

Historiographical Silences and the Overlooked Legacy of U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh

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Abstract

The historiography of anti-colonial resistance in Meghalaya has traditionally centred around prominent figures such as U Tirot Sing, whose leadership and defiance against British authority have been widely documented and celebrated. However, this dominant narrative has often marginalised other significant contributors to the Khasi resistance, notably U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh of Hima Maharam. His role and contributions have remained largely underrepresented in both colonial and post-colonial scholarly discourse. This academic neglect can be attributed to the enduring influence of British colonial historiography, the selective availability of contemporary sources, and the subsequent replication of these biases by local historians. As a result, the broader spectrum of Khasi resistance has been narrowly framed, often overlooking the complexity and multiplicity of actors involved. This paper argues for a critical reassessment of U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh's legacy, examining his administrative defiance and armed resistance as integral to the Khasi struggle against the English East India the anti-colonial movement in the Khasi Hills, and to restore the visibility of lesser-known patriots in the collective memory of the region's history.

Keywords: *Anti-colonial Resistance, Collective memory, Khasi, Patriot.*

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I. Introduction

U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh was born in 1770 at Mawtngam, and his paternal heritage remains somewhat ambiguous, with his father being described as an individual of foreign origin, referred to by the indigenous people as a product of *ki kharstem* or foreign people, distinguished by a yellowish complexion (Personal communication, 2023). Oral traditions suggest that these foreign ancestors were primarily from Burma, engaging in occupations such as iron ore mining and blacksmithing. It was held that they would engage in their profession of smelting iron and move from one location to another.

Though of foreign origin, U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh's father, integrated into the local community by marrying a Syiemlieh woman from whom he had six children of which three were boys and three girls. Among the three sons, U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh was the eldest, with his brothers U Ramsing and U Bormit as his immediate successors in the family lineage (Personal communication, 2022). The familial structure was marked by a division of the chieftdom among the three brothers, a territorial arrangement that would later define the political landscape of their community, with each brother potentially overseeing different regions or responsibilities (Personal communication, 2023). His father, renowned for his knowledge of warfare and strategic wisdom, imparted important teachings to his sons, focusing particularly on the art of combat and the maintenance of interpersonal relationships. These teachings were crucial not only for their personal development but also for their leadership roles within the community. U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh inherited not only his father's intellectual prowess but also his physical strength and combat abilities. Described as possessing a muscular and stalwart physique, U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh embodied the martial excellence that was passed down from his father. He was also known for his quick wit, intelligence and wisdom, attributes that complemented his formidable physicality (Personal communication, 2022).

Upon assuming the role of chief in 1820, U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh consolidated his position as a leader not just by birthright but through the application of the lessons learned from his father (Marwein, 2003). His ability to govern effectively, as we shall discuss below, can be understood as the culmination of both his personal qualities and the political and social structures in place within his family. Though he was reserved and not prone to extensive speech, his actions and leadership left a significant impact on his community.

On 4 April 1829, the Nongkhlaw massacre, or the First Anglo-Khasi War, took place. A local confrontation with the company's servants became the cause of most of the Khasi *hima* to take up arms in what

seemed a concerted attempt to drive out the British from the hills. Appeals for help went to many Khasi *syiem*. This resulted in the Anglo-Khasi War, and a confederacy of Khasi *Syiem* rose in arms against the Government (Bareh, 1984). In 1832, Tirot Sing requested U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh, the Chief of Maharam, to fight against the British. With a hundred troops, he marched towards Nongkhlaw only to find Tirot Sing had just been arrested. So, he had to return, and on his way back home, to commemorate or mark his movement or support towards Tirot Sing, he set up a memorial stone in *Mawmaram* (a place located on the west side of the village of Sohiong via the Shillong to Nongstoin route) (Personal communication, 2023). Therefore, *Mawmaram* stands as the participation of U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh with Tirot Sing against the British. Within a few years, however, several Khasi *Syiem* were made to surrender and enter into agreements recognising the Company as the Sovereign power. Many Khasi *hima* ceded land and paid fines for the part they had taken in the uprising. Realising he could not fight the Company's forces alone, Tirot Singh surrendered on 13 January 1833. However, despite what the Company had accomplished, the tumult of the war had not yet been entirely silenced.

