



**Interface between Constitutional Governance and Traditional Governance:
A Study of the Role of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council in
Traditional Local Self-Governance of Jirang Syiemship, Meghalaya**

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ABSTRACT

The state of Meghalaya is characterized by a multi-layered system of governance due to the existence of multiple institutions at various levels. At the apex lies the constitutional mechanism of the State Government. At the middle is the Autonomous District Councils as provide by the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. At the bottom lies the traditional political institutions viz. the Syiemship, Clan based Institutions and Village Dorbars (Village Councils). The existence of such a system of administrative structures poses a question of conflicting powers and administrative conundrum. This paper attempts to understand the question of the relationship between the traditional political institution of Syiemship vis-à-vis the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council with special reference to Jirang Syiemship.

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Introduction

The issue of political autonomy in North India has been one of the most important structural changes of post independent Indian political administration. Each Tribal community has their own traditional governance system. Tribal areas in India are divided into schedule V and VI as per constitution. While administrative autonomy has been given to schedule VI areas of North Eastern States, people in schedule V are striving for implementing Panchayats Extension to Schedule Areas (PESA).

The demand for autonomy has been a matter of political debate right from the pre-independence period. In 1929, the Nagas sent a petition to the Simon commission seeking independence from India (Walker, 2024). After independence, the Khasis, Garos, Mizo and Karbi raised the demand for the separation from the larger state of Assam and self- governance for the people of their own tribal communities. The constitution makers of India realized the importance of separate political and administrative mechanism for the administration of the hill tribal areas, thus, the making the decision of creating Autonomous District Council under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution of India.

The recommendations put forth by the North East Frontiers (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Sub-committee, commonly referred to as the Bordoloi Sub-committee and presided over by Gopinath Bordoloi, who held the position of Chief Minister of Assam during that period, constituted the foundational framework for the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. To ensure the effective functioning of democracy and to safeguard and uphold the unique cultural identity of the indigenous populations within the northeastern region of India, the Constitution of India, via the Sixth Schedule, endows local self-governing authorities with the mandate to oversee matters pertinent to tribal communities, encompassing land, forestry, social customs, and practices, among other areas.

The inclusion of Autonomous District Council in India, as mentioned in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India, empowers the councils with autonomy in order to handle the special needs and requirements of the tribal communities in those particular regions, ensuring strategic improvements related to legislative, executive, judicial and financial authority respectively (Gassah, 1997). This study revolves around the interface between the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) and traditional local self-governance, with special focus on the Jirang Syiemship in Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya. The study seek to understand the working patterns in relation to present status of governance, between the two structures of governance. The study focusses on preservation of cultural customary practices, identity and traditional local-self-governance of Khasi people. It also sheds light on



the emerging challenges faced by traditional institutions in the modern context. The functional relationship of the Jirang Syiemship with KHADC was examined in the study. Hence, the study aims to study the role of the Khasi Autonomous District Council (KHADC) in traditional administration and to look at the relationship between the KHADC and the Syiemship in local self-government.

Objectives of the Study

- i. To understand the role of Khasi Autonomous District Council (KHADC) in traditional administration.
- ii. To understand the role of traditional institutions of Syiemship in local self-governance.
- iii. To understand the relationship interaction between KHADC and Syiemship in local self-governance.

Research Questions

- i. What is the structure of the traditional political institution of Syiemship in Jirang?
- ii. What is the role of the KHADC in local self-governance in the Jirang Syiemship?
- iii. What are the prospects for the sustained reverence and relevance of the traditional institution of Syiemship in Jirang?
- iv. How has the role of the KHADC evolved over time in terms of governance and administration of the Hima Jirang?

Methodology:

- i. **Area of the Study:** The study is conducted in Jirang Syiemship of Ri-Bhoi district, Meghalaya. It is about 65 kilometers from Shillong, the capital city of Meghalaya. It is home to around 107 villages, with a population of 30,919 according to the 2011 Census. The residents mainly belong to the Khasi community and follow traditional agricultural practices.
- ii. **Sources of Data Collection:** Data was collected both from primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources include books, articles, and internet sources. Primary data is collected from the Syiem along with other members from the office of the Jirang Syiemship of Ri Bhoi District with the help of structured interview schedule.
- iii. **Tools of the Data Collection:** Structured Interview method was used to collect the required information from the respondent.
- iv. **Sampling:** This study involved Purposive sampling to select the respondents, focusing on Syiem of Jirang along with other members from the office of the Jirang Syiemship, ensured the



inclusion of individuals directly involved in the traditional local self-government in KHADC.

- v. **Methods of Data Collection:** The Study relied mostly on qualitative, descriptive and content analysis methods to find out the answers to the research questions of the study.

Local Self Government

The establishment of the local self-government system, popularly referred to as "panchayats," was intended to empower India's poorest citizens. In every state, there are elected bodies at the village, taluk, and district levels under the three-tiered system known as panchayats, or local self-rule. Since ancient times, the idea of panchayats has existed in Indian society. The idea has evolved over the ages, and following decentralization reforms in the early 1990s, it most recently took the shape of Panchayati Raj institutions. The 73rd and 74th Amendment Act of 1993 legally incorporated these grassroots democratic institutions into the Constitution. The primary goal of establishing local self-government organizations was to empower and enable the local population to take charge of their affairs by participating in decision-making and more effectively implementing policies.

