



# Decentralisation And Grassroots Democracy In The Khasi Hills Of Meghalaya

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**Abstract:** The rights of indigenous peoples to their land and ancestral homelands are a common focus of indigenous struggles all over worldwide. All human societies have established various institutions to address recurring basic problems in social life. It is possible to view traditional institutions as organization founded on tradition and custom. Scheduled tribes in India have remained on the periphery of growth, but this is less of a problem in the Northeastern regions where the majority of the population is tribal. As a result, there has been an increase in interest in the Sixth Schedule, which is a special constitutional provision that pertains to these regions and recognizes the right of tribal communities to own and control their land and natural resources.

Political institution establishes the proper way to govern and how the ruled should treat their rulers. The development of the Khasi people is intricately intertwined with the formation of their traditional political system, which has been passed down through generations. It is still important to take into consideration the Traditional Institutions and leadership that exist in these countries. There is a fact that is of great historical, political, and sociological significance, and that is the emergence of politics as the dominant theme of the new nations, as well as the increasing politicalization of individuals and their groups within these societies. Despite the fact that the traditional system of local governance has been around since the beginning of human history, it has only recently made its way into the wider academic discourse. This is because different societies have different social circumstances.

The purpose of this paper is to present a study that examines the socio-political aspects of the Khasi community in the state of Meghalaya, as well as the challenges and opportunities inherent in the administration of the Autonomous District Council.

**Keywords:** Meghalaya, Traditional Institution, Sixth Schedule.

## I. INTRODUCTION

There has been an impasse in the study of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council, which keeps a keen interest in the grassroot Democracy of the Khasi society. Meghalaya is the only state in the Northeastern region where the entire area is governed under the Sixth Schedule's provisions. In 1952, the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills District and the Garo Hills District, along with other hill districts in the then-combined State of Assam, first adopted the Autonomous District Council system<sup>1</sup>. When the Indian Constitution was adopted,

<sup>1</sup> L.S Gassah, MN Karna, And C.J Thomas, Power to People in Meghalaya: Sixth Schedule and the 73rd Amendment, (Regency Publication, New Delhi, First Publication, 2012, Reprinted, 2021) Chapter 5, Pg. – 50

it envisaged strong democratic institutions at the grass root level and concerning the affairs of the tribal communities

All of us know that the tribal people of India have been constitutionally empowered through the 6th Schedule of the Constitution of India. The purpose of the Sixth Schedule has multiple positive aspects for, e.g., Institutional Recognition, socio-economic development, and Preservation of Resources. Nevertheless, again District Council has been provided with Autonomous Decision-Making Mechanism just like the Legislative Assembly at the State Level and Parliament at the National Level. It shows that Politics on the grass root would also determine the positive role of the District Council. The sixth Schedule to the Constitution is a mini-constitution governing the administration of tribal areas of the country's Northeastern part. The Sixth Schedule has granted such powers to the District Council regarding Legislative, Executive, and Judiciary. The Legislative history of the applicability of the Sixth Schedule and administration of justice in the state of Meghalaya was traced by Ansari, J. in Richard Lyngdoh. As of now, there are the following District Councils in the state of Meghalaya<sup>2</sup>.

Theoretically, the Constitution mercenary (6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution) recognized the upliftment of the Tribal people (Indigenous origin of the country). The political setup in the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council resulted in Disempowerment which led to the erosion of the primary sense of the 6th Schedule on which the Autonomous District Council was formed. In practice, the powers and functions carried out by the ADC are not up to the marks that powers have given them. There are many hurdles, be it Social, Economic, or Political.

This resulted in upgrading and pondering the situation between the Government of Meghalaya and the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council. The traditional root institution, the third-tier establishment, has also faced a barrier in which the highest authority has reached demands upon them, which led to the disagreement. This problem increases the study and explores how the problem arises in the state. Modernization has given rise to the emergence of a new political elite in the Khasi society. The fact remains that the Khasi people have not forgotten their traditional customs or absorbed new ideas. Society lies somewhere between a progression from tradition to modernity, which may sometimes be called the modernity of tradition.