Causes that led to the outbreak of the war

The Maharam chieftom, as said, consisted of both hilly and plains areas. The chieftom of *Hima* Maharam comprised three portions: *Rilum* (Upper Range), *Ri War* (Lower Range) and plains (with Puran, Saspur, Kadir, Konah and Chanduk) now included in Bangladesh. However, the revenue of the domain came mainly from the plain area, where the chief, younger brother U Bormit Syiemlieh, was appointed to collect payment from these essential areas. After Tirot Sing's fall, the British government started to tax the inhabitants in the plain area (Kodir, Konah, Chanduk, Puran and Saspur) located on the Sylhet side (Bareh, 1984). On seeing the increased revenue from these areas, the British snatched away some lands and revenues belonging to the Maharam kingdom, which infuriated U Sngap Syiem. Therefore, he made his plan to continue to struggle with the British, and it seems inevitable that the domain lent solid support because the people were also angry about the conduct of local officers who seized the revenue from the plain sector. Upon hearing of the East India Company's successful capture of Tirot Sing, Bormit seized the opportunity to call upon the East India Company to intervene and wage war against the *Hima* Maharam. His primary motivation was his desire to ascend to the position of chief, a process that would otherwise require waiting for his second elder brother, who was next in line of succession based on the principle of primogeniture (Aitchison, 1983) Although Bormit had long established an understanding with the East India Company, the eventuality of their involvement and his rise to power came at a later juncture (Marwein, 2003) In 1832, he was asked by the East India Company to pay tribute to them, which was marked as a punishment to all the chieftoms who had lent support towards Tirot Sing. On hearing this, U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh was furious and refused to pay, which made the East India Company angry (Personal communication, 2022).

The Nongstoin Rajah (Bareh, 1967), U Dor Sing Syiemiong, who was weak but cunning, had hosted the British troops in one of his villages in Sohphoh, which made it easier for them to keep track on the internal developments within the Maharam chieftom. On seeing this, U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh, attacked and burnt down the village of Sohphoh. This event was corroborated by E.D. Townshend, Civil in charge of Mairang, on June 27, 1834 and reported "that a party of 100 Cosseyeahs led by Phanwun of Maharam, attacked the village of Saphoo (Sohphoh), which falls under the jurisdiction of Nongstoin, and had burned down villages which shelter foreigners." U Dor Sing appealed to the government for intervention, but no immediate action was taken by the British authorities. In the meantime, because of this delay U Dor Sing requested for permission to open hostilities against the people of Maharam with whom he is at enmity but was not granted. It may be pointed out here that U Phanwun was the same man who murdered the brother of Nongstoin Rajah four years ago. Townshend was directed to summon the people of Maharam and that "the relative evidence should be taken in your presence before a Panchayat of Kossiah Sirdars, who should give their opinion on the criminality of the accused agreeable to their customs. If, however, they would fail, a suitable fine was to be imposed upon the whole community, and a more explicit treaty was to be concluded with the Rajah" (Foreign Department of Political Consultation, 1834). This enmity between Nongstoin and the Maharam chieftom led to the immediate outbreak of the Second Anglo-Khasi-Maram War between U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh of *Hima* Maharam and the British.

