

**DEPUTY COMMISSIONER IN BRITISH
ADMINISTRATION:
A CASE STUDY OF
KHASI AND JANTIA HILLS DISTRICT**

ABSTRACT

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A B S T R A C T

The institution of the District Offices was in tune with the time honoured Indian system of territorial organisation which entailed repeated sub-divisions of areas with graded levels of administration, each entrusted to the charge of an official of the central government. The district which was in origin a land revenue division became, over a period of years, the fundamental administrative unit, on whose framework were built civil, criminal and police jurisdiction and also those of welfare and technical services provided by special department of government. The district Collector was the nucleus of the system and the district its key-link and the centre of life in the Indian empire.

Throughout British India the District, technically so called, was the unit of administration. In the details of District organisation there were great variations in different provinces, but the general principles on which the administrative system was based were much the same every where. In every district of British India the government had its representative in whom all executive civil authority centred. The District officer, whether known as Collector-Magistrate in the Regulation provinces and Deputy Commissioner in the non-Regulation Provinces was the responsible head of his jurisdiction.

British India, had been for practical purposes governed under a bureaucratic form of government. At the top of the hierarchy stood what had come to be known as the Indian Civil Service consisting of covenanted, uncovenanted and soldier-civilians - forming a corps d' elite, once described by Mr. Lloyd George as the steel frame of the Indian administration. This service, for a major portion of British rule in India, constituted both the 'government' and the 'administration' or both the policy-making and executive body.

Deputy Commissioner of Khasi-Jaintia Hills in the Assam Commission was an institution by himself. In conformity with his compeers in the British Indian district he was generally head of the civil administration of his district. But though there had interesting similarities between them, the Deputy Commissioner of Khasi-Jaintia Hills was somewhat a different institution, while European bureaucratic principles were gaining ground in the British-Indian administration, the District Officer of Khasi-Jaintia Hills was very much akin to the Mughal prototype - the Subadar, while the authority of the administration was heading towards decentralisation, a trend of concentration of administrative duties had been concentrating in the person of the Deputy Commissioner of Khasi-Jaintia Hills. There is another side of the shield. He was the Political Officer of the Khasi states along with his normal duties as a Magistrate, Collector and Civil Judge. The position of a Political Officer was by no means an easy one. It called for great qualities of character, tact, sympathy, patience, and good manners. He had to identify himself with the

interests of both the paramount power and the princes and people of the states. He must have all the qualities and accomplishment of a diplomatic officer. For the Khasi Hills, the Political Officer required to be something more than expected elsewhere.

The concept of district administration in British India and the officers appointed therein as the District Officers have found positive expression in several writings of the "Civilian" writers. E.A.H. Blunt in his The I.C.S.; John Beams in Memoirs of a Bengal civilian; Henry Beveridge in his The District of Backerganj : Its History and Statistics; Roberts Carstrirs, in his The Little World of an Indian District Officer; H.J.S. Cotton in his Indian and Home Memoirs; Philip Hutchins in his An Indian Career; Evans Maconochie in Life in the Indian Civil Service; John Strachey in his India, Its administration and Progress and several other civilian writers and contemporary Scholars have left behind enough materials about the district administration in British India and achievements of the District Officers as "government" and "administration" in India. These writing were mostly concerning settled districts and provinces under the British Government. Save for these, there had several other districts and Provinces which were known as non-regulation territories, and the officers in charge of such districts were known as Deputy Commissioners. A. H. Aslam in his book The Deputy Commissioner : A Study of Public Administration; Sudesh Kumar Sharma in his Deputy Commissioner in Punjab informed about the Deputy Commissioner of Punjab. The administration in the Hill Districts were somewhat different as

practised elsewhere. The Hill Districts and the Deputy Commissioners therein received little attention of the Scholars, and no attempt has yet been made to highlight the nature and working of administration of a frontier hill district and the corresponding role and the working problems of the Deputy Commissioner.

This study is based mainly on official documents - both published and unpublished - available at the National Archives, Calcutta; West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta; Assam Secretariat Records office, Shillong; District Records Room, Shillong; and Private possessions of Mr. Kympham Singh, Shillong. Besides official reports, gazette, gazetteers and number of contemporary and recent works have been consulted and utilised.

This investigation has two aspects to study - District Officer (Deputy Commissioner) as an institution in the district level of British Colonial bureaucratic administrative structure, and an approach of non-regulation at the later stage a deregulation administration as well as a political administration in the Khasi-Gaintia Hills and the role of the Deputy Commissioner, in different stages of development therein. This subject is introduced in the Introduction of the present study in the Post Independence context of Indian Republic.

The first Chapter deals with an evolution of the Institution of District Officer, the character and spirit of the British administration in India, making of the District and District officer in general

administrative framework, the non-regulation system of administration introduced in the North-East Frontier of India, and the concept of District and District Officer emerged in the North East Frontier in particular reference to Khasi-Jaintia Hills.

The Chapter II deals with the Khasi-Jaintia Hills in the background of Khasi indigenous administrative system prior to the British intervention of these hills, the British annexation of Khasi-Jaintia Hills, administrative arrangements till the Khasi Hills political Agency emerged, Khasi-Jaintia Hills as made a district of Assam Commission, the Garo Hills Act that introduced a new system of hill district administration in the North-East Frontier including the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, and the later development of the administrative structure in the said district upto 1947.

The third Chapter finds an exposition to the evolution of British-Indian bureaucracy, the problems and working of the bureaucracy, the socio-educational background of the Civil Service consisting of civilian, soldier-civilian and uncovenanted civilians. This chapter has put emphasis on the formation and growth of Assam Commission, important features of the Commission and finally the unique position of the Deputy Commissioner of Assam including the officers in charge of Khasi-Jaintia Hills.

The Chapter IV deals with the relation of the Deputy Commissioner as Political Officer in the Khasi States in the background of an evolution of a political system in India.

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The fifth chapter deals with the role of the Deputy Commissioner, Khasi-Jaintia Hills in relation to administration of Justice. In this chapter, an attempt is made to examine the development of a judicial Administrative structure in Khasi-Jaintia Hills District, which formed the core of British Hill administration in India. A comparative and distinct role between the Deputy Commissioner of Khasi-Jaintia Hills and District Officers in Assam Commission is attempted to project to in this chapter.

The sixth chapter deals with the changing power structure in Assam in the formation of several departments in the Assam administration and the jurisdiction and role of the Deputy Commissioner in Police, Revenue, Education, Registration, Jail, Agriculture and Land Records, Local Self-Government, Forest & etc. in Assam, while the position of the Deputy Commissioners or District officers had been on the road to infringement due to the growth of special departments in India in general and Assam in particular, a different picture could be perceived in Khasi-Jaintia Hills.

This study is concluded with a note projecting a distinctive attitude of British colonialism in Khasi-Jaintia Hills which entailed a distinct administration in both civil and political spheres of these hills. This unique character of administration made the Deputy Commissioners a unique institution in the annals of British rule in India.