

*My Experience in Public Life...
and other reflections.*



B.B. Lyngdoh

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A POLITICIAN REMINISCES

For the interest of the present and future students of political history in North Eastern India, I would like to record my 52 years experience in public life. I propose to publish them in three parts. The first part will be for the years 1937 to 1959, the second for the years 1960 to 1970 and the third for the years 1971 to 1989. I may live to the ripe old age of 90 and write the fourth part for the period 1990 to 2000 A.D.

My introduction to public affairs was during the campaign in the general election to the Assam Legislative Assembly in the year 1937. One day, a tall man named Rev. J.J.M. Nichols Roy, came to our house to get my father's support in his election. I heard my father saying, "As a man of God you are not to involve in the affairs of the world." Rev. Roy replied that by serving people, he and his church were serving God. My father was not convinced, but my mother was. She worked very hard, going from door to door to canvass for Rev. J.J.M. Nichols Roy. He won the election. However, we never saw him throughout his term which, because of the Great War, was extended till 1945. He never came to see us nor did we ever go to see him. This was because in those days the general people had little to do with the government.

After finishing primary education in the Laitlyngkot Presbyterian L.P. School, I went to study in the Ram Krishna Mission School at Cherrapunjee. There I was made aware of the vast Indian Sub-continent by the teachers who came from Calcutta, Madras, and other places. I joined the Shillong Government High School in 1940 where I came across a little book entitled *Our India* authored by Minoos Masani. It was prescribed for rapid English reading in Classes VII and VIII. That book created in me an all India interest of sorts and I became an ardent supporter of the great Independence Movement. Together, with a few like-minded Khasi students, I joined the "Quit India" Movement called by Mahatma Gandhi on 9th August 1942. Of course, we played only a very tiny role in it such as staying away from classes for a few days and writing "Quit India" on street walls.

While reading I.Sc. at the well-known Cotton College in Gawahati in 1944-45 I stayed in a predominantly Assamese hostel called "Tarun Kutir," near Digalipukhri. We talked in the common language, English. Since my aim was to be a teacher or a lawyer, personally, (and now to my regret) I saw no point in learning languages. During 1946 to 1952, studying B.A. in Calcutta, I stayed for a while in a Bengalee Hostel which was named Acharya Prafulla Chatravas Hostel located in Park Circus and I later on shifted to the Scottish Church College Hostel, North Calcutta. However, my pleasant sojourn there ended unceremoniously with the outbreak of the communal riots. I returned to Shillong and went on to obtain my degree from St. Edmund's college.

THE CALCUTTA MAIDAN EPISODE

In 1946 Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of the interim Union Government, addressed a huge public meeting on the grounds of the Calcutta Maidan. I forget the date. It was the largest meeting I had ever seen. While Nehru was speaking, there were some people who distributed leaflets among the crowds. The police charged them. In the process the whole crowd dispersed and left Pandit Nehru alone with his colleagues in the rostrum. Coming back to the hostel where I was lodged, I wrote a long letter to a Newspaper (I forget which one), criticizing the police for their folly. Seeing my writing, my room-mate, a Bengali medical student, asked how many friends I had then in Calcutta. I mentioned a few plus the big man who had befriended me when I was but a callow boy at the Ram Krishna Mission School, Cherrapunjee. I explained that this saintly man, Swami Lokeshwara Nanda, the then head of the Rama Krishna Mission School in Cherrapunjee, was now in Calcutta and that I frequently meet him in this great metropolis. He laughed and warned me not to meddle with the police in Calcutta or anywhere. They were trained to be anti-people by the foreign imperialists, he said. That stopped me.

