

CHAPTER XII

Law and Order

The Khási Hills in the main used to be administered by chieftains called **Syiem**s before the British Conquest. These chieftains were the supreme dispensers of justice, administered directly or by local officers — **Lyngdohs, Sirdars** etc., in accordance with the uncodified tribal laws. In view of his role as the upholder of justice and protector of peace, it was the endeavour of every **Syiem** to ensure the security of life and property of his subjects and to maintain law and order in his territory. According to tribal custom, the **Syiem** did not have the autocratic powers of other Indian princes but was always guided by the advice of his Dorbar or Council of Ministers or **Myntris**.

B.C. Allen mentions in his Gazetteer¹ that in the dispensation of justice the “fine is the form of punishment which Khasi Siem (Syiem — Ed) most frequently employs. Sentences of imprisonment are occasionally awarded, but the culprit is then, as a rule detained in the seim’s house and compelled to work for him without pay The fines imposed consist of sums of money ranging from Rs.15 to Rs. 100 plus in each case a pig. The fines are appropriated by the seim and his assessors so that they have every inducement to convict and to impose heavy sentences. The Khasis are, however, a very democratic people and any open injustice of this kind would be very speedily resented Rupees 1,100 was the fine imposed for murder before the advent of the British. If the prisoner was unable to pay so large a sum he was put to death.” This fine would in effect be “blood-money” and as such it is unlikely that any part of it could have been appropriated by any one other than the **Syiem** or any other constituted authority. The ordinary Khasi would view with dread the appropriation of such money, as indeed he would view any form of punishment that would result in physical impairment or death to a fellow-human. It has been suggested that the institution of syiemship itself was originally established for such contingencies, a person being set up as **Syiem** to bear upon his person all responsibility for such drastic penalties. This may not be the whole truth: some **Syiem** families, for example, those of the former Shillong and Jaintia kingdoms claim supernatural ancestry, and this fact in itself would place these **Syiem**s above the limitations of laws observed by common men. If any person was to be executed for capital crimes, apparently only if he could not make adequate compensation, sentence to the effect would be given by the **Syiem** and the sentence would be carried out apparently by

1. Allen, B.C.: Gazetteer of the Khasi & Jaintia Hills, op.cit.

- (b) **Ri Nongtymmen** is **Ri Kynti** Land which has descended from generation to generation usually after two or three generations. This land is divisible or apportionable by a *dorbar* of the clan or by a branch of the clan if already divided among the several branches thereof. The head of the family i.e. the mother may also divide this land among her children, usually daughters. The division or apportionment is resorted to when the clan or the branch of the clan, or the family of the branch as the case may have increased in number and desires for the sake of peace and harmony to avoid future disputes or litigations or if the clan, branch of the clan or family or the branch falls upon hardship or for some other reasons which would make such division both admissible and desirable.
- (c) **Ri Maw** (lit "Stone Land") is **Ri Kynti** land acquired by right of purchase or by right of apportionment among the members of the family or of the clan and the holders thereof have the right to erect boundary stones to demarcate their respective lots.
- (d) **Ri Seng** is **Ri Kynti** Land acquired from ancient time by a number different clans or families and has not been divided. Income from this land is divided among the households of the clans or families holding it. The management of *Ri Seng* is in the hands of the representative elected by members of all owing clans or families. The executives are generally the President and the Secretary. In certain *elakas* such land may also devolve on male descendants when the clan or families have become extinct, that is when their female relations have died leaving no female issues.
- (e) **Ri Dakhol** is land over which a person has obtained *Ri Kynti* rights by right of occupation and making permanent improvements thereon or by right of purchase or winning a court case.
- (f) **Ri Shyieng** is a portion of **Ri Kur** specially allotted to *Ka Khadduh* (Youngest daughter) of a clan or a family to enable her to meet the expenses connected with the performance of a religious rites and ceremonies concerning the clan, *kpoh* or family, like depositing of the ashes of the dead in the cairns of the clan. Such land is generally given to *Ka Khadduh* as an additional share.
- (g) **Ri Lyngdoh** is **Ri Kynti** of the *Lyngdoh* or Priest clan of a particular native State.
- (h) **Ri Syiem** is **Ri Kynti** of the *Syiem's* clan. In some *Syiemships* as has been shown under Section 1 above, it can be *Raid* Land set apart for maintenance of the *Syiem* clan.
- (i) **Ri Iapduh** is *Ri Kynti* of a clan or a family which has become extinct. Such lands according to the time-honoured custom reverts to the chief who is immune from a curse on that family but who will keep it for the *elaka* as *Ri Raid*, or as *Ri Bam Syiem* for the family of a ruling chief, or it may escheat directly to a *Raid* wherein it is situated and becomes a *Ri Raid**.

* Source : (Report of the Land Reforms Commission)