Local self-governance refers to the administration of regional matters by local entities that have been duly elected by the residents of the community. S. K. Dutta of the Gauhati High Court in its report remarked, "It may also be noted that the institutions of local government play a prominent part in all democratically governed countries. The smaller units of administration are called local Governments because they imply the management of local affairs generally by representatives of the local people...." (Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council). It is commonly acknowledged that local self-governing institutions are a crucial and fundamental component of the democratic process and that they are necessary for both national development and successful public engagement. People can instill democratic principles and experience a feeling of responsibility when they live in a grassroots democracy with small units of governance (Reetika, 2024).

However, unlike the rest of the Country who practiced the Panchayati Raj System, Northeast India system of governance is characterised by the existence of traditional institutions, for example Syiemship in Khasi Hills, Haosa Chieftainship among the Kukis, Nokma of the Garos, at the grassroots levels. Orji and Olali define traditional institutions as the indigenous political frameworks that select and turban leaders with verified histories in accordance with their traditional rules and norms. Traditional institutions exist to regulate conflicts among community members by enforcing the laws and customs of the people and to maintain the customs and traditions of the people. Organizations and offices known as



traditional institutions were developed or fostered by the local populace prior to the arrival of colonialism. These are long-standing customs that are not supported by the official state constitutions (Mistura and Onuoha, 2024).

In Khasi civilization, traditional institutions are "living organisms" that have persisted for millennia. With specified offices and office holders like the Rangbah Kur (a clan senior who was typically the eldest maternal uncle), these ancient institutions developed from the clan-based council, ka Dorbar Kur. The State Council, also known as ka Dorbar Hima, is the highest traditional institution in Khasi culture. Its members include the Syiem, Lyngdoh, Sirdar, Wahadadar, and Doloi, who were elected from particular clans and held specified positions. The traditional head or chief oversaw the autonomous administration of each of these traditional institutions, which were spread across a defined territory (Lyngdoh, 2016).

Sixth Schedule to the Indian Constitution

Tribal region administration in India has long been a source of worry. Every tribe has a customary form of government and a set of rules. According to the Indian Constitution, tribal regions are separated under schedules V and VI. Schedule V residents are working to implement PPESA, a law that acknowledges their customs, even if administrative autonomy has been granted to schedule VI territories of the North Eastern States (Singh, 2010).

The inclusion of the Sixth Schedule in the Indian Constitution was a significant political development aimed at addressing the unique needs and aspirations of tribal communities in the Northeastern region of India. During British rule, the Northeastern region was administered through a system of indirect rule, particularly under the Inner Line Regulations and the Government of India Act of 1919 and 1935. These regulations were intended to protect tribal areas from external influences and to preserve their distinct cultural identities. The British designated certain tribal areas as "Excluded" or "Partially Excluded" areas, where local governance was largely managed by traditional tribal chiefs and councils, with limited interference from the colonial administration (Riamei, 2022).

Following India's independence in 1947, there was a need to integrate these tribal areas into the new nation while preserving their unique identities and autonomy. The Indian leadership recognized the distinct socio-cultural and political needs of these regions. An Advisory Committee on Tribal Areas and Scheduled Areas was formed under the leadership of Vallabhbhai Patel and Gopinath Bordoloi to



address the governance issues of tribal areas. The committee, North East Frontiers (Assam) Tribal and excluded areas sub- committee, popularly known as Bordoloi subcommittee, under the chairmanship of Gopinath Bordoloi, the then chief Minister of Assam, included representatives from various tribal communities and experts on tribal affairs (Laskara and Singh, 2015).

In order to establish an autonomous body based on the idea of regional autonomy in all matters pertaining to custom, inheritance, the administration of justice, land, forests, etc., the Bordoloi subcommittee thoroughly examined the administrative structure that was in place in the hill regions of North East India at the time (Report of the North East Frontiers, 1950). To give tribal territories some degree of self-governance, the Committee suggested creating Autonomous District Councils (ADCs), which were incorporated into the Constitution under the Sixth Schedule. In order to govern local issues and maintain tribe customs and traditions, these councils are endowed with legislative, executive, and judicial authority. In order for the tribal people to maintain their traditional way of life and protect their customs and cultures, this plan aimed to establish autonomous administration in the hill regions of Assam, specifically in the United Khasi Jaintia Hills District, Garo Hills District, Lushai Hills District, Naga Hills District, North Cachar Hills District, and Mikir Hills District (Sayema, 2023). D. S. Bhuria, noted in its report, “The Sixth Schedule was conceived by the framers of the Constitution to be an instrument of socio-economic development and self- management of the hill tribal communities inhabiting the districts. The self- management was expected to satisfy ethnic aspiration of the tribal community ...” (Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council).

Autonomous District Council

In response to multicultural diversity, India created a structure that grants federal states a great deal of autonomy from the federal government, with the boundaries of these states generally aligning with language groupings. In contrast to other policies that promote "assimilation" of individuals into a liberal Indian state, an Indian strategy of "integration" of communities into a multicultural Indian nation is consistent with a level of autonomy for big linguistic and other communities. The Autonomous District Council (ADC), the third tier of the Indian federal government, is where the integration principle is most obviously recognized. (Stuligross 1999: 497). Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) and Autonomous Regional Councils (ARCs) are, thus, constitutional devices created under the VI Schedule of the Constitution (Article 244) in Northeast India (Dev 2004).



