



## **Forgotten Catastrophe: The Khasi Hills and the Partition of 1947**

**SASHI TEIBOR LALOO**

TEIBORSASHI@GMAIL.COM

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### **Introduction**

The Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Indigenous communities constitute the largest population in Meghalaya, a state in North-Eastern India. The hills where these communities resided, were categorised as the Jaintia Hills (in the East), Khasi Hills (in the centre) and Garo Hills (in the West) during the colonial period which formally began in the 1830s. With regards to the area under study, the Southern Khasi Hills or foothills that share a border with the plains of Sylhet in Northern Bangladesh, are geographically and culturally significant due to their exceptional climatic conditions and unique cultures, thriving in the region. It is where Mawsynram and Sohra—the rainiest places on earth are situated. This region is also home to the well-known Whistling Villages (that confer to every single individual a unique tune given by the mother during birth) and the Living Root bridges, which for centuries the elders have perfected the art of intertwining and taming the roots of trees from both sides of the riverbank.

For centuries, the Khasi Chiefs administered these southern foothills by nourishing their culture and advancing the trade of agricultural and horticultural produce as well as natural resources like limestone, timber and stone which were in high demand in Sylhet. Before the advent of colonial administration, the influence of Khasi Chiefs stretched to the



plains of northern Sylhet, aided by geographical proximity and mutual socio-economic benefits.

Over the years, the word 'Khasi' has evolved as an umbrella term to denote the *Ki Hynniew Trep* (seven clans) that descended from Heaven through the sacred Sohpetbneng Hill, embedded in the region's folklore. The *Hynniew Trep* comprised the clans Khyntiam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Maram, Lyngnam and the now-extinct Diko. In time, these clans migrated across the Khasi and Jaintia hills in search of agricultural lands and economic activities. In the absence of a Khasi script (till the mid-nineteenth century) their history was handed down by word of mouth and testified by stones, megaliths and unique landmarks. A prominent folklore recalls that the Khasi-Jaintia Hills were home to *Ka Ri ki 30 Syiem bad 12 Dalloi* which translates to the land of 30 *Syiem(s)* or Chiefs in the Khasi Hills and 12 *Dalloi(s)* or administrators in the highlands that were accountable to the Jaintia King. The Khasi Hills were administered by Chiefs of royal descent alongside their *Mintri(s)* or council of ministers/clan elders. The territory of a Chief is called a *Hima* which can be understood as a State or Chiefdom.

As per tradition, the Khasi community follows the matrilineal system, where children inherit the clan title or surname from the mother's lineage. Hence, the position of a Chief is non-hereditary but passes on from the Chief to his nephew, whereby the Chief's sister's son continues the lineage of the clan title. Matrilineal societies are also found in many parts of south-east Asia, where the biggest in terms of population belongs to the Minangkabau community inhabiting in Indonesia and parts of Malaysia.

The Khasi-Jaintia are considered one community, but as a result of the colonial categorisation, it disrupted the social unity into two separate administrative units: Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills. On another note, the portrayal of the community as savage and uncivilised like many North-Eastern tribes of British India is misleading and false. The Khasi community had thriving socio-economic contacts along the north-eastern frontiers of Bengal since the pre-colonial period. However, it is from the eighteenth century onwards, that the Khasi opened much of their economic corridors with the English East India Company and it resulted in a vast array of socio-political modifications in time.

The establishment of the East India Company's station in the Khasi Hills began with the need for a sanatorium, strategic location, economic alliance and control of the route between Assam and Sylhet. After the Anglo-Khasi War of 1829, the Company's victory gave them an upper hand over the political affairs in the region. The Khasi Hills Political Agency was set up in 1835 and it gradually developed into an indirect



administration over the Chiefs and therefore, interfering with the lucrative trade and commerce along the Sylhet-Khasi Hills corridor.

It is important to understand that the Khasi Chiefs and their territories gradually acquired the status of states in the British correspondences as their administration crystallised in the Hills. In the twentieth century, when the course of nationalism rose to great heights and the colonial days were numbered in 1947, the Khasi States which amounted to 25 of them were expected to officially agree with the Indian Union through the Instrument of Accession and the Instrument of Merger. To date, the Khasi States have not signed the latter.

