of *Hima* Nongkhlaw. The Company sought men and material support from the native communities and also the right of passage for the British troops to pass through their territories.<sup>18</sup> With the support of the native communities, the British forces drove away the Burmese troops and forced the Burmese chief to surrender at Rangpur in 1825. Realizing that the Burmese invasion had become possible only because of the help rendered by some of the hill tribes, especially the Singphos, the British troops moved beyond Sadiya into the Singpho territory and drove the Burmese and their allies out of the Singpho villages. Similarly, the British troops were sent from Sylhet to liberate Manipur and Cachar. Fearing defeat at the hands of the British forces, the Burmese withdrew from both the kingdoms, paving the way for the British to reinstate Gambhir Singh and Gobind Chandra as rulers of Manipur and Cachar respectively. Finally the British forced the King of Ava to sign the Yandaboo Treaty in 1826, wherein the Burmese king gave up all his claims over the Ahom, Manipuri and Cachari kingdoms. Subsequently in 1826 the British officers entered into treaties with the chiefs of the Moamarias, the Khamptis and the Singphos to ensure that they would not side with the Burmese and would help the British in their war efforts against possible future invasions by the Burmese.<sup>19</sup>

### **Contact with the Hill Tribes of North East India**

Once the immediate threat of Burmese invasion disappeared, the British made efforts to bring some kind of administrative and political order in the Ahom territory, affected by palace intrigues and tribal revolts. Having by then emerged as the de facto rulers in the valley, the British were no more willing to withdraw from the region. Apart from their strategic considerations to protect the frontiers of Bengal, the British, who by then had become aware of the economic

potentialities of the region, chose to become a key player in Assam. Accordingly, the Company annexed Lower Assam to itself and made one Purander Singh the Raja of Upper Assam. Realizing the contradictions between the Ahoms and the tribes of Upper Assam, the British acknowledged the authority of the chiefs of Moamarias, Khamtis and Singphos over their respective communities and kept them out of the direct control of the new Ahom king. At the recommendations of David Scott, Neufville was appointed as Political Officer at Sadiya to engage the native hill tribes and ensure peace in those areas. It was while operating in Upper Assam that the British came into contact with tribes like the Abors, the Mishmis, the Khamtis, and the Singphos, etc. With the integration of lower and central Assam into the British territory, the British had to engage the Bhutias, the Akas and the Duflas inhabiting the northern side of Darrang district and also the Garos, and the Khasi-Pnars to the south of the river Brahmaputra. After allowing Purender Singh to rule Upper Assam with restricted powers for a few years, the Company divested him of all powers in 1838 on charges of corruption and mismanagement.<sup>20</sup> Similarly the hill region of Cachar, which was placed under Tularam, was absorbed by the British in 1854 on the pretext that Tularam's sons had failed to putdown the Naga raids and control the inter-tribal clashes.<sup>21</sup> Likewise the British compelled the native kings of Manipur and Tripura to accept their supremacy. The British appointed Political Agents to supervise the working of the princely states and safeguard the colonial interests in the region. While engaging with Manipur and Tripura, the British also came in touch with different tribal communities in the adjoining hills over which the princely states had some control.

Thus by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the British came into contact with almost all the hill tribes inhabiting the region. However, for quite some time the colonial administration was not clear as to what kind of policy had to be adopted to deal with the hill tribes. Initially the policy makers at the higher echelons of British administration instructed their officers not to interfere in the internal affairs of the hill communities. But at the ground level the tribal conflicts at times resulted in so much violence and bloodshed that

the officers on the field were forced to intervene in different inter or intra-tribal squabbles. Such engagements resulted in direct confrontations between the British subjects and the native tribes, much against the wishes of the colonial authorities. In addition to such unintended encounters, the colonial policies of the British also played a part in intensifying conflicts between the British and the hill communities in the region.

### **Impact of British Rule on the Hill Tribes of the North East**

After the 1857 Revolt, Company rule came to an end with the British Crown deciding to take direct control of the administration of India.<sup>22</sup> The shift from Company rule to the British Raj made little difference to the hill communities of the north-east India, for the Crown continued with the same old policies adopted by the Company. The colonizers' desire to increase revenue from their new possessions in the plains led the British to introduce certain changes in the valley region. Efforts were made to bring more and more land in the Brahmaputra valley under cultivation by initiating new forest and wasteland policies. The British planters were allowed to expand tea cultivation up to the foothills. The British encouraged immigration of people from other parts to work for them in administration, trade, agriculture and the plantations in the region. Such colonial projects in the plains had indirect effects on the hill areas as well. The colonial government controlled all the *duars* and trade routes of the region. The British officers undertook surveys both in the plains and the hills with the idea of taking direct control over territories with mineral and forest resources. To facilitate the movement of their men, materials and troops, the British constructed roads through the hills to connect the valleys of the region with Bengal. On occasions, in the name of uniformity, the British began demanding tributes from the hill chiefs and imposed house tax and other taxes on some of the indigenous tribes. The traditional right of *posa* that some of the hill tribes traditionally enjoyed was either denied or was considerably restricted. In place of the barter system, monetary transactions were introduced. The hill communities, used to living autonomous lives, found it difficult

to assimilate and accept the new changes. The presence of a large number of outsiders – the whites and also the people from the plains – in their midst or in their vicinity caused fear and tension among the hill people. The colonial initiatives like the enactment of new forest and wasteland policies, the replacement of *posa* by payment in cash, the abolition of slavery, the expansion of tea plantations and agricultural activities up to the foothills, the control over *duars* and markets, etc., adversely affected the traditional sources of livelihood of the indigenous hill tribes. Some tribes felt the increasing burden of taxes and the growing administrative control over their traditional institutions and practices unbearable. Initially, when the British were not sure of their own strength, they made treaties with the native rulers and chiefs treating them as equals. But once the colonial power had consolidated its authority, the old treaties that were based on mutual recognition and reciprocity were replaced by new treaties with more clauses and stringent conditions. The decisions to annex Jaiñtia (1835) and North Cachar Hills (1854) were taken to protect colonial interests. Such colonial interventions and policies that impinged upon the traditional rights of the indigenous people enraged the hill tribes to attack the British subjects and interests. Apart from acts of murder, plunder and kidnappings that the Nagas, the Lushais and other frontier tribes indulged in throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British had also to endure several organized tribal revolts and rebellions in the region. To ward off the threats to their colonial interests in the plains and to maintain peace along the borders, the British followed the carrot and stick policy. Continuing with the punitive expeditions wherever necessary, the British took up humanitarian measures to pacify the hill tribes of Assam.

