



Tribal Intellectual
Collective
India



EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE PERIPHERALIZED

A
DECOLONIAL-HISTORICAL
APPROACH

bodhi s.r



Epistemology Of the Peripheralized

A Decolonial-Historical Approach

by

bodhi s. r



Dedicated
to

Prof. Virginius Xaxa

TICI SERIES ON METHODOLOGIES IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

NEW VEHICLE PUBLICATIONS

**Epistemology of the Peripheralized
A Decolonial-Historical Approach**

Copyright © 2020, bodhi s.r. and Tribal Intellectual Collective India

First Published, 2020-12-16

Print edition 2020: ISBN 978-81-948224-4-8

Ebook edition 2020: ISBN 978-81-948224-3-1

Published in India by

New Vehicle Productions

Bhandar Mohalla Indora,

Post Bezonbagh

Nagpur 440014

M.S., India

Email: thenewvehicle@gmail.com

Contact: +91-9766963499

In association with

Tribal Intellectual Collective India

www.ticijournals.org

Series Editor: bodhi s.r.

Cover Design: Subodh N.W

Printed at Panchsheel Graphics, Nagpur

No part of this book may be reproduced, retrieved or transmitted in any form, by any means without the prior permission of the copyright holder



Preface

With the entry of the British East India Company into Khasi inhabited areas, the Khasi reality was subjected to alteration. The political geography was re-imagined, physical infrastructure was restructured, particular ecosystems were degraded for geopolitical and economic interests, the social and political fabric of the community was torn apart, and above all, a colonial story was produced – reinforcing the superiority of the coloniser over the colonised. These politico-economic processes created a new language, a new story of restructured polities, and a new geography of power.

After the British left, numerous negotiations took place between the Khasi peoples represented by 25 Khasi *himas* and the Governor of Assam as representative of the Ministry of States, Dominion of India. Majority of the *himas* had already acceded to India and negotiations went on for nearly two years for a separate state within the Dominion. However, by a quirk of historical unreason and misplaced agreements, all of the Khasi inhabited areas represented by the Khasi *himas*, except those outside the Radcliffe line, were ‘by declaration’ pronounced to be within the State of Assam.

The Indian Constitution, once operationalised, fixed the rules of engagement. The political and legal institutions, ushered in new realities, which began altering Khasi polity, while still grounded in a continuity of a somewhat fractured Khasi narrative. The initial integration by accession and later by constitution is near complete. Even though people are yet to completely comprehend these laws, it definitively occupies and holds a central place in their lives. Now, a new story is being told and a new history is being written. This is the factuality of the current historical moment. This is the context that this book examines, and this is the narrative it attempts to disentangle.

Theoretical content for this text is sourced from my doctoral thesis on the Khasi Political System. The line of inquiry chosen for the thesis was the Federation of Khasi States. For insights gained from the study, I am indebted to Bah John F. Kharshiing, the adviser and spokesperson of the Federation of Khasi States. Currently he is the one holding fort as the public intellectual on political systems among the Khasi. He is a library unto himself, his office has the richest collection of historical documents; a treasure trove for any researcher on Khasi political history and system.

I am also extremely grateful to all the Khasi Chiefs who have enriched my understanding tremendously. They have been teachers par excellence and it is to them that I owe this short equanimous text. In parts of the text, I have tried to give voice to their historical struggles and it is their realities

that you hear spoken through me.

As you go through the text, you will get a glimpse of the socio-historical realities of the Khasis and their persisting narratives carried over generations. I urge interested readers to engage with the text only as my limited version of the overarching Khasi narrative. Mine is one of the many academic attempts to tell an old story differently.

The text is divided into three parts – Historicising Khasi Political Reality in the Northeast India Context, Theorising Khasi Politics: Unravelling Intersecting Socio-Historical Standpoints and Khasi Polity: Some Reflections on its Epistemological Premise.

This book being part of the ‘Methodologies in Social Research Series’ of the Tribal Intellectual Collective India (TICI), I have added a Postscript titled Decolonial-Historical Approach. These are personal equanimous reflections on the challenging subject of methodology, post studying the Khasi context. The approach constitutes of six methodological categories; decoloniality, epistemological decolonisation, contextualisation, engaged observation, equanimity and dialogical historiography. Through this postscript, I hope to reach out to members of the TICI and scholars who are interested in Tribal Studies and allied disciplines, especially those in search of new, non-colonial ways of engaging with their knowledge projects.

There is a belief among the Khasi, that a living tradition is one that is rooted in its context and one that has a continuous ongoing conversation with its own past. This book is located within such a discourse, written to deepen and enrich conversations around the subject of Khasi political history, organic systems and social epistemology. This book is also positioned as a theoretical dialogue with other diverse communities and academics finding value in understanding the often philosophically contentious, epistemology of the peripheralized.

bodhi s.r

Introduction

In northeast India, the historical experience of the Khasis regarding state formation and instrumentalisation of government is unique. Their history since the 1800s, provides deep insight into their experience of society, state and polity. This context engenders varied political processes which provide a critical vantage point of viewing the whole region, outside of the dominant prevailing gaze. It can even be posited as a frame of reference for understanding the northeast in general, and the political processes of many tribal societies and tribal areas in particular.

Engaging with these minute and complex historical processes, an attempt is made to foreground the 'Epistemology of the Peripheralized' into three distinct yet interconnected historio-theoretical parts. The first locates Khasi political history within the northeast context under various regimes, and historicises the path traversed by 25 Khasi states from mid 18th century to 2017. The second theorises contemporary Khasi social context arising out of four politico-historical contradictions, and the third discusses the epistemological basis of the Khasi political system.

Part I

Historicising Khasi Political Reality in Northeast India Context

Before India's independence on 15 August 1947, the idea of northeast India, was constituted by the (i) Assam Province (ii) Assam Tribal Areas (iii) Manipur State (iv) Tripura State and (v) Khasi States. Within the Assam Province there was (i) Normal Areas (ii) Partially Excluded Areas and (iii) Excluded Areas. The Normal Areas were Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur and Cachar. The Partially Excluded Areas were Garo Hills, Khasi and Jaintia Hills except Shillong Municipality and Shillong Cantonment and Mikir Hills portion within two Districts of Nowgong and Sibsagar excepting the mouzas of Barpathar and Sarupathar. The Excluded Area¹ were Naga Hills, Lushai Hills and the Cachar Hills Subdivision within Cachar District. There were also the Assam Tribal Areas² which consisted of (i) North East Frontier Tracts including Balipara

1 There were no members in the Assam Legislative Assembly from the Naga Hills District and the Lushai Hills Districts which were regarded as Excluded Areas vide The Government of India (Excluded and Partially Excluded Area) Order, 1936 issued in exercise of the powers conferred by Section 91 of the Government of India Act, 1935.

2 Assam Tribal Areas were created vide Notification No.387 NEF dated 30 October 1947 and Notification No.388 NEF, dated 30 October 1947 published in the Gazette of India, Part I. Section I, November 8, 1947: pp.1464-1465, read with Notification No 1-X, dated 1 April 1937 issued by the Government of India in the External Affairs, Department. For details, please see

Frontier Tract, Abor Hills District and Mishmi Hills District³ and (ii) The Naga Tribal Area.⁴

In the process of state making in the region, the Native State of Tripura which signed the Instrument of Merger on 9 September 1949, and Manipur which signed on 21 September 1949 were declared as the Chief Commissioner's provinces with effect from 23 January 1950 vide The Merger (Chief Commissioners' Provinces) Order, 1950 issued under the Government of India, Ministry of Law Notification No.S.O.30 dated 22 January 1950.⁵ Both Tripura and Manipur was taken over for Central administration by the Chief Commissioner on behalf of the Government of India on the 15 October 1949.⁶ Both were known as Part-C States with effect from 26 January 1950 vide the First Schedule to the Constitution of India, read with The Constitution (Amendment of First and Fourth Schedules) Order, 1950: 0.0. Dated the 25 January 1950 issued by the Government of India in exercise of the powers conferred by Article 391 read with Article 392 of the Constitution of India. They were for some time Union Territories and only on 21 January 1972 became States vide the North Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971.⁷

It is critical to note, for the purpose of this book, that the 'Khasi and Jaintia Hills' constituted of only those areas under Assam province of British India. Today this consists of the Jaintia Hills District and a small portion within Shillong called the Municipality and Cantonment Areas. All of Shillong after 1873 was under *Hima Myllem*, one of the 25 Khasi states, and

Constituent Assembly Debates, Volume VII, p.126. The administration of these Areas was entrusted by the Government of India to the Government of Assam and had a different governance framework.

3 The North-East Frontier Areas (Administration) Regulation, 1954: "... (a) The North-East Frontier Tract, including the Balipara Frontier Tract, the Tirap Frontier Tract, the Abor Hills District, and the Mishmi Hills District shall be known as the North-East Frontier Agency (b) The Balipara Frontier Tract shall be divided into two separate units of administration called the Subansiri Frontier Division and the Kameng Frontier Division..." Later the "North-East Frontier Agency (Administration) Regulation, 1965" and the "The North-East Frontier Agency Panchayat Raj Regulation, 1967" was enacted.

4 Gilbert Shullai on 'Noristan' published in Ropeco June 10, 1981. Also see 'Ka Symboh History Bad Ka Ri Hynniewtrep'.p.64- 65 by the same Author.

5 By the States Merger (Chief Commissioners' Provinces) Order, 1950, dated 22nd January 1950 that came into "force on the 23rd day of January, 1950... 2(1) As from the appointed day, each of the States of Manipur, Tripura and Vindhya Pradesh shall be administered in all respects as if it were a Chief Commissioner's Province, and shall respectively be known as the Chief Commissioner's Province of Manipur, Tripura and Vindhya Pradesh." Reference Appendix XLVIII of the White Paper on Indian States, pp. 315-316.

6 White Paper on Indian States, Government of India, Ministry of States, 1950.p.48.

7 See bodhi s.r and Ziipao, r.r. (2019) Integration: A Historical Conspectus from a tribal/Adivasi Perspective. p.100.

the British either rented or 'bought' pockets or small portions of the space from the *hima*. As for the twenty-five Khasi states, spread over a wide geography of current Meghalaya, none were ever part of the British province of Assam. The White Paper on Indian States (1950) noted the following:

The Khasi Hill States had formed a Federation of their own and had both individually and collectively acceded to the Dominion of India subject to the provisions of an Agreement. The Instrument of Accession empowered the Dominion Legislature to make laws for the Khasi States in respect of any matter. The Agreement which formed part of the Instrument of Accession, provided *inter alia* for unified legislation on subjects of common interest to Assam and the Khasi Hill States. Constitutionally therefore the position of the Khasi Hill States Federation approximated to that of a Chief Commissioner's Province.⁸

They were recognised as an independent native state similar to Manipur and Tripura after 15 August 1947, but how they came to become part of the state of Assam in 1950 and what trials and tribulations transpired through the period makes for a very interesting read. The polity, the state and society in the northeast cannot be understood without a proper reading of the history of the Khasis. This is not only because the small portion of Shillong, rented by the *Syiem* of Myllem to the British was the capital of Assam province for 100 years, but because many post independent state instruments, especially the Sixth Schedule along with other Autonomous District Councils for tribal areas of the region, was born from the contradictions of its reality.

The Khasi Context and the Onset of British Colonialism

Written history about the Khasi peoples begins with the presence of the French and the British flags alongside Armenian and Greek traders together with Bengali food suppliers, all intermingling in the plains of Sylhet. Records from around the mid-18th century about Khasi realities speak of a socio-political system whose governing principle was based on a shared value arrived through consensus and public referendum. Majority of the population in the habitat lived in politically stable communities that, at most, were seeking to expand their polities into other geographical spaces, or were contended with lives lived within the bounded spaces of their own clan-based *Shnong*, *Raid* and *Himas*.

8 White Paper on Indian States, Government of India, Ministry of States, 1950.pp.45-46. Reference to the Khasi States is made in Paragraph 112, 113 and 114.

Beginning mid 1800s, the British began using the words Cossahs,⁹ Cossyahs,¹⁰ Cosseahs,¹¹ Casseahs,¹² Cusseahs,¹³ Cassies,¹⁴ Cossayahs,¹⁵ Cossya,¹⁶ Khassayahs¹⁷ and Khassiahhs¹⁸ to refer to Khasi. In 1840, Fisher noted that the community that the British addressed by the above names actually 'call themselves as Khee'. With the formation of the hill district, the term Khasi came into common usage. In Bangladesh they are still identified by the name 'Cossaya'.

Soon after 1826, the year the treaty of Yandaboo was signed, David Scott, the then British Civil Commissioner, started interacting and negotiating with the Khasi *Syiem*s. In 1827 he sought an interview with *Tirot Sing*, the *Syiem* of Nongkhlaw State for the construction of a road from *Rni* in *Kamrup* district (present day Assam) via *Nongkhlaw* (present day Meghalaya) to the Surmah valley (present day Bangladesh).¹⁹ The project was soon operationalised with the consent of the *Dorbar Hima*. A tract was cleared and bungalows were set up at *Nongkhlaw*. The officers commissioned bore a good relationship with the locals for 18 months.

While the road construction work was in progress, in 1829, the Khasis felt an apprehension about a probable British takeover of their homeland. What followed was a prolonged violent clash between the Khasis and the British. The insurrection was subdued with the British emerging victorious and *Tirot Sing*, the *Syiem* of *Hima Nongkhlaw* having to submit to them in January 1833. He was sent to Guwahati from where the Calcutta Council decided to incarcerate him in the Dacca jail (present day Dhaka, Bangladesh). In Dacca, he was treated as an ordinary prisoner till his death in 1841. To suppress any further rebellion against the British colonialists, *Nongkhlaw* (in present day Meghalaya) was chosen as a British station. Later, due to weather conditions, the British station was moved to 83 kms south to *Saitsohpen*, *Sobra* (also in present day Meghalaya).

9 Sylhet District Records,(1785) Vol.I Letter No.11 Year: 1774.

10 Ibid., Letter No.20 Year:1774.

11 Ibid., Letter No.226 Year:1783.

12 Ibid., Letter No.204 Year:1784.

13 Ibid., Letter No.271 Year:1784.

14 Ibid., Letter No.291 Year:1787.

15 As used in Pemberton (1835), Report on The Eastern Frontier of British India with an appendix and maps.

16 As used in Mckenzie Alexander, 1884 in his book 'The North East Frontier of India' p.221.

17 As used in Memorandum from Major J.C.Haughton, Officiating Agent, Governor General, North East Frontier- (No.29, dated the 6th September 1862) Papers Relating to the Disturbances in the Cossyah and Jynteeah Hills. Part II, No.VI.