The first part of this essay attempts to trace the evolution, developments and ripple effects brought forth by colonial policies and demarcations beginning from late eighteenth until the twentieth century. Among scholars working on borderlands in the Indo-Bangladesh region, David Ludden wrote extensively on the evolution of Sylhet's northern boundary and further mentioned that the Company's Sylhet and Khasi Hills boundary in the 1790s laid the foundation of the Indo-Bangladesh border today. Ludden wrote from a Sylhet perspective with very few mentions of the historical narratives of the Khasi community and the Hills. Therefore, the essay addresses the Khasi perspective and the multiple phases of boundary alignments that developed after 1790. The paper will also highlight the key political events in Bengal and how they directly affected the Khasi Chiefs in the southern foothills.

In the second part of the essay, a social history of two Khasi territories, namely *Hima* (State) of Langrin and Wahlong, administered by a *Sordar* (Wahlong, written as 'Byrong' in the colonial accounts) will be highlighted. Further, the essay will throw light on the implementation of the Two-Nation theory in 1947 and the impact of the Partition in the Khasi Hills. Keeping in mind that the Indian subcontinent is a land of diverse ethnicities and faiths, certain questions need to be addressed here. Since the separation was based on religious lines backed up by political ideologies, why did communities outside the sphere of Hinduism, Islam and the political spheres bear the brunt of it all? Most importantly, how did the regions crossed by the sudden stroke of the Radcliffe Line adjust to such a catastrophic decision that divided a community into two nationalities?—the Khasi(s) of India and the Khasi(s) of Sylhet. As most of the narratives regarding the Partition of 1947 were dominated by the Panjab and Bengal, the Partition also needed equal perspectives from Chiefs, traders and landowners of North-East India.

Thus far, Partition narratives have not yet painted a complete picture of the Partition and India's academic curriculum is yet to include the



Partition and its impacts on the Khasi States. The reason for the shortage of literature and narratives, as compared to the Panjab and Bengal may be understood when Ranajit Guha explains that historiography in the Indian context has so long been dominated by colonial and nationalist elites. Therefore, these endangered histories and experiences of marginal communities have been sidelined. Guha further explains that this process of writing history “Fails to acknowledge, far less interpret, the contribution made by the people on their own, that is, independently of the elites” (Guha 2005, 3).

The Partition of 1947, especially in the context of the Southern Khasi foothills and the concept and evolution of borders needs to be understood through a long process of colonial mercantile interests and alterations that came into play from the concluding decades of the eighteenth century till 1947. It is important to understand how these altered frontiers paved the way for colonial demarcations in the region (Schendel 2004; Cederlöf 2014; Ludden 2011; 2003; D.R. Syiemlieh 1989; 2014; Giri 1998; Dutta 2012; Kar 2009) which eventually led to the establishment of the Indo-East Pakistan (Bangladesh after 1971) international border in 1947. Historians like Schendel and Ludden who worked on the Bengal borderlands extensively, have given a conceptual framework and new perspectives to explore the impact of borders on community lives.

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### **The evolution of territorial demarcations: Turning back the pages of time**

If we reflect on the territorial demarcation after the Sylhet Referendum in 1947, we must keep in mind, that in the context of the Khasi Hills and Sylhet, multiple demarcations or a geographical hill-plain divide had already taken place over the past centuries. Demarcations were ongoing in favour of the East India Company’s mercantile interest or to put it bluntly, a gradual fulfilment of their *Diwani* (revenue) rights in the region. Under the *Diwani* treaty, the Company perceived that the plains of Sylhet automatically belonged to the Company and the influence of the Chiefs ended in the hills, a situation where the history of territorial control was disregarded. However, from the late eighteenth century onwards, Sylhet’s northern territory came to be defined and re-defined, by colonial annexation and policies towards their allies. Despite gradual skirmishes between the Company and the Chiefs, trade and commerce among the Khasi and Sylhet communities persisted as revenue extracted from these interactions was paramount.

It is important to trace the evolution of boundaries in the region that emerged from political events after the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and the Battle of Buxar in 1764. The Treaty of Allahabad in 1765, granted the



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East India Company the *Diwani* (the right to collect revenues) over the Bengal *Subah* (province) which comprised modern-day West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha in the Indian Union and Bangladesh. For the economy of the Khasi hills and the Sylhet plains, the markets or *Haats* along the foothills were crucial for the regional economy. Among the abundant minerals and produce from the hills that caught the attention of the Company were the finest quality of limestone, oranges, iron, potato, spices, coal, timber and stone. From the plains, the Company had control over commodities that moved into the hills like rice, salt, tobacco, fish, oil, corals, brass, copper utensils, clothes and livestock like cattle and goats that were in high demand in the hills (Yule 1844; Mills 1901; Gurdon 1914; Ludden 2003; Syiemlieh 2006). Many of the *Haats* located along the river banks and foothills were under the jurisdiction of the Khasi Chiefs.