Today the positive role of the District Council is turning negative because of ideologies and party politics in the District Council Mechanism. However, outwardly it may not be visible that this Empowerment is turning into Disempowerment because Tribal people became busier with the power struggle than the development of the people. In this sense, the Empowerment of the tribal people through the District Council is contested as Disempowerment. Traditionally this power struggle at the community level was more or less nil. As a result, this needs to be examined from this perspective. Once such an example can be taken from what is happening in the functioning of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council, which mostly the powers covering all most every aspect of the material and cultural life of the people, have created institutionalism. However, in reality, this raises concern for the Traditional Tribal Political system.

The Khasi society had its deep-rooted tribal institutions since time immemorial. This primeval institution has to face caustic stress for the new modern institutions, creating complications between the two. The causes' powers and functions supervised by the traditional heads were granted to the District Council and are under their administration. In the writing of Professor L.S. Gassah it is reflected that the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council is not working well. Before the formation of the Autonomous District Council and with the British form of Autonomy, the hills people work peacefully without much trouble, there is no party politics, no differentiation of autonomy<sup>3</sup>.

### **Objectives**

1. To examine the socio-political dimensions of the Khasi community.
2. To examine the challenges and opportunities within the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council.

<sup>2</sup> Banwari Lal Hansaria, Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India, (Universal Law Publishing, New Delhi, Fourth Edition, 2016) Pg. no- 180

<sup>3</sup> E. Jyrwa, & Gabriel, S. Relationship between the Government of Meghalaya and Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council since 1978: A Review. Indian Journal of Public Administration, 33(4), (1987) Chapter 9 Pg. No 41-49.

## Research questions

The present study will test the following questions:

- 1) How far can the Khasi people exercise their authority by the KHADC?
- 2) What are the effects of the District Councils on Traditional Institutions?

## Methodology.

The research papers consist of both Primary and secondary data.

The primary sources have been collected of 50 samples from East Khasi Hills District under the Khasi Hills Society with in the Autonomous District Council. The data from primary sources was based on the semi-structured questionnaire method from which information was gathered for the Autonomous District Council to empower the people under the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council.

The secondary sources include different material and internet sources, and data collected from the official sources, the official documents, and the official accounts offices from the headquarters.

## Traditional Political Structure

Prior to the arrival of the British, the indigenous populations inhabiting the hills of Northeast India had established political systems that emerged organically from their social evolution. Two distinct forms of governance emerged in the hills: a democratic system that included village councils and headmen overseeing clan-based societies, and an autocratic system whereby clan or village chiefs wielded control over community governance. The power and authority of these traditional political institutions varied among tribes. In certain communities, these traditional institutions were systematically organized and structured, and in some instances, they even resulted in the establishment of miniature states. In other communities, these institutions were informally structured and lacked a central authority<sup>4</sup>.

The Khasis developed a one-of-a-kind three-tier democratic system that has Villages at the bottom, Raids in the middle, and Syiemships at the top. It is worth mentioning that the indigenous people did not keep any written records regarding the operations of these traditional political institutions. Before the British arrived in the hills of northeast India, there were no written documents available on the traditional tribal system of governance, except for a few casual references in the chronicles of neighboring kingdoms like Assam and Cachar. In fact, it was the British who were the first to study the traditional political institutions of the hills because they were interested in administration. Scholars of social science in post-Independent India have attempted to create models of the traditional political systems that existed among the various tribal communities before colonial intervention. They have done this based on the various reports and other writings of the British administrators who were responsible for administering the hill tribe of northeast India. The development of the traditional political system among the Khasis is closely connected to the process of evolving of the Khasi race itself. The Khasis believe that the Hynniewtrep Hynniew skum were the ancestors of the Khasi people. In this case, "trep" is equivalent to "Kur" or "clan." In fact, the Kur had been the center of all historic sociocultural and political systems<sup>5</sup>.