18 As used in B.W.D.Morton, Deputy Commissioner (dated Jowai, 1 October 1862).

19 As noted by Gait, Edward (1905) in his book 'A History of Assam'. p.354.

The Cossayah Hills Political Agency (CHPA) was established by the British on 11 February 1835 and Captain Lister was appointed as the first Political Agent. He was stationed at *Saitsohpen*. In the same year, Captain Lister gave a letter issued by the Governor-General to Rajendra Sing, the Chief of Jaintiapur, notifying that Hima Jaintia would be taken over by the British. Further a portion of Jaintia kingdom, close to Sylhet, would also be joined with the existing Sylhet District and the area known as Gobha would be joined with Nowgaon District. The remaining portion of Jaintia would be part of the CHPA constituting Sohra, Nongkhlaw, Myriaw, Shella and Mawsynram.

In 1836, Rajendra Sing showed interest in becoming Chief of Jaintiapur again but this was rejected by the British. A few years later in the year 1839, Maharam State was brought within CHPA. An important historical event took place in 1841, when the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Foreign Missionary Society changed the term *Cossayah* to *Khasi* and recognised the *Sohra* dialect as a basis for writing the Khasi language. It must however be pointed here that each of the 25 *himas* had different dialects of a very similar language.

The Cossayah Hills Political Agency ended in 1853, and in its place, the Cossayah and Jynteah Hills District (CJHD) was instituted. This district was brought under a Principal Assistant Commissioner and C.K.Hudson was appointed to the said position on 19 April 1854. Later, the CJHD was spelled as Khasi and Jaintia Hills District (KJHD). The KJHD was made one of the Districts of Assam Division and was notified as being under the Commissioner of Assam-W.J.Allen in 1858. The person in-charge of the Assam Division, which was still under Bengal Presidency, was designated as Commissioner.

Between 1860-1862, a war broke out between the people of Jaintia Hills led by U *Kiang Nongbah* and the British. The British violently repressed the struggle and U *Kiang Nongbah* was arrested and hanged on 30 December 1862. During this period, *Hima Jaintia*, *Muliang*, *Nongpoh* and *Sobbar* were declared British Areas. *Muliang* consisted of *Jyrngam*, *Nonglang* and *Nongrangai*. For each of these areas, a Sirdar was appointed. Further, *Saitsohpen* in *Hima Sohra* was also declared a British Area. In *Hima Shillong* (later split into *Hima Khyrim* and *Hima Myllem*); *Laityngkot*, *Laitkroh*, *Mambhlarkha*, *Mawmai* and *Mawmluh*, *Nongthymmai*, *Myrdon* and *Marbisu* were declared British Areas. Two distinct areas emerged at this time; the British Areas within the KJHD, which was under a Deputy Commissioner, and the Khasi States, consisting of 25 Khasi *himas* whose contact point with the British, was the Political Officer.

In 1864, the headquarters of the KJHD was shifted from *Sobra* (Cherrapunji) to the drier hills of *Iewdub*, located at the foot of the Shillong hill ranges. Kynpham (1979) quotes Babu Jeebon Roy²⁰ stating

Following the Jaintia War the English government feels that the Headquarters should be shifted to a more central place, equidistant north, south, east and west; and another reason was because of the excessive rainfall in Cheerapunjee. I remember that this was in Col.H.S.Bivar's time, Deputy Commissioner; he brought out the map of the Khasi Hills, and asked for my help to choose the site, so we chose a spot, which is the Shillong of today, planning to station the European garrison in Upper Shillong. The natives were to reside in Laban. A committee was formed in 1867 when the final shifting from Cherra Station to Shillong Station was completed.²¹

By a Proclamation No.379 dated 6 February 1874, the Governor-General took over power and control from the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal for the following districts in present day Assam, Meghalaya and Nagaland; Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Naga Hills, Garo Hills, and the district of Cachar, separating them from the administration of the Government of Bengal. Then as per notification No.380, again dated 6 February 1874, the Assam Province was brought under a Chief Commissioner, and declared a Chief Commissioner's Province. On 20 March 1874, a notification No.49 issued by the Chief Commissioner of Assam stated 'that the headquarters of the Chief Commissionership of Assam have this day been transferred to Shillong.'²² Later on 12 September 1874, Sylhet was also incorporated into the newly formed Chief Commissionership and Lt. Colonel R.H.Keating, was appointed the first Chief Commissioner. In 1876, the Bengal Municipality Act was extended to the Shillong and a Shillong Municipality was instituted.

An important event took place in 1905, when Bengal Province was divided into Bengal with Calcutta as headquarters and the Eastern Bengal and Assam Province with Dacca as its headquarters. The Khasi British Areas were brought under East Bengal and Assam Province. In 1910, Shillong became a municipality under the Bengal Municipal Act 1884. In 1912, Bengal was reunited with East Bengal and Assam was again declared a Chief Commissioners Province. The Assam Province was given a

20 Babu Jeebon Roy joined the service of the East India Company in 1858. Later he became the first khasi senior extra assistant commissioner.

21 Kynpham (1979).p.xxi.

22 No.49, File No.23 a G of 1874 Serial No.2 dated 20 March, Office of the Chief Commissioner of Assam.

Legislative Council with 25 members. Shillong regained its status as the capital of the Province. This was declared during the Coronation Durbar of King George V. Beginning 1915, a series of laws were passed that had direct implications on the governance structure and the role of people in governance in British India.

Emergence of Colonial Political System

In the initial years, through negotiation and even offering military assistance to some Khasi states, the British signed an agreement²³ and in 1829 they were given permission to set up headquarters at *Sohra* (Cherrapunji) by the *Syiem* of *Hima* Sohra. The headquarters were shifted from Nongkhlaw to Saitsohpen, Sohra.

Once the British established themselves in the region, they began using the policy of Subsidiary Alliance to bring the Khasi *himas* into their control. The policy of Subsidiary Alliance was framed to mean “in varying degrees of dependence, through their *Sanads*, on the Paramount power”. Through this policy, independent *himas* were brought under a single administration within the larger Bengal Presidency. Following the creation of the Assam province, all hill areas directly under the British were also brought under its jurisdiction.

The British introduced ‘contradicting policy’ upon the Khasi-Jaintia areas. Initially they adopted the policy of consolidation, bringing all independent states under British administration. Then they began incorporating peoples and areas into two distinct categories – directly under them and the other as being in subsidiary alliance. In the process of creating their territories they carved out portion of lands from the *himas* and brought them into the ‘British Areas’ through various agreements. It is from these processes that two distinct entities emerged; the Khasi States Areas and the Non-State or British Areas²⁴. Then finally over the years they tied the semi-independent

23 On 10 September, as per Aitchinson Treaties No. LXXVI. Translation of Articles of Agreement entered into, in the year 1829, between Dewan sing, Rajah of Cheera Poonjee, and his ministerial officers and others, and Mr. David Scott, Agent to the Governor-General, North-East Frontier. Again on 12 September, No.LXXVII. Translation of an Agreement executed in the year 1829, by Dewan Sing, Rajah of Cherra Poonjee. Plus in another Agreement on the same date relating to Ceding Land in Exchange for same Quantity in Vicinity of Punduah and Company-Gunge, within Sylhet, Setting a Haut, Leases to British Government Limestone and a Judicial System Independent of each other but Intersecting when the Disputant is Bengalee and Cossayhs (Appendix No.4 A, In W.J.Allen 'Report On The Administration of the Cossyah and Jyntiah Hill Territory')

24 It is to be noted that at this point in time the “Khasi and Jaintia Hills District” does not include the geographical and political space that falls within the “Khasi States”. The Khasi and Jaintia Hills Districts includes only the “British Areas” which falls within the jurisdiction of Jowai

himas/chiefs in various agreements called *Sanad* and *Purwanas* and co-opted them.²⁵

Nevertheless, it is important to note here that though the British remained in these hills for more than a century, they left the Khasi chieftains, both hostile and neutral, in un-interfered exercise of their authority in their respective territories. They abstained from imposing any taxation on the Khasis and for all practical purposes, the Khasi territories were held to be beyond the borders of British India except for a few pockets that were declared by them as British Sirdarships. In these Sirdarships, which in most cases comprised of one or two villages, the British appointed a *Sirdar* chosen from local residents as the revenue official.

As the British Political system began asserting itself on the Khasis, the Deputy Commissioner enjoyed almost unlimited powers in matters relating to Khasi British Areas and Political Officer in relation to Khasi States. The Deputy Commissioner, much later, also became the ex-officio Chairman of the Municipality of Shillong. Moreover, enforcement of government orders from time to time enhanced his position. Although the Khasi States remained semi-independent till the very end of British rule, being in Subsidiary Alliance with the British, the Political Officer played a major role in monitoring and regulating the internal affairs of the Khasi States through *Sanads*, signed between each of the chiefs and the British Government.

Over the years, the areas notified as British areas within the KJHD expanded with more areas within its catchment that actually fell within Khasi States going under the British. There were parts of *Hima Myllem* in Shillong that were notified as British Areas as per agreements in 1863. Similarly the village *Marbisu* and others were notified as British Areas. These villages were later designated as British Sirdarship. It must be noted that the Khasi and Jaintia Hills District does not include the 'Khasi States' but some of the areas of the Khasi States that were forcibly brought into the Khasi and Jaintia Hills District as pointed above. There were as noted earlier 25 Khasi States.

The Montagu-Chelmsford Report of 1917 saw the beginning of political development in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. Prior to that, while there was some

Subdivision. This was notified as early as on 6th November 1869 and published in Calcutta Gazette, November 24, 1869: p. 2067.

25 Mentioned in the popular Khasi historian and cultural activist Professor Helen Giri's (1990) book 'The Khasis under British Rule (1824-1947)' which is her revised doctoral thesis submitted in 1979 to Guwahati University. p.80.

form of emergence of a Khasi political consciousness, the above report stirred the Khasis across *himas* into action. The report recommended that Assam should become a full-fledged Governor's province and proposed to exclude from the scope of the Reformed Council the typically backward areas. These backward areas were to be administered by the executive head of the province. This exclusion meant that a backward tract should be wholly excluded from the working of the constitution and no resolution concerning these areas should be moved in the legislation. Legislation for such areas should be affected entirely by means of a regulation made by the Governor-General-in-council under Section 71 of the Government of India Act 1915.

The report was referred to the Assam Government. Helen Giri notes "Sir Archadale Earl, the Chief Commissioner of Assam (1912-1918) who had probably taken for granted in discussion on the announcement of 1917, that all Hill Districts where the ordinary law was not in force would be excluded from the schemes. Legislation or administration of such areas would be carried on by 'Regulations' made by the Governor General in Council under the provisions of Section 71 of the Government of India Act, 1915"²⁶. Beatson Bell, the Chief Commissioner (1918-1921) "proposed the exclusion of the Naga and Lushai Hills, the Frontier Tracts and Manipur as 'Typically Backward Areas'. The Khasi and Jaintia Hills, however, occupied a peculiar position because partly it consisted of Khasi States which were in Subsidiary Alliance with the British and partly of British Territory. The Shillong Cantonment was a British enclave and part of the civil station was also British but the remaining portion was not. The Municipal law had also been applied to non-British part of Shillong under the operation of the Foreign Jurisdiction order."²⁷ The suggestion put forward by Beatson Bell was not accepted by the Functions Committee (Southborough Committee). In 1918, this committee recommended the exclusion of the tracts in question from the jurisdiction of the Reformed Provincial Government and be administered by the Governor himself as proposed in paragraph 199 of the Joint Report 2. The Committees also suggested that some department like excise, forest and public works may be treated as 'reserved subjects'.

The Government of India agreed that the hill areas should be excluded from the reforms, but all the hill areas were not completely backward. Therefore, total exclusion was not desirable. The backward areas should be classified into two; the areas in which reform 'should not be

26 *Ibid.*, p.112.

27 *Ibid.*, p.113.

introduced' and the areas in which reform 'may be introduced'. The former would remain under the control of the Governor and the latter would be administered by the Governor-General-in-Council of ministers. The legislature would have the power to make laws for the latter only.

This was followed by the Government of India Act 1919, where Assam was brought under a Governor and made a Governor's Province. The first Governor was Nicholas Dodd Beatson Bell. In 1919, the Assam Province had only the Legislative Council. The Government of India Bill 1919, containing the recommendations of the Government of India was referred to a Joint Select Committee. The Government of India Act was passed by Parliament on 23 November 1919. Acting upon the provisions of the Act, the Governor-General-in-Council declared:

the Lushai Hills, the Naga Hills, the British portion of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills (Excluding the Shillong municipality and cantonment) the Garo Hills, the Mikir Hills (in Nowgong and Sibsagar Districts) the North Cachar Hills, the Lakhimpur Frontier Tracts, the Sadiya Frontier Tracts and the Balipara Frontier as backward Tracts.

The Act also declared that all laws provincial or central shall apply only as directed by the Governor-in-Council and with such modifications as may be made by him. Further, the Governor was authorised to extend to these under laws passed by the Provincial and Legislative Council with such modifications and exceptions as the Governor thinks fit. The Governor was also given great discretionary powers under the Assam Frontier Tracts Regulation of 1880 and the Assam General Classes Act (1915). The Instrument of Instructions issued to the Governor enjoined him to see that due provision was made for the advancement and social welfare of the people of the tribal areas. To give effect to this, the Governor framed a rule that all proposals which affected a backward tract directly or indirectly, all proposals for postings to backward tracts, transfer or grant of leave to Officers of backward areas, should be submitted to him. As a matter of fact, all cases affecting the backward areas must be taken to the notice of the Governor.²⁸

The Legislative Council did not understand the difficulties involved in the administration of these areas. The members of the Legislative Council resented the union of the hills and the plains. They grumbled that the plain districts had to meet the deficit of the hill areas and demanded that the entire burden of the cost of the administration of the hill must be borne

28 Noted in the Report of the Indian Statutory Commission (Simon Commission) Report for Assam (1930)

by the Government of India, particularly that of the Assam Rifles. Some of the members went to the extent of demanding the separation of the hills from the plains.

In 1920, for the first time, the hill areas were represented by a nominated member. At first a member of the Garo community, Jangin Sangma was nominated. He attended only two sessions and found it difficult to communicate in the language of the British. By 1924 these areas were represented by J. C. Evans, the Welsh Missionary whose experience had been confined mainly to the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The first elections for the Shillong General Urban Constituency were held in 1921. Since 1921 the Khasis were allowed one member to represent them in the Governor's Council in Assam. But only those residing in the Shillong Municipal area were entitled to vote. This constituted the Shillong Municipality and the Shillong Cantonment areas and not the British Area and Khasi States areas.