The Autonomous District Councils (ADCs), frequently characterized as a "miniature constitution" in their own regard, represent a significantly more extensive application of the integrationist paradigm concerning the incorporation of Indian national identity. ADCs exemplify the attentiveness of India's founding fathers to the requirements of tribal communities in the northeastern region, whose interactions with governance structures during the colonial era were particularly disjointed and indirect. The ADCs were designed to safeguard "the distinct social customs and tribal organizations of the various peoples as well as their religious beliefs," while simultaneously addressing "the apprehension of tribal populations due to their superior organization and business acumen." Furthermore, it aimed to guarantee that the designated territories would possess adequate financial independence to render political, social, and economic autonomy genuinely substantive (Hansaria, 1983).

Powers and Functions of the Autonomous District Councils

The authorities and responsibilities of the Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) are delineated in Article 244(2) and Article 275(1) of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Currently, the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution encompasses ten autonomous district councils across four states. These are the Bodoland Territorial Council, Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council and Dima Hasao Autonomous District Council in Assam, the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council, Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council and Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council in Meghalaya, the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council and the Chakma Autonomous District Council, Lai Autonomous District Council, Mara Autonomous District Council in Mizoram.

In addition to preserving economic security, the autonomous districts serve as a safeguard for the indigenous people's traditional heritage, customs, and usages. This is accomplished by giving them development and financial powers and functions in addition to executive, legislative, and judicial authority.

a. Legislative functions:

The District Council's legislative duties include enacting legislation governing the distribution and use of land outside of conserved forests for residential or non-residential purposes, grazing, and agriculture. The management of open woods is another area it oversees. Additionally, it controls the use of canals for shifting cultivation and other agricultural purposes. In addition to regulating inheritance, marriage, and divorce, it also handles public health and sanitation. It also controls commerce and money lending by non-tribals in the council's jurisdiction. Since he has the authority to change any laws approved by



the council that violate the Sixth Schedule, the governor serves as the leader of the Autonomous District Council. The Sixth Schedule's paragraph 3 (1) further outlines the authority granted to autonomous district councils in the autonomous areas with relation to:

- i. The administration of any forest that isn't a reserved forest.
- ii. Using any waterway or canal for agricultural purposes.
- iii. The creation of village or town committees or councils and their authority; the management of jhum or other shifting cultivation practices.
- iv. Any other issue pertaining to town or village governance, such as public health and sanitation, or village or town police.
- v. The selection of Headmen or Chiefs.
- vi. The passing down of property.
- vii. Social customs;
- viii. Marriage and divorce.
- ix. Regulatory frameworks governing the activities of money-lending or commercial transactions conducted within the district by individuals who are not members of the Scheduled Tribes residing in the district.

b. Executive Functions:

Based on several amendments to the Sixth Schedule, the roles of District and Regional Councils in managing districts vary from Council to Council. District and Regional Councils are able to form, operate or monitor primary schools, dispensaries, markets, cattle pounds, ferries, fisheries, roads, road transport and waterways due to the list provided in Paragraph 6. They are also allowed to make rules that manage and control these facilities. The board also has the power to determine how primary schools in the district should instruct students. Councils can also be tasked with duties related to social welfare, cooperative organizations, agriculture, animal husbandry, village planning, and any other area where the state's executive power extends.

c. Judicial Functions:

Paragraph 4 of the Sixth Schedule grants the council the authority to perform specific judicial duties. To handle issues involving customary laws where both parties are tribal, the council may establish Village and District Council Courts within its jurisdiction. These courts are not permitted to decide cases involving punishments of death, life in prison, or five years in prison. All disputes and cases heard by



the District Council Courts and Village Council Courts are appealed to these courts. It should be mentioned that disputes and cases determined by the council courts are only under the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court and the High Court.

d. Financial Functions:

The District and Regional Council's financial function includes the authority to charge and collect taxes on stores, holdings, and other assets, as well as the ability to collect land revenues. Toll collection within their authority is one of their other financial tools for taxation. Additionally, it has concurrent authority over trade, occupations, animals, ferried products, etc. On behalf of the Council, the state government assigns and collects the local motor vehicle tax. The District and Regional Council also receives funding from state government grants, loans, and advances. The District Councils are autonomous, and the issues they oversee are often exempt from state or parliamentary actions. Any act should only be extended with the required changes and exceptions approved by the regional council. Paragraph 9 states that the District Council should receive a share of the annual royalties paid by the state government for licenses or leases used in mining activities in any autonomous district. Should any issues about this occur, they should be resolved by the Governor.

The Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC)

Following the inclusion of the Sixth Schedule to the Indian Constitution, the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) was set up on June 27, 1952, so that the tribal people could achieve their aspirations. Because their system of government had existed for a long time and allowed them to protect their heritage, customs and economic situation, they were granted executive, legislative, judicial, as well as developmental and financial powers and functions (Lyngdoh, 1997).

Garo Hills Autonomous District Council, Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council, and Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council are Meghalaya's three autonomous district councils. Of the 30 members of each ADC, 29 are chosen by the electorate, while one is nominated and serves at the governor's discretion. Before taking their seats as Council members, all elected members and nominated members must take the oath required by the Third Amendment of the Indian Constitution. Their terms are for five years. The chairman of the ADC calls meetings at least three times a year, and he or she conducts all business in compliance with the standard parliamentary procedure and practice outlined in the 1951 Assam and Meghalaya Autonomous Districts (Constitution of District Councils) Rules. According to



paragraph 11 of the Sixth Schedule, all laws, rules, and regulations created by the ADC must be published in the State Government's official Gazette in order to be enforceable.