### **Consolidation of British Rule in the Hills**

The British understood from their experience that the methods adopted to deal with native resistance elsewhere in India would not be of much use in dealing with the resistance offered by the hill tribes in North East India. After muddling through several conflicts, the British realized that as the nature of their resistance to colonial

interventions differed from community to community, they had to devise appropriate strategies to deal with each of the tribes. Comparatively it was easier to deal with the more civilized and less violent tribes such as the Khasi-Pnars than with tribes like the Nagas, the Lushais, the Garos and the Singphos. In the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, considering the hold that the traditional rulers had over their people, conscious efforts were made through administrative interventions to diminish the powers of these rulers and weaken the traditional institutions. The British took stern action against the Khasi *Syiems* who joined hands with Tirof Sing and revolted against British rule in 1829-30. After suppressing the revolt, the British took possession of Mawsmat, Mawmluh and Sohbar and appointed *Sirdars* or headmen to carry on their day-to-day administration on behalf of the British government. The British proclaimed their right to station troops, construct roads and control trade and mining activities in the Khasi Hills. Yet instead of annexing the entire Khasi Hills, the British chose to restore the traditional authority of the *Syiems* in the rest of the Khasi Hills and allowed them to deal with civil and judicial matters in accordance with native traditions, of course, on the condition that the traditional rulers would through treaties and *sanads* unconditionally accept the supremacy and authority of the British.<sup>23</sup> Although civil administration in the Khasi States was thus left with the *Syiems*, *Lyngdohs*, *Wabadadars* and *Sirdars*, the British saw to it that matters relating to grave crimes, sedition and other issues of importance were directly dealt with by a Political Agent appointed by the British. The Political Agent in charge of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills supervised and exercised a considerable influence over the activities and functioning of the traditional rulers. Theoretically the areas under the *Syiems* and other traditional heads were not part of British India. But in reality, the unequal and discriminatory treaties, engagements and *sanads*, allowed the British to intervene in the functioning of the Khasi States. The British retained their control over the mines and roads and virtually dictated the rules to be followed with regards to the succession of *Syiems* and other administrative matters. Different functionaries starting from the *Syiems* to the *Lyngdohs*, the *Sirdars* and the *Wabadadars* needed

recognition by the British to carry on their duties.<sup>24</sup> In the Jaiñtia Hills on the pretext of insubordination, the British compelled the Jaiñtiapur king to relinquish his authority as king. Consequently in 1835 the British annexed the plain areas of the Jaiñtia kingdom to Sylhet and placed the hills under the control of the Political Agent of the Khasi Hills, who administered the hills with the help of *Dolois* or *Sirdars*.<sup>25</sup> Political control over the Jaiñtia Hills was further tightened after the Jaiñtia Revolt in the 1860s. Similarly in the Garo Hills, overshadowing the traditional institutions of the *Nokmas* the British appointed *Laskars* and *Zimmadars* from among the Garos to look after the civil and criminal administration in the areas.<sup>26</sup>

The British took a keen interest in the administration of the hills inhabited by the Khasi-Pnars and Garos in view of their strategic location and commercial significance. But they followed altogether a different policy with regards to the frontier hills. For a long time the British were clueless as to how they should deal with the wild and barbaric frontier tribes that only understood the jungle law. In the beginning the British officers tried to lure the tribal chiefs into making treaties by offering them presents, stipends, pensions and land grants in the plains. But they soon understood that it was difficult to make the frontier tribes like the Singphos, the Nagas and the Lushais to commit to any written treaties. The tribes neither understood the alien language and the legal implications of the treaties, and nor did they feel any need to show reverence to the treaties they entered into. The British made efforts to allay the fears of the hill communities by offering employment to tribes like Thadous in tea plantations. But the hill communities were extremely individualistic and accepted no outside control or external domination. They basically acted on instincts and attacked people whom they perceived as enemies. Although they had only primitive weapons, their hit and run guerrilla tactics caused considerable problems for the British authorities. To prevent the frontier tribes from plundering the villages and killing the British subjects, the British undertook several punitive expeditions from time to time. For instance, to subdue the Mizo tribes the British sent expeditions in 1844, 1850, 1859, 1870-71 and in 1889.<sup>27</sup> With the

objective of creating terror in the minds of the defiant hill communities, the British troops used to destroy the villages and set fire to the granaries. In vain did the British seek cooperation from the kings of Manipur, Cachar and Tripura to control the wild tribes. Wherever possible they tried to pit one indigenous tribal group against another, for example the Khampis against the Singphos and the Kukis against the Nagas. Denying access to the *duars*, and closing the *bats*, were other means used by the colonial authorities to teach the rebels a lesson. The British raised different regiments such as the Rangpur Light Infantry, the Assam Light Infantry, the Gurkha Rifles and the Assam Rifles and stationed the troops in different places to deal with the defiant tribes.<sup>28</sup>

### **Inner Line Regulations: A Policy of Segregation?**

The British learnt from experience that the policies that appeared to be beneficial and profitable to the plains were often perceived by the hill tribes as threats to their existence. It became clear to the British that as long as encroachment of tribal lands by the planters and cultivators continued, it was impossible to ward off tribal attacks on British subjects and property. Knowledge of the cultural and racial differences also made the British officials believe in the irreconcilability of the interests of the hill tribes and the plainmen. In a way, all these factors contributed to the pursuit of the colonial policy of segregation through the enactment of the Inner Line Regulations in 1872-73. The said Act gave powers to the Lieutenant-Governor to prescribe a line, to be called 'the inner line', in the frontier districts beyond which no British subject or foreign residents can pass without a licence. The pass or licence, even when given, would be subject to such conditions as may appear necessary. The regulations prescribed rules regarding trade, possession of land and other matters. The planters – both Indians and British, were not allowed to acquire land beyond the Inner Line, either from the Government or from any local chief or tribe. It was left to the authorities to decide as to what part of the districts comes under the regulations.<sup>29</sup> The Inner Line Regulations were invoked in the North East Frontier Tracts of Sadiya, Balipara