J.J.M.Nichols-Roy contested against Sriji Sivanath Dutta. In the contest, the former got 358 votes and latter got 112 votes. In the Province, the Legislative Council consisted of the following: among the Europeans - six were elected and seven nominated, and for Indians - 33 were elected and eight were nominated. The Shillong General Urban Constituency sent only one representative in J.J.M.Nichols-Roy. There was no representation from the Khasi States as they were not part of Assam Province.

Formation of the Khasi National Dorbar

In 1923 the Khasi National Dorbar (KND)²⁹ was formed. It consisted of some chiefs of *bimas* and other representatives and elders from all over the Khasi States, including those from the British Areas, exception being the Jaintia Hills. The felt need to convene such a Dorbar was to respond as a community to the complex conditions arising throughout British India and the British portion of the Khasi and Jaintia inhabited areas. The motive was to find ways to negotiate the paths and strategies of the Khasi community in the new provincial set-up as framed by the British. This was to forestall any unpredictable situation that may arise that could go against the community.

29 The individuals who called for this Dorbar were Kmuin Manik Syiem, Syiem Myllem, Bidor Singh, Syiem Nongkhlaw, Hormu Rai Diengdoh, K.Swett, Assiam Lyngdoh, J.J.M.Nichols-Roy and Wilson Reade. The meeting was scheduled to be held in J.J.M.Nichols-Roy home in Goalapaty. The first office bearers were President- Join Manik, Syiem Sohra, Vice President- Sahib Hormu Rai Diengdoh, Secretary- Rev.J.J.M. Nichols-Roy, Asstt. Secretary- Hajom Kissor Singh, Treasurer- U Chandra Nath Roy. There were also eleven elected executive committee members.

The task undertaken by the KND was remarkable in the sense that it attempted to codify the diverse social and cultural usages of the Khasi people; something done only by the British about the Khasi system. They put in writing the *Jinglong Khun Hima Ha Ki Hima Khasi* (Laws Related to Citizenship Rights in Khasi States), *Ki Ain Bri Khyndew Ha Hima Khasi* (Law Related to Land in Khasi States) and *Ka Ain Hiar Bad Ioh-Pateng Ha Ki Hima Khasi* (Law Related to Inheritance and Lineage Right in Khasi States). This is the initial documentation that for the first time forced an intersection between the 25 Khasi States and the British States Areas within the Khasi inhabited areas.

It is important to note, that the KND was the first consciously crafted space in which chiefs of Khasi States and leaders from the Khasi community were to engage with each other. This space cut across religious affiliations, which by this time had set in and was becoming entrenched. Debates and discussions taking place within the KND related to issues such as the status of treaties signed with the British, mobilisation and conscientisation of peoples in *himas*, along with business and trade. Later in the late 1930s, over and above these, discussions revolved around the Khasi response to the war crisis, strengthening of Khasi institutions, building of a place for a National Dorbar, strengthening and expanding critical infrastructure like roads, negotiating strategies and a cohesive response to British rule, etc.

The KND in this sense was the first attempt to bring diverse Khasi realities across the length and breadth of the region into one political space that included Khasi elders and heads of various *himas*. One could argue that it was from this space that the Federation of Khasi States actually emerged. It were the attempts made from this platform, that later galvanised the chiefs and the *Ki Khun Ki Hajar'* (inhabitants of the Khasi *himas*) to negotiate with the powers that be as a cohesive political entity.

Major events that followed 1926 from the KND platform were the meeting and submission of a memorandum in 1928 to the Simon Commission and the Butler Commission. By 1929 the concept of a Federation of *Himas* emerged and there were detailed discussions about the concept of 'Federation' as is observed from the minutes of the Khasi National Dorbar dated 2 May 1929. The discussion about the Federation was initiated by Ajra Singh Khongphai. The person who proposed Khongphai's speech was Joab Solomon. The title of the talk was *Ka Jingiasyrdoh lang ki Hima Khasi* (Federation of Khasi Native States). Important discussion took place in the meeting. S. G. Nalle, one of the key participants postulated the difference between two political frameworks.

One was the structure of a 'Unitary Government' where all merge into one single hima to be ruled by one *Syiem* as it is with the United Kingdom. The second was a Federal Union where *himas* come together for the purpose of good governance, yet the power of every hima remains intact and within itself. In the latter framework there was no possibility or intention of doing away with any of the Khasi *himas* and the sovereignty of every hima remains intact. All those present in the Dorbar agreed with the latter idea and five persons were entrusted with the specific task to put the same in writing. A proposal to print and circulate pamphlets about the need for such a federation was agreed upon and this pamphlet was to be distributed far and wide to every hima.

In 1930, the question of inclusion and exclusion of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills was again debated by the Assam Government in relation to the Simon Commission's visit to India. The Khasis demanded that the Commission should not group British areas inside the district with the so called 'Excluded Areas' (including other Hills Districts) as the district (next to Kamrup) had the highest percentage of literacy in the province, the Khasis being one of the most advanced communities in the province. An acrimonious debate took place on this issue within the Khasi community between those who wanted to be part of the 'reform' and those who wanted to be 'out of the reform'.

In 1933, in response to the visit of the Viceroy, Lord Wellington (Freeman Freeman-Thomas) to Shillong, a hurriedly constituted 'Khasi States Federation' (KSF) was formed. Its objective was to act as a representative and executive body for all the 25 Khasi States and put forward a claim for securing greater judicial power. In fact, it wanted more administrative powers from the government and the transference of some departments from the Deputy Commissioner to the management of the *himas*. It also carried on negotiations with government for recognising the KSF as the body to speak for the Khasi States when any alteration of policy and administration was planned. The KSF struggled to secure a seat in the Chamber of Princes in India. These points were stressed when the KSF delegation met Lord Wellington during his visit to Shillong on 3 October 1933. However the Khasi States were not able to extract and realise any of their requests.

By 1935, through the Government of India Act two very important Rules further prompted the mobilisation of the Khasis towards a cohesive and functioning Federation. Part XII, Rule (3), notes 'No Indian State shall, for the purpose of any reference in this Act to Federated States, be deemed to have become a Federated State until the establishment of the

Federation³⁰. Part II, Rule (8), notes 'In this Act a State which has acceded to the Federation is referred to as a Federated State, and the Instrument by virtue of which a State has acceded, construed together with any supplementary Instrument executed under this section, is referred to as the Instrument of Accession of that State.'³¹ Post 1935 Act, it seemed that the only way to get recognition from the Government as a Federated State was to set up a Federation that can then get representation in the Chamber of Princes.

Federation of Khasi States and its Integration into the Indian State

In 1946, a Federation of Khasi States was officially formed with support from a representative party, known as the Khasi States Peoples Union. As per the Indian Independence Act 1947 which received its Royal Assent on 18 July 1947, two dominions were formed; India and Pakistan. Many princely states, numbering around 565,³² signed the Instrument of Accession (IoA) and the Instrument of Merger with the Indian Union. There was 216 States that were merged with Provinces, 61 States were taken over as Centrally-administered areas and 275 States were combined and integrated into the Unions of States.³³

The process of integration was led by a States Department announced by the Cabinet of the interim Government on 27 June 1947, and came into being on 5 July, 1947. Sardar Vallabhai Patel was in charge, assisted by Sardar Abdur Rab Nishtar and V.P.Menon as Secretary. Before the States department, the Political Department had already begun the process of integration of States and sent to the Rulers a Standstill Agreement. The Government however felt that the same would not provide any kind of answer to the problems confronted at that time. Thus, the States Department and not the Political Department was tasked to take charge of the negotiations with the Rulers. Three subjects of Defence, External Affairs and Communication were included in the agenda of negotiations.³⁴

The first draft agreement between the Khasi States and the Governor of Assam, called the "Standstill Arrangement" by the Governor himself, was discussed in the first week of July. This draft was sent by the Governor of

30 As noted in Government of India Act 1935. p.201.

31 Ibid.,p.5.

32 The White Paper on Indian States quotes the Butler Commission who put the number of three types of States as 562. However Vapal Pangunni Menon of the States Department put the number as "about 565". Reference to the same can be found in V.P.Menon (1955)'The Story of the Integration of the Indian States'. p.75

33 White Paper on Indian States, Government of India, Ministry of States, 1950.p.58

34 Ibid., pp.34-35

Assam to Jawaharlal Nehru and the Ministry of States dated 16 July 1947. While awaiting a reply from the Ministry of States that did not come immediately, the Governor sought the commitment from each Khasi States and the FKS as a Federation to sign a roughly prepared IoA and AA on 9 August 1947 pending the final decision of the Ministry. He assured the Khasi States that they need not commit to any future constitution in which they might be bound without their active consent. A total of fourteen Khasi States signed this agreement.³⁵ When the final IoA and AA came back, the line “for a period of two years” which was there in the first draft was deleted by the Ministry from the Annexed Agreement and it was noted as follows: “continue in force ... until new or modified arrangements have been arrived at between the respective authorities concerned.” The finalisation of the IoA and AA for the Khasi States went back and forth from about 22 August 1947 right up to 24 November 1947 between Mr.C.C.Desai of the Ministry of States, Mr.K.V.K Sundaram, Secretary Ministry of Law, Mr.S.Narayanswamy, Mr.S.A.Lal and Akbar Hydari about deleting the words ‘for a period of two years’. Once finalised, it was this new revised IoA and AA that was finally signed by individual 25 Khasi States starting from 15 December to 19 March 1948.

Starting 15 December 1947, the States of *Khyrim, Myllem, Cherra, Nongkhlam, Bhowal, Jirang, Maharam, Mawsymram, Langrin, Mawiang, Malai Sohmat, Mawphlang, Sohiong, Lyngiong, Shella Confederacy, Nonglwai, Pamsangut, Mawdon* and *Dwara Nongtyrnm* signed the IoA. Following this initial signing, Sardar Patel came to Shillong in the first week of January 1948. He had meetings with the Governor and representatives of the Khasis and even delivered a public lecture on 2 January. Following this the Khasi States of *Nobosolphob* and *Nongspung* signed the IoA on 11 January 1948.

The Khasi States did not sign the ‘Instrument of Merger’ that most Princely States committed to. In its stead, a democratically elected body called the *Khasi States Constitution Making Dorbar* (KSCMD) was promulgated by the Governor to advise the Constituent Assembly of India on the status and position of the Khasi States. Its secretary, Paiem Jor Manik brought out a notice for the constitution of the KSCMD on the 15 January 1948 and sent the same to all Chiefs of Khasi States on 26 January, 1948. This notice was however partially stopped by the Dominion Agent, Khasi States on the advice of the Governor who wanted to bring two warring factions; the

35 Six Khasi States- Khyrim, Jirang, Maharam, Sohiong, Dwara Nongtyrnm and Mawdon signed the agreement on 9 August, 1947. Two Khasi States- Nongstoin and Mawiang signed on 13 August, 1947. Six other Khasi States- Myllem, Nongkhlaw, Pamsangut, Mawlong, Nonglwai, Mawphlang signed the same on 14 August, 1947

Khasi States Federation who represented the States Area and the Khasi Jaintia National Federated States Conference, who represented the Non-States Area into a single platform. An advisory body of 10 members each was selected to assist the Dominion Agent in framing the terms of reference of the KSCMD.

During this period, the remaining Khasi States who earlier did not sign the IoA committed to the same. *Mamlong* State signed on 10 March. *Rambrai* and *Myrian* signed on 17 March 1948 and *Nongstoin*, signed on 19 March 1948. With Nongstoin State, all the 25 Khasi States acceded to India.

The Governor of Assam, with all formalities of accession completed, released an Order No.237-P, dated 16 June 1948, published on 30 June, 1948 for the setting up of a Khasi States Federation Court under the jurisdiction of the High Court of Assam, declaring the members of the Federation of Khasi States as First Class Magistrate as per the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898.

This was followed by a joint meeting of the representatives of 'different Khasi Political Organisations' held in the office of the Dominion Agent on 5 July 1948. From this meeting, the agreed upon procedures of the election to the KSCMD were formalised and finally accepted by the Governor with a few modifications. This was then followed by C.Rajagopalachari, the Governor General of India³⁶ accepting the Instrument of Accession and Annexed Agreement of all the Khasi States on 17 August 1948.

The elections to the KSCMD were held between December 1948 and February 1949. The open seats, divided by 4000 people per seat, were contested by two political parties, the Khasi States People's Union (supporting the FKS) and the Khasi-Jaintia Federated National Conference under the Presidentship of J.J.M.Nichols-Roy. The newly constituted body consisted of 56 elected, 25 Khasi States Chief and 8 nominated members.³⁷ The KSCMD was inaugurated on 29 April 1949 by the Governor, Sriprakasa and the meeting was chaired by N.N.Phukan, the Dominion Agent, Khasi States (KS).³⁸

The second sitting of the KSCMD to arrive at a resolution about the future of the Khasi States began on 11 July till 21 July 1949. Two resolutions were debated, one proposed by J.J.M.Nichols-Roy and the other by G.G.Swell.

36 White Paper on India States. Government of India, Ministry of States, 1950.pp.215-218.

37 For a detailed history of the KSCMD, please see L.Gilbert Shullai (1997) Khasi States Constitution Making Durbar. Published by S.S.Majaw.

38 The cover picture of this book is the photo taken after the inauguration of the KSCMD outside Dinam Hall.

While the former argued for a sixth schedule, the latter adhered to the agreements as per the IoA and AA. Each of the proposals sought to merge the Non-States Areas (Khasi and Jaintia Hills District) and the Khasi States into a single entity. When put to vote, the former was supported by 40 members and the latter, after a suggested modification by the *Syiem* of Jirang was supported by 46 members. This led to the 40 who supported the resolution of J.J.M.Nichols-Roy to walk out of the KSCMD.

On 21 July, 1949 a resolution was passed. The same noted (i) the ardent desire for the formation of the said one administration and sought the (ii) preservation and maintenance of rights, privileges and customs over (a) existing democratic institutions of *Syiems*, *Lyngdohs*, *Wabadadars*, *Sirdars* and the *Durbar*, (b) land, its protection thereof and the ownership, according to customs (c) water rights (d) minerals (e) excise (f) forests (g) judiciary and (h) legislative powers covering all these subjects mention above.