As the population in the original villages grew, some people moved to different areas and started new villages there. Although the newly established villages used to have their own village-level administration, they were

<sup>4</sup> L.S Gassah, MN Karna, And C.J Thomas, Power to People in Meghalaya: Sixth Schedule and the 73rd Amendment, (Regency Publication, New Delhi, First Publication, 2012, Reprinted, 2021) Chapter 4, Pg No 33

<sup>5</sup> P.G. Bonney, Chapter Six Syiemship in Khasi Society: The Syiemship of Nongstoin P. Gracefulness Bonney. Revisiting Traditional Institutions in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, Cambridge scholars publishing, UK (2016). Pg. - no 80.

still under the overall control of the parent villages. The office of the Basan Raid was developed to deal with problems that arise between villages. This process has led to the emergence of Raids, which are larger territorial units made up of several villages, as well as Raid-level institutions such as Durbar Raids and Basans. The congregation of such raids finally gives rise to the institutions of Syiemships. However, the actual process of transition from the Raids to Syiemships needs to be researched further with the goal verify the currently held notion that a common understanding among the earlier groups had given existence to the later.

The Khasi political system that consists at three levels: i) village, ii) raid, and iii) state. Once again, clans at the village level used to operate as a subsystem of the larger system of village administration. Every clan had its own council, which was called a Durbar. It is known as Durbar Kur, which is presided over by the Rangbah Kur, or the clan headman. In the past, the Rangbah Kur had been chosen by the male representatives of each clan. The Institutions of Durbar Kur and Rangbah Kur were previously responsible for overseeing all of the internal matters of a clan. In fact, both of the clan-based institutions appeared to be social units that were under the political authority of the institutions at the village level. Other issues related to the interests of the villages were outside the authority of the village administration. These were dealt at the Raid level. Raid functioned as a political unit comprising several adjacent Khasi villages, structured to uphold social order and facilitate the resolution of civil and judicial issues in a cohesive manner. This was the largest political unit encompassed by the Syiemship. A durbar raid occurred at the raid level, presided over by an elected headman. The headman was referred to by various names, including Basan, Lyngdoh, and Sirdar, during different raids. The Durbar Raid institutions, comprising the headman and other elected officials, were tasked with dispute resolution among villages and safeguarding the interests of the Raid. Disputes unresolved at the Raid level, along with cases involving life imprisonment or the death penalty for serious crimes, were escalated to the highest political authority, the Syiem. All Raid officials operated under the authority of the Syiem's office, as the Syiem was responsible for confirming the election of each official to their respective positions.

### **Intervention from colonial powers, and the subsequent warping of the conventional political structure.**

The British, by issuing sannads to the Syiem and through numerous treaties and agreements, diminished the Syiem's office to a subordinate authority beneath the paramount power. The indirect colonial rule was ultimately legitimized when the Paramount power officially acknowledged the office of the Syiem, necessitated by British intervention in the succession to the Syiemship. Despite the recognition of traditional hereditary and elective succession systems, the formal endorsement of their roles by the supreme authority rendered the Syiems significantly dependent on colonial power. The British revoked the Syiems' authority to conduct warfare or establish independent treaties, along with their jurisdiction over murder and homicide cases. Decisions rendered by the Syiem may be contested in the Deputy Commissioner's court. Furthermore, the Syiems were obligated to adhere completely to all mandates issued by the Deputy Commissioner. Although the traditional hereditary and elective succession was acknowledged, the formal recognition of their office by the paramount authority rendered the Syiems largely dependent on the colonial power. The British revoked the Syiem authority to engage in warfare, enter independent treaties, and adjudicate case of murder and homicide. Appeals against the Syiem's judgement were permitted in the Deputy Commissioner's court. The Syiem's were required to comply implicitly with all directives issued by the Directive Commissioner. As British supported Christian missionary endeavours expanded and a new generation of Christian. Syiems emerged exhibiting greater allegiance to the British than to Khasi, the traditional power structure became subordinate to British administration.<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, while British rule did not disrupt the overall operation of the traditional Khasi political system concerning internal administration where in Village and Raid-level institutions remained intact, the status and authority of the Syiem's office were considerably diminished to ensure loyalty and compliance with British interests. The office of the Deputy Commissioner was established over with the Khasi states to serve as a guardian authority and to implement indirect British governance.