and Lakhimpur and in the Naga and Lushai Hills. In the areas coming under the Inner Line, the British administered only politically. Later, following the Scheduled District Act of 1874, the frontier areas were exempted from normal administrative procedures and legal codes applied in other parts of the country. Instead of imposing direct rule, the British considered it wise to use the services of the traditional heads to consolidate their hold over the frontier tribes. In order to mediate between the conflicting tribes and to communicate with them, the British created the office of Dubashis in the Naga Hills or the Circle Interpreters in the Mizo Hills. The administrative arrangements were devised in such a way that the ordinary tribal people need not encounter the British officers like the Deputy Commissioner and the Sub Divisional Officers for day-to-day needs.<sup>30</sup> It was only in extreme cases involving acts of murder and sedition that the Political Officers or the Deputy Commissioners intervened. Though such regulations and acts set limits to the operation of the jurisdiction of the civil officers and gave considerable amount of internal autonomy to the native tribes in the frontier hills, the colonial authorities made it clear that the Inner Line should not be construed as the borders. The British government always reserved the right to intervene militarily even in the territories coming under the Inner Line at any time to establish its authority and to maintain law and order.<sup>31</sup>

The policy of segregation pursued through the Inner Line Regulations helped the colonial administration in so many ways. By halting encroachment of the tribal lands, by pursuing the policy of least interference and by allowing the hill tribes to govern themselves according to their own traditions and customs, the British created a sense of security among them and contributed to the mitigation of tensions between the frontier tribes and the plainsmen. The policy relieved the British of the burden of setting up and running highly structured legal and administrative institutions in economically and socially underdeveloped areas. By making the tribes settle down in particular hills and restricting their movements into the plains, the British made the tribes feel that they belonged to the hills and the

hills belonged to them. At a later date this policy of segregation lent a hand to the British to keep the frontier tribes away from the influence of the Indian national movement. By precluding even positive interactions with the people of the rest of India, the Inner Line policy helped the British officials, anthropologists and the Christian missionaries in convincing the hill tribes that racially, culturally and historically they had nothing to do with the rest of India and the Indians.

It should, however, be made clear that the Inner Line Regulations were not invoked in all the hill areas of Assam. The British took direct control of the administration of the Garo and Jaiñtia Hills. In the Khasi Hills they took control of thirty one villages and left other areas under the control of the traditional rulers. For many years Cherrapunji in the Khasi Hills used to be the centre of British civil and military authority in the hills. Later in 1861 the Deputy Commissioner's establishment in the Khasi Hills was shifted to Shillong, which the British built by acquiring land from the *Syiem* of Myllem. After Assam became Chief Commissionership in 1874, Shillong became the capital of Assam. Being the provincial capital of Assam, several Bengalese, Assamese and Marwaris came and settled in Shillong as bureaucrats, professionals and businessmen. Because of Shillong's status, the British refrained from imposing the Inner Line Regulations in the Khasi-Jaiñtia Hills. Similarly, the Garo Hills, surrounded by a settled economy was also found unsuitable for extending the Inner Line Regulations. Although from the point of view of social and economic development, the Garo Hills were no different from the frontier hills, the British officers chose not to invoke the Inner Line in the hills as they felt it would disturb the ongoing trade between the Garo Hills and the adjoining plains.<sup>32</sup> Because of the non-imposition of the Inner Line in the hills inhabited by the native communities such as the Khasi-Pnars and the Garos both positive and negative interactions took place between the native hill tribes and the immigrant non-tribal people. The native tribes inhabiting these areas, especially the educated among them, kept themselves abreast of the political developments and movements

taking shape in the rest of India. Consequently, despite the development of ethnic identities even in the hills inhabited by the communities like the Khasi-Pnars and the Garos, anti-Indian feelings did not emerge among them. That seems to be the case even in the Karbi-Anglong and North Cachar Hills wherein the native tribes had close interactions with the valley people of Assam.

### **Development of Colonial Administration in the Hill Areas**

After occupying the valleys of Assam, the Company created the office of a Commissioner and appointed a Principal Assistant in each district to take care of civil and criminal administration. Apart from strengthening the revenue, judicial and criminal administration, the British took initiatives to develop agriculture, tea plantations, communications, and trade and mining operations in the valley.<sup>33</sup> However, in the hill areas inhabited by the native tribes the British had to move slowly and cautiously. Initially they appointed Political Agencies in the hills as and where required and placed them under the charge of Political Agents or Political Officers. In some cases the Deputy Commissioners of the adjacent valley districts were given additional charge as Political Agents or Officers for a certain period. After consolidating their authority, some hill areas were converted into districts and placed under the charge of Deputy Commissioners or Principal Assistant Commissioners. The Political Agency at Cherrapunji ceased with the appointment of C.K. Hudson in 1854 as Principal Assistant Commissioner of the Khasi-Jaiñtia Hills district. After the shifting of the administrative headquarters from Cherrapunji to Shillong in 1864, the district of Khasi-Jaiñtia Hills was constituted and placed under the charge of a Deputy Commissioner, who also acted as a Political Officer in charge of the Khasi States. The Garo Hills became a fully-fledged district under a Deputy Commissioner in 1869 with Tura as its headquarters. In 1867 the Naga Hills district came into existence with Samaguting, bordering the Nowgong district of Assam valley, as its headquarters. After successful expeditions in Mozema and Kohima, the headquarters of the Naga Hills district was shifted to Kohima in 1878.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, recognizing the practical difficulties of the Bengal government in looking after the administration of the hills and valleys of Assam, a decision was taken to form the Commissionership of Assam in 1874. The already constituted hill districts of the Nagas, the Garos, and the Khasi-Pnars, which were till then under the supervision of the Lt. Governor of Bengal, were merged with the Commissionership of Assam. Although the British established their hold over the Lushai Hills by 1890, the southern part of the hills remained under the Chittagong administration, while the northern part came under the Assam administration. Later in 1895 the south and north Lushai Hill districts were merged into one district under the Commissionership of Assam.<sup>35</sup> No efforts, however, were made to bring the hill areas north of the river Brahmaputra, populated by tribes such as the Akas, the Duflas, the Khamtis, the Miris and the Singphos etc., under a district administration. The Assam Frontier Tracts Regulation 1880 provided for the removal of these frontier tracts, inhabited or frequented by barbarous or semi-civilized tribes, from the operation of enactments in force therein. In their own interests, the British left the administration of these hill tracts to traditional chiefs. In 1882 the Dibrugarh Frontier Tract was created. Later in 1914 the British reorganized these hill areas into three North East Frontier Tracts of Sadiya, Balipara and Lakhimpur.<sup>36</sup> Separate Political Officers were appointed for the Sadiya and Balipara frontier tracts, but the Lakhimpur tract was placed under the charge of the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur. Later in 1943 the Tirap Frontier Tract was created by amalgamating some portions of the Lakhimpur and Sadiya frontier tracts and placed under the charge of a separate Political Officer, who operated from Margherita. The Political Officers or Deputy Commissioners in charge of these tracts usually operated from the bordering towns in the valley districts. They followed the policy of least interference in the internal affairs of these tribes and intervened only when their colonial interests were threatened.

