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NORTH EAST INDIA  
HISTORY ASSOCIATION



EIGHTH SESSION

KOHIMA : 1987

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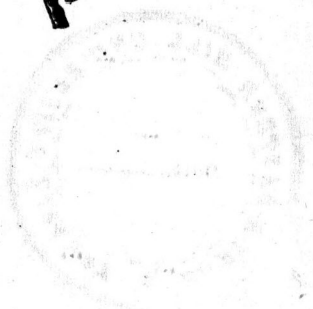
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Department of History

**North-Eastern Hill University**

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## PREFACE

The eighth session of the North East India History Association at the Kohima College, Kohima was indeed a milestone in the history of the Association. With this we have been able to hold at least one session in all the seven states of the region within eight years of the existence of our association. The session was attended by about one hundred and fifty delegates and sixty research papers were presented and discussed in the three-day session. It is for the first time that an academic gathering of this magnitude was organised in Nagaland. An additional feature of this session was a symposium on "Indian History Congress and Historical Research in the North-East" organised by the Association to mark the Golden Jubilee celebration of the Indian History Congress in which the key paper was presented by Dr. O.P. Kejariwal of the North-Eastern Hill University.

The present volume is the proceedings of the Seventh Annual Session of the North East India History Association held at the Kohima College, Kohima on October 27-29, 1987. Professor Gangmumei Kabui of Manipur University presided over the session which was inaugurated by Shri Shikiho Sema, Minister of Education, Government of Nagaland. Shri H. Gupta, Principal, Kohima College did us a great honour as Local Secretary of the session. Principal Gupta, his colleagues and the students made excellent arrangements for the conference and stay of the delegates. Besides its high academic contents, the delegates shall cherish the fond memory of the session for warmth of the reception extended by the organisers. Our thanks are due to the authorities of the Kohima College and the Government of Nagaland.

I am personally thankful to my colleagues Dr. O.P. Kejariwal, Dr. J.P. Singh, Dr. Milton S. Sangma, Dr. Gautam Sengupta and Dr. D.R. Syiemlieh for the help in editing and publishing the volume.

We are also thankful to the Indian Council of Historical Research for the generous financial assistance extended to the Association.

**(J.B. Bhattacharjee)**

**Shillong** General Secretary  
The 1 July 1988 North East India History Association

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## KHASI IRON CULTURE AND IRON TRADE WITH SYLHET IN THE LATE EIGHTEENTH AND EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURIES

D.R. Syiemlieh

The abundance of iron ore in the Khasi Hills made it possible, with other requirements of fuel, clay and water, for establishing a flourishing industry. It was in part the search and location of iron ore that the Khasi moved west from their first settlements in the Jaintia Hills. It is not certain how old this industry and its trade could have been, but it may be reasonable to say that the Khasis have had a knowledge of the excavation, smelting and production of iron implements of sorts for centuries. What is also not certain is whether the science was developed in the hills itself, or whether it came from the plains to the south. It is likely that the science of excavation, smelting and manufacture came through Sylhet from where so many influences made their impact on Khasi life and culture.

The principal sites for the mining operations were Myllem, Nongkrem, Laitlyngkot, Nogundee and the region around Cherrapunji. The open mines appear to have been excavated in similar manner. A small stream is allowed to rush down a slope. Excavator stand on the slope, poke the soil from between the boulders with long poles having iron spikes. The loosened soil tumbles down the stream and iron ore is made to settle at the base of a dam made of sticks while the force of water allows lighter grains of soil to be carried off. The ore is then removed to the washing trough, where it is washed and then dried.<sup>2</sup> Washing of the ore may be repeated four times.

Of the many accounts of the smelting of iron in the Khasi Hills, that by William Cracroft,

Officiating Agent to the Governor General, North East Frontier, may be quoted at length for its very detailed explanations.