<sup>6</sup> M.N. Laloo. Chapter Ten Relations of Traditional Institutions with Modern Constitutional Institutions Monica Neeta Laloo. Revisiting Traditional Institutions in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, Cambridge scholars publishing, UK (2016) Pg. No138.

## **Autonomy and Integration: Sixth Schedule and Traditional Political Institutions.**

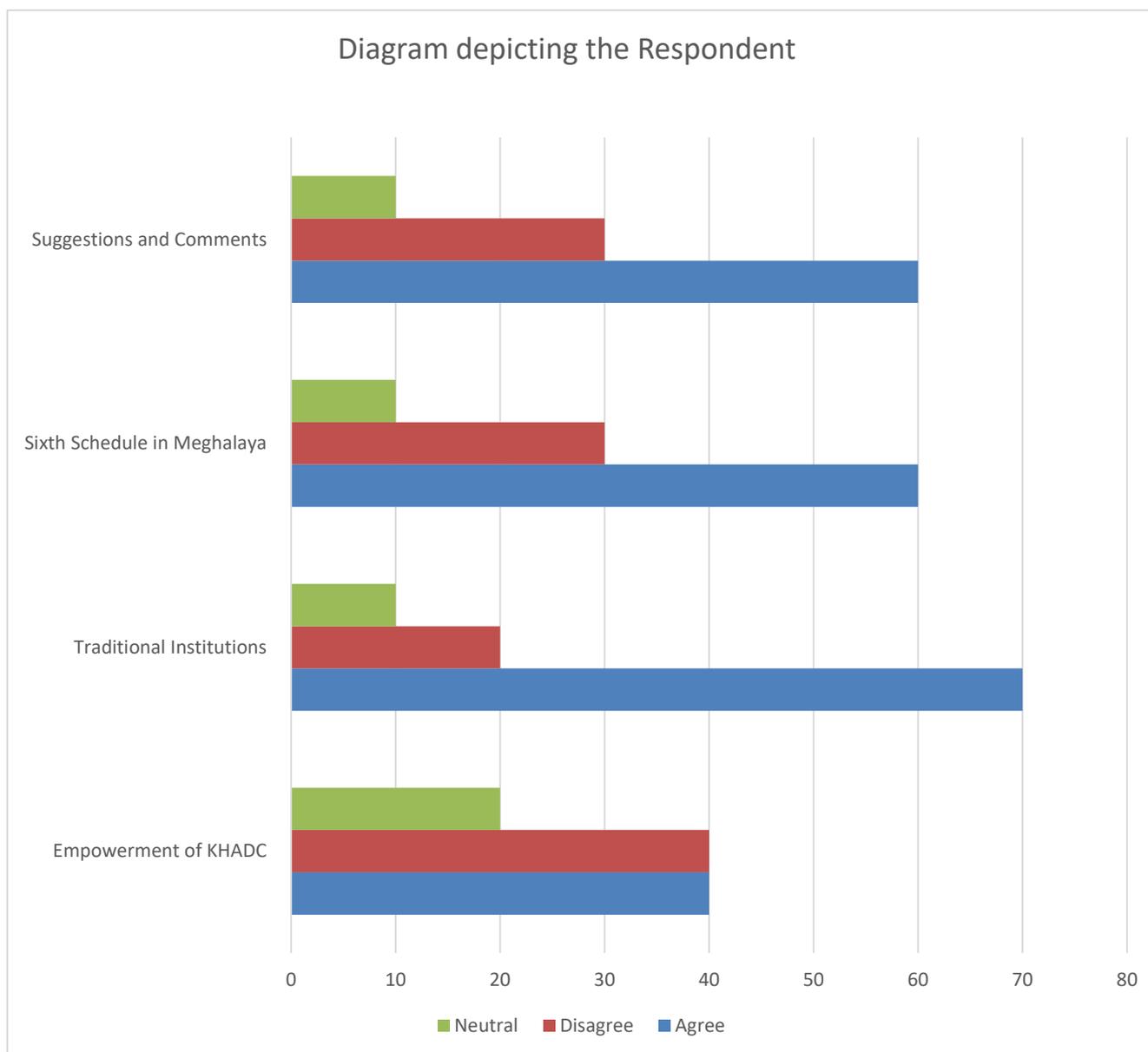
Since the Khasi states were not incorporated into British India, they were not added to His Majesty's Dominion. However, for administrative reasons, they were merged with the Jaintia and Garo Hills to form the Khasi and Jaintia district. In August 8, 1947, the Federation of Khasi States signed the Standstill Agreement. In December 1947, the Khasi states signed the Instrument of Accession, and then they became members of the Indian Union. For the time being, until new or revised arrangements are reached, the Federation of Khasi States was granted judicial, administrative, and legislative powers under the Agreement. Deputy Commissioners serving as Political Officers under the Governor of Assam continued to oversee affairs in Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo Hills prior to the 1950 commencement of the Constitution of India.