As local self-governing entities, the Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) do not operate in parallel to the State Government; rather, they are governed by the Sixth Schedule, which outlines their authority and jurisdiction. This is comparable to the way that Article 246 divides the powers between the State and the Union Government. The KHADC has the authority to oversee how the traditional institutions in the districts under its control operate. These organizations have a tribal focus and were established and approved with the express purpose of promoting and safeguarding the diverse cultures, traditions, customs, dialects, religions, and other aspects of minority tribe existence.

A quadruplex-tier system of Dorbar Kur (Clan Council), Dorbar Shnong (Village Council), Dorbar Raid (Commune Council), and Dorbar Hima (State Council) is found in Meghalaya's traditional institutions, especially in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, where the traditional Durbars have deep roots. Among other authorities and functions of local governance, these Durbars are typically used to implement traditional practices and usages.

The Khasi Traditional Institution of Syiemship

The institution of a clan (kur), which established itself in a specific territory and cleared the path for the founding of a village (shnong), is the earliest level of grassroots governance in the Khasi Hill. A council of the clan's adult males selected the eldest male member, known as a Lyngdoh (priest), to lead the clan. The hamlet gradually emerged as clans expanded in size and number, frequently taking on new members. Rangbah Shnong or Sordar, the village chief, was selected from among the people who belonged to the village's original or founding clans (Gassah, 2002: 180-193).

Many villages united to establish a commune or raid as the villages grew in size and the art of governing became more intricate. The Raid would handle issues that the participating villages shared. With the help of a Durbar Raid or Commune council made up of these councilors, the Basan and the Lyngdoh continued to administer the raid. Subject to the consent of the Raid's inhabitants, who were all adult male citizens, the Basan or the Lyngdoh appointed these councilors. As the Raids' numbers and scope increased over time, new issues surfaced that made the establishment of a centralized, shared authority necessary to oversee state activities on a grander scale than the current sociopolitical institutions could handle. These conditions led to the federation of clans, villages, and communes to form the Hima, or



state. The Hima is hence a "territorial conglomeration of communes and independent villages falling under the jurisdiction of administrative heads known as Sirdar, Wahadadar, Lyngdoh, or Syiem." Under the leadership of a Syiem, a monarch, a new political entity known as the Syiemship came into being. Thus, the Khasis' highest political organization became the institution of Syiemship (Syiemlieh, 2006). The heirship to the position of Syiem is always tracked through the female offspring, and the Syiem is typically appointed from the predetermined royal clan known as the Syiem clan. Sixty-four Khasi states—seventeen Syiemships, thirty-three Sirdarships, three Lyngdohships, and one Wahdadarship—make up the ancient political institutions of the Khasi people today (Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council, 2024).

Powers and Functions of the Syiem

The Sixth Schedule in the Indian Constitution states that land ownership and control in the Khasi Hills belong to the community. To give an example, the Syiemship help manage the land in the Khasi Hills. The process of registering and managing land belongs to the Syiemship which does this through the traditional Village Durbar. All property sale deeds are valid only after the Syiem has given his permission.

The Syiem functions as the principal authority of the Hima. The term Syiem translates to King; however, in reality, the Syiem embodies the role of a traditional Chief and is expected to serve as the protector of all individuals within his Hima. The Syiem convenes and oversees the gatherings of the Executive Committee and the Durbar. He bears the responsibility for the preservation and management of all resources pertaining to the Hima. Although a Khasi Syiem serves as the leader of his state, he exercises his authority in alignment with “ethical directives, as delineated by customary norms, legal statutes, and regulations, in conjunction with established customs, traditions, and practices.” (Gassah, 2002). He is required to articulate his policy in alignment with the resolution issued by the Durbar representing the populace. In essence, it is the Durbars that perform both political and judicial roles, and their determinations are conclusive. The actions or decisions made by a Syiem may be overridden by the Durbar if they violate the customs and traditions of the community (Lyngdoh and Gassah, 2005).

In all legislative endeavors, the Syiem and his Durbar Synshar are predominantly influenced by the customary practices and legal frameworks inherent to the region. In matters of executive governance, his jurisdiction primarily encompasses the regulation of markets, the apprehension of wrongdoers and offenders, as well as the collection of levies and taxes from various sectors within the state.



Furthermore, he possesses the authority to endorse the appointments of subordinate officials within the state apparatus. Should the situation necessitate, the Syiem may also designate a Syiem Khynnah or Junior Syiem to aid him in the administration of state affairs during periods of temporary incapacity or even to succeed him in the event of his deposition or removal from office. In judicial contexts, the Syiem wields the authority to adjudicate cases and impose sentences in collaboration with the Dorbar Synshar. Historically, the court presided over by the Syiem constituted the apex court of appeal within the Hima. It was frequently argued that during the adjudication and execution of legal matters, while the Syiem fulfilled the role of a judge, his Durbar functioned as the jury (Syiemlieh, 2006).

The Syiem is endowed with the jurisdiction to collect “the material wealth of a citizen of the state whose lineage has become extinct and execute the cremation rites for individuals who have passed away without any relatives” (Bonney, 2008). In the capacity of a ruler, the Syiem does not possess any rights to land holdings, as land is considered to belong to the clan and the populace. Consequently, he is precluded from claiming land revenue. Nonetheless, a limited portion of Raid or communal land may be allocated to him for his personal utilization. His financial resources are primarily generated from penalties imposed in the resolution of disputes, tolls or khrong, collected from the markets under his authority, and from the issuance and renewal of patta for land holdings (Bonney, 2008).