The organization of hill districts in the names of dominant native tribes inhabiting the region did not mean that all the areas inhabited by those particular tribes were included in the respective districts.

The Khasi-Jaiñtia district did not include the Khasi States which were placed under the Syiems and other traditional authorities. It included the whole of Jaiñtia Hills, thirty-one Khasi villages which were directly under the control of the British and Shillong city with adjoining cantonment areas. Similarly, the Naga Hills district included initially only the Angami, Ao, Lotha and Sema tribal areas. It was only in course of time that some other Naga tribal areas such as Mokokchung, Zunheboto and Phek were incorporated into the Naga Hills district. Yet there still remained many other Naga inhabited areas which were either left un-administered or were made a part of Manipur or Burma. It was years after the constitution of the Garo Hills district that the British could bring the interior independent Garos into the fold of British administration. Previously un-administered Lakher and Zongliang areas became part of the Lushai Hills district only in 1921 and 1931 respectively.<sup>37</sup>

### **Civilizing Mission: Education and Christianity in the Hills**

British officers like David Scott, Major Jenkins and James Johnstone who worked for several years in the region understood that the hill tribes could not be tamed by treaties, punitive expeditions and material concessions. The officers felt that as long as the hill tribes remained backward and uncivilized, it would be difficult for them to make the native tribes accept the changes brought in by colonial rule. Hence these British officers considered it necessary to civilize and humanize the hill communities through the spread of modern education and Christianity. David Scott, the first Agent to the Governor-General for the North Eastern Frontier of Bengal, experimented with his ideas in the Garo Hills by starting a school at Singamari in 1831 with the help of the Serampore Baptist Mission. Lord Amherst, the then Governor-General, also supported the idea of spreading Christianity among the hill tribes. However, the Directors of the East India Company in London, who subscribed to the policy of religious neutrality, disapproved the initiatives taken in the Garo Hills. They were afraid that religious intervention would provoke the natives to revolt against the colonial rule. However, Scott argued that the hill tribes of the

north-eastern region were different from the Hindus and the Muslims in mainland India. He maintained that as the hill communities did not have an institutionalized religion, the introduction of Christianity would not have any adverse reaction in the hills. Moreover, he justified taking help from the missionaries on the ground that it was meant for education and humanitarian purposes. Scott wanted to impart the knowledge of agriculture and the mechanical arts to the hill tribes so that they could become self-reliant.<sup>38</sup> Due to financial constraints and the inadequacy of manpower, the Serampore Mission abandoned its activities in Assam and the Khasi Hills.<sup>39</sup>

Major Jenkins, who succeeded David Scott as the Agent to the Governor General of the North East Frontier, believed that it was necessary to encourage Christian missionaries to carry on their activities in the hills to tackle internecine strife among the warring tribes. He invited the American Baptist Mission Foreign Society to undertake a "mission of civilization among the warlike tribes". At the request of Jenkins, Rev. Nathan Brown of the American Baptist Mission started a school at Goalpara for the Garo boys. The government undertook to pay for the maintenance expenses of the boys and for the salaries of the teachers. The government also gave grants for the preparation and printing of textbooks. The schools were established in Rongjuli, Damra, and Rajasimla. Rev. Stoddard and his wife played very important roles in the spread of education and Christianity among the Garos. The Roman Catholic Mission and the Seventh Day Adventists entered the Garo Hills in the nineteen thirties and forties. The government-aided missionary schools were started in the northern part, while the government directly undertook the responsibility of starting schools in southern Garo Hills. The schools were initially providing education through the Bengali medium. The missionaries developed the Garo dialect into a written language using Bengali script. Later on the missionaries started making use of the Roman script for the Garo language and began teaching the Garos in the Garo medium. They translated the Bible and other religious tracts, wrote textbooks and published Garo journals. With the help of Garos educated in their schools, the church carried on evangelical works in

the villages. By bringing the Garos of different areas and clans to schools and the church, the British brought some kind of unity and understanding among the tribes.<sup>40</sup>

The Serampore Mission started educational activities and evangelical work in the Khasi Hills with the encouragement and protection given by local British officers. Krishna Pal of the Serampore Mission baptized the first Khasis in the foothill village of Pandua in 1813. The Mission made efforts to translate the Bible into the Khasi language by using the Bengali script. In addition to the school in Guwahati, schools were started in Cherrapunji, Mawsmai and Mawmluh. However, because of its own internal problems, the Serampore Mission abandoned its activities in the Khasi Hills in 1838. Later the Welsh Presbyterian Mission entered the Khasi-Jaiñtia Hills in 1841. The Welsh Mission was the first to establish a church in the Khasi Hills. The mission baptized several Khasi-Pnars, including those belonging to the ruling families. They started several schools and churches and provided medical services to the people in the different Khasi states. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Roman Catholic Mission also started its activities in Khasi-Jaiñtia Hills. They emphasized on educational and medical activities in Shillong. The Salesians of Don Bosco started schools and colleges in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the devastating earthquake that hit the Khasi-Jaiñtia Hills in 1897, the missionaries undertook relief measures to help the victims. Thereafter several locals converted to Christianity. The educated among them became pastors and they played a key role in spreading the Christian faith among the people of their community. Some among them like Rev. Nichols-Roy, Rev. Joseph Dkhar, and Rev. Mon Lyngdoh started indigenous churches such as the Church of God movement, the Assembly Church of Jesus Christ and the Christ National Church.<sup>41</sup>