Before one understands the impact of the demarcation of the Khasi states/territories in 1947, it is important to throw light on how these communities residing on the Khasi Hills began to develop an image of a "Hill" tribe (an identity context) with the setting in of colonial administration in Sylhet. After 1765, the Company confidently perceived that northern Sylhet (an area administered by the Khasi Chiefs and Jaintia Kings then) was a geographical extension of the Bengal plains under the Dacca District. W. M. Thackeray took charge as the Company's first Revenue Collector in 1772 and wrote to his superiors in Calcutta that:

Away to the east of Dacca lay an immense district, as yet almost entirely unexplored and practically unknown. Peopled by wild hill tribes, with its further boundaries ill-defined and its limits stretching away into impenetrable jungles, even the *Musulman* Emperors at the height of their power had never wholly succeeded in subduing it and including it within their empire (Bradley-Birt 1911, 127).

In trying to control the Khasi territories, the Company's *Diwani* Rights gradually came into conflict with the Khasi Chiefs who influenced parts of northern Sylhet. In the skirmishes over control over the region, the Jaintia King (the eastern neighbour of the Chief of Khyriem) repeatedly disturbed the movement of the Company boats, eventually leading to an armed conflict. The Company's victory over the forces of the Jaintia King in 1774, established the Company as a new power in the foothills. However, as the interest of the Company was of economic control and not direct rule over the region, the Jaintia King was reinstated as ruler on the condition that he opened the Surma River to the free movement of the Company's boats (Passah 1988, 225).

During the last decades of the eighteenth century, the Company



gradually made inroads into the Khasi territory at Sylhet. As more lands along the frontiers of Sylhet meant more revenue the Company encouraged its commercial agents to expand their influence over the lucrative limestone trade, a mineral found in abundance in the Khasi hills. Within a decade of the Company's administration in Sylhet (a region that was initially placed under the District of Dacca), it acquired the status of a new District in 1778, with Robert Lindsay as its first collector. (Bengal Board of Revenue Files, No 11, 1782).

Further, to safeguard the Company's interest and defend against future skirmishes, the Collector of Sylhet Robert Lindsay's letter on 26 June 1779 requested for the construction of a fort at Pandua on the Khasi Foothills. (Firminger 1917a). Pandua was an important weekly *Haat(s)* of the Khasi(s) situated to the south of Shella (Syiemlieh 2006). Collector Willes took charge after Lindsay in 1788 and continued with his predecessor's policies. He proposed to Governor-General Lord Wellesley (1773-85), for the need for demarcation and clarifying the boundaries as the people in the northern plains of Sylhet are "partly subjected to us and partly subjected to the Cosseah, in which they exert authority" (Firminger 1917b). A major development took place in 1799, whereby a proposal was made to survey the foothills and demarcate the border within the Khasi Hills (Allen 1905, 35).

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David Ludden, who studied the evolution of Sylhet's northern border with the Indigenous communities beginning in the 1780s, highlights the factor that the altered boundary between Sylhet and the hill territories did not result entirely from skirmishes or political annexation but northern expansion occurred from natural calamities. Floods that ravished Sylhet in the years 1783 and 1787 hampered the revenue collections and with pressure from Calcutta (base of the East India Company), the district collectors encouraged the cultivators to move northwards towards the territories of the Khasi Chiefs (Ludden 2003a, b). As the Company wanted to encroach on these lands for better revenue production, the Company faced stiff resistance from the Khasi Chiefs under the leadership of Gunga Sing and others. The years following the 1780s were marked by an ambition to quell the disturbances of the Khasi communities in the Company lands. (Karlson 2011; Ludden 2003a, b; Cederlöf 2014).

In the nineteenth century, the East India Company eventually made inroads towards the Khasi highlands, beginning with the Company's success during the Anglo-Burmese War between 1824 to 1826. The war etched Britain's victory over the Burmese and both signed the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, giving the Company an upper hand in the administration affairs over North East India, a region administered by local



rulers like the Khasi Chiefs, Ahom Kings, the Jaintia Kings and the Kings of Manipur. A few years after the Treaty of Yandaboo, road projects to connect the Company territories in Assam in the North and Sylhet to the South began through the Khasi *Hima(s)*.