In accordance with Khasi traditions, the Syiem could not undertake any significant actions without first consulting and securing the consent of the dorbar. One of the principal roles of the Syiem was to function as a judge, with the dorbar acting in the capacity of the jury. Among the other vital responsibilities of the Syiem were the establishment of markets within the Hima, leading the militia during conflicts, and serving as a priest during public festivals and ceremonies. In addition to his magisterial powers, the Syiem traditionally also held policing responsibilities for the maintenance of law and order and exercised control over prisons and jails referred to as *hajat*. However, this authority was rescinded from the Chief with the advent of modern governmental structures (Syiemlieh, 2006).

Another significant role of the Syiem pertains to the collection of revenue. Traditionally, the Syiem in the various Khasi states would institute markets to facilitate trade and commerce. From these markets, customary tolls were levied by the officials of the Syiem. The revenues accrued by the Syiem were predominantly derived from the tolls collected in the markets and fines imposed on criminals adjudicated by the dorbar, a portion of which was allocated to his *myntri* (ministers). Furthermore, the Syiemship was also responsible for collecting taxes from the natural resources extracted from regions



under their jurisdiction. The rental income generated from the utilization of land, particularly for agricultural endeavors, constituted another avenue of revenue for the Syiemship (Bonney, 2008).

Lastly, the Syiem holds the authority to appoint traditional village leaders referred to as Sordar or Rangbah Shnong. The selection of the Village Head occurs through a democratic election process at the level of the Village Council. Nonetheless, the confirmation of the appointment is contingent upon the acquisition of sanction (*sannat*) from the Syiem (The Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council, 1995). Currently, the Khasi Syiemships operate under the administrative jurisdiction of an autonomous district designated as the Khasi-Jaintia Hills Autonomous District. As previously mentioned, the establishment of the Autonomous District Councils under the Sixth Schedule represents a significant development in political institutions aimed at managing administration within tribal regions. The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution confers a supervisory function upon the Autonomous District Councils concerning the appointment of the Syiems. Furthermore, the Autonomous District Council possesses the legislative authority to regulate the appointment or succession of chiefs or headmen across the various Khasi Syiemships.

Traditional Political Institution of Syiemship in Jirang

Jirang Syiemship is a traditional administrative region (*Hima* in Khasi) in the Ri Bhoi district of Meghalaya, India, under the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC). A Syiem, who is the chief of the area, heads the administration of the Syiemship. Known for its beautiful landscape, Jirang Syiemship features rolling hills, dense forests, and a rich cultural heritage. It is home to around 107 villages, with a population of 30,919 according to the 2011 Census. The residents mainly belong to the Khasi community and follow traditional agricultural practices. Farming, including the cultivation of crops like rice, vegetables, maize, ginger, turmeric, pineapple, and betel leaves, along with livestock rearing, is the main livelihood. The people live a simple lifestyle, strongly connected to nature, and follow a matrilineal system, where inheritance and lineage pass through the mother. The villages are peaceful and consist of traditional bamboo and thatch homes. The community is known for its warmth and hospitality, with festivals, traditional dances, and community events being central to social life (Government of Meghalaya, 2024).

On December 23, 2024, a field study was conducted with the office of the Syiem, Secretary and other members from the Office of the Syiem of Jirang Syiemship using a structured interview schedule.

Major Findings of the Study

i. Structure of the traditional political institution of Syiemship in Jirang

The General Dorbar is the highest authority in the traditional political system of the Jirang Syiemship. Its members are elected annually, with 1/50th of the village's male population chosen to serve. The Dorbar Shnong (Village Dorbar) elects these members from any clan within the male population for a term of one year and submits their names to the Syiem's office.

The Executive Dorbar ranks as the second-highest authority in this traditional system. It comprises the Syiem, Deputy Syiem, the Myntris, and six members appointed by the General Dorbar. Members of the Executive Dorbar do not have a fixed term but can be removed from their positions if they break the rules of the Dorbar.

At the grassroots level is the Village Dorbar, which includes all the male members of the village. This body is headed by the Sordar Shnong (Village Headman) and serves as the foundational decision-making unit within the traditional governance structure.

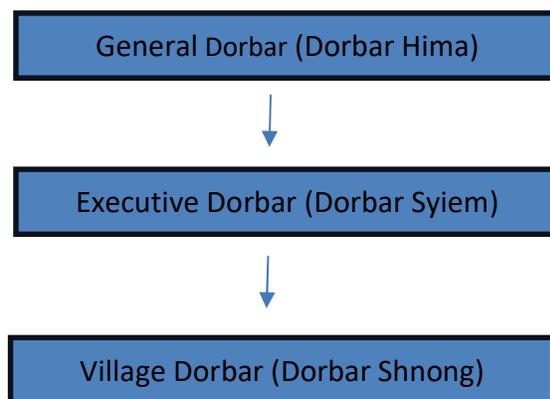


Figure 3.1: Structure of the traditional political institution

ii. Powers and Functions of the Syiem in Jirang Syiemship

The Syiem is the head of the General Administration of all the villages within their Syiemship. The Syiem of Jirang Syiemship, a traditional Khasi chieftainship in Meghalaya, acts as both the administrative head and spiritual leader of the community. The Syiem upholds customary laws, ensuring justice, resolving conflicts, and maintaining peace and order. The Syiem works closely with the Dorbar (council), the Syiem creates rules and policies that preserve traditions and promote the welfare of the



people. As a spiritual leader, the Syiem oversees important cultural and religious ceremonies that reflect the community's unique identity. The Syiem also manages community resources, including land, ensuring they are distributed fairly and used sustainably. The Syiem represents the Jirang Syiemship in external matters, serving as a unifying figure and symbol of the community's heritage and autonomy. By combining governance, cultural preservation, and resource management, the Syiem plays a central role in safeguarding the traditions, identity, and independence of the Jirang Syiemship for future generations.