Major Jenkins invited Rev. Bronson of the American Baptist Mission, who was working then among the Singphos. Bronson dared to reside in the midst of the Angamis and started a school and a Church at Namisang for the young and the old. Initially the tribes

found it difficult to adjust to school rules and discipline because of their untamed habits and lack of time consciousness. Apart from teaching the three R's, Bronson sought to impart lessons in industrial arts to the tribesmen. He asked the government to offer them facilities for improving the production of tea and salt. Despite the British government's hesitation to deviate from its self-declared policy of religious neutrality, for practical reasons, the officers at the grassroots supported the activities of Bronson. But Bronson, despite his enthusiasm and commitment had to leave Namsang for health reasons. Later Rev. E.W. Clark came and worked in the Ao inhabited areas. Because of the Inner Line regulations, the British authorities permitted him to find a settlement among the Nagas at his own risk with no assurance of protection from them.<sup>42</sup> With the help of Godhula Brown, an Assamese convert, Clark started church and educational activities among the Ao Nagas. Later Rev. C.D. King and Rev. Rivenburg and Mrs. Rivenburg undertook the missionary activities among the Angami Nagas. The Roman Catholic Mission first made their entry into the Naga Hills in 1915.<sup>43</sup>

With the support of British officers, J.H. Lorrain and F.W. Savidge of Arthington Missionary started missionary activities in the northern Lushai Hills. They developed the script and the grammar for the Lushai language, designed school primers and provided education and medical help. Later Rev. D. Jones, Edwin Rowlands and Peter Fraser of the Welsh Presbyterian Mission took up missionary activities in the North Lushai Hills. J. Shakespeare, the Superintendent of the North Lushai Hills district acknowledged the work of the missionaries in the pacification of the Lushais. In the South Lushai Hills district the British Baptist Missionary Society started its activities with the help of J.H. Lorraine and F.W. Savidge who had by then left the Arthington Mission. Later the British government also permitted the Roman Catholics and the Salvation Army to work in the Lushai Hills.<sup>44</sup>

The Christian missionaries played a very important role in restoring peace in the region by pacifying the tribes and making them accept the changes introduced by British rule. What the colonial power

could not do with its military might, the missionaries accomplished it through the spread of education and Christianity. In the course of their civilizing-cum-humanitarian mission among the hill tribes, the missionaries encountered considerable hostilities and hardships. They had to demonstrate patience and tact in making the tribal people attend schools and accept the Christian religion. Initially some tribes looked at the missionary activities with suspicion and hatred. A couple of missionaries working among the wild tribes were even hacked to death. Despite such reactions, the Christian missionaries continued their activities in different hill areas of North East India. Apart from education, the missionaries offered medical services to the sick, taught the tribal peoples the value of hard work, personal hygiene and sanitation, and trained them in skills such as agriculture, horticulture, masonry and carpentry. In pursuit of their goals, the missionaries denounced, what seemed to them, several obnoxious and superstitious cultural and religious practices of the native tribes and encouraged the natives to give up their traditional ways of life by acquiring attitudes, values and behaviour compatible with Christian and modernist values.<sup>45</sup> Although the colonial officers did provide material and monetary support to the missionaries, there were instances when the missionaries went ahead with their activities even with out their support and even dared to confront the colonial authorities on issues such as the practice of slavery among the hill communities.<sup>46</sup> Such instances would not, however, hide the shared ideological commonalties between the colonial authorities and the missionaries. The missionaries operated or were allowed to operate only in those hills where the colonial interests so demanded. The humanitarian activities undertaken by the missionaries were to a considerable extent supported by the finances provided by the British government. The missionaries worked in the hills inhabited by the Khasi-Pnars, Nagas, Mizos and Garos. But the missionaries were conspicuous by their absence in the North Eastern hill tracts and also in the Mikir Hills and North Cachar Hills, where the British did not feel the need for missionary activities. Both the colonizers and the missionaries looked at the hill tribes as wild savages, who needed to be civilized and humanized in the western,

Christian mould. Both aspired to ensure that the hill communities reconciled to the changes introduced by the British and accept the colonial rule. One could see such overlapping consensus and identity of interests between colonialism and the missionaries even in countries like Canada, Australia and the USA. Yet it should be admitted that the missionaries who operated in North East India did not imitate their counterparts in other colonized countries, wherein the missionaries in the name of education and a civilizing mission separated the children from their natural environment, put them in residential schools with the avowed purpose of alienating them from their native culture, language and traditions, while abusing them physically, sexually and psychologically.<sup>47</sup> Contrary to what the missionaries did in countries such as Canada and the USA, the missionaries in North East India identified themselves with the region and the people. They learnt the local languages of the hill tribes, developed scripts and wrote primers and books in these languages. They started schools in different villages and taught the students in their own tongues. Although the spread of Christianity brought in certain changes in the native traditions and culture, many missionaries allowed the converted natives to continue practising their traditional ways in their day-to-day lives. Although the Kiang Nangbah-led Jaiñtia outbreak in Jaiñtia Hills (1860-64), the Sambudhan's revolt in the North Cachar Hills (1881-82), the Zeliangrong rebellion led by Jadonang and Gaidiliu in the Naga inhabited areas of Manipur (1930-32) and the Seng Khasi movement that took place in Khasi-Jaiñtia Hills during the 1930s all had anti-Christian overtones,<sup>48</sup> it should be mentioned that on the whole the native hill communities of north-east India did not experience the extent of alienation that the indigenous people had experienced elsewhere following the spread of Christianity. Whatever might be their initial reactions, in course of time the native hill communities began to look at the missionaries as benefactors.