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

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

The nozzles of the bellows unite in a tube which leads underground, from a sort of wind chest, to the hearth about four feet in front of them. Over the hearth is a chimney of pipe-clay braced with iron hoops, two feet in diameter at the bottom and about six feet high. The mouth at bottom is on the side away from the bellows, and the chimney inclined from them to direct the heated air from the smelter towards an opening in the roof. At the right side of the bellows and even with the top of the chimney, is a trough containing damp charcoal and iron sand: at every motion of his body the operator with a long spoon tumbles a piece of this charcoal with the iron sand adhering to it, down the funnel of the furnace and when a mass of melted or rather softened iron is formed on the hearth, it is taken out with tongs and beaten with a heavy wooden wallet on a large stone by way of anvil."

The ore was often not smelted in the villages adjoining the mines. It was sold in basket contained three maunds of ore, and carried often for many miles to the villages where the smelting furnaces were situated. In most cases the pig iron in the shape of circular lumps and balls was again brought to market and carried to other villages where it was manufactured into tools and other articles.<sup>4</sup> Much of the iron was sent to the plains markets, particularly to Bholaganj, Chattak, Lakhat, Jaintiapur, Jaflong, Pharalbazar, Maodon, Sonapur, Molagul, Pandua and Lengjut in Sylhet. The iron that remained in the hills was wrought into spades, shovels, knives, daos, arrow heads, swords and spears. Joseph Hooker, the botanist who travelled through the Khasi Hills in 1850 wrote in his 'Note' that from the summit of Kyllang Rock "the tingling sound of hammers from the distant forges on all sides was singularly musical and pleasing; they feel on the ear like "bells upon the wind", each ring being exquisitely melodious, and chiming harmoniously with the others."<sup>6</sup>

The mining and smelting of iron was not a year round occupation. Only during periods of heavy rain could the ore be collected. Yule noted that from Rs.4 to Rs.10 was paid for a mine, when the proprietor was not the excavator. The miners received 4 annas a day. Women washing the ore received  $1\frac{1}{2}$  annas a day and young boys who assisted in the mining process got a daily wage of 2 annas. Blacksmiths could over the period employed in smelting the ore take home a pay of Rs. 25 or more.<sup>7</sup> The quality of the iron was "excellent", of a "very superior quality ... superior to any made in Europe by charcoal."<sup>8</sup> Despite the dross covering the pig iron lumps, its quality improving after a second process of purification by heat and hammer, Khasi iron had a ready market as it was the only source of the metal for the hills and the two valleys below.

The manufacture of artefacts in the hills was done in workshops differing entirely from the huts in which the first smelting were done. They were generally open sheds of an oblong shape, with the hearth and bellows at one end. The hammers used by the smiths were long in the head, being from 12 to 17 inches, only one faced with the handle inserted near to the end of the head. "This handle is frequently not much longer than the head of the hammer itself. This peculiarity in the form of the hammer leads to a marked difference in the mode of using them as compared with what an English mechanic would adopt. A Khasi smith never swings his hammer, however heavy, but simply lifts it vertically, and the force of the blow depends on the weight and impetus of the hammer itself, as it falls, rather than on the muscular power of the person who wields it." Few of the hammers exceeded 6 pounds in weight. The anvils were rounded blocks of hard granite. The wedges were good and serviceable. The sharpening of spades, the main manufacture, was by rapidly driving the implement into moist sharp sand, the sharp cutting edges of the small quartz grain in the sand acting as a grindstone, giving a clean and smooth surface to the spade.