An open battlefield, 1835-1839

It was generally held that with the surrender of U Tirot Sing in 1833, the resistance against the British intrusion into the hills had come to an end. However, the case of South West Khasi Hills has a different story to offer. References can be drawn to the struggle that was carried out by U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh, the chief of Maharam, even though knowing that all the other Khasi *Syiem*s had surrendered, he continued to fight against the oppressor and resisted their demands. On seeing that the people of Maharam had refused to be under the jurisdiction of the British and in trying to persuade them to come under its terms and conditions, a Political Agent from Sohra by the name of Captain Lister had appointed *Jon Snarai*, an individual noted for his intelligence and strength, hailing from Sohra, along with a contingent of the East India Company's army. This force was instructed to march towards Raibah, the residence of U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh, with the aim of apprehending the latter. On

hearing that the government would send an army to his domain to capture him and his territory, U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh called upon his people to start preparing for war, where he trained them to fight and protect their *hima* (Personal communication, 2023). As mentioned, he was a wise, intelligent, and decisive leader, he knew that the first and foremost thing the British would do was to come and look after him in Raibah. He departed from Raibah after instructing the queen to inform any inquirers that U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh had travelled to a festival in Nonglang and Jakrem. Subsequently, he proceeded to Nongnam, Mawngam, Rangthong and Rangjadong. He made a stronghold position at Nongnah, which today is regarded as one of the exquisite places in the Khasi hills, and collected significant quantities of millet to sustain his troops for five years (Marwein, 2016).

U Sngap, thereupon, took to fighting alone without any help or alliance on a grand scale, as was that of U Tirot Sing. The roles of U Moit Khaw, U Tep Shaik, U Phanmaram, and U Yrja in their gallant defence of the stockades are still being remembered by the people of this area to the present day. The villages of Nongnam, Rangthong, and Nongnah witnessed heavy fighting, which was carried out by these leaders. Among the patriotic women, mention may be made of *Ka-Lar*, who provided intelligent information to those who were fighting in the front (Bareh, 1967). The war was able to be prolonged because of the support of these leaders to U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh, who declared that:

'The war is inevitable. We shall fight to keep our sovereign status intact. Our enemy shall snatch away our markets and trade and deprive us of dominion. But with our queen and Myntris together, I am determined to fight to the last. An orator thus replied: 'We shall fight to protect our lands and keep our moral sense intact: to keep our women's sense of decency and build up our resources. We shall stand on our legs. We shall not allow social exploitation to play a foul game or havoc' (Bareh, 1984, 143-144).

Therefore, in March 1835, an expedition under Jon Snarai, a Khasi from Sohra, marched towards *Hima Maharam*. On reaching Raibah, U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh had already gone into hiding, and the queen was questioned about his whereabouts. With a happy smile, she informed the troops that U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh had gone to a festival at Nonglang and Jakrem. Not believing her statements, Jon Snarai moved towards the hill of Mawpait overlooking the state of affairs at Nongnam. On the following day, Jon Snarai, along with his men, reached Nongnam and started questioning the chief's location, but they got the same reply as that of the Queen at Raibah. The absence of adult boys in the village also alarmed Jon Snarai, and he was informed by the villagers that many of them had gone for fishing. On reaching Mawkyrwang, one of the sub-villages of Nongnam, Jon Snarai realised that the village was strongly fortified and that on each side it was surrounded by cliffs and ridges, which made it difficult for the troops to enter. At this point a conflict between the two sides became eminent and U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh and his men started the attack by shooting with their poisoned arrows, and at the same time firing with their indigenous fire-arms. Huge stone boulders were also rolled from the cliffs which led to casualties on the side of the British. However, this claim that was made in the oral narratives could not be ascertained from the colonial records as the colonial sources were silent about the seriousness of the fight and the casualties incurred. In this fight Jon Snarai and his troop had to retreat, and in the process many of the soldiers who were native Indians from the plain areas were attacked and their heads were chopped off (Personal communication, 2023) and this place is known till today as "*Khlieh Dkhar*". Jon Snarai managed to escape from this place and went directly to Mawngam, the ancestral place of U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh and found out that all the adult men of the village were not present and suspected that they were involved in the attack on British troops. Upon failing to locate U Sngap Sing and his men, Jon Snarai ordered the village at Mawkyrwang to be set on fire. He then proceeds to Rangthong hunting for the rebel chief and found out that it was fortified, but U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh had already eluded them. In frustration, the entire village, along with its crops and millet, was burnt down by the troops. Informers were sent to gather information about the whereabouts of U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh and after two days, word came from an informer about the presence of U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh at Nongnah but it would be a challenging task to capture him as he was camping at a ridge of a cliff which was very difficult to access without being spotted by the warriors of the Chief (Marwein, 2003).