### **Development in the Hills on the Eve of Indian Independence**

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, partly because of their own efforts and partly because of missionary activities, the British had, to

a large extent, consolidated their authority in the hill areas adjoining the plains of Assam. Although there were sporadic revolts here and there, by and large the British succeeded in restoring peace and order in the region. After engaging in violent confrontations for about five decades, the native hill tribes started reconciling themselves to the changes that had been thrust upon them and started exploring the possibilities of development within the constraints imposed by colonial rule. Factors like development of commodity relations, expansion of communication, development of local languages, growth of modern education, spread of Christianity etc., initiated significant changes in the native tribal societies. Although traditional institutions and leadership were allowed to function in the hills, their significance began to decline slowly and gradually under the colonial influence. While the administrative measures compelled the native communities to settle down within particular areas, the schools and the churches established by the missionaries emerged as new places of interactions among the tribes. New bonds that emerged out of the interactions did contribute to the decline of clan identities and led to the development of broader tribal ethnic identities as Nagas, Mizos, Khasis and Garos.<sup>49</sup> From within each of the tribes, there developed a middle class, which had their base neither in land nor in business. This class comprised newly educated members working in modern professions and closely associated with the Church. Access to modern education and interaction with British officials and the missionaries gave them knowledge about the world around and implanted in them new ideas and aspirations. This class, either in collaboration with the traditional chiefs as in the case of the Nagas, or as in the case of the Mizos, in confrontation with their own chiefs, began to organize different sub-tribes and articulate the collective interests of their respective ethnic communities.<sup>50</sup> The newly emerging ethnic elites started socio-cultural organizations for the uplift of their communities and contributed considerably to the construction of ethnic identities, by differentiating themselves from the people in the plains and also from other native hill communities. They played a key role in shaping the attitudes of

their members to the political developments taking place in the subcontinent during the last three decades of British rule in India.

After the First World War, the British government came out with the Act of 1919 which introduced a system of diarchy and made provisions for legislative councils at the provincial level. Although all major concerns such as finance, industry, and defence remained reserved subjects, the provincial legislative councils were given limited powers over transferred subjects like local self-government, education, health, agriculture etc. With Assam becoming a Governor's province in 1921, a state legislative council also came into existence in the province of Assam. However, following the official recognition of all hill areas of Assam as backward tracts, the legislative council could not exercise its jurisdiction over the hills. Only the Shillong urban constituency enjoyed a legal representation in the state legislative council. Some members nominated to represent certain hill areas virtually played no role in the legislative council. As per the law central and provincial legislation could be applied to the hills only with the approval of the Governor General or the Governor, with modifications as may be suggested. Since the legislative council had no authority over the hills, the council members from the valley often expressed opposition to shoulder the cost of expenditure involving the administration of the hill areas.<sup>51</sup> During the period the hills witnessed the birth of different native associations of the emerging middle classes such as the Naga Club and the Young Mizo Association. When the Simon Commission was constituted to make recommendations for constitutional reforms to accommodate the growing national aspirations of the Indians across the country, the Naga Club with the support of the British officials submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission requesting them to exclude the Nagas from the political processes taking shape in the country.<sup>52</sup> But this view of the Nagas was not shared by other hill communities. The hill tribes living in the North Eastern Hill Tracts remained unaware of the political developments taking place in the Indian subcontinent. But many educated middle class intellectuals of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills expressed their willingness to become a part of the

new constitutional arrangement. The British government had to take into consideration differences in the level of political and educational development in the hills. Their realization that some hill areas were more developed than others, led them to come out with suggestions for the reorganization of hill areas. Accordingly, on the basis of indicators such as literacy and political development of the region, the Act of 1935 grouped the hills into two categories: excluded and partially excluded. The frontier areas such as the North Eastern Frontier Tracts, the Mizo Hills and the Naga Hills were declared as Excluded Areas, whereas the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, the Garo Hills, the Mikir and North Cachar Hills were designated as Partially Excluded Areas. Although there were differences over the inclusion of the Garo Hills as a Partially Excluded Area,<sup>53</sup> still the classification continued to guide the British in their administration. The administration of Excluded Areas was placed under the charge of the Governor of Assam, who as the Agent to the Governor General exercised direct control over the hills included under the list. The excluded areas were out of the purview of the Assam provincial legislature. They had no representation in the provincial legislature. However, the Partially Excluded Areas had their representatives in the Assam legislature and the Assam legislature had powers to make laws with respect to these hill areas, subject to the approval of the Governor of Assam. Legally the Governor had overriding powers even with respect to the Partially Excluded Areas, although he rarely exercised them in practice.<sup>54</sup> The Inner Line Regulations were not enforced in the Partially Excluded Areas. The division of hills into Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas had contradictory effects on the subsequent political developments in the hills. In the Excluded Areas the natives lived isolated lives without any positive interaction with the people of the rest of India. Naturally the ethnic elite in the frontier districts remained either opposed to or divided over joining the Indian Union. In the North Eastern Frontier Tracts, which were left un-administered, the native hill tribes virtually had no knowledge of the political transition taking place in the Indian subcontinent. Unlike them the native people and leaders in the Partially Excluded

Areas interacted with the people from the plains and identified themselves with the political processes shaping the subcontinent. Naturally, in the Partially Excluded Areas the ethnic identity formation did not take an anti-India colour.

Another spin-off effect of the Act of 1935, which had serious implications for the hill tribes in North East India in the years to come, was the decision to separate Burma (present Myanmar) from British India. For administrative convenience, the British took the decision to demarcate the boundaries between India and Burma. The boundaries were arbitrarily drawn without taking into consideration the fact that different native tribes of the North East region inhabited on both sides of the border. The demarcation of boundaries did not create much of a problem for the native tribes, as long as British rule continued both in India and Burma. Since the British left the hills on either side of the borders almost un-administered, the borders then did not obstruct the normal lives of the hill communities. But after the Second World War, when the British took the decision to withdraw from both India and Burma, the fate of the hill tribes living on either side of the borders had to be left at the mercy of the new nation states that came into existence. Similar problems arose when British India was partitioned into India and Pakistan and some of the areas inhabited by the hill tribes such as Khasi-Pnars became part of East Pakistan. Anticipating such problems, some British officials like J. H. Hutton, N.E. Parry and Robert Reid, who subscribed to the view that the hill tribes of the region were not Indians, proposed the idea of establishing a Crown Colony comprising of all the hill districts / tracts of North East India and Burma with the aim of protecting the backward native tribes from possible domination and neglect by the new rulers who would take over power in British India and Burma. The proposal, however, could not make any headway, as it did not receive any attention or support from any of the parties involved in the negotiations for the transfer of power at that point of time.<sup>55</sup>