After a three years course in the Calcutta University Law College, I obtained my LLB degree in 1951. At that time one had to undergo a year's probation under a senior advocate before getting a license to practice in the courts. Having plenty of time at my disposal, I wrote and published two Khasi booklets in 1952 and 1953, namely *The Khasis* and *The Working of the District Council*. The subjects concerned things that were largely social and political. I also secured a one year teaching job at the Mawkhar Christian High School after facing an interesting interview before a selection committee consisting of one Welsh Missionary, the Rev. Adams, Mr. Rai Bahadur Ropmai and the Headmaster Mr. W. Reade. When I said that I would serve only for a year after which I would practice in the courts, and thence go into public service, the Rev. Adams said in a tone of mixed sarcasm and disapproval, "Oh you would join the Bar and then go to politics?" Before I could think of an appropriate reply, Rai Bahadur Ropmai, a church stalwart intervened by saying very emphatically, "Yes, we will send good Christians to politics to purify it." In *The Khasi*, I wrote about a certain sense of discontent and restlessness among the Khasi public in Shillong at that time. There was even a whisper doing the surreptitious rounds that hinted at "the Naga Way". Eventually, it took the form of a demand for a separate Hill State.

THE HILL STATE MOVEMENT

I joined the Shillong Bar in 1952. On 8th October, a Hill Leaders' Conference was convened at Tura as decided at the meeting of Rev. J.J.M. Nichols Roy and Capt. W.A. Sangma, Pu Supranga and B.M.Roy, the three Chief Executive Members of the Garo, Mizo and Khasi District Councils respectively on 16th June, 1954. I attended the meeting as an invitee and there the conference decided to submit a memorandum to the State Reorganisation Commission demanding the creation of a separate State for the six Autonomous Hill Districts of the then composite State of Assam.

In order to organise mass participation in the movement and to negotiate with the Government of India, the meeting formed the Assam Hills Tribal Union with Captain W. A. Sangma as Chairman and Mr. B. M. Roy as Co-Chairman. I was elected General Secretary. We toured extensively visiting many places both remote and near in order to contact hill leaders and mobilize support for the mass movement that we were about to launch. We organized Union District Units so as to enable to create awareness and also generate action towards the cause.

WITH J.J.M. NICHOLS ROY

Rev. J.J.M. Nichols Roy got nominated to the Constituent Assembly in 1946-49 where he played a very important role for the hill communities in the North East. In 1952 he noticed me a little when I published a small booklet on Khasi social and political life. But my close association with him came after the 1952 Hill Leaders' Conference at Tura. Every Monday evening we met in the sub-committee meetings of the Shillong Unit of the Tribal Union. As Secretary, I was the convener. It was around this time that J.J.M.Nichols Roy confided in me the reasons for joining the Indian National Congress. In 1945, he was in San Francisco in the USA when representatives of the five victorious allied powers met there. They included the presidents of China, France and America, the Prime Minister of Great Britain and the Foreign minister of the Soviet Union. From the deliberations that took place there, a clear indication was given that India as well as other subject countries would achieve independence. In such an event, what then would happen to the tribals of the North Eastern Hills? J.J.M.Nichols Roy flew to Shillong, realizing that he must get into the Constituent Assembly and the only viable way was through the Indian National Congress or through the Muslim League. Thus, he joined the Congress. He got elected during the 1946 General Elections, which, significantly was seen as a general referendum on the India's independence demand. He was nominated to the Constituent Assembly, and being of a very

persuasive nature combined with his towering personality, was instrumental in getting a separate Chapter, the Sixth Schedule meant for safeguarding the interest of tribal peoples of the six hill Districts of Assam, incorporated in the Constitution of India.

He advised us that we bring out an English Weekly to propagate our hill state demand. He contributed a good amount of money to defray part of the expenses. We published the paper *Eastern Chronicles* with me as Editor. In introspection, I can say that the Hill state movement was instrumental in souring his relationship with the Government since the Assam Pradesh Committee singularly opposed the separate state demand, the movement, consequently became an anti-Congress one.

Eventually, J.J.M. Nichols Roy had to leave the Congress in 1957. He revived the Khasi-Jaiñtia Conference and took over as its President. From then on we worked together almost on a daily basis. From him I learned a great deal about public affairs in Assam, in India and about the Constituent Assembly, where he played a very important role for the hill people of North East India, and generally for secularism and religious freedom in the country. He successfully stopped the proposal to prevent any person below the age of 18 to change his religion. He said that he met his God at the age of 16. His contention was how could any man bind a fellow man's soul in its relation with God? Premier Gopinath Bordoloi supported him. Rev. J.J.M. Nichols Roy passed away in 1959. After the passing away of this great man, I was made President of the Khasi-Jaiñtia Conference, an organization he so ably led.