A 16 member Negotiating Committee 'with full powers' was also chosen to represent the KSCMD and 'settle the implementation of the above resolution and to decide the connection of the Khasi States with all authorities concerned within the Union of India.'³⁹ Immediately after, Olim Sing Syiem, Jor Manik Syiem, O.H. Rees and Kong Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh, key member of the Negotiating Committee travelled to Delhi, seeking an appointment with the Viceroy on 25 July, 1949 related to 'the demands of the Chiefs of the Khasi Hills in regard to the new Constitution for British India and Indian States.' The Viceroy House however informed the representatives through Kong Mavin Dunn on 28 July 1949 that neither the Viceroy nor his Private Secretary was able to meet her.

The final representation of the Negotiating Committee was submitted to the Governor on 30 July 1949. Twenty days after passing of the second reading of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, the negotiating committee rushed to the Governor to submit a memorandum on 27 September, 1949. They were however informed by the Governor, who had just come from Delhi that most of their demands will be included in a sixth schedule spearheaded by J.J.M.Nichols-Roy. There was panic among the members of the Negotiating Committee.

Later having received the news that the recommendations of the KSCMD was not included in the Constitution of India, the members submitted another memorandum to the Governor on 5 November, requesting that a paragraph be inserted in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The

39 For a detail reading of the 'Resolution' please refer to L.Gilbert Shullai (1997) pp.37-39.

paragraph stated:

“Provided that nothing in this Constitution shall be construed as empowering any authority to interfere with or undermine the democratic institutions and traditional customs and usages of the Khasis, nor to diminish their traditional rights and privileges.”

There was nothing that moved from the Governors side and as a last ditch attempt the committee sent an urgent letter to the Governor dated 8 November, 1949, noting that “there is a great panic amongst the Khasi people that, unless the proviso submitted by the Negotiating Committee is incorporated in the constitution there will be no safeguard to our democratic institutions and our rights and privileges over the soil.”

One day before India’s republic day, the Governor of Assam published the Khasi States (Administration of Justice) Order, 1950, dated January 25, 1950 which extended to the whole of the Khasi States excluding the Shillong Administered Areas. The order gave some powers on the subject of criminal justice to the Courts of the *Syiems* of the Khasi States which includes the court of the Sirdar, Lyngdoh or Wahadadar. This power was however not to exceed those of a Magistrate of the First Class as defined in the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898.

Thus the setting up of a KSCMD was only temporary in character i.e., from August 15, 1947 to February 25, 1950 and with the Sixth Schedule coming into force, they faded into oblivion. On 25 January 1950, the Officers of the Government of Assam seized the office of the Federation of Khasi States and took away all notes, documents and properties.

Starting 26 January 1950 onwards till 26 January 1952, the UK-JHADC was under the direct supervision of the Governor of Assam as empowered by paragraph 19 of the Sixth Schedule. He appointed a 20 member Advisory Council which constituted of a mixture of erstwhile members of the KSCMD and those who were supporters of J.J.M.Nichols-Roy. The Advisory Council was inaugurated on 24 May 1950 in the Government House in Shillong by the Chief Minister Mr.Gopinath Bordoloi. The session was chaired by the Governor of Assam who was replaced by Shri Jairamdas Doulatram on 27 May 1950.⁴⁰

However it was not until the general elections of 1952 which chose representatives to the UK-JHADC, the Assam Legislative Assembly and the Lok Sabha that people began to experience the fault line in Khasi

⁴⁰ For a detailed reading of the events please see L.Gilbert Shullai (1989) *Ki Symboh History Bad Ka Ri Hynniewtrepp*.pp.54-56.

society created by two contested perspective of those who supported J.J.M.Nichols-Roy and those who supported the Khasi Chiefs.

For the elections to the UK-JHADC, 18 members were elected. Later the Governor nominated 6 more members to the Council, taking the total strength of the Council to 24 members. The whole process went smoothly, or so it was thought. On 27 June, 1952, the day when the UK-JHADC was inaugurated by the Governor, 1155 days post the inauguration of the KSCMD, the simmering tension emerged and protest by youths immediately erupted.⁴¹

Part II

Theorising Khasi Politics

Unravelling Intersecting Socio-Historical Standpoints

From the stated historical context that began around 1923, numerous struggles erupted within Khasi society against the power that emerged; both during British India and now Dominion of India. Each of these struggles arose as a response to events, colonial strategies and agreements or felt betrayals by the Khasi people. However much before 1923, a socio-religious movement to collectivise people around their organic belief system had already taken roots among the Khasis. They called themselves the *Seng Khasi*.

When power was passed from the hands of the British to India, a number of agreements were signed between the Governor of Assam and the Khasi *himas*. The non-fulfilment of these agreements kick-started two simultaneous struggles, one led by the 'Federation of Khasi States' against the dishonouring of the Instrument of Accession and Annexed Agreement, and the other led by Paiem Wickliffe, *Syiem Khyinnab* of *Hima* Nongstoin against the dishonouring of a Standstill Arrangement.

However amidst these, there were also those who followed the footsteps of J.J.M Nichols-Roy under the umbrella of the 'Khasi Jaintia Federated States National Conference' who championed an Autonomous District Council as envisioned in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Among its supporters, three political positions have emerged over the years. Each of these ideological standpoints is discussed in this section.

An attempt has been made to engage with each of these political movements chronologically. It begins with the formation of the Seng

⁴¹ Ibid., p.55

Khasi, followed by movements around the Stand Still Arrangement, the Instrument of Accession and Annexed Agreement, and lastly, three distinct positions arising out of those who embraced the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.

Early Khasi Resistance to British Colonialism – The Seng Khasi

While discussing colonialism, one cannot but make a reference to the earliest Khasi resistance to British colonialism. This resistance was led by the Seng Khasi. The *Seng Khasi*, initially called as the *Seng Samla Khasi* (Khasi Youth Association) was established on 23 November 1899. It was the first indigenous organisation of Khasis to resist Christian proselytization and British cultural domination. It was started by sixteen young men,⁴² who thought it necessary to work together to protect ancestral and traditional forms of clanship system and world views. They believed that it was imperative to protect the Khasi way of life and belief systems in the light of persistent Christianisation in places where British rule was in force. Its founder patron Babu Jeebon Roy, himself a civil servant in the British Government, began taking steps, that in his words were imperative in the light of religious onslaught from all sides. In the preface to his book *Ka Niam Jong Ki Khasi*, (1897) he states (in Khasi) “The people will completely forget now at this time with the entry of the Christian religion, the Roman Catholic religion, the Unitarian religion; the Brahmo religion; the Khasi religion unfortunately, without any written record will vanish into oblivion and after many years, people will forget it completely.”⁴³ This was coupled with the fact that many Khasis were beginning to see how their culture was being demeaned and attempts to erase its distinctiveness was taking place.

It was in 1901 that the *Seng Samla Khasi* renamed itself simply as the *Seng Khasi*. It called upon the Khasi community to join in the effort for the welfare of the community. The objectives of the Seng Khasi were (i) to foster the mental and physical development through regular lectures (ii) building strong, active and healthy bodies by various physical activities and

42 The sixteen founder members were U Kupar Don Jaid Dkhar, U Mohon Roy Rynjah, U Rubi Singh Swer, U Burton Sing, U Rash Mohon Roy Nongrum, U Chandra Nath Roy Jaid Dkhar, U Raibon Sing, U Nalak Sing lang Blah, U Joshon Singh Dkhar, U Said Sing Jaid Dkhar, U Ram Charan Dympep, U Robert Jaid Dkhar, U Rajinshon Marbaniang, U Nadon Roy Diengdoh, U Rutionmuni Roy War and U Indromuni Jyrwa.

43 The full paragraph reads as follows: “Ba lada ngim iathoh noh dang kumne, ki briw kin klet noh shisyndon mynta ha kane ka por ba la wan kiw ka Niam Khristan, Ka Niam Roman Kathalik, Ka Niam Unitarian; ka Niam Brahmo; ka Niam Khasi bapli khlem thoh khlem tar kan shu jah lynngaid bad ynda bun snem kin klet noh ki briw shisyndon. Kumba long ka Niam Budhism shi synkhie ka rasong ka la jop ia kiba bun ki hima, Ceylon, China, Japan, Siam, Burma, Bhutan bad shawei shawei pat.” Babu Jeebon Roy, *Ka Niam jong ki Khasi*, Shillong, 10 February 1897, p.i.

sports (iii) building up a library and upkeep of the same and (iv) building up a collection of traditional musical instruments⁴⁴. At the point of changing its name in 1901, it re-envisioned its objectives to position itself more clearly on questions pertaining to Khasi society. Over the years its objectives were stated as (i) to foster a sense of brotherhood among Khasis who still retain their socio-cultural and religious heritage (ii) to revive the true faith of their ancestors (iii) to understand the true meaning of conscience and truth as handed down by them, which are being neglected, misled and blinded by the teachings of foreigners (iv) to create consciousness about 'U Blei', who always resides in the heart of a devotee and therefore the devotee need not be imported or borrowed from outside (v) to earn righteousness through service and respect one's own fellowmen with a sense of humanity and divinity strictly in accordance with the precept of Kur and Kha (vi) to work for the mental and physical development of fellow members, and to regulate the way of living, both morally and socially (vii) to work for advancement of education (viii) to encourage national sports like archery, cultural dances and other social festivals (ix) to undertake welfare and development activities such as maintenance of cremation grounds for those who dispose of dead bodies according to tradition and religion.⁴⁵

The Seng Khasi is registered under the Indian Society Registration Act 1886 as a Socio-Religious Cultural organisation of the indigenous Khasis belonging to the *Niam Khasi* way of life. At the heart of the Khasi way of life lies three fundamental principles (i) *Tip Briew Tip Blei* (ii) *Tip Kur Tip Kha* and (iii) *Kamai Ia Ka Hok* (i. know self, know being, ii. know one's matrilineal clan, know one's father's clan, iii. Earn your own truth).

On 23 November 2016, addressing the indigenous Khasi faithful gathered in the yearly congregation of its members at the Weiking ground, Shillong, its previous president B. Rumnong stated, "one hundred and seventeen years ago the Seng Khasi was formed with the objective to protect and preserve the Khasi religion as it had faced a threat from external forces who were hell bent on eradicating our customs and traditions." He urged Seng Khasi members to "cling to their values and not to forget the ancient tradition and customs of the indigenous Khasi community." He asserted "it is the duty that the indigenous Khasi community will continue to strive and

44 These objectives of the Seng Khasi were noted by Sing Kynpham in Kharshiing, Hipshon Roy (Ed), 'Where Lies the Soul of Our Race' published by the Seng Khasi, 1982. p.8.

45 The reworked objectives were noted by H.K.Synrem (1992) in his book 'Revivalism in Khasi Society'. pp.12-13.

live on for thousands of years to come.”⁴⁶

The Seng Khasi is much more of a culturo-religious institution than a socio-political organisation. However, it is imperative, from a political point of view, to see the organisation as the first organised political attempt by the Khasis to collectively resist and confront colonialism. It is in this sense that the Seng Khasi is part of a political movement demanding both theoretical attention and academic respect.

Indo-Khasi Negotiations – The Stand Still Arrangement

When Paiem Wickliffe Sing Syiem,⁴⁷ took over as *Syiem Khyinnah* (young Chief) of *Hima* Nongstoin in 1937, assisting the present chief, Sib Sing *Syiem*, he took charge of many activities in the *hima*. He was both the Attorney General and Adviser of the *hima*. Together with other known personalities in the Khasi community he was instrumental in setting up the Federation of Khasi States (FKS). Paiem Wickliffe, as part of the FKS, visited officials of the British Government in Delhi to present the case of the FKS. Not being able to make much headway in this regard, the delegation was fortunate to meet Sardar Patel, who in his conversation promised to respect the indigenous institutions and power to govern if the Khasi States joined the Indian Dominion. This was agreed upon with the exception of three areas; Defence, Communications and Foreign Affairs. Once it was clear that independence for the Indian Dominion was in the offing, the Khasi chiefs held a meeting on 8 August 1947 and signed the “Instrument of Accession, acceding to the Indian Union on three subjects referred above as was the case with the majority of Indian States. The Federation also authorised its representative in Delhi to sign a Standstill Agreement with the Indian dominion on its behalf on 9 August 1947.”⁴⁸

Although the chiefs initially resisted, they were assured that the agreement was good and would have no negative ramifications for the Khasi *Himas*. This was an agreement accepted by both sides that all arrangements would be in ‘Stand Still’ for two years, that is, from 15 August 1947 till new arrangements are arrived at. However, in a period of four months, the Dominion of India through its Governor in Assam sought the agreement

46 This was the speech delivered to the gathering of the Seng Khasi by its President. <http://spnewsagency.com/seng-khasi-was-form-to-protect-and-preserve-the-khasi-religion-b-rumnong/>

47 Wickliffe Sing Syiem has a B.E (Civil engineering) Bombay University, 1937. He was also the first Khasi to have a Post Graduate (Engineering) London and was later appointed as Wing Commander of the Labour Corps during World War Two.

48 This is noted in the text 'Ka Synjuk Lang Ki Hima Khasi', Vol III, August 1947. p.1. The same is also quoted in Lyngdoh, R.S. (1996) book 'Government and Politics in Meghalaya'. p.189.

of the FKS on a new arrangement - the Instrument of Accession and Annexed Agreement to be signed on 15 December 1947.

The *Syiem* of *Hima Nongstoin* and Wickliffe, the Deputy *Syiem*, did not attend the meeting in Shillong on 2 January 1948 with Sardar Vallabhai Patel who had come to try resolving the impasse. Paiem Wickliffe opined that this act of the Dominion of India was an outright betrayal of the agreement arrived at through the Standstill Arrangement, which clearly stated the period of two years in the agreement. He requested Sib Sing Syiem to convene a national Dorbar of the *bima*.

A Dorbar was called on 13 January 1948 in which 1300 members attended. After rounds of discussions, it was decided that *Hima Nongstoin* would declare independence from India on 14 January 1948. Sib Sing was approved as the President of the independent State of Nongstoin, Wickliffe as Secretary cum Adviser and the clan heads as Ministers. It was also decided that a new Constitution be framed for the independent State of Nongstoin that will be debated, confirmed and passed on the 30 March 1948. A Foreign Committee was created in which Paiem Wickliffe and Bah S.A.Chyne was members.