The Second World War had virtually brought the Japanese forces to the backyard of the hills of North East India. Compelled by the

situation, the British made efforts to seek support and involve the native tribes in the war efforts. The Nagas and the Mizos responded positively and helped the British forces in different forms. However, the Kukis revolted against the British, refusing to join the British Army as labour corps.<sup>56</sup> Some native tribes did lend support to the Indian National Army led by Subhas Chandra Bose against the Allied forces. The British decision to leave India caused considerable worry among the hill communities and activated political forces within. Every hill community was concerned about its future in the post-colonial India. However, their reactions to the prospect of joining India were not uniform. The Naga National Council (NNC) took the extreme stand of demanding freedom for the Nagas and expressed their desire not to be a part of India.<sup>57</sup> But in the Mizo Hills, which also happened to be an excluded area, the people were clearly divided. While the Mizo Union, representing the radical educated sections as opposed to the traditional Mizo chiefs, showed their willingness to join India, the Mizo chiefs toyed with the idea of joining other Mizo tribes in Burma and becoming independent.<sup>58</sup> In the Khasi Hills some of the Syiems were in favour of joining India. But they expected the Khasi States to be treated as other princely states and wanted their relationship with the province of Assam to be determined by agreements.<sup>59</sup> There was not much opposition in the Garo Hills, the North Cachar Hills and the Mikir Hills to joining India and becoming a part of the Assam province. But the tribes of the North East Hill Tracts, who were completely left un-administered, remained oblivious of all that was happening in the adjacent hills.

With the British deciding to grant freedom to India, the Indian nationalists established a Constituent Assembly in 1946 to draft a Constitution for independent India. The Constituent Assembly set up an Advisory Committee on minorities, tribal areas etc., under the chairmanship of Vallabhai Patel. Realizing the specificity of the hill areas of the North East, a subcommittee on north-eastern tribal areas and the excluded and partially excluded areas was constituted under the Chairmanship of Gopinath Bordoloi as part of the Advisory Committee to suggest the appropriate institutional set-up for the hill

districts. The subcommittee included some representatives of the hill communities as members and co-opted members. The committee received memoranda from the representatives of different hill communities. Bordoloi met the leaders of the different hill communities and tried to convince them that their interests would be protected in independent India. The Naga National Council (NNC) boycotted the Committee, while the Mizo Union sent its representatives as co-opted members. The Committee in its recommendations suggested the need for a special set-up for the tribal areas so that the tribal people would overcome the fear of exploitation or domination by the advanced sections of the people from the plains. To make the native tribes overcome their apprehensions, the committee recommended that the tribal people should enjoy full freedom in respect of their own, customs, inheritance, social organization, village administration etc. The Bordoloi Committee's recommendation took the shape of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which made provisions for Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) in all the hill areas with the state of Assam. Only the Nagas rejected the proposal right at the beginning, whereas other hill communities started [after some amount of persuasion and coercion] from there a new journey in pursuit of autonomy and self-reliance within the Indian Union.

### **Conclusion**

The colonial rule had adversely affected the indigenous tribal communities in all the territories colonized by European powers. It does not make much of a difference whether the territory colonized was Canada or India; everywhere the native tribal communities resisted the colonial domination and tried to defend their traditional rights. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both in British Columbia and in the hill areas of Assam, the British had been able to put down native resistance and establish their control over all major native hill communities. Similar tactics were pursued in both countries to establish colonial rule over the natives. Making efforts to befriend the native communities through treaties, sending punitive expeditions against rebellious

communities and using missionaries and modern education were some of the instruments used by the colonial powers to deal with native resistance.<sup>60</sup> In both countries, British rule introduced certain new professions and tried to impart European/Christian morals, lifestyles and etiquettes, alien to native traditions. Despite some such similarities in the means and tactics that the British colonizers adopted, native history took different paths in these colonies. While concluding the paper, one may reiterate the distinct trajectory that the history of native tribal communities had taken in the hills of Assam and analyze why it had to be different from the course that the native history had taken in countries like Canada.

As in India, the Europeans entered Canada initially as traders. As they found profitable market for fur products in China, different European explorers-cum-traders vied with one another to have control over the Native Indian communities in Canada, whose support they needed to hunt the fur-bearing animals. Although the relations between European traders and the Native Indian communities were not always harmonious, the traders' dependence on the native communities compelled them to follow a policy of least interference in the internal affairs of the Native Indian communities.<sup>61</sup> During the period of fur trade, the Native Indians in British Columbia continued to be in possession of their land and resources, but following the decline of the fur trade and with the growth of agriculture and mining activities, the immigration of the whites into Canada increased enormously. To accommodate the increasing white settlers' population, the colony of British Columbia made attempts to extinguish the Native Indian's claims to land and resources by engaging them in treaties or by creating reserves and promising certain material guarantees if they should give up their claims over the territories.<sup>62</sup> Later the promises made to the Native Indian communities were broken and the size of the reserves allotted to them was arbitrarily reduced to appease the white settlers.<sup>63</sup> The colonial government did not hesitate to use force at times to discipline the defiant Indian tribes. The need for the excessive use of force did not however, arise as the spread of the white man's diseases killed thousands of native Indians and made the

communities so weak that they hardly had any mental and physical strength to fight the colonial expansion.<sup>64</sup> Contrarily, the British did not have to rely much on the hill communities of Assam at any point of time for promoting their economic interests. The British showed interest in the hill communities because of the need to control tribal incursions into the plain areas controlled by them. Their primary interest was to maintain law and order in the plain areas under their occupation and to ensure peace along the frontiers. To pursue these objectives the British had to try all means at their disposal to tame the hill tribes. The British found the treaties and the material incentives to the traditional elites to be of little value, as most hill communities did not attach much significance to them. Consequently, the British had to resort to several punitive expeditions for about a century to put down all native rebellions in the hills of Assam.