At Pandua pig iron in lumps called 'bira' was sold at Re 1. 5 annas per maund (1829),<sup>10</sup> Re 1. 2 annas a score at Nongkrem (about a dozen pieces went to the maund) and at Pandua they sold by weight at Re 1. 4 annas a maund (1842).<sup>11</sup> At Chattak such iron could be purchased at Re 1. 4 annas to Re 1. 6 annas per maund. Better iron which was beaten into bars called 'peti' sold for Re<sup>12</sup> 1. 10 annas to Re 1. 12 annas per maund (1879). It is thus evident from the above that over a period of fifty years (1829-1879) the cost of Khasi iron was stable if not actually cheaper, an indication that it was losing its market for cheaper iron from British iron mills. The cost of carriage from the hills to the plains" was about 6 annas per

maund, Khasi traders who had a control over this trade getting an<sup>13</sup> average profit of only two annas per maund. It is estimated that in 1858 the annual export of iron was between 45,000 to 50,000 maunds valued at Rs. 67,000 and more.<sup>14</sup>

Much of the iron sold in Sylhet was used for the manufacture of double hook-like nails to fasten planks for boats. The boat building industry of Sylhet was old and lucrative. Even as early as when Mughal rule extended to this region, Sylhet built large boats for the Mughal fleet stationed at Dacca.<sup>15</sup> Smaller square rugged boats and 'barkis' were also constructed, the latter used by the lime merchants to transport limestone from the hills to depots in the plains.<sup>16</sup> Bengali blacksmiths of Sylhet preferred Khasi iron to English iron because of its malleability.<sup>17</sup> Before the export of limestone from the hills in the last quarter of the eighteenth century and some quantity of coal early in the nineteenth century, iron constituted the chief commodity of trade with Sylhet. The other important items of trade were oranges, pineapple, betelnut, pan and tezpat. These were bartered for rice, fish, cotton, silk cloth and salt. It may be reasonable to say that before the very large volume of limestone trade it was that of iron that balanced the two-way trade, for no other export had such a volume in terms of money value to pay by barter for the imports into the hills.

Though European traders in Sylhet were aware of the iron trade, none invested any capital or sought to make technological improvements in the existing process. They were more concerned with trade in limestone, and later after its discovery in 1814, that of coal. Some others traded in salt. When it became possible for Europeans to travel through the hills some among them gave their attention to this trade. Captain Jones thought Pandua "the best situation in India for an iron mill ... for the

manufacture of bar, bolt, hoop and iron sheet." He believed that the mills might be worked at the least nine months in the year and could be constructed at a very moderate expense.<sup>18</sup> With the end of monopoly and the start of free trade, Lt. Colonel Thomas C. Watson hoped in 1834:

"ere long that the efforts of enlightened industry, and all the aid of modern machinery and scientific research, supported by a liberal outlay of capital, will be employed in perfecting the existing produce and manufacture of the country."<sup>19</sup>

He was convinced "that works might be established in those hills (Khasi hills) for the manufacture of iron and steel on a very extensive scale."<sup>20</sup> Nothing came out of his plan, nor did the paper by Lt. Yule<sup>21</sup> have any results towards this end.

The disadvantages in expanding and improving the technology were many. Mining was expensive and labourous for it was only surface mining with not sufficient concentration of iron ore; transportation added to the cost, and the impure state in which the iron was sent out added weight and ate on profits. One great defect in the manufacture was the want of a sustained and sufficiently high and equable temperature in the hearth so as to keep the whole of the mass of metal in a molten state at the same time so as to move completely separate the slag from the pure metal. Moreover, the mining washing and smelting of ore was only possible during the monsoons, for the Khasis had no use of water mills and aqueducts as Watson had suggested for its use.<sup>22</sup> The decline of the Khasi iron trade was evident soon after the British took control of the hills. Watson wrote in 1834, "Of late, the sale of iron has been unusually dull, and numerous individuals who were employed in digging, washing and smelting the ore, are out

of employment."<sup>23</sup> What really rang the death knell for this industry was the competition it got from superior English iron and sold in the plains at a cheaper rate than Khasi iron. Oldham was informed that even in the immediate vicinity of the hills, English manufactured spades could be processed at as low a price as the Khasi spades.<sup>24</sup> By the second half of the last century the production and trade of iron had all but ceased as the import of this metal had far exceeded what continued to be exported.<sup>25</sup>

The Khasi iron industry continues to cling on to a precarious position. Little or no mining is done today. Blacksmiths continue to fashion implements in the shapes and sizes that their predecessors first wrought, and it is this that has ensured a continuation of this craft for tradition dies hard both for the producer and discriminating purchasers.