iii. Method of Election and Eligibility to the Office of the Syiems and Myntris in Jirang Syiemship

The Syiem is elected from the Wahlang Pahsyntiew Clan, the ruling clan of the Syiemship. The clan nominates a candidate, who is then presented to the General Dorbar. If there are no other candidates, the General Dorbar forwards the nominee's name to the District Council for approval, and the council officially appoints the candidate as Syiem. However, if there is another candidate from the clan, an election is held to decide the position. The District Council, ensuring a fair process, conducts this election. The system reflects both the traditional authority of the ruling clan and the role of the District Council in maintaining transparency and legitimacy in the selection of the Syiem.

The Jirang Syiemship has four Myntris, with the first, known as the Kongor Myntri, traditionally being a man married to a woman from the Wahlang Pahsyntiew Clan. The remaining three Myntris are elected by the General Dorbar and can be chosen from any clan. This structure combines the hereditary connection of the Kongor Myntri with the broader representation provided by the election of the other three Myntris, ensuring a balance of tradition and inclusivity.

iv. Role of KHADC in the appointment of the Syiem and Myntris

The Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) is responsible for approving the appointments of the Syiem and other members of the traditional governance structure. The process begins with the ruling clan, through the Syiemsad, nominating candidates for positions such as the Syiem, Deputy Syiem, Myntris, Acting Syiem, and other members of the Executive Dorbar. Once nominated, the appointee is introduced to the Executive Dorbar of the Hima. The Executive Dorbar then presents the candidate to the General Dorbar for further consideration. Finally, the General Dorbar submits the candidate's name to the KHADC for formal approval. This multi-step process ensures that appointments are rooted in traditional practices while adhering to the oversight and legitimacy provided by the District Council.

**v. Composition of the Dorbar Hima**

The Dorbar Hima of Jirang Syiemship in Meghalaya is a traditional governing council integral to the Khasi administrative system. Its composition includes the Syiem, who serves as the chief and overall leader, responsible for governance and decision-making. Assisting the Syiem is the Syiem-Khynnah, or Deputy Syiem, who supports the administration and may act on behalf of the Syiem when needed. The council also includes the Myntri, or ministers, who are responsible for advising the Syiem and overseeing specific aspects of governance. The Dorbar Hima comprises village headmen, who represent their respective communities within the council and ensure grassroots participation in decision-making. This structure reflects the traditional Khasi emphasis on participatory governance, where every segment of society is involved in maintaining cultural and administrative continuity. The Dorbar Hima remains vital in preserving the customary laws and practices of the Jirang Syiemship.

vi. Relationship between the Syiem and the Dorbar in the Jirang Syiemship

The relationship between the Syiem and the Dorbar is important to the traditional governance system of the Khasi community. The Syiem serves as the chief leader and custodian of the Hima, entrusted with overseeing its administration, preserving customary laws, and ensuring the well-being of the people. The Dorbar, a council comprising the Syiem-Khynnah (Deputy Syiem), Myntri (ministers), and village headmen, acts as an advisory and decision-making body. This relationship is collaborative and complementary, with the Dorbar providing counsel, support, and representation for the community. While the Syiem holds executive authority, significant decisions are deliberated upon and approved in consultation with the Dorbar, ensuring collective governance. This dynamic reflects the Khasi principle of participatory leadership, where power is balanced between the Syiem's authority and the Dorbar's representation, fostering accountability and preserving the cultural ethos of the Jirang Syiemship.

vii. Role of traditional institution of Syiemship in Grassroots Governance

Traditional institutions in the Jirang area, particularly the Dorbar Hima, play a crucial role in upholding law and order while driving development. Rooted in the Khasi customary system, these institutions offer a governance framework that prioritizes community involvement, accountability, and the preservation of cultural traditions. The Syiem, as the head of the Hima, works in tandem with the Dorbar—a council comprising ministers and village headmen—to enforce customary laws and resolve disputes equitably and efficiently. This localized approach to conflict resolution ensures harmony within the community, while the judiciary committee addresses minor cases and refers more complex issues to higher authorities. The committee also has the authority to impose fines.



Land management falls under the jurisdiction of the General Dorbar, but land agreements require approval from the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC). In the realm of development, the Syiem utilizes funds from various sources, including forest produce such as logs, bamboo, and stone quarries, as well as agricultural products, collections from weekly markets, annual land pattas, and royalties. The Syiem collaborates with the government to access schemes and resources. By integrating traditional practices with modern governance, these institutions ensure both sustainable development and the maintenance of law and order in the region.

viii. Evolution of the role of the KHADC in governance and administration of the Hima Jirang

The Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) plays a significant role in local self-governance within the Jirang Syiemship, particularly in overseeing general administration and ensuring the preservation of traditional governance systems. As a constitutional body established under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, the KHADC is tasked with safeguarding the customary laws, practices, and institutions of the Khasi people. In the Jirang Syiemship, the KHADC works closely with traditional institutions such as the Dorbar Hima, providing regulatory oversight and support. It has authority over matters like land management, approving land agreements, and ensuring that customary governance aligns with legal and administrative frameworks. The KHADC facilitates the integration of traditional governance with modern administrative practices, enabling effective self-governance at the grassroots level. Through its role, the KHADC ensures that the cultural identity of the Khasi people is preserved while promoting accountability and good governance in the Jirang Syiemship.