After suppressing the native tribal revolts in the frontier hills of Assam, the British chose not to intervene in the internal affairs of the hill communities and allowed the tribal chiefs to govern their communities in accordance with their traditions. In the Khasi Hills also they allowed the rule of traditional chiefs with restricted powers, but in the Jaiñtia Hills and the Garo Hills they created new posts and appointed local persons to take care of civil and criminal administration on behalf of the British. As such the British did not follow any uniform administrative policy with regards to the hill communities. Considerable autonomy was given to the Political Agents or the Deputy Commissioners to initiate appropriate forms of administration. The British were reluctant to impose elaborate legal and administrative institutions and procedures in the hills. This policy was in clear contrast with what the colonizers did in Canada. By treating all Native Indians alike, the British in Canada tried to impose a uniform policy for all indigenous communities, in complete ignorance of the specificities of each of the communities they came across. Their quest for a uniform Indian policy culminated in the enactment of the Indian Act of 1876 by the Federal Government of Canada. The Act laid down rules for the determination of the status of Native Indians, replacement of traditional leadership by the elected chiefs, creation of band

governments, determination of their powers and functions and appointment of Indian commissioners to supervise the functioning of the Native Indian governments.<sup>65</sup> The federal government established a separate department of Indian Affairs to deal with all Indian bands. The native Indian communities often complained that the Canadian state ignored the specificities of native tribal groups while giving shape to the Indian policy.<sup>66</sup> No native tribal communities in the hills of Assam seemed to have lodged such complaints against the British authorities.

Likewise, in the case of missionary activities also the experience of the hill areas of Assam differed from that of Canada. In Canada with the avowed purpose of civilizing the natives, the Christian missionaries tried to bring up the native children in residential schools by taking them away from their native environment and forcing them to learn the English language and the English ways of doing things. The missionary activities in Canada led to the alienation of the native Indian children from their native languages, traditions and culture. Unlike in Canada, the different Christian missionaries who worked in the hills of Assam made efforts to learn the local languages, developed local scripts and grammar, started schools in the native villages and towns and taught them in their own tongues. Although new religious and cultural practices were introduced, most missionaries did not force the hill communities to give up all tribal customs and traditions. The missionaries in both British Columbia and North East India provided education and medical help, taught the tribal communities cleanliness and sanitation and trained them in cultivation, industry and the liberal arts. But while the Christian missionaries in British Columbia lost their reputation because of their residential school experiment, their counterparts in the hills of Assam won over the confidence of the native tribes by providing them educational and medical services. Although some native tribes did not trust the missionaries initially, by and large, the hill tribes of Assam responded positively to the missionary activities. They did not feel overawed, abused and dominated by the missionaries. The hill communities of Assam began to see the Christian missionaries as saviours and

benefactors. By winning over the hearts and minds of the natives, the Christian missionaries succeeded in pacifying the native anger against colonial rule and helped the natives reconcile to the changes introduced by the British in the hills.

These marked differences in British colonial policies towards the native tribal communities in British Columbia and the hill areas of Assam could be explained only by relating them to the differences in colonial interests. Like the East India Company, the British trading companies like the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company came in contact with the Native Indian communities in Canada. In British Columbia the imperatives of colonial economy necessitated the integration of the native communities with the colonial economy right from the days of the fur trade. The passive dependence of the native tribes on the fur trade led to the weakening of their traditional and autonomous sources of livelihood. Once the fur trade declined, the Native Indians found themselves difficult to return to their old ways of life.<sup>67</sup> The impetus given by the growth of agriculture, the exploration of mineral resources and finally the discovery of gold encouraged immigration and led to the settlement of native land by thousands of white settlers, adding more pressure on the Native Indian communities in British Columbia. To accommodate the increasing settlers' population, the colonial authorities used treaties or material incentives to make the native communities give up their claims over land and move to the reserves allocated for them by the colonial government.<sup>68</sup> The capitalist-colonial expansion called for assimilative policies and programmes aiming at extinguishment of the traditional rights of the native communities.

In this respect the colonial situation in North East India was quite different. No doubt the British looked at India as its precious colony and aspired to exploit its people and resources for the benefit of Great Britain. For facilitating their colonial exploitation, the colonial government appointed British officers at higher levels of civil and military establishments and supported the initiatives of British industrialists, traders and planters inside India. But at no point of

time, did the colonial rule encouraged large-scale migration and settlement by the white people as they did in countries like Canada. A few thousand British officers ruled India for about two hundred years by recruiting the Indians themselves in the lower rungs of civil and military services. Wherever their colonial interests so demanded, the British encouraged / compelled certain communities to migrate and settle in other regions within the country. Such voluntary or forced migrations of people caused demographic changes in certain parts of the country, including Assam. During British rule the plain areas of Assam witnessed large-scale immigration and settlement of thousands of Bengalese, Marwaris and tribal people from Central India. Such colonially induced inter-regional migration generated a fear psychosis among the native communities in the valley areas.<sup>69</sup> Although the communities which migrated to the region were not white people, as in the Americas, nevertheless their immigration in many respects had the same impact on the native people inhabiting the plains.

Compared to the valley region, the colonial experience of the hill areas of Assam remained quite different in many respects. As the hills remained peripheral to the colonial economy, the British interfered very little in the internal affairs of the native communities and evinced no interest in initiating drastic changes in the economic and administrative arrangements in the hills. Except for a couple of towns like Shillong, which because of their administrative and economic significance attracted many outsiders, other hill areas of Assam by and large remained under the control of the native communities. Unlike the Native Indians in Canada and the USA, despite the colonial rule, the hill communities of Assam escaped racial discrimination, alienation, exploitation, displacement, disease and deaths. Thanks to the missionary activities, the hill tribes found it difficult to distinguish between the whites that ruled and the whites that preached. The presence of non-tribal Indians was effectively exploited to ensure the hill communities' support for the British rule. While initiating changes in the social and cultural spheres to the extent that they felt expedient, the colonial rulers and the missionaries saw to it that the hill

communities maintained their own tribal identities. By preventing positive interactions with the people in the plains and by exploiting the fears and suspicions of the hill communities, the British had to some extent succeeded in ensuring that the hill tribes of Assam kept themselves away from the Indian nationalist movement and accepted British rule, not just as fait accompli but as something beneficial to them. The study thus shows that because of the differences in the colonial situations, the policies pursued by the British colonizers in British Columbia and the hills of Assam differed both in form and content.

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