David Scott, who served as an Agent to the Governor General of India and in charge of the North East Frontier, commissioned the road connecting the British territories of Assam and Sylhet and envisioned the need for a sanatorium at Sohra (Cherrapunjee) came to fruition in 1835 as the headquarters of the Khasi Hills Political Agency. However, during the road construction project, Scott and other officers of the Company came into conflict with various Khasi Chiefs along the Khasi hills for political and security reasons. When the British broke their promise to reinstate lands to the Chief of Khadsawphra (which became Nongkhlaw, after colonial intervention), the disturbances faced by the womenfolk in the hands of the colonial labourers in the road project, and the loss of revenue lands along the northern Sylhet, the Khasi Chiefs under the leadership of Tirot Sing of Khadsawphra and other Chiefs along the southern foothills fought the Company in what came to be known as the Anglo-Khasi War from 1829 to 1833 which ended in the Company's victory. (Bareh 1984, 46 onwards)

As the East India Company began to impose the idea of a hill-plain dichotomy and demarcated areas like Pandua to form parts of the Sylhet administration in the eighteenth century, the nineteenth century was marked by the Company's political alteration into the Chief's lands in deriving maximum revenue for the District of Sylhet at the same time maintained an indirect administration over the Khasi Hills.

However, from 1829 onwards, correspondences between David Scott and the Khasi Chief of Sohra, Duwan Sing and later, with his succeeding nephew Sobah Sing, painted an interesting picture. It gives the readers an important source that tables the fact that not all Khasi Chiefs opposed the interference of the Company. In a letter addressed to Fort William dated 20 August 1829, David Scott stated that "the Cossyas who are very desirous to have their new bazaar established should (be done so) without further delay in consequence of disputes which have recently occurred between them and the *sepahees* stationed at Pundua" (Dacca Commissioner's Papers). The British accordingly exchanged lands with the Chief of Sohra and received an area of 50 acres in the highlands of Sohra for lands of equal size at Bholaganj. This place is known as *Haat Majai* to the Khasi Community.

Further, The Khasi Hills Political Agency was established at Sohra (Cherrapunjee). It was headed by Colonel Lister, formerly the leader of the Sylhet Native Infantry during the British Expedition in the Khasi Hills,



and now a Political Agent. Lister made his son-in-law Harry (also known as Henry) Inglis his assistant in administering the affairs of the hills (Mills 1901). As they deemed it more practical, the Political Agency maintained the status quo of many Chiefs in the Khasi Hills, with conditions favourable to the East India Company.

Historian Andrew May, who has studied the region extensively expressed the development as “the interweaving of economic and political power was now complete” (May 2012, 202). Further, in highlighting the economic thirst of the Company in the region, J. B. Bhattacharjee also believes that “the market factor was equally important in the case of the annexation of Jaintia in 1835. The annexation was preceded by an army operation and the deportation of Raja Rajendra Singh of Jaintia to Sylhet as a captive in which Harry Inglis, proprietor of the Inglis & Co. played a dubious role” (2000, 68). A report of A. J. M. Mills stated, ‘The Jaintia Hills cannot be considered a part of the Khasi Hills’ (1853, 3-4). Therefore, such colonial policies of divide and rule were engrained into the very thought process and administration of the region not just in the past but an occurrence to the present day as well.

In boosting the potential trade relations between Khasi Hills, Assam and Sylhet, the British attached the District of Sylhet to the newly formed/ established Province of Assam in 1874, with its capital at Shillong, in the Khasi Hills. However, despite the ongoing developments of altering territories, certain priorities of demarcations were maintained. For instance, since the British recognised the status of the Khasi Chiefs and governed the Khasi *Hima(s)* indirectly through them, the boundary between their territory and Sylhet (administered by the British directly via Zamindars) saw the need for maintaining a border between the two. The task of re-accessing the areas was carried out by a survey where ‘in 1861- 65, Captain Clark and Mr Jones as Boundary Commissioners finally settled certain differences along that boundary, and Devy’s maps (1861-1865) were altered in the Surveyor General’s office to show these corrections’ (General Department 1913). Therefore, in the Assam Province, the socio-political boundaries of the Khasi States with the other British-administered regions (within the Province) were spelt out very clearly through boundary pillars.

However, a tragic earthquake in 1897 ravaged the Khasi Hills and the Sylhet and Khasi-Jaintia Hills demarcation pillars were damaged or displaced. In the early twentieth century, the Zamindar of Gauripur in Sylhet took advantage of the situation and encroached upon the lands belonging to the Langrin and Nongstoin Chiefs. Such encroachment became an issue as the lands of the Khasi cultivators were compromised.