In the year 1836, the government had sent the Light Infantry from Sylhet under the command of Captain Lister to hunt down U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh and his followers, but it was too difficult to capture or convince him to come out for talks with the British. He was alert, watchful, and rigorous in waging war against the invaders through guerrilla tactics, taking advantage of the high cliffs, ravines, and deep gorges (Bareh, 1984). The British troops often tried to advance towards the upland but would suffer losses when boulders would be rolled down the hills which was then followed by attacks with swords and firearms. During the course of the fight, Captain Lister was shot with a poisonous arrow and was badly wounded. This was his second wound, the first being in 1829 (Bareh, 1967) in his fight against Tirot Sing.

In response to the ongoing disturbances, the Governor-General of India, Lord Auckland, in April and May of 1838, demanded that the local government should provide comprehensive information regarding the origins and nature of these upheavals. In light of this directive, another military expedition was launched in 1838 under the command of Captain W. J. Bennett, accompanied by the Sylhet Light Infantry. However, the expedition faced significant resistance as the indigenous warriors ambushed the party with a relentless barrage of arrows,

compelling Bennett to retreat. On a subsequent occasion, Bennett dispatched a messenger, a Dobasia, with an offer for the warriors to surrender and disarm. This diplomatic gesture, however, was met with hostility, as the warriors responded with defiance, challenging Bennett to retreat or else they would be removed by force (Foreign Department of Consultation, 1838). The Maram, leveraging the strategic advantages of their rugged terrain, were able to effectively concentrate and sustain their defence at Nongnah. Operating from their strongholds situated on the precipitous heights of Nongkdait, Theip Bamon and Mawtajem, they successfully repelled multiple military expeditions attempting to approach Nongnah via the Balat route. This series of engagements underscores the effectiveness of the Maram's resolute resistance to military incursions (Marwein, 2003). By leveraging the formidable geographical advantages of their terrain, the Maram not only impeded but effectively repelled external military efforts, thereby highlighting their capacity to maintain a resilient autonomy in the face of prolonged external pressures. The Maram's ability to maintain such a resilient defence not only highlights the tactical significance of the area's topography but also underscores the formidable resistance posed by the local population against external incursions.



Fig 1: Nongnah, an impenetrable stockade during the fight between U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh and the British.
(Photo taken by Jasmine Kharbteng)

During the early part of the conflict between U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh forces and those of the British, it would appear that the former was having the upper hand in the fight. However, despite their early setbacks, the British forces under the command of Captain Lister were able to get the help of U Bormit, the younger brother of U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh. It may be pointed out that Bormit had previously sought British assistance for the invasion of *Hima* Maharam, as he wanted to ascend to the position of a chief, a process that would otherwise require waiting for his second elder brother, who was next in the line of succession based on the principle of primogeniture (Herbert, 1903). Ultimately, Bormit's involvement played a pivotal role in destabilising his brother's command and shifting the momentum in favour of the British forces.

With Bormit's guidance, the British forces executed an incursion from the west side of Nongnah, an approach that U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh and his supporters had not anticipated and one that was considered an unlikely route for military engagement. This strategic choice proved crucial, as it exposed a significant gap in U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh defences, which had been reliant on a network of support from the surrounding areas. The western flank, poorly defended and neglected in the overall defence strategy, became the site of a decisive British assault in January 1839. The British forces, under Bormit's direction, burned down a village on the westernmost edge of Nongnah, which in turn revealed the critical vulnerability of U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh's defensive infrastructure. The attack severed the local forces from their central command, leaving them increasingly isolated and unable to effectively resist the British advance. As a result, U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh's defensive system began to collapse, weakening his position significantly. Despite efforts to flee with his family and loyal Myntis to Raibah, U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh was ultimately captured after a month-long escape attempt, making the cessation of his resistance (Marwein, 2003). Oral traditions and interviews with key figures, including Colonel Syiemlieh, suggest that Sngap Sing's downfall was not solely the result of military defeat but rather the consequences of

internal betrayal (Personal communication, 2022). These actions, motivated by personal gain and material rewards, led to the exposure of vulnerabilities in Sngap Sing's defences. It was this internal dispute, coupled with external military strategy, that facilitated the British conquest of Nongnah and the eventual defeat of Sngap Sing's forces.