ix. Role of the KHADC in facilitating development initiatives in the Jirang Syiemship

The Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) plays a limited role in facilitating development initiatives in the Jirang Syiemship. While the KHADC provides regulatory oversight and support for governance, the majority of development work in the area is carried out using funds collected locally by the traditional institutions. These funds are derived from sources such as forest produce, agricultural products, royalties, land pattas, and weekly market collections. The Syiem and the Dorbar Hima primarily utilize these resources to address the community's developmental needs. Although KHADC occasionally supports development projects, its contributions are minimal compared to the efforts driven by traditional institutions. To supplement their resources, the Syiemship often seeks additional assistance through government schemes and collaborations.



x. Measures undertaken by the KHADC in preserving cultural and traditional practice in Jirang Syiemship

The Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) has taken minimal initiatives to preserve the cultural and traditional practices in the Jirang area. One notable instance of their involvement was during the Monolith Festival, held in Mawphlang, where they participated by constructing traditional houses to showcase the unique architectural heritage of the region. This festival provided an opportunity to highlight and celebrate the traditional culture of Jirang on a larger platform. However, beyond this event, the efforts by KHADC to actively preserve or promote the rich cultural traditions of Jirang have been limited. The responsibility for safeguarding these practices largely falls on the local community and traditional institutions. While the Monolith Festival participation was a step forward, more consistent and comprehensive measures are needed to ensure the preservation and promotion of Jirang's cultural and traditional heritage for future generations.

xi. Role of the Syiem and KHADC in customary law and disputes

The Syiem and the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) are responsible for handling cases related to customary law and disputes in the Jirang area. The KHADC previously organized subordinate courts, which included the Syiem and the Executive Dorbar, to address local matters. The Syiemship has been granted authority to resolve petty cases, while disputes that are more complex are referred to higher authorities within the KHADC. The General Dorbar, which oversees broader community issues, typically meets once a year, while the Executive Dorbar convenes every market day to discuss and address ongoing matters. This structure ensures that customary laws are upheld at the local level, while also providing a channel for more significant cases to be escalated for further consideration by the KHADC.

xii. KHADC influence on land tenure, resources management and collection of revenues in Jirang Syiemship

The Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) has limited involvement in land tenure and resource management in Jirang Syiemship. Revenue collection is carried out by the Executive Dorbar, with 1/8th of the collected amount being paid to the KHADC. However, the management of local resources, including land, falls entirely under the jurisdiction of the Syiemship, and the KHADC has no role in these matters. The Syiemship is responsible for overseeing land tenure and the distribution and use of natural resources within its domain. This system allows the Syiemship to maintain control over its resources while ensuring that a portion of the revenue generated is shared with the KHADC. The



KHADC's involvement in resource management and land tenure is minimal, with the Syiemship playing the primary role in regulating and managing these aspects of local governance.

xiii. Challenges faced by the KHADC in coordinating with the traditional bodies like the Syiem and the Dorbar

The Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) faces several challenges in coordinating with traditional bodies like the Syiem and the Dorbar. One of the main difficulties is ensuring that the Syiem follows to the rules and regulations outlined in the KHADC's Senate. If the Syiem fails to comply with these guidelines, there is a risk of suspension, which complicates the relationship between the KHADC and the traditional leadership. The Syiem, while being the head of the Syiemship, must navigate the balance between upholding customary laws and adhering to the administrative frameworks set by the KHADC. This creates occasional tensions, as traditional practices and modern governance structures sometimes conflict. The challenge lies in ensuring that both the Syiemship and the KHADC work together harmoniously, respecting each other's authority and responsibilities while fostering a productive and cooperative relationship. These coordination difficulties can sometimes hinder effective governance and development in the region.

xiv. Community Perception towards the role of the KHADC in relation to their traditional leadership of Syiemship

Community members have mixed perceptions of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) in relation to their traditional leadership. While the KHADC is seen as an important administrative body that provides oversight and support, many view its role as somewhat limited when it comes to engaging with the traditional institutions like the Syiem and the Dorbar. There is a sense that the KHADC's involvement in the daily affairs of the Syiemship is minimal, with much of the governance, including dispute resolution and resource management, being handled by the traditional bodies. However, the community also acknowledges the KHADC's regulatory role, particularly in matters like land tenure and revenue collection. Some people believe that the KHADC's interventions are necessary to ensure legal and administrative coherence, while others feel that it sometimes disrupts the autonomy of the traditional leadership.

xv. Relevance of the traditional institution of Syiemship in Jirang

The prospects for the sustained reverence and relevance of the traditional institution of the Syiemship in Jirang appear promising, despite the challenges posed by modern governance. The Syiemship remains



deeply rooted in the cultural and social fabric of the community, with its traditional institutions such as the Syiem and the Dorbar continuing to play a central role in maintaining law and order, resolving disputes, and managing local resources. As the community values its customary laws and practices, the Syiemship authority remains significant in everyday life. However, the increasing influence of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) and modern administrative structures presents both opportunities and challenges. The ability of the Syiemship to adapt to changing circumstances, while preserving its cultural heritage, will determine its continued relevance.

xvi. Challenges to traditional institution of Syiemship in Jirang

Emerging challenges that could threaten the traditional institution of the Syiemship in Jirang include state legislation, land encroachment, and changes in land use practices. All land in the region belongs to the Riads, with no private ownership, and the Syiem issues land pattas to individuals as long as they are actively using the land. However, if a person does not use the land for three consecutive years, the Executive Dorbar has the authority to reallocate it to someone else. This system ensures that land is used productively, but it also creates challenges, particularly when encroachment or disputes arise. The land cannot be registered in an individual's name, and the Syiem does not sell land, which limits opportunities for private ownership or market-driven land transactions. State legislation could also introduce changes that conflict with these traditional practices, further weakening the Syiemship's control over land management and its role in the community.