Concerning trade, the markets in the hills functioned at a regular





interval of eight days a month to enable the traders' periodic visits to the various markets located on the hills and *Haats* along the plains. For instance, the Chiefs of Sohra and Khyriem levied market dues at Lakhat and Bholagunj. Other Chiefs with land towards Sylhet controlled these *Haats* from which they derived a *Khrong*, a market levy (Syiemlieh 2008, 57).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the British divided the Bengal Presidency on the pretext of effective administration. The Partition of Bengal in 1905 and the policies of Governor-General Lord Curzon (1899-1905) had direct consequences on the Khasi Hills. In a major re-shufflement from 1905 onwards, the Assam Province along with the Khasi Hills were placed under East Bengal, and the capital was shifted from Shillong to Dhaka. However, in 1911, the Partition of Bengal was annulled due to the nationalist fervour of the Hindus and Muslims who stood opposed to the separation. There were also major political and administrative decisions that took place post-1911, for instance, Delhi was decided to be the new capital of British India, and concerning the North East Frontier, Assam once again retained the status of a province. After the political upheaval in the Partition of Bengal, the administrators turned a blind eye to the destruction of the boundary pillars caused by the earthquake in 1897.

In maintaining the boundary between Sylhet and the Khasi Hills, the correspondence from the Deputy Commissioner via a circular dated 26th November urging the *Syiem* (Chiefs) of Sohra, Malai Sohmat, Bhowal, Maharam, Langrin, Nongstoin as well as the *Sordars* of Sohbar, Wahlong, Mawlong, Mawdon, Dwara Nongtyrnm and the Wahadadars of Shella whose lands shared a border with Sylhet to be present and assist the surveyors and officers to avoid any complications in the near future (General Department, No 711-21, 1912). Further, this direction in relaying the boundary comprised more than three-quarters of the Khasi Hills boundary with Sylhet.

The twentieth century also witnessed two world wars which in the process, greatly influenced the consolidation of socio-political identity in the British Colonies. While Indians were involved in the Second World War on many fronts, actual combat occurred at Imphal and Kohima in North-East India. At the same time, British India was also brewing with political movements and communal riots. Britain having suffered in the Second World War, prompted her to concede to the demand of Muhammad Ali Jinnah's Two Nation Theory of 1940 based on religious majority. The Boundary Commission was given the official responsibility to Partition India. The event had a devastating effect and brought collective traumatic experiences for the entire continent much so for the



population residing in the boundaries. Sadly, the repercussions of the Partition in 1947 are still felt today in many parts of India. (Bajpai & Framke 2018).

In the past decades, scholars and writers have begun to critique the stereotypes that have long dominated Partition studies. A major gap in these studies both regionally and globally is the absence of the Khasi experience and the territories of the Chiefs as the Khasi Hills formed a part of the Bengal frontier experience in 1947. This phenomenon in history writing can resonate when Paul Thomson opines that, since history is recorded from the standpoint of authority, oral history thus gives a fair platform to the voiceless, and "in doing so, oral history has a radical implication for the social message of history as a whole" (Thomson 2000, 6-7).

### **The Partition of 1947: The Khasi Hills chapter**

In British India, the journey of independence had its advent with the formulation of the Government of India Act 1919 and most importantly with the Government of India Act of 1935. The latter paved the way for provincial elections which gave rise to communal politics started by the Muslim League and the Congress. In time, the Muslim League under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah pressured the British government that the only solution to end the communal violence is a separate state for the Muslim nation. With mounting difficulties and economic hardships at home, Britain finally decided to give in to the demands of the leaders of the Congress as well as the Muslim League thereby weakening the National movement and unity of the masses.

The Mountbatten Plan or the June 3 Plan (proposed by India's last viceroy Lord Louis Mountbatten on 3 June 1947) was a major component of the Indian Independence Act of 1947 which became official on 5 July 1947. Two of the main points in the Mountbatten Plan that are of importance to this essay were, 1) the fate of Sylhet depended on the referendum and 2) a Boundary Commission would officially carve or demarcate East and West Pakistan from India. As communal clashes emerged in many parts of India after the Second World War, the implementation of the Two-Nation Theory and the process of demarcating Assam and East Pakistan took shape. Binayak Dutta stated:

When the Cabinet Mission arrived with the grouping plan, the Assam Congress leaders opposed the Cabinet Mission for placing Assam in Group "C" along with Bengal but pointed out that they had no objection to the transfer of Sylhet from Assam to Bengal. When the Muslim League led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah demanded the inclusion of Assam in Paki-



stan, the Congress leadership rejected the idea but agreed to the referendum in Sylhet. When Lord Mountbatten announced the decision of the colonial state to organise a referendum, the Congress, the Communists and the Jamiat-ul-Ulama-i-Hind were on one side and the Muslim League and the Jamiat-i-Islami on the other jumped into the campaign. It was this battle that decided Sylhet's fate after 14th August 1947 (Dutta 2014, 164).