The Governor of Assam, Akbar Hydari, immediately dispatched G. P. Jarman (Dominion Agent, Khasi States) with a full army battalion of the Assam Rifles to *Nongstoin* to force the Chief to sign the new IoA. Sib Sing Syiem after initially resisting was requested by the *Bakhras* (Heads of clans) to sign the IoA, just to save the day for himself. Wickliffe in the meantime had sent word to Sib Sing not to sign even if they would have to die for the same. However, the might of the Indian State was difficult to confront. After the signing, G. P. Jarman, brought out a notice that Wickliffe cannot enter *Hima Nongstoin*, and if he needed anything he must come to Shillong and seek permission from there first. Paiem Wickliffe under threat of arrest moved his camp to East Pakistan. On 20 March 1948, he wrote an urgent letter to Jawaharlal Nehru seeking his intervention to stop the Governor of Assam to use force against Nongstoin State. Following this on 24 March 1948, he sent a telegram from Dacca to the Secretary General of the United Nations Organisation Headquarters in Lake Success U.S.A to command that India stop the forceful acquisition of the independent State of *Nongstoin*. Many more attempts were made by Wickliffe to represent the case of Nongstoin State in International forums. Settled in Bangladesh, he died on 21 October, 1988.

Many of these narratives formed the historical basis for the struggles of a radical movement called the 'Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council'

(HNLC). This movement began its militant protest around the late 1980s and its struggle simmers to this very day. The struggle through the years produced numerous incidents, one of which was a lockdown on celebration of India's Republic and Independence Day. The years between 1995 and the early 2000s, saw a rise in violence within Khasi inhabited areas of Meghalaya supposedly initiated by the organisation. There are numerous narratives about the HNLC that circulate among the Khasis, some of which are of great academic value, especially for understanding ethnic struggles.

According to the HNLC, 'Meghalaya', which itself is not a Khasi or Garo word, did not get the so-called claimed republic with its consent. The HNLC is of the opinion that since the 'Government of India Act' was imposed, the rights of the Hynniewtrep people were strangled and suffered the imposition of the Sixth Schedule. Resisting the Sixth Schedule, their argument is grounded on resurrecting the "Standstill Agreement." They perceive the later IoA and AA as having been signed under duress. The HNLC have also expressed their dissatisfaction with the arguments of the Khasi chiefs under the Federation of Khasi States noting in 2014 that "We are surprised to see that the traditional chiefs are now demanding for Article 371. This clearly signifies that they (chiefs) are not yet conscious of the worth of the Standstill Agreement."⁴⁹

The HNLC, gained tremendous public support throughout the 1990s, but is currently on the wane. The question raised by this movement though still remains, and there is a subterranean reality that simmers among Khasi youth on this particular historical hurt.

Indo-Khasi Negotiations – The Instrument of Accession and Annexed Agreement

Political conflicts arising out of these varied positions have been a mainstay of Khasi identity and politics. These have led to violent upheavals and street protests. For those articulating around the Instrument of Accession (IoA) and Annexed Agreement (AA), the Federation of Khasi States is the key organisation. Movements grounded on this historical event have simmered through the 1950s to current times.

It may be recalled that the rulers, individually and collectively under the FKS had committed to the IoA, making it mandatory on the part of the Government to provide special provisions for the protection of their customary and social rights and its incorporation into the Indian

49 Retrieved from <https://theshillongtimes.com/2014/10/21/centre-should-recall-armed-forces-hnlc/> on January, 2020.

Constitution. It should be noted that the Khasi States cannot be equated with the ex-princely states in the sense that they did not get any Privy Purse. The difference between the accession of the Khasi states with the Dominion of India and the erstwhile princely states is that while the latter merged with the neighbouring states or constituted separate states within the Indian Union by means of the Instrument of Merger and the process of proclamation; the Khasi states retained their identity within the provision of the Indian Constitution through the IoA and AA only, officially accepted by the Government of India on 17 August 1948.

Once the Khasi States were brought under the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council (UK-JHADC) of the Sixth Schedule, post 1950, trouble began. The *Syiem* of *Hima* Myllem Jor Manik Syiem was first suspended by Bah Hobel Rynjah, Chief Executive Member (CEM) in 1953, and then by Bah B.M.Pugh, CEM on 7 July 1959. Paiem Jor Manik sought a stay order from Assam High Court and was reinstated.⁵⁰ The UK-JHADC then followed up by enacting the 'United Khasi-Jaintia Autonomous District (Appointment and Succession of Chiefs and Headmen) Act, 1959' which came into force on October 1959. Bah T. Cajee, CEM, then appealed to the Supreme Court.⁵¹

A Division Bench of the Supreme Court on 20 September 1960 set aside the order of the High Court, confirming the power of the District Council to remove and suspend the *Syiem* of *Hima* Myllem. This single event gave rise to acrimonious debates within the Khasi community framed around those who support the Federation of Khasi States and those who follow the Sixth Schedule. Nevertheless, this tension simmered and played out through various ways but did not manifest in any real movement till the early 1990s. With the Proclamation of the year 1993 as the Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples by the United Nations General Assembly, the movement by the Federation of Khasi States began gaining some momentum. One of the Khasi Chiefs together with many Khasi public intellectuals began organising people around this theme and coined a popular slogan for the celebrations "revival for survival". The celebration committee responsible for carrying forth specific events for the year was chaired by the President of the FKS.

For seven long years till the visit of the Government of India's

50 Case Number C.A.394 of 1960 in Assam High Court

51 For a detailed reading please see 'Ka Jingiathuh Khana-Pateng Shaphang ki Syiem jong ka Hima Myllem (Naduh 1830 haduh 1960)' by Jor Manik Syiem (1984) pp.67-71.

Constitution Review Commission in 2000,⁵² members of the FKS travelled far and wide to many *himas* to address dorbars on matters relating to the imperative of traditional Khasi institutions. On 12 December 2000, a mammoth gathering of the Chiefs at the Dorbar *Hima* was convened by Paiem Laborious M Syiem, the *Syiem* of *Hima* Myllem and former President of the Khasi States. The Dorbar passed resolutions primarily urging the Government of India to incorporate in the Constitution of India a proposed thirteenth schedule⁵³ which would facilitate the constitution of a Federal Council for the Khasi States within the Constitution of India. Following this, the Chiefs officially met and presented a memorandum to the Sub-Committee of the National Commission for Review of the Working of the Constitution.⁵⁴ The Commission however could not understand the complexities of the Khasi political system and instead recommended in their proposal to the Parliament in 2002, the nomination of five *Syiem*, five *Dolloi*, and five *Nokma*, as nominated members of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills Autonomous District Councils. The Chiefs of Meghalaya outrightly rejected the proposition on grounds that they did not want to mix the Chiefs in a legislature which was ‘party based’.

During the period 2003-2004, not willing to give up on their efforts, the FKS co-ordinated a call for reassertion of their rights and received a major boost with open support from Robert Kharshiing, Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha (2002-2008). This culminated in the first historic Dorbar Ri (People’s Parliament) held on 14 January 2004 at Smit, *Hima* Khyrim, 16 kilometres from Shillong under the platform of the Grand Council of Chiefs of Meghalaya (GCCM). While these were organised under the banner of the GCCM, bring traditional institutions of the Garos, the Jaintias and the Khasi under one platform, it was planned and lead by the Federation of Khasi States.

These mobilisations spearheaded by the Federation of Khasi States, was resented by the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC). This brought the Federation of Khasi States (especially some of the *Syiem*s) in direct confrontation with it. This led to the suspension of the *Syiem* of *Hima* Myllem. Subsequently, pertaining to this suspension, there was an out of court settlement where the *Syiem* of Myllem who also held the post of

52 The Constitution Review Commission was set up in February 2000 by the Government of India to review the Indian Constitution and make suggestions to improve the same.

53 Discussion about the proposed 13th schedule by Hima Myllem is done in detail in later chapters.

54 Source: www.ncrwc.nic.in related to the report of the NCRWC.

President, FKS was reinstated in 2006 but with a condition that he resigns as *Syiem* the very same day. These events were a serious setback to the FKS and it took some time for the FKS to regroup and gain lost ground.

Nonetheless the FKS, under the umbrella of the GCCM followed up their movement by a second People's Parliament on 6 October 2007 at *Hima Mawphlang* and a third on 14 November 2011 at *Asanangre*, West Garo Hills. The people's parliaments in 2004, 2007 and 2011 received many goodwill messages from dignitaries and brought together chiefs, village chiefs, clan chiefs and elders of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo peoples.

On 8 May 2011, the GCCM submitted a Memorandum to the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (a constitutional body under Article 338A). The GCCM delegation comprised of the Chiefs of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo communities and was led by the Chairman, GCCM and Spokesperson FKS. The Commission after hearing the delegation passed directives on 26 April 2012, in favour of the Chiefs and referred the matter to the Union Ministry for Tribal Affairs. It also sent a demi-official letter to the Union Minister for Home Affairs, Government of India drawing the attention of the Ministry. While in Delhi the GCCM also met the Chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), who in a response letter dated 16 June 2012 considered 'the matter was within legislative competence of Parliament, and directed the petitioners to approach the Central Government'. On 9 June 2012 for the first time since India's independence, the GCCM jointly addressed national media regarding the "position of the non-fulfilment of the national solemn commitments made by the Central Authorities to the Khasi States and their people in New Delhi."⁵⁵

Continuous and persistent engagement with the Indian State has resulted in a number of communiqués between the Federation of Khasi States and the National Advisory Council, Minister Tribal Affairs, Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Chairman of the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, National Human Rights Commission, Ministry of Home Affairs and even the President of India and Prime Minister.

In each of these communiqués, the position of the Federation of Khasi States is formulated on one single premise - the primary reason that indigenous institutions are in conflict with the present central government's executive, legislative and judicial structure is because the treaties (IoA and AA) signed between the FKS and the Government of India on 15

⁵⁵ From an interview with the Chairman GCCM and Spokesperson FKS on 6 March 2015.

December 1947 were not incorporated in the Constitution of India in 1950. This has led to a stalemate in the process of demarcation of executive, legislative and judicial jurisdiction between the two different administrative political systems.

On this pretext, the FKS persist on seeking an amendment of the Constitution of India to correct and reconcile this historical 'anomaly'. This is viewed as paramount for the preservation and protection of the age old wisdom, role and functions of indigenous traditional institutions. While the struggle of the FKS carries on, the issue is yet to be addressed either by the past or the present Central Governments. Notwithstanding the same, the historical movement of the FKS carries on. A Fourth People's Parliament to keep the struggle and narrative alive was held on 13 February 2013 at Mairang, *Hima* Nongkhlaw and since then many more such gatherings have been organised.

Post-Independence - The Sixth Schedule (Three Positions)

For those who sided with J.J.M Nichols-Roy in his struggle to realise the rights of the Khasi people within the province of Assam, the outcome was the Sixth Schedule. Many Khasis conceived the Sixth Schedule as the most viable alternative to the Stand Still Agreement or the Instrument of Accession (IoA) and Annexed Agreement (AA). From those who supported the Sixth Schedule, varied number of political positions have emerged over the years. While some demand a stricter operationalisation of the schedule, there are others who seek the removal of the schedule itself.

The Sixth Schedule arose in reference to the geographical context of the British areas and the struggle of J.J.M.Nichols-Roy. The context includes the Jowai Sub-division, the thirty-one British villages and the areas (ceded or rented) of Shillong British Portion under *Hima* Myllem that fell within the Shillong Municipal Board and the Shillong Cantonment Authority. All these areas together were called British Areas. Following the Government of India Act 1919, a Shillong General Constituency was created. In the first election held in 1921, J.J.M.Nichols-Roy represented this particular constituency. It had voters hailing from different ethnic and religious communities. They include Khasis, Jaintias, Karbis, Britishers, Afghans, Assamese, Bengalis, Marwaris, Nepalese and others. All of these identities were residents of several pockets of Shillong.

From within this bounded geographical space, J.J.M.Nichols-Roy emerged as an important leader around the year 1946 when India was at the threshold of independence. He was elected as a representative from the

Congress party, Assam Province to the Constituent Assembly.⁵⁶ His political vision and mission, sourced from his own context of being a Minister in the Government of Assam Province soon gave birth to a political platform called the 'Khasi Jaintia Federated National Conference' (KJFNC). This came about just a few months after the formation of the FKS. Important to note that the KJFNC represented the British Areas and the FKS represented the Non-States Areas, but both within the Khasi inhabited areas.

A political tussle broke out between the two and a number of meetings were held to resolve the conflict. Being a Minister in the Gopinath Bordoloi led Congress government; he had more power and leeway. He was also chosen as one of the representatives to the Constituent Assembly and went on to play a major role in the 'North East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Sub Committee.' This Sub Committee authored a report that later became the basis for the formulation of the Sixth Schedule of which he was the main author.

On 26 January 1950, when the Constitution came into force, the FKS-controlled Khasi States Area, which were, until then, outside of the Assam Province, were included 'by description' as part of the newly created state of Assam. By a single scheduled, the whole system of 25 *Khasi Himas* was brought under the framework of the Autonomous District Council (ADC). Immediately, contradictions between the two arose in Khasi society.

The animosity between those supporting the Sixth Schedule and those supporting the IoA and AA persist to this very day. Among those who followed J.J.M. Nichols-Roy and accepted the Sixth Schedule, perceived the said schedule as an instrument to subsume the FKS within the ADC's control, and reduce the IoA and AA upheld by FKS to a historical artefact.

Supporters of the ADC see the Sixth Schedule as legal acceptance by the Khasis of their merger with the Indian state, without having to formally sign the Instrument of Merger. This is important to note as many are not aware that all the princely states (which constituted the Chamber of Princes) along with signing the IoA, had to also sign the Instrument of Merger.

From among those who perceive the Sixth Schedule as a 'merger instrument' in lieu of the Instrument of Merger, a number of ideological

⁵⁶ Altogether there were 8 members. Others who were elected were (From Congress Party) Gopinath Bordoloi, Omeo Kumar Das (later replaced by Kaludhar Chaliha) Dharanidhar Basamutari, Rohini Kumar Choudhury, Nibaran Chandra Laskar, (From Muslim League) Syed Mohammad Saadullah and Syed Abdur Rouf.

and political positions have emerged. Some of which are discussed below. However, it is important to note that there are numerous other positions on the said schedule, and thus the framing of ideological positions below is not exhaustive. The reason I have chosen only the following three positions is because they are widely held and articulated in the public domain by a number of public intellectuals.