As part of the peace agreement, Captain Lister insisted on the payment of compensation to meet the cost of the British expedition, to which Sngap Sing Syiem replied: "I have no tribute to render. You know we, too, were quite exhausted. You have burnt our villages, killed our cattle, confiscated our paddy, and starved our people. Moreover, I was not able to collect revenue for so long" (Bareh, 1984, 140).

However, the final terms of agreement were concluded as follows:

1. U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh's life was spared and his personal liberty was guaranteed.
2. Amnesty was offered to his followers, and the troops that were temporarily stationed were withdrawn.
3. A fine of Rs. 2000/- was imposed on U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh, and his close relative was taken as a hostage to be kept under the supervision of the Political Agent at Cherra (Sohra). (Later, the government decided that he would reside with the Rajah of Myllem instead of being detained at Cherra).
4. The government also agreed that the prisoners who had not been guilty of taking up arms would be released. Still, those suspected of being "concerned in the murders" would be detained for the present or until the country's inhabitants have resumed their peaceful habits and occupations (Foreign Department of Political Consultation, 1839).

A.J.M. Mills in his *Report of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills 1853*, mentions that "the treaty that was concluded on February 13th, 1839, or 3rd Falgoon, 1246 B.S., between U Songaph Rajah and the Political Agent to the Governor-General (Mills, 1854)" are as follows:

"That having acknowledged my dependency on the Company...I agree to administer justice to my subjects as usual but not to pass a death sentence upon any of them.

"That whenever a body of the Company's troops passes through my country, I will attend to them, supply their provisions and other necessities, and receive the price thereof from the Company in the usual course.

"That whenever the Sahibs require me to appear before them on account of any disturbances in the hills, I shall do so with my Khasi people and shall attend as long as I may be desired to be present, during which time only the provisions of my people will be charged to the Company.

"That if any person committing murder or dacoity conceals himself within my country, I bind myself to arrest and deliver him to the Sahibs when ordered.

"That within one month from this date, I will pay the Company a fine of Rs. 2,000 for the pardon of my offences.

"That Chand Manik Raja and Burro Manik of Raja of Moleem (Myllem), Poonjee will stand security for the due fulfilment of the above conditions and that I give (sister's son) nephew Soolong Raja of Moleem Poonjee, to execute all orders passed concerning my country. On these conditions, I execute this deed of agreement, dated 13 February 1839" (Mills, 1853, 51-52).

After the war, in order to avoid any further confrontation, U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh was allowed to rule his chieftdom until he died in the summer of 1846 at Raibah. Accordingly, U Bormit, who was instrumental in helping the British in their fight against U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh, was recognised as the Chief. By this time, the Maram chieftdom had lost substantial territory in the plain's areas, and steps were taken by the government to recognise the domain as semi-independent. The submission of U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh in February 1839, followed by the pacification of the hills, effectively ended the Khasi insurrection.

Despite his valiant leadership, U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh's contributions have often been overshadowed by the exploits of U Tirot Sing, and this trend can be seen in the scholarly discourses and written traditions that have been going on for decades. Much of these writings have a lot to do with the influence of English colonial historians and the availability of other contemporary sources, and were eventually picked up by the local historians too. This academic bias has led to the underrepresentation of the contribution of U Sngap Sing Syiemlieh and his role in the Khasi resistance against the English East India Company. It is important to reassess, acknowledge and to understand the significance of his struggle along with his followers, which had transcended from administrative actions to defiance against the British and also to comprehend the complexities of the struggle for Khasis in their fight for freedom.

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