The referendum also known as the Sylhet Referendum took place in July 1947 and resulted in favour of the Muslim League which decided Sylhet to East Pakistan. As much as it was to the victory of the Muslim League and the defeat of the Congress and its allies, the result was a major setback to the Chiefs whose economic influence was mostly generated from the trade with Sylhet and most importantly the fate of Sylhet (a very intrinsic part of the province of Assam since 1874) was shifted to East Pakistan. As a consequence of the Radcliffe Line, undivided Assam (consisting of the Khasi Hills) lost a total of 4.769 square miles of territory and a population of 2.825,282 was impacted in 1947 (ibid.).

In the context of the Princely States, to which the Khasi States were a part, an option was given to the heads of states whether to join either India or Pakistan or they may stay independent. Twenty-three out of the twenty-five Khasi Chiefs chose to align themselves with India and signed the Instrument of Accession a treaty made with the Indian Government in 1947. The two States of Nongstoin and Rambrai refused to sign the agreement. Deputy Chief of Nongstoin, Wickliffe Syiem (the first engineer from the Khasi community) was not in favour of the Instrument of Accession for many reasons and one of them was to surrender the jurisdiction over their lands. It is important to keep in mind that Nongstoin had tracts of land in the plains of Sylhet and their economy depended largely on trade and commerce with the plains. However, under pressure from the Indian Government, the two remaining states were forced to sign the Instrument of Accession in the early months of 1948. Interestingly, another important treaty known as the Instrument of Merger was never signed by the Khasi States to date and this served as the platform for the insurgency movement in the past decades.

Given the Partition and the experiences of the Khasi community, Nari Rustomji, advisor of Tribal Areas to the Governor of Assam in the 1940s, mentioned that the Pakistan authorities encouraged an economic blockade towards the Khasi Hills so as "to put pressure on the Khasis and create among them a feeling that they would be better off in Pakistan" (Rustomji 1971, 110). Most of the markets along the southern foothills lost their significance in the economic blockade and minerals like lime,



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stone, coal and agricultural produce like oranges, areca nut, beetle leaf, bay leaf etc. were left unsold. Rice, a staple of the Khasi-Jaintia community along with salt, fish, oil etc. were some of the commodities that lost their way into the hills. Hence the closure of markets along the new international border brought scarcity and the inaccessibility created so much chaos in the Khasi-Jaintia foothills (Gassah 1984; Pyrngap 2017).

For instance, taking the plight of a very important market, *Iew Rilang* or Rilang market was under the jurisdiction of the Langrin Chiefs with their capital at Phlangdiloin. It operated twice a week and the market functioned at the confluence of Kynshi and Rilang River. It catered to the traders belonging to the highland as well as those of the foothills of Maharam, Nobosohphoh, Nongstoin and other Khasi states. The traders carried their goods on their backs and sometimes on horseback. Due to the length of the journey, many traders took an overnight halt at Phlangdiloin. They proceeded to the market at dawn the following day. Presently, these areas fall under the West and South West Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya.

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Figure 1: Rilang Market was located on the banks in the confluence of the Rilang and Kynshi Rivers (semi-turquoise colour), which lies a few kilometres from today's Indo-Bangladesh border. The market catered to the people belonging to the states of Langrin, Nongstoin and others. It is presently in ruins after it had been gradually given up after Partition in 1947.

Through various field visits taken by the author alongside conversations with the elders who survived the partition, it was found that in the pre-partitioned days, boats from Sylhet brought rice, salt, sugar, fish, dried/smoked fish, oil and other commodities and in return, they bought



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potato, pepper, beetle leaves, areca nut, ginger, fruits like banana and oranges, bay leaves etc. The people along the foothills acted as middlemen between the Khasi Hills and the plains of Sylhet. During Partition, when the market gradually came to a halt, the people had to resort to black marketing and this came with constant harassment from the border security guards.

Felix Lyngdoh Shigi<sup>1</sup> was twelve years old when Partition took place. For months into the Partition, his family had to resort to hunting and scavenging for vegetables, bamboo shoots, wild potatoes, yam and the inner stem of the *Dieng Tlai* or Fish Tail Palm in the forest as there was a shortage of rice. With so many shortages and insecurities, Mr. Felix Lyngdoh Shigi stated that feeding on the bland vegetation mixed with a small quantity of rice, made them feel that they were no less than pigs.