The First Position is held by a number of public intellectuals with a sizable following among the public in rural areas of the Khasi hills. This perspective situates its arguments on three key premises: (1) in the new democratic state structure, the role of the ADC as a constitutional sanctioned institution is to protect the historical rights of the community. Hence the elected members of the ADC replace the earlier institution of *Bakbrangs* or clan heads. The ADC now operates as a legal platform of erstwhile *Bakbrangs*, through a first past-the-post democratic election, (2) the foundation of Khasi society can be traced back to the institution of *Bakbrangs*. The institution of *Syiems* came much later and the Syiemship itself was an agreed upon institution created by the *Bakbrangs* to serve their own needs at a particular stage of the evolution of Khasi society. The Syiemship did serve the purpose then but in the new democratic set up, it is no more relevant, (3) even when *Syiems* were heads of *himas*, power was never in their hands. Real power always lay with *Bakbrangs* right from the village level, to the *Raid* and to the *Hima*. This can be seen in the case of land ownership system among the Khasis. It was the British who in order to fulfil their own needs of control and rule, turned the institution of Syiemship into one of Administrative Chief of their *Himas*. This was done because it was difficult for the British to subjugate and then force the signing of agreements with the numerous *Bakbrangs* in a *Hima*. Moreover, the individual *Syiem* was much easier to control and manipulate.

In the light of these facts, the *Syiems* and their institutions should not be taken seriously anymore and be allowed to disintegrate along with the IoA and AA that they signed. Being mere remnants of history, whose usefulness has reached an end point, they must remain in memory and even be respected for that. However, that should be all that the institution deserves. Under the new framework of the ADC, one should use the power sanctioned by the Indian Constitution and enact laws as permitted under the new democratic set up to protect and promote the Khasi society. The Khasi community has merged itself into and is now very much part of the Indian State situated in it through a special schedule that safeguards their historical customary rights. The task now is to make use of these guaranteed rights and place the Khasi society strategically in the forward

movement of history.

The Second Position is held by many progressive public intellectuals with support of many Shillong based residents. They position their arguments around two historical points. (1) There were historical tensions and even conflicts of interest between the Khasi States/FKS and the KJFNC. It is a historical fact that the Government of India which then had a dominion status did sign the IoA and AA with the FKS. Further there was confusion pertaining to the way the Khasi States were subsumed within the Sixth Schedule by the Ministry of States, even though a separate Khasi States Constitution Making Dorbar was formed at the same time to deliberate the status of Khasi States within the India Dominion. Even when the Constitution of India was being enacted, the ‘constitutional anomaly’ pertaining to the Khasi States existed. At the time they were included in the Indian State, while still under agreement and treaty rights with the FKS. However, this stood null and void after the Supreme Court Judgment of 1959 on *T.Cajee Vs Jormanick*,⁵⁷ where it is clearly defined that a Khasi Chief is not a ruler but an officer under the ADC. The IoA and AA, the key document on which the FKS bases its arguments has since then become ‘ultra vires’ and is now a closed chapter in the history of the Indo-Khasi relationship. Nonetheless, contradictions in the Sixth Schedule remain but are beyond the powers of the ADC and the State Government. Any attempt to resolve the IoA and AA is a matter that falls within the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. (2) Now that the IoA and AA is ultra vires, and the status and position of Khasi society has been defined as per the Indian Constitution; processes, both political and social, that must be set forth is a focus on the improvement of governance. This should be based on principles laid out in the Indian Constitution, i.e., adherence to democratic norms, active participation of citizenry, accountable and transparent systems of governance, and equality in the eyes of law for all citizens no matter what community, religion and belief systems that may hold. To achieve this, all custom-based and custom-driven institutions, right from the village level, the *raid* and the *hima* must be reformed for the sake of installing an effective grassroots governance system in the state. This is the dire need of the hour.

Those adhering to this ideological position see the FKS and its agenda as anachronistic. Any argument of upholding and safeguarding age-old

57 Case No. C.A. 394 of 1960. Case filed by Syiem Jor Manik in Assam High Court against his suspension by the UKJHADC. Later the UKJHADC appealed to the Supreme Court and got a ruling that overturned the ruling of the High Court.

customs and institutions is perceived as unnecessary and a meaningless politicisation of processes for the benefit of a few who speak the language. After 1959, when the Khasi States were fully merged with the Indian State 'by law', and not merely 'by description', the task for the Khasis as a society was to direct efforts towards making government and governance work. Public intellectuals and the general public who are located in this position are upfront in their politics against militant movements premised around the Stand Still agreement. Such confrontations persist.

The Third Position is led by very assertive and articulate Shillong based public intellectuals from across the ethnic spectrum, with a sizable following among the educated class and Khasi diaspora. Like the above two groupings, four key arguments are posited by those within this ideological location. (1) anyone who speaks about indigenous Khasi institutions as being alive and efficacious is out of touch with social reality. Those who hold noble ideas that the Khasis are a clan-based society and the clan system is intact, that Khasi institutions of Dorbars are 'Dorbar Blei',⁵⁸ that matriliney and matriarchy exist and persist as a social, political and economic system among Khasis are fooling themselves and the people at large. None of these, it is argued, exist empirically in the way Khasis speak about them. Each of these institutions has experienced distortions, more so after the advent of Christianity, a powerful religious force that changed the belief system of the Khasis to a great extent, (2) the Standstill Agreement, Instrument of Accession (IoA) and Annexed Agreement (AA) are dead instruments, and institutions such as *Syiem*, *Myntris*, *Sordar*, *Rangbah Shnong*, etc that are spoken and glorified by the Federation of Khasi States are not merely dying institutions, but socially and politically regressive systems. Thus, the earlier these instruments and these institutions are done away with, the faster the society can begin to advance. It is these institutions that are holding back change and progress. Not only do those who speak about the Stand Still Agreement, IoA and AA affirm an imagined notion of the Khasi community and traditional institutions, but they create a superficial boundary and hierarchy between ethnic groups who are now as per law, equal citizens with equal rights. Affirming such politics, it is perceived, allows for the interplay of regressive politics that pitches one individual against another based on ethnicity, thereby excluding others merely on the pretext of imagined communities and realities, (3) any politico-historical

58 The word 'Blei' translates as 'gods'. But the Khasi usage of Dorbar Blei is the recognition of values such as honesty and truthfulness as the key governing principles of the Dorbar. It does not refer to, as some people state – the Dorbars of the Gods. This, in my understanding is a misrepresentation of the concept Dorbar Blei.

argument posit about state, government and governance based on these non-existent Khasi institutions, are untrue and a strategy for distraction. As equal citizens in the eyes of law, all ethnic based institutions must be done away with and fundamentally reformed. The Khasi *Himas* must merge fully into the Indian State and those institutions and political processes that do not allow for such a merger must be done away with, (4) rather than debating on and about ethnic-base and Khasi-centric mechanisms for empowerment, generic institutions that are applicable across the country such as the Panchayati Raj model (73rd Amendment) and other governance systems as per 74th Constitutional amendment must be enacted. In each of these institutions, based on the fact that there is penetration of patriarchal remnants and ethnic preference into many Khasi institutions, gender equity and equality must be made law and force be used to guarantee the same.

Those holding this perspective believe that in the reality and structure currently lived, there is a need to first begin to conceive the Khasis to have fully merged with the Indian State and thereby as equal and full citizens of the State. They argue that only after the acceptance of such a position, one could then entertain and hold the belief that people are connected as a society by language, culture etc. There are many such societies in India, and the Khasis are one among the many. The Khasis, it is held, are fully merged both historically and politically with the Indian state and the way forward is to operate by its laws.

From the above analysis of Khasi society, we observe very distinct political positions being articulated. Each of these ideological positions frames their engagement around acceptance and understanding of a single politico-historical moment that took place during the period 1877-1959. Such moments are the basis on which current discursive content is formulated and articulated. Each of these political struggles remain vibrant both in the social sphere, persisting in attempts to transform the current context from their points-of-view. Nonetheless this forward movement of history, it is observed is never complete. It keeps recreating and framing current content in varied ways.

Part III

Khasi Polity

Some Reflections on its Epistemological Premise

Khasi polity is a complex construct, arising out of intricate relationships between historically inhabited lands, women centred clan systems, organic land distribution and ownership patterns, clan intersections and governing

institutions posited to manage various levels of Khasi social life. It is these ontological elements, all intertwined differently in varied geographical contexts, that propels the continuity of a political narrative and forms the basis of its social epistemology.

The Approach

From a historical point of view, most knowledge which forms the source of any political narrative is a product of waves of historical constructions and interpretations about events over time. These complex processes engender varied historiographies, many of which are methodologically external to Khasi episteme but are intertwined and have direct impact in the reproduction of Khasi social life and polity. Within historiography, some which are key in this construction and production process are (i) colonial historiography (ii) nationalist historiography (iii) regional historiography and (iv) subaltern historiography. Narratives produced from such historiographies envelop the Khasi social reality whether in the domain of state, politics, political systems, religion, language, culture, etc.

For the purpose of this text, a conscious attempt has been made not to use any of these historiographies. Instead, a direct engagement is attempted with the 'lived', through 'lived historiography'. The idea is to get as close as possible to Khasi social life and unravel the foundational elements of Khasi epistemology, in order to get a better insight into its organic polity.

This historical approach, as the name suggests, is centred on the lived experiences of people in their here and now. Methodologically, it rejects the 'colonial location' and embraces a 'decolonial position', giving rise to a different way of writing history; a decolonial historiography. While there are many differences between colonial and decolonial historiography, one that is critical pertains to their frame of reference. Each of these historiographies; colonial and decolonial, have their own frame of reference. While colonial; including nationalist, regional and even subaltern historiographies are often written from within a 'universal-particular' frame of reference, decolonial historiography makes a fundamental paradigm shift away from such a frame and posits itself within a 'diversity-coexistence' framework.

Most colonial historiography often conceives social reality as all subsumed within a single universal-particular framework; all beings are multiple particulars of a single universal. Differences in this framework, if any, exist within this single all encompassing universal. This way of thinking is often identified with colonialism and the point-of-view emerging from this particular type of thinking is referred to as 'coloniality'.

The 'diversity-coexistence' frame of reference, however, sees social reality as fundamentally diverse and, at a deeper level, in coexistence with each other. It does not negate or deny the existence of an embedded universal-particular within a diverse identity, but it sees the overarching social reality as characterised by heterogeneity, plurality and diversity. This way of thinking about social reality is identified as decolonisation and the point-of-view arising from such a perspective is called 'decoloniality'.

The methodological framework within which this text is written, has diversity-coexistence as its frame of reference. It is from this frame of reference and point-of-view that one begins to examine some fundamental issues concerning epistemology within Khasi polity. The intention to unpack epistemology in relation to polity is only so far as it visibilises the underlying structure of Khasi polity and provides the reader with a deeper insight into the structure and functioning of the Khasi political system.

The Context

Khasi context within itself and in relation to others, one may argue, is subjected much more to the diversity-coexistence framework. The term 'Khasi' embodies multiple intersecting realities of 'particulars', with their own embedded 'universal-particulars', in the form of numerous clans spread across hundreds of *shnongs*, *raid*, *sirdarships* and *bimas*. Every clan, *shnong*, *raid* and *hima* intersects with each other but in most cases, their boundaries; physical and social, are clearly drawn and respected. When the 'Khasi' entity intersects with other social identities, the reality of diversity and coexistence becomes starker.

The system is complicated for any observer at first glance until one begins a theoretical layering of critical constructs that make Khasi polity. Most of these layers are experienced as social processes and are intrinsically woven into each other in four life domains; clan, women, land and social institutions.

The Clanship System

The Khasis are constituted by approximately 3000 to 4000 clans. The exact number is not available. Attempts to codify the number of Khasi clans are still an ongoing exercise by the authorities concerned; the Federation of Khasi States and the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council. Each clan can trace their historical roots to a particular *shnong* and *raid*. If this is not possible because of their movement from one place of residence to another over the years, they can however still trace back their source to a particular *hima*. There are 25 *bimas* of the Khasis. Most *shnong* and *raid*

which constitutes a *himas* have founding clans. These clans remain alive, active and functioning to this very day. Although they are not as cohesive as they used to be, every member of the Khasi society carries a clan name and can be identified as such.

With the declaration of a portion of Shillong as the capital of the province of Assam starting 1874, many Khasis moved closer to the place and settled in or around it. While the founding clans of two *himas* - *Mylliem* and *Khyrim* which were once a single *Hima Shyllong* till 1853 remains intact, Shillong has many more clans that own land and inhabit the place now.

Women Centred Social System

At the very core of the clan social system is the woman. Khasi women are the very foundation of its social structure. It is around the woman that clans are constituted, built and revolve around. The lineage passes down the mother's line and most property, especially land is in the mothers' name and her clan. It used to be a traditional practice that Khasi men marry into the clan of a Khasi woman and takes residence in her home. The practice is followed to this very day among the Khasis, although changes have begun taking place.

Further, because of this particular lineage system of the Khasis, all children born out of wedlock between a Khasi woman and a non-Khasi male, automatically becomes Khasi. However, in the case of a Khasi man marrying a non-Khasi female, if they so desire, they can seek to start a new clan that is recognised by the village, the Chief or the Seng Khasi. This practice is called '*Tang Jait*' among the Khasis. Although there is deeply embedded hostility around this practice in contemporary times, because of the Khasi and non-Khasi divide, yet the tradition still prevails.

With the growth in population and spread of residence among the Khasis, most individuals usually trace their ancestry directly to a maternal grandmother or *Ka Kpoh*. This organic system among the Khasis cannot be generalised across the all the *himas*. In some *himas*, *raid* and *shnong* this system is extremely cohesive, while in others, especially the border regions, there are different innovations to the practice.

The identity of a Khasi individual is often framed around a clan name and each clan is connected to their land and forest within a *shnong*, *raid* and *hima*. Most Khasis historically derive their names from an intrinsic connect between land, women, clan and *hima*. While one cannot speak about this interconnectedness in the classical sense anymore, especially in Shillong city, yet this is very much prevalent in many *himas* outside Shillong.

Land Epistemology

Each *hima* has a different land system characterised by intricate ownership patterns. Collectively however, across all Khasi himas, there are two types of land systems; *Ri Kynti* and *Ri Raid*. The former is sub divided into 18 classes of land and the latter into 20 classes.⁵⁹ *Ri Kynti* is either self acquired or ancestral and *Ri Raid* is under the jurisdiction of a *shnong*, *raid* or *hima*. Each of these types of lands has multiple layers of boundaries and social institutions that encapsulate them, making it extremely difficult to pass ownership from one to another within the Khasis themselves. This relationship between land, women and clan is wired into these social institutions at various levels.