Conclusion

As stated earlier, the structure of the traditional administrative framework of the Jirang Syiemship is based on a clear hierarchy involving in the General Dorbar, Executive Dorbar, and Village Dorbar. Each plays a pivotal role in decision-making and governance. The KHADC integrates with this system, primarily in an oversight capacity. It ensures that traditional practices are upheld with the framework of constitutional provisions, thereby, balancing cultural preservation and legal accountability. This model highlights the unique coexistence of customary governance with modern administrative norms.

Furthermore, the study found out that the KHADC oversees the appointment of the Syiem and Myntris, ensuring legitimacy through a structured, multi- step process involving traditional constructional validation. This dual layered approach preserves traditional authority while integrating external checks. The system retains significant autonomy for the Syiem, reflecting a delicate balance where the KHADC respects and supports traditional institutions without overpowering them, thus fostering community self-



governance. The KHADC's efforts to preserve cultural practices are limited, as evidenced by isolated events like the Monolith Festivals. The KHADC has yet to implement consistent measures to actively safeguard or promote traditional practices. This leaves much of responsibility for cultural preservation to the local community and traditional institutions, emphasizing the needs for more robust interventions by the council.

It may be noted that the traditional institutions of Syiemships, particularly in Jirang, are deeply rooted in participatory governance. The General Dorbar serves as the apex decision-making body, with representation from village-level Dorbars. This structure ensures that governance decisions reflect the collective will of the community. The Syiem, as the administrative and spiritual leader, works alongside the Executive Dorbar, which comprises ministers and appointed members. This collective framework fosters inclusivity and accountability, making the governance system resilient and community-centric while preserving traditional practices with a structured framework. Traditional institutions play a vital role in maintaining law and order within the Jirang Syiemship. The Syiem and the Dorbar work collaboratively to enforce customary laws and resolve disputes. Minor conflict is addressed locally, ensuring quick and culturally appropriate resolutions, while complex cases are escalated to higher authorities such as the KHADC. This localized judicial mechanism reduced reliance on external legal system and upholds community's trust in traditional governance. The system's efficiency and alignment with cultural norms ensure harmony and stability within the community.

The Syiemship is responsible for managing community resources, including land. The General Dorbar oversees land allocation, ensuring that it is used productively and equitably. The traditional system prevents private ownership, reinforcing communal values. Revenues generated through land pattas, forest resources, and local markets are reinvested into the community, fostering self-reliance. While the KHADC provides oversight, the Syiemship retains significant autonomy in managing resources, highlighting its central role in ensuring sustainable development and economic stability.

Lastly, the Khasi Autonomous District Council (KHADC) plays a crucial role in providing oversight and ensuring legitimacy in the traditional governance system of the Syiemship. It is responsible for approving appointments of the Syiem and other members of the Executive Dorbar. Ensuring that these appointments align with customary laws while maintaining administrative transparency. This oversight reinforces the Syiemship's credibility and accountability, bridging traditional practices with constitutional governance. The KHADC ensure that local governance under the Syiemship remains



effective and aligns with broader legal and administrative frameworks. The relationship between KHADC and Syiemship is characterized by collaboration in governance. The KHADC supports the Syiemship by regulating land agreements, managing revenues, and occasionally contributing to developments projects. While the Syiemship handles day-to-day governance, dispute resolution, and cultural preservation, the KHADC provides a constitutional framework to legitimize these practices. This dynamic allows Syiemship to retain its autonomy while benefiting from the KHADC's regulatory supports, demonstrating a balance between traditional and modernity.

Nevertheless, the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) faces challenges in working with traditional leaders like the Syiem and the Dorbar. One major issue is making sure the Syiem follows the rules set by the KHADC's Senate. If the Syiem does not follow these rules, there is a chance of suspension, which makes the relationship between the KHADC and the traditional leaders difficult. The Syiem has to manage both traditional laws and the KHADC's rules, which often leads to conflicts.

To conclude, it can be said that the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) and the traditional institution of Syiemship reveals the slight interplay between modern governance structures and indigenous customs. Rooted in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, the KHADC represents an attempt to safeguard tribal autonomy and cultural identity, ensuring self-governance within the framework of a democratic state. The historical evolution of the Syiemship, deeply embedded in Khasi traditions, highlights its enduring significance in managing communal resources, resolving disputes, and preserving cultural heritage. However, the growing challenges of these institutions face including the encroachment of state legislation, limited financial resources, and tensions between traditional practices and administrative frameworks. While the KHADC plays a pivotal role in regulatory oversight, its minimal engagement in promoting cultural preservation and development initiatives has been noted. The Syiemship remains central to grassroots governance, maintaining its relevance through participatory practices and community-focused leadership. The prospects for the continued relevance of these traditional institutions pivot on their ability to adapt to modern governance demands while safeguarding the unique cultural identity of the Khasi people. As the region navigates the complexities of development and cultural preservation, a balanced approach integrating traditional and modern governance systems offers the most sustainable path forward.

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