Figure 2: Mr. Felix Lyngdoh Shigi

Considering the social history of political boundaries in the region, the Census of India 1961 mentioned in the columns, certain schemes that relocated 500 families along with financial assistance to the Bhoi Areas lying on the northern Khasi Hills. There were also schemes for road construction to divert the flow of goods from the southern foothills to other parts of the region (Burman 1970). Despite the efforts from the government to distribute food rations along with the setting up a chartered flight to carry the agricultural produce from Shella to Calcutta (for a few years before it crashed) the efforts of the Government did not



live up to the expectations due to the geographical terrain, the vastness of the Southern foothills and the untimely crash of the plane. The census report also stated that despite the negotiations with the Government of East Pakistan, the "Import of rice from the plain areas of Pakistan for use in the United Khasi & Jaintia Hills District did not materialise" (ibid).

From the official records across the border, *The District Gazetteers of East Pakistan* mentioned that "Immediately after the partition there was a slump in all the markets, Sylhet market lost its links with Calcutta, Patna and Cooch Bihar and export link with Cherrapunji, Bholaganj, Lakhat, Dawki, Jowai, Shillong, Karimganj and Silchar. The Marwari capitalists left Sylhet for good" (Rizvi 1970, 251). From the reports above, it was clear that the population along the Khasi foothills were either displaced or left to fend for themselves when the event of the partition brought centuries of trade relations to a standstill. If the people were affected, it also concludes that the Chiefs lost a major part of their revenue generation to the Partition.

In another account, late Sancimerely War, the author's paternal Grandmother was born in 1930 at Wahlong, a hamlet located near the present Indo-Bangladesh today. The last Chief of Wahalong was murdered by the Company soldiers in the Anglo-Khasi War of 1829. Since then, the Company introduced the office of a Sordar—an administrator. Sancimerely narrated her account of the pre-Partition days of how her village's prosperity was derived mainly from trade with Sylhet. There were many festivals during the orange harvest seasons, and labourers from different communities were employed. The principal exports from her village were limestone and oranges. Being the eldest daughter, she spent winter vacations (December to March) engaged in the family business that went on for three long months during winter. She was seventeen years old when the Partition took place and she remembered that her neighbourhood heard about the Partition after the Sylhet Referendum took place, but no land surveyors or government officials were in sight. Even on the day of Independence nothing was certain, but to their astonishment, the nightmare of losing lands and starvation gradually became a reality after August 1947. When borders were gradually defined and markets thereafter diminishing, Sancimerely saw heaps of oranges left to decay outdoors as the Partition took its toll on the region.

There was also inflation in food commodities like rice and salt which were dependent on Sylhet and the situation compelled them to attain their staple food items through the black market. In addition, border patrols constantly ill-treated and bullied the people and it was unsafe for women to travel on their own. Sancimerely had never imagined that



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such an event would cause so much chaos and rob the riches of the people living in the southern foothills. Shortly after Partition, she and her family migrated to Shillong. To meet their expense, they sold her mother's gold and silver ornaments worn during special occasions and festivities. In the process of the hasty demarcation, the Radcliffe line passed by her family's ancestral land in Mawbang and became part of Bangladesh today. However, it was only in recent years, when the initiative of the Government of India to fence the borders, that Sancimerely's family was financially compensated as the international fencing crossed their land. According to the information from the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, Meghalaya shares a 443 km border with Bangladesh out of which 325,773 km have been fenced (Ministry of Home Affairs).