The power and functions between the Autonomous District Council (ADC) under the Sixth Schedule and the Panchayati Raj, there are suitable adjustments that would fit the traditional socio-political structures such as Syiemships, Doloiships, Nokmaships, and Durbars (Council) in the overall scheme. The offices of the Syiem, Doloi, and Nokma, which are located in Khasi, Jaintia, and the Garo Hills, respectively, are considered to be subordinate officials of the ADCs, as stipulated by the Sixth Schedule by the government. The majority of their traditional power and functions have either been reduced or eliminated entirely as a result of the acquisition of ADCs. The District Council has the authority to regulate the appointment of Chiefs and headmen, as well as the succession of those positions, in accordance with the provisions of paragraph 3(i)(g) of the Sixth Schedule.

There were instances in which the United Khasi-Jaintia Autonomous District Council attempted to make provisions for removal and suspension, and even for the debarring of chiefs, deputy chiefs, and acting chiefs from participating in politics and elections to either the Parliament, State Legislature, or District Council. This was done by the Executive Committee of the District Council in the event that it believed that these incumbents had violated the terms and conditions of their appointment. In light of the fact that it possesses such constitutional powers, the District Council has consequently established a complete control over the traditional institutions. Therefore, in accordance with the new constitutional framework, the traditional chiefs are relegated to a position of subordination behind one another. We are compelled to ponder the question, "What is going to happen to the traditional socio-political institutions in Meghalaya?" as a result of this constitutional development<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, No 3, Chapter 1, Pg No 11



The above diagram illustrates the distribution of respondents based on the survey responses. The largest proportion of participants fell under different comparison from the above questions.

### Findings

The study results collectively the importance of Traditional Institutions of the Khasi Hills society with in the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council. The Dorbar system has been prevalent in Meghalaya since time immemorial and contributes to the unique aspects of the State. There is a believe that Dorbar system is a very significant and systematic system that should be preserved. Besides the Sixth Schedule has resulted in the lessening of influx migration, being the only state that is fully governed by the state representative shows the significance of the KHADC.

The study also finds that there is a failure to work together as a team, no unification between the members, corruption takes place, it is not benefitting and misuse of it which leads to a downfall. The findings not only provide the downfall of the relationship between the Autonomous District Council and the Traditional Institutions of the Khasi society but a deeper understanding of the collaboration between politics, authoritative and its role in the community.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study takes up upon the Dorbar as a medium through which concerns of the locals can reach the Council's notice. Hence empowering the Local Self Government is compelling so interest and matter of contention of the common people not left unattended. This research put forward how the Council is less interested in taking matter into their hands or lack of commitment of these members to address the solutions, reflecting there is a need of recognition of the importance of Grassroot Institutions of the Khasi Society. The study also examines the importance of Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council to work hand-in-hand alongside with the Dorbar. There is a need of transparency in the daily affairs and avoidance in delay to compete the task, it represents a unique system of democratic decision-making in modern democratic practices.

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