#### Notes & References

1. Lt. Yule wrote of remnants of the industry at Nongkrem and Mylliem: "So marked an effect how these works achieved in the inundating hills which cover the country that in many instances what must have been like their neighbours, round selling knolls, appear to have collapsed and sunk to their skeletons, showing nothing but fantastic piles of naked boulders; the earth which once bounded and covered them, having been entirely washed out by the heavy rains .... So numerous and extensive are traces of former excavations, that judging by the number at present at work, one may guess them to have occupied the population for twenty centuries." 'Notes on the Iron of the Kasia Hills', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, No.129, 1842, p.853.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 854.

3. W. Cracroft, 'Smelting of Iron in the Kasya Hills', **Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal**, Vol. I, 1832, pp.150-151. A much more detailed account is available in Yule's 'Notes', **Op.cit.**, pp. 854-855. The first account, though very short was made by H. Walters, 'Journey across the Pandua Hills near Sylhet in Bengal', **Asiatic Researches**, Vol. XVII, 1832, p.505. A Captain Jones also wrote of this process in 'Some particulars regarding the mineral productions of Bengal', **Gleanings in Science**, Vol. I, 1829, p.284. Walters, Cracroft and later Joseph Hooker gave sketches of iron smelting furnaces in the Khasi Hills.
4. Thomas Oldham, 'On the Geological Structure of a portion of the Khasi Hills', **Memoirs of the Geological Survey of India**, Vol. I, Part II, 1858, p.202.
5. The Khasis who have had no use of the plough could cultivate crops only by tilling the soil by the spade, the shape of which has not changed over generations.
6. J.D. Hooker, **Himalayan Journals**, Vol. II, reprinted, New Delhi, 1974, pp. 292-293.
7. Yule, **Op.cit.**, pp. 855-856.
8. Oldham, **Op.cit.**, p. 206; Lord Lindsay, **Lives of the Lindsays or A Memoir of the house of Crawford and Balcarres**, Vol. III, London, 1849, p. 174.
9. Oldham, **Op.cit.**, pp. 203-206; Yule, **Op.cit.**, p.855.
10. Jones, **Op.cit.**, p. 284.
11. Yule, **Op.cit.**, p. 856.
12. W.W. Hunter, **A Statistical Account of Assam**, Vol. II, reprinted, Delhi, 1975, p. 235.
13. **Ibid.**, W.J. Allen, **Report on the Administration of the Cossyah and Jynteah Hills Territory**, Calcutta, 1858, reprinted, Shillong, 1903, p.48.
14. **Ibid.**
15. Walter Hamilton, **The East-India Gazetteer**, Vol. II, reprinted, Delhi, 1984, p. 553.

16. B.C. Allen, **Assam District Gazetteers**, Vol. II, Sylhet, Calcutta, 1905, p. 155.
17. **Ibid.**, W.J. Allen, **Op.cit.**, p.48.
18. Jones, **Op.cit.**, p. 284.
19. Thomas C. Watson, 'Chirra Punji and a Detail of some of the favourable circumstances which renders it and advantageous Site for the Erection of an Iron and Steel Manufactory on an Extensive Scale', **Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal**, Vol. III, 1834, p.25.
20. **Ibid.**
21. Yule, **Op.cit.**, pp. 853-857.
22. Oldham, **Op.cit.**, pp.206-207; Watson, **Op.cit.**, pp.32-33.
23. Watson, **Op.cit.**, p.29.
24. Oldham, **Op.cit.**, p.206; Hunter, **Op.cit.**, p.235.
25. In 1876-77, Rs. 7000 of iron implements was exported against nails and ironmongery imported to the value of Rs.18,000. Hunter, **Op.cit.**, p. 235.