85

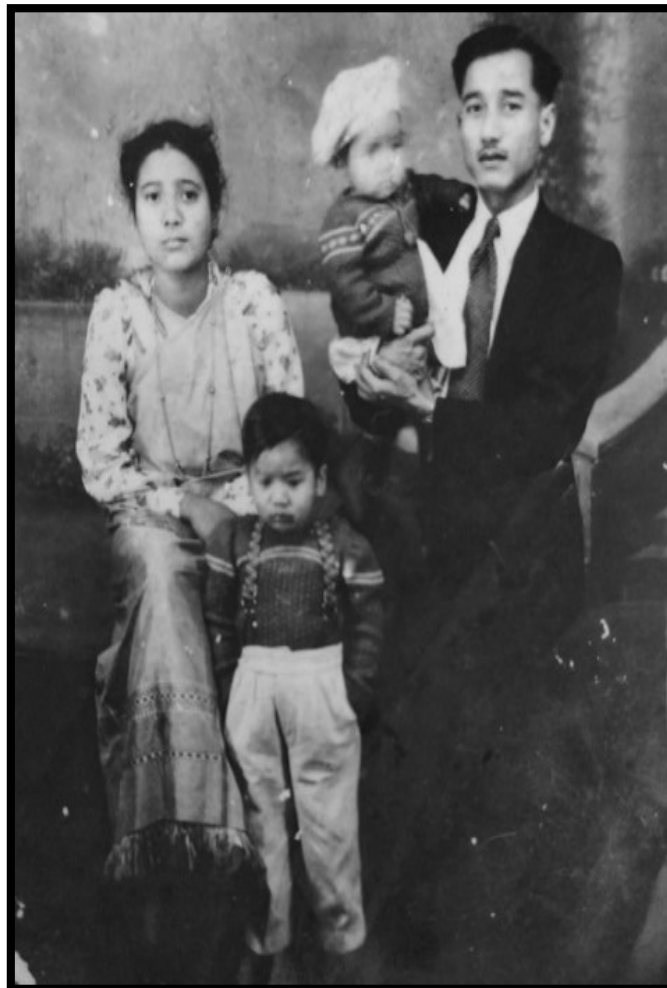


Figure 3: Family portrait of the late Sancimerely War, her husband, the late Stap Sing Kynta, and two of her children. The photo was taken in Shillong, in 1955 or 1956.



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INDIAN POSTS AND TELEGRAPHS DEPARTMENT

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Recd. at 14 H. 32 M. Sent at 6 P.M. M. Office Stamp

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Office of Origin Bhola gangbar 3 Date 3 Service Instructions Words 21

TO Honble Prmeminister of assam Shillong

Sir there is an economic boicot of trade by pakistani people help us Sirdar byrong

7 B.—The name of the Sender, if telegraphed, should be written after, but separated from, the text

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Figure 4: A telegram of distress from the Sordar (Sirdar) of Wahlong (Byrong) dated the 3rd of November, 1949. Courtesy: The Assam State Archives.

In conclusion, the history of territorial negotiations has evolved since the evolution of human settlements. However, with the setting of nationalism and political interests in the twentieth century, boundaries began to be re-defined on the lines of ethnicity, language, religion and geography or at times a mixture of all four leaving many communities at stake. The southern Khasi-Jaintia foothills of Meghalaya and the history of demarcating lands need to be understood through long-lasting colonial policies considering the geopolitics of Bengal from the 1770s onwards. With the creation of international boundaries in 1947, the colonial perceptions of boundaries and the need for a Muslim homeland etched a line across one of the most promising corridors and disrupted the centuries-old hill-plain economy. The process of boundary demarcation and crystallisation also disregarded the opinions and rights of Chiefs or *Sordar(s)* in the complex and hastily decisions of the Boundary Commission.

In the context of the Khasi Chiefs and administrators, the period before and after Independence witnessed the dedication of the members of the Bordoloi Committee which was named after its head, Gopinath Bordoloi. The committee members consisted of many representatives—J. J. M. Nichlos Roy, a Khasi from the village of Shella—a region that was impacted severely by the stroke of the Radcliffe Line. The members toured most of the North-East region and noted down the aspirations of the people, their insecurities and their hopes of being governed by the jurisdiction of Assam and under the Indian Union. Accordingly, the





Bordoloi Committee submitted a report to the Government of India with a recommendation that the culture, tradition and practices of the indigenous communities should not be compromised. As a result, in framing the Indian Constitution, the Bordoloi Committee Report was taken into consideration and through the 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution, the traditions of Chiefs and their customary rights were maintained under the governance of the Autonomous District Councils. The United Khasi-Jaintia Autonomous District Council was inaugurated in 1952 and this pacified the Chiefs having second thoughts about being a part of India.

The story of India's Partition has been overshadowed by two fronts and has forgotten a third front that being the region of North-East India. The history of the region after 1947 is dominated by identity and insurgency movements in resentment towards many unresolved issues. However, there has been very little academic light thrown on the evolution and impacts of the international boundaries and the opinion of the Chiefs and Rulers especially those who administered lands along the international boundaries. This essay reflected just two narratives of individuals who suffered and were displaced by the Partition of 1947. There is still an ocean of narratives that needs to be unearthed. The Khasi Hills still face the brunt of the Radcliffe Line today through the lens of social insecurities, loss of lands in the making of the border fencing, illegal trade and smuggling of objects and livestock and so on. Hence, it is crucial to understand these underlying issues before the region gears up the Look and Act East policies of the government.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Felix Lyngdoh Shigi was interviewed on the seventh and eighth of February, 2021 at Phlangdilion, South West Khasi Hills District, Meghalaya.

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