The Structure of Social Institutions

Around each of these social domains – clan, women and land – are woven social institutions with political and economic responsibility. Khasi men in this woman centred system are conceived as guardians, advisers and public representative of the clan in social forums that intersect with other clans. Historically, every clan has their own *Dorbar Kur* or clan dorbar. The smallest *dorbar kur* is instituted by kindred who source their being to a single maternal grandmother or *kpob*. This is overarched by another institution of the same, but larger clan dorbar that runs across many *kpob*. Over and above this is another clan institution that is constituted by a conglomeration of many clans that can trace their interconnectedness to a single founding clan. These are the social institutions built on and structured around clans. While one observes these *dorbar kur* waning over the years, there are persistent attempts to strengthen this social institution at every level. These *dorbar kurs* used to serve many purposes; social, economic, political and even religious. However, after the advent of Christianity among the Khasis, the religious role of the clan dorbar has taken different forms, roles and practices.

All of these clanship institutions are weaved into other socio-political institutions at the *Shnong* (village), *Raid* (a number of interconnected villages) and *Hima* (a number of raid). Within a *Shnong* there is a still smaller unit called *Dong*. It is in these spaces that there are social and political intersection among clans. Bigger *himas* have many *Raid* that constitute it, but smaller *himas* might have only two tiers - the *shnong* and *hima*.

Each of these social institutions are spaces in which collective decision making that concerns the larger community takes place. Each have their

59 Report of the Land Reforms Commission for Khasi Hills (1979).pp.19-26.

own Dorbars, starting from the *Dorbar Dong*, followed by the larger *Dorbar Shnong*, then the *Dorbar Raid* and finally the biggest *Dorbar Hima*. Over the years, starting late 2000s there have also been attempts to go beyond a single *hima* and institute the *Dorbar* of all *Himas* of the Khasis. Four such initiatives, called *Dorbar Ri* have taken place led by the FKS.

Each type of *Dorbar* is constituted by all the inhabitants of either a *Dong*, *Shnong*, *Raid* and *Hima*. The functioning of each of these *Dorbars* is mostly managed by selected male representatives called *Basan* or *Bakhran* of founding clans located within each institution. They in turn are finally selected through consensus and referendum by clan members or the people. Within Shillong however the practices within the villages that constitute it are committed through direct elections, even though there are still many villages that follow the earlier tradition as practiced in many other *shnong*, *raid* and *himas*.

These social institutions have many responsibilities; from managing day-to-day activities to maintaining of peace and tranquillity within their defined geographies. When an issue arises that is beyond their spatio-temporal jurisdiction, such concerns are brought up in the larger *dorbar*, the *Dorbar Shnong*. If the issue cannot be resolved within the *Dorbar Shnong*, it is taken to the *Dorbar Raid* and finally the *Dorbar Hima*. Currently with the operationalisation of the Sixth Schedule, the Autonomous District Council has been placed above the *Dorbar Hima* to become the final arbiter of disputes among the Khasis.

Concluding Remarks

These social institutions with a political and economic responsibility that arose from intricate connections between women, clan and land, form the epistemological basis of Khasi identity. Each institution is managed by a spatio-temporal concept called *Rangbah Dong*, *Rangbah Shnong*, *Sordar Raid* and the *Syiem*. While the first three are clan based and under direct clan control, the *Syiem* of a *hima* are concepts developed by clans to manage a 'space'. The *Syiem*⁶⁰ among the Khasis can be thought of as a neutral space that is crafted and agreed upon by the *Bakhrans* of founding clans of a *hima*. This space is often a socially sanctified and respected space among the Khasis, managed by a '*Syiem*' clan who are chosen and anointed by the *hima's*

60 The Report of the Land Reforms Commission for Khasi Hills (1974) explains the concept of *Syiem* as follows: "A Khasi Chief, be he a *Syiem*, a *Lyngdoh* or a *Sirdar*, was never, and is not a territorial ruler; he is an elected chief, elected according to the customary practice by an electoral college of the founding clans of the *elaka*, sometimes supplemented by elders of the villagers constituting the *lelaka*." p.2.

founding clans. The *Syiem*, often male, comes from the maternal line of the *Syiem* clan and occupies the responsibility of *Syiemship* for life. There are sixteen Syiemships among the Khasis. There are also 3 *Lyngdohships*, 5 *Sirdarship* and one *Wabadadarship*. The *Lyngdoh* is responsible for *ka knia ka kbriam* or rituals of a spiritual significance within the community and also is the chief of the *Lyngdohship* elected by the people for life. The 5 *Sirdar* are elected by adult members of the *Sirdarship* for life, and the *Wabadadar* of *Shella* Confederacy, a *hima* constituted by 9 *Shnongs* bordering Bangladesh are elected by adult members of the *hima* by secret ballot for a period of 5 years.

From an epistemological perspective, it is these organic ways of social organisation that the people are weaved into an identity called 'Khasi'. Each of the intertwined concepts; land, women, clan and social institutions are spaces in which people are physically raised, socially conditioned, relationally structured, their identity constructed, rights enshrined and above all, knowledge about self and the world are fundamentally grounded.

POST SCRIPT

The Decolonial-Historical Approach

Based on the insights derived from studying Khasi political systems through the Federation of Khasi States, an attempt is made to critically engage with the methodological issues arising from the study. For a text that attempts to dwell on the subject of epistemology, a discussion on methodology is important because it locates the text both within the larger public domain and the narrow but vital academic space. Before proceeding it is important that a word of caution for self and the reader is asserted at the very outset.

We live in a hierarchically complex society in which the forces of marginalisation are invested in defending and protecting their hegemonic grip over methodology. Methodology, for the dominant, is a key tool to firmly control knowledge and dominate discourse, and in many ways, to wade off any challenge to inherited power. This book however is a project of dialogue, emancipation and healing, and it would be meaningless for such a project, if that which is proposed as a methodology affirms in any way the oppression, both physical and epistemological, of any marginalised identities.

Having stated the same, one will now attempt to methodologise the Khasi context, unravelling insights that were derived from studying the same. Since these are personal equanimous reflections, the author will reflect and write about the same in first person, occupying an 'I' location. However, the usage of the concept 'I' in the reflections, is posited not as an isolated imperial 'I' claiming knowledge, authority and power over the subject, but as a transient interdependent 'I' in search of theoretical insights, deeper truth(s) and epistemological emancipation.

I call the methodological insights derived from context of study the **Decolonial-Historical Approach**. The need to choose and affirm this approach out of many other ways of engaging with the subject is because of a few theoretical issues that are considered imperative. This approach is constituted by six co-dependent and interconnected concepts - decoloniality, epistemological decolonisation, contextualisation, engaged observation, equanimity and dialogical historiography. Below an attempt is made to draw out theoretical contours and some key elements that constitute the same.

1. Key to the Decolonial-Historical Approach is the perspective and intent of a researcher. How one sees a reality is critical for the

approach. In my case, this perspective is framed around a concept called **decoloniality**. Decoloniality is a way of looking at social reality, and in that sense, a point-of-view. Intent is embedded in such a point-of-view. Part of the historical project of colonialism was to forcefully extent a particular way, a colonial way of looking at the world across all 'other' colonised realities. This way of looking, stemming from the coloniser's own sociality. Social reality, I wish to argue, is constituted by diverse reality(s). Each of these diverse reality(s) has embedded within themselves a frame of reference often spoken about as the universal-particular framework. This same frame of reference is also embedded in the social reality of the coloniser, like it is for every other diverse reality. When a single colonial entity began to impose itself through colonisation and colonialism on other diverse realities, it also extended its embedded 'universal-particular' to other realities. In the process of colonisation, the coloniser began to subjugate other diverse realities and subsumed them under its own frame of reference. Through this process, the colonised became the new 'particular' of the coloniser, and had to begin operating within the set rules of the coloniser's universal. Further, this produced a colonial difference in which the coloniser's universal was reproduced and perceived as superior, and the colonised, who are the particulars, were classified as the inferior within the universal of the coloniser. This did not end there, as colonialism classified the new subjugated particulars as inferior beings and constructed itself as superior beings. Across the world it even went on to mark people as full-human and half-human, pure beings and polluted beings etc. Hence, the universal of the coloniser became the universal for all other diverse colonised identities to submit, venerate and emulate. At the same time a rigid structure of double social inequality was embedded to place the worthy superior-particular over and above the now condemned and stigmatised inferior-particular. Manifested from this classification process was another phenomenon that was critical to understanding colonialism. Throughout this process the coloniser did not lose their subjecthood, and held on to their subjectivities, while the colonised became a mere object of the coloniser, devoid of any subjecthood. The coloniser remained a 'subject' and the colonised was reduced to an 'object'. This gave rise to what is called 'coloniality'; a gaze, a way of looking at the world in which this colonial difference became an established 'knowledge', accepted and consumed as normative by both the coloniser and the colonised. Knowledge produced around this process established coloniality as a 'given'. From the above we

can see that the project of colonialism was not merely a project of wealth accumulation by threat, force and violence but also a project of rule by knowledge; an epistocracy. It is within this understanding that the concept of decoloniality is pitched. For me, the notion of decoloniality challenges this colonial gaze, but not only this gaze, it attempts to replace the very premise of the 'universal-particular' by another frame of reference I call 'diversity-coexistence'. From a decolonial gaze the world is diverse and each of these dynamic diversity(s) are, at a more fundamental level, in a state of negotiated co-existence. Any act of pulverising, eradicating and homogenising these multiplicities, that were imperative for colonialism to succeed, amounted to violence; genocide, epistemicide and axiocide. Genocide – the total obliteration of the physical body of the other. Epistemicide – the extermination of knowledge systems and culture of the other. Axiocide – the annihilation of the 'good' and 'beauty' of the 'other', the destruction/distortion of the value attached to it, and the attempt to completely erase any history of genocide and epistemicide from public memory.

This methodological approach to the subject of inquiry is first and foremost grounded in decoloniality, and the frame of reference is 'diversity-coexistence'. At a personal level, I assume that diversity in itself is good, even though diversity coupled with inequality can be brutal. I am aware of this concrete possibility and my usage of the category 'diversity' is not without caution. Coexistence, I wish to assert is the most fundamental life principle in a world characterised by diversity. Based on this understanding, for this particular research, I gazed at the world from such a point-of-view asserting that it is diversity-coexistence which is more fundamental as a frame of reference rather than the universal-particular framework. Having been 'objects' of colonialism myself, am aware of its ideological moorings. My engagement with the history of the Khasis, is as one among the diverse many, neither as isolated subjects nor as colonised objects. Whether it is among the Khasis or in relation to other identities in the region, diversity is the defining overarching characteristic. For me the lens of decoloniality is how I gaze at the social reality; diverse and in coexistence.

2. From this decolonial point of view, I approached the subject of study through a process I call **epistemological decolonisation**. Before proceeding, it is important to touch upon the subject of colonial epistemology in order to be able to further my description of epistemological decolonisation. Within colonialism, the idea of

coloniality began to get consolidated into a distinct epistemology – the colonial epistemology. This took place incrementally over a period of time. It was this colonial epistemology that constituted the basis of the colonial gaze. With colonialism spreading across the world, this epistemology penetrated and perpetuated itself throughout the world of the colonised. Through this epistemology, the coloniser began to produce a structured social reality in ways that fit their image of the world and in means that serves their purpose and convenience. The act of decolonisation in this context is an attempt to deconstruct the process of colonial reproduction and its concomitant constructs through colonised societies. But it does not end there, for decolonisation is also an axiological resistance to colonial epistemology. It is from such an epistemological disobedience that the notion of epistemological decolonisation stems from. I consider it necessary to assert this point in order to bring to bear my thrust and focus on epistemology in the decolonisation project. My engagement with the production of knowledge from a decolonial gaze is not a theoretical confrontation with colonisation per se, but a rejection of an epistemology that appropriates and subjugates diverse entities into a single unilinear universal-particular frame of reference. In this sense, epistemological decolonisation is restrained from reducing colonisation to a single historical event. Instead, it sees colonisation as an epistemology that is violently layered into the lives of people through waves of colonialism and multiple intersecting colonial mentalities. Epistemological decolonisation is posited to unravel and face up to such a conception of colonisation.

It is this approach that I take in my study, engaging with the subject in ways that consciously attempts to resist the production of knowledge from colonial epistemology, that is from a universal-particular or coloniser-colonised framework. For me this colonial epistemology has its own set of rules and regulation for knowledge production. In overt yet subtle ways, it imposes on the knowledge producer how one should produce knowledge, what qualifies as knowledge and what particular knowledge is valid or invalid. Having been historically encapsulated in colonial epistemology myself, it was important for me to attempt to free myself from its standards and rules, set to reproduce colonial views and prejudices. The idea of epistemological decolonisation was critical for me, as I attempted to study a context such as the FKS that has its own embodied epistemology much before colonisation and colonialism. My attempt in this sense is to centre stage the criticality of epistemology in any colonial and decolonial project. The challenge is to see colonialism,

coloniality and colonial practice as an epistemology everywhere and not to reduce the same to a single historical event of pre and post. As a matter of perspective, I wish to argue that in contemporary times, rather than using the concept of pre and post, it is more appropriate to conceive social reality as waves of colonialism.

3. Having clarified the point-of-view and the approach within the overarching frame of epistemology, it now becomes necessary to clarify how I conceive my research subject, in this case the 'Khasi', and within it the 'Federation of Khasi States.' What constitutes these realities, and how do these realities lend themselves to a research process. I approach this conceptualisation from a process I call **contextualisation**; an attempt to ground myself around the 'context'. For me the 'context' is defined as a dynamic confluence of time, space, place, persons, fluid and interacting, organic and structured, experienced in the here and now, historically embedded and containing within itself an embodied epistemology. Every context embodies an epistemology - a context epistemology; that propels the production of knowledge, also the ways in which knowledge is structured, the usefulness and necessity of knowledge, the rules of validity or non-validity of knowledge and how its constitutive elements come to know and experience their realities. Context epistemology also constitutes of multiple intersecting realities within itself and in relation to others. It has a boundary, but the boundary is not rigid and static, it opens and closes based on concrete historical conditions and socio-political events. Embodying such a conception of context, I approach the process of contextualisation. The act of contextualisation for me is a conscious effort that demands the engagement, deconstruction, delineation, unravelling and reassembling of these intersecting realities through the identification of 'lines of enquiry' rather than the 'object of inquiry'. There is no object to inquire, only multiple lines of intersecting inquiries to be unravelled and comprehended in context. This gives rise to its own theory, but not a single universal theory, instead it produces an assemblage, a multiplicity of interdependent intersecting theories. Contextualisation engages with this multiplicity, with all its complexities, and unravels a particular line or more lines of inquiry in the context. Knowledge produced through contextualisation is multiple and in process, and it cannot be reduced to a single universal truth. This is how contextualisation conceives knowledge. As far as the knowledge producer engaging in knowledge production is concerned, contextualisation is somewhat restraint to any truth claim

by any person about having understood the totality of a reality. The knowledge producer has at most unravelled one aspect of the social reality, not the total reality. This limitation set on the knowledge producer about truth claiming and the characterisation of knowledge as a continuity of intersecting narratives, demands the recognition of two fundamental processes in knowledge production (i) that the knowledge producer should openly choose and state one's line of inquiry in the knowledge enterprise and (ii) that any social knowledge produced is only one among the many. In contextualisation there is no single Truth to be found, only multiple narratives to be unravelled. The role of the knowledge producer is to articulate these narratives and to restrain from making universal truth claims that fixes reality(s) in time and space as static entities.

It is from such a conception of context and contextualisation that I approach my study. For me the category 'Khasi' is a context. The architecture of this context has multiple interdependent lines of inquiry within itself, and is constantly intersecting with many other contexts. It is this 'context' that I attempt to study, which to me is a living pulsating subject that I wish to understand. Out of the numerous lines of inquiry available to understand the context, I have chosen the traditional Khasi political system represented by the Federation of Khasi States. I assert that this particular line of inquiry allows me to unveil Khasi history, epistemology and contemporary political reality. This however does not mean that the chosen line of inquiry is the only one possible to understand Khasi political system, for in context there are always multiple lines of inquiry to a subject. It only sets the limits of how much can be known, for what is possible to know is infinite. This insight about the limits of knowledge humbled me to a great extent. Contextualisation however is not a simple concept to practice; it requires a fundamental shift in how knowledge production and the role of theory are viewed. When one begins to see and become more established with the idea that it is context that produces theory and not theory that produce context, one has probably got closer to the possibilities of practicing contextualisation.

4. Having clarified the subject of study and how I perceive the same, it is necessary to discuss the process of engagement with this context within contextualisation. One of the methods of contextualisation is what I call **engaged observation**. This way of engagement is partly a rejection of what is often spoken about in the (colonial) social sciences as 'participant observation'. The attempt in engaged observation is not merely be a participant in the observation of the

context but to become so engaged in the context that one becomes the context itself. How does one do that, one might ask? To answer this question, one has to unravel the idea called ethnography and its method called participant observation. The idea of participant observation has its roots in colonialism. The way in which a 'participant' observer produces knowledge in ethnography is to make clear distinctions between the subject (researcher) and the object (data). The subject begins by objectifying the data, then classifies the same, followed by categorisation and finally produces knowledge by comparison. Such a process was part of a method in which colonialism framed the production of colonial knowledge. The idea of objectification and classification was actually fundamental to the colonial project. Colonialism needed to engage in such processes as it allowed them to produce the colonial difference that marked them (the coloniser) as superior and the other (colonised) as inferior. This was important for the coloniser because it is through this strategic methodological intervention that the coloniser was able to then encapsulate, dominate and control the 'object'. Once the coloniser took upon the universal position of the knowledge producer, the colonised 'object' is subjugated to an inferior being, who can then be reconstructed and reproduced in the coloniser's new project of rule. It is through this process of inferiorising and infantilizing the other that the coloniser began manufacturing and perpetuating the notion of being historically and morally superior and thus responsible to rule the inferior subject. It is this same intentionality that went on to inform the framework of colonial research. In colonial research the researcher occupies the location and gaze of the coloniser, and the research subject (peoples and cultures) are reduced to an 'object' of inquiry that needs to be define, classified, compared and theoretically taken control of, as in claim ontological epistemological authority over the 'object'. Throughout the process, the researcher uses their observation, mostly cognitive bounded reflexivity to collect 'data' and piece together a theory around and about the data/object. This is then compared to other data/theory in the process of analysing and writing to produce what colonialism considers social scientific knowledge. In direct contrast to participant observation, engaged observation goes beyond, by first attempting to merge the subject and the object in ways that the researcher is no more engaging only from cognitive centred reflexivity but can begin to feel the reality of the object. Here the context of study subsumes both the subject and object to become subject-object. The conceptual distinction between

the two remains, but as mere entities that in practice have become one in context. Engaged observation also asserts that all social knowledge is situated and the ability to occupy a location or a point of view is key to any knowledge enterprise. This position on knowledge challenges the way colonisers conceive knowledge. For colonialism, social knowledge is not situated, and the notion of objectivity, by the usage of a 'scientific' method, is their path to claim subject expertise over a knowledge domain. This is how it is argued by the coloniser, that true unbiased knowledge is produced. In this (colonial) way of producing knowledge the object of inquiry is a silent subject, without a voice, without being able to speak for itself and nothing more than data for the theorization, theoretical production and meaning making project that affirms and neatly fits into the world of the researcher/coloniser.

Engaged observation demands that we see the context as a 'subject' in which our subjectivities are to be intertwined. It was important for me to feel what the 'subject' of inquiry experiences, not only cognitively but as a sensation. The context was no more than just mere 'data' subjected to objectification, but it became a living pulsating entity with its own set of subjectivities in which I also became part of. It is from this subjective location and occupying this point of view that I began to engage in the knowledge enterprise about the context; unravelling, disentangling, discerning, reassembling and conversing about the traditional Khasi political system. But how did engaged observation work for me? This requires a deeper understanding of another important concept concerning one's state of 'sensation-perception-mental fabrication' that I call equanimity.

5. The next question that arises is what state of mind should the 'self' be while practicing engaged observation in the context. Also, when does one know that one's subjecthood is now entangled with the subjectivities of context? To discuss these processes, I propose to use the concept **equanimity**. The idea of equanimity goes beyond (cognitive) reflexivity. It enters the domain of what can be called 'ecologies of sensation'. The 'self' in a research context is a 'sensation'; a feeling plus thinking being. It cannot be reduced only to a thinking being. I opine that it is when one can feel the sensation of the context; the people and all other beings that constitutes it (thus the word ecology), that a researcher engaged in a knowledge enterprise can begin to get a deeper insight and understanding of the subjectivities of the identified context. The context in and by itself is

a 'subject' and not a mere 'object' that is to be objectified and interrogated. While this sounds easy enough, it demands much more than equanimity and 'ecology of sensation', it demands 'compassion', as in equanimity-compassion on the part of the researcher. The concept equanimity is often spoken about as closely link to compassion, not in the metaphysical but in the methodological sense. Human beings are capable of one more act, over and above sympathy and empathy, which is the ability to feel and experience compassion. It is not that compassion does not require empathy, it does, but it demands much more than just the cognitive aspects of empathy, it requires the emotive possibilities of empathy to be embraced wholeheartedly. The idea of compassion constitutes both cognitive empathy and emotive empathy. Cognitive empathy, which is often championed in the social sciences, is often spoken of in the research process as an important capacity of the researcher. However, while cognitive empathy requires great degree of sensitivity arrived at through critical reflexivity between self and the other/external reality, emotive empathy has to be cultivated as part of a conscious research practice of turning the gaze within or into the self, while operating in the external reality. Looking within to look without is part of this cultivation process. The equanimity-compassion continuum within the decolonial historical approach replaces what is often asserted in the interpretative schools of social science as the reflexivity-empathy spectrum which stresses more on the cognitive aspects of engagement. Equanimity however is different, because while reflexivity; often referred to the human capacity, over and above reactivity and responsivity that a researcher has while engaged in inquiry, equanimity refers to the capability of the researcher to observe oneself while observing the subject of study. Further while empathy loosely refers to a capacity that humans have to cognitively understand the concrete condition of the 'other', compassion refers to a non-judgmental affect that is possible for a researcher to experience the 'other' much beyond empathy. These two simultaneous processes of equanimity-compassion, goes beyond the ability of a researcher to produce knowledge not merely as a subject observing and trying to understand a concrete condition, but as one with an organic and partly authentic experience of the context itself. Two points however are important to note here about the equanimity-compassion continuum. First, when one hears such a conception for the first time, one might immediately feel a cognitive repulsion to the proposition. There could be many reasons for this,

one of which could be that ‘research’ as a means of knowledge production has been so dominated and subsumed within western/colonial rules that any conception out of this framework is immediately negated and ridiculed. This however is what the decolonial project attempts to historically rupture and theoretically unveil; the limitations of western colonial knowledge enterprise and the problematics of a conception in which the mind is the cause of existence – ‘I think therefore I exist’. Secondly; the reason we posit the equanimity-compassion as a stance in research is because we wish to argue that it is possible for every serious researcher, no matter what social background, to study any context without having to be trapped in the colonial insider/outsider debate. Nonetheless, this argument is not to take away from the fact that even western social science research is now beginning to seriously engage with such processes. Some of the new methods like autoethnography, critical ethnography, critical discourse analysis, critical and affective histories and the likes have been proposed to study varied domains such as society, culture, technology and biodiversity.

For me personally this ability was critical. It not only helped me realise my situatedness and location but also impressed on me the necessity of taking responsibility for what is said and done. I am from the Khasi community, but am trying to approach the subject of study as an equanimous researcher. Needless to say, that every context has its own method, a set of rules and regulation of engagement. For me the traditional political system in the form of the Federation of Khasi States was a great teacher, a very active teacher. It demanded that I read, engage, propel, rethink and act. In such a context one realises that whatever knowledge was gained from engaging with the subject, most of it was subjected to the rules of the co-production of knowledge rather than an extraction/construction process of the knowledge enterprise. When knowledge is seen and subjected to such rules, one begins to feel the tension of the context, the pain of its failures, the feeling of historical hurt, the fear of being condemned, the grief of being demeaned, the sorrow of being let down, the lamentation from unsuccessful attempts, etc. It is then that one begins to experience and grasp the subtleties of the context and gain deeper and superior insights into the context that were hidden. Such a knowledge project is no more than just mere cognitive extraction by the researcher from and about the context; instead, the context itself is now speaking through the researcher as a co-producer of knowledge.

6. Finally, I introduce one more critical method interconnected with all

the above processes. This concerns the direct engagement with the history of the context, inclusive of the method of writing history and ways in which theoretical production becomes part of the knowledge enterprise. I call my method of engagement with history as **dialogical historiography**. To understand dialogical historiography, we first need to contrast it with colonial historiography. Fundamental to colonial historiography is to posit the writing of history within a universal-particular framework. Two claims are made by colonial historiography (i) that the history written is universal; as in applicable across time and space, and (ii) the approach to writing is objective; as in being unbiased and neutral. 'Dialogical historiography' rejects this claim and makes no such assertion, either about being objective or about producing universal knowledge. The only claim it makes is that historical knowledge is situated and is neither objective nor neutral. There are many differences between colonial historiography and dialogical historiography, but one and the most fundamental being the frame of reference of both. The frame of reference of dialogical historiography is diversity-coexistence as compared to the universal-particular framework of colonial historiography. This fundamental shift from universal-particular to diversity-coexistence frame of reference is the defining characteristic of dialogical historiography. A whole new paradigm of historiography now arises, giving rise to a new frame of reference grounded on a new premise. The premise of this new paradigm is what I call 'diversity-dialogue'. The notion of dialogue within this framework stems from the idea of coexistence. Dialogue is akin to coexistence and knowledge from this perspective is conceived more as a means of dialogue rather than an attempt at truth-assertion. Dialogical historiography simply affirms the notion of 'points-of-view' and 'non-judgementality' rather than the delusory claims of objectivity and neutrality. An important point to note here is that this idea of points-of-view and non-judgementality does not negate criticality, instead it embraces criticality openly. Criticality here is conceived as a conscious decision taken to locate oneself within a critical gaze, which is the dialectical opposite of the commonsensical, the traditional, the unperceptive and the undiscerning gaze. This is what marks dialogical historiography different, it stresses upon the dialogical nature of knowledge. Dialogue as knowledge, or dialogical knowledge being an act of engaging, conversation and reciprocity, rather than defining, constructing and controlling. This knowledge intends not to impose or forcefully construct the other, rather it attempts to converse with the other. This inter-epistemic dialogue

speaks simultaneously to its own context and also to other dynamic contexts in a rational, dignified and self-respecting manner. Such knowledge and ways of engagement, I assert, not merely inform but emancipate and heal.

Within this framework I want to state that through my engagement with the Khasi political system, I do not claim to have any academic authority over the subject and context of study. Mine is probably one of the many possible narratives of relatedness about Khasi political history. Being a narrative, I write not to coerce, define or construct but to engage, reassemble and deconstruct. Mine is not a knowledge project envisioned to claim that I know the truth about the Khasi reality through the studying of its traditional political systems and my knowledge is more or better than others. I do not believe that there is any single static truth about the Khasi reality that my short text captured and purports to tell. I believe that even before I began writing this text, the reality has already moved and at most my written reflections was only able to capture moments in this historical movement. For me, the Khasi social reality is in a state of continual transformation, always in the process of becoming, moved by varied causes and multiple reasons. Nothing in the Khasi reality is produced by a single cause, and nothing in it exists as a single autonomous unit. Everything depends upon another and this other on which it depends is itself dependent on another. Nonetheless my knowledge project is not without intent, I am clear of my own interest in the subject, as much as am clear that in engaging with the subject I am seeking my own historical truth. I do not deny that mine is a truth-seeking project. Thus, while I will not claim authority on the subject, I do however assert that through my own search I probably can provide some superior insights into the dynamic Khasi reality and its organic political systems. At a personal level, as a Khasi myself, the way in which I attempt to share these insights is within the framework of diversity-dialogue. From this view I have used dialogical historiography as a way of thinking, reflecting and writing to unpack my theoretical insights. I have extended my insights to domains that visibilise the invisible narrative, bring forgotten history to live, reassemble distorted axiologies and above all challenge the notion that the Khasi context is nothing more than hostile peripheries.

Is dialogical historiography apolitical? Not at all. Is dialogical historiography a dispassionate way of writing history? Probably. Is dialogical historiography another way of writing history out of the colonial, nationalist, regional and subaltern historiographies? Definitively.



This book is part of the Methodologies in Social Research Series of the Tribal Intellectual Collective India. Based on empirical studies carried out by its members, critical insights and aspects of methodology are shared. This particular text discusses the 'Decolonial-Historical Approach'. The approach constitutes six interdependent methodological categories - decoloniality, epistemological decolonization, contextualization, engaged observation, equanimity and dialogical historiography. The main text concerns itself with the political history of the Khasis in the Northeast context. Scholars interested in knowing the complex history of Northeast India and the genesis and contemporary debates pertaining to the Sixth Schedule would greatly benefit from this book.

bodhi s.r is National Convener, Tribal Intellectual Collective India and Faculty, TISS Mumbai