PHIZO'S VISIT

In 1955 Mr. Phizo the famous Naga leader visited Shillong. We invited him to a discussion in Rev. J.J.M. Nichols Roy's basement hall. We wanted the Nagas to join us in the separate state movement under the Indian Constitution. The MP, Mrs. B. Khongmen, pleaded

that he and his colleagues come together with us in the same boat. He said, "Yes, let us sail together but in a higher boat" meaning complete independence. The talks ended there.

THE COAL WAR

During the years 1953 to 1958 I was closely connected with the affairs of the Sohra Syiemship (former Cherra State) as a part-time consultant in legal and administrative matters. Because of the heavy rains (in fact the heaviest on Earth) agriculture is practically absent in all the hilly portions of the Syiemship. But the people were very prosperous as coal mine owners. They sold their coal to Shillong and Guwahati and also to certain parts of the present Bangladesh. But in September 1954 something happened that shook the whole structure of their life. There was a notification that all the coal mines of Cherra Syiemship were being taken over by the Assam Government. It also became known that the government would lease out the mines to the companies. The ruler, Late Join Manik Syiem, his Myntiris, the general public- all of us were shocked.

As a grown-up, educated Khasi I knew the customary laws of the Khasi people and the constitution of the Khasi States. Land with all its contents, the soil on the surface, the minerals below and the trees above absolutely belong to the people as a community, a clan or an individual that is *raid* lands, *kur* lands and *ri kynti* lands. The Syiem has nothing to do with land. Therefore the Assam government notification baffled me. So I went to meet Rev. J.J.M. Nichols-Roy who was then a Minister in the Assam government. I was surprised to learn that he did not know about the notification. He was very angry with it. He moved for its withdrawal, but Mr. Medhi was adamant. The people rose in protest. It became a mass movement. The government came down heavily. Public meetings were prohibited by the District Magistrate. Under the protection of the Syiem and with his active participation, we defied the prohibitory orders. Police force came down from Shillong and

stationed themselves in several places. Tear gas was used to disperse public meetings or to scare away the owner from the mines. After a year or so, the government gave up.

At that same period there was also the strong hill people movement for a separate State. To ease the situation Mr. Bimala Prasad Chaliha was brought to replace Bishnu Ram Medhi as the chief Minister of Assam. He was known to be a friend of the hill people. He was broad minded and kind hearted. I liked him very much. However, being new to Khasi Hills he was misled by the interested parties to restore the decision to take over the coal mines of Sohra Syiemship. I came to know about it from Mr. Stanley Nichols-Roy, son of Rev J.J.M Nichols-Roy. He said that a lease agreement would be signed within seven days. There was no time to organize public protest. Once the lease agreement was signed, government would find it legally difficult to cancel it afterwards. So we got the most prominent Khasi leaders of Shillong to issue a protest which was very effective . The protest had the desired effect. The government called the Cherra leaders for discussion. Ultimately I led a 50-stong delegation to meet Chief Minister Mr. Chaliha in his residence at Shillong. He was happily surprised to learn from us about the healthy, decent economic life of the Khasis. Each family has a house and a garden, within which vegetables are grown and cattle, pigs and chickens are reared. Outside the village the family has coal mines or paddy fields or potato cultivations. The people would not give up that beautiful life and go to live in the barracks of the companies. Within a week Mr. Chaliha cancelled the proposed scheme of taking away the coal mines from the people.

THE SEEDS OF THE HILL STATE MOVEMENT

The events leading to the coal war might have been a separate issue altogether but it can be said that in its dynamics were already spawned the seeds of discontent which would fester and result in the full

blown symptom of an unrest that would have ramifications leading to the inevitable – that is, the strident voicing of concerns, the general malcontent and the growing awareness of differences hitherto tolerated and even ignored. For the sake of political record, it can be emphatically stated that it was the passing of the Assamese Official Language Act by the Assam Legislative Assembly on 24th October 1960 that proved to be the catalyst that set off the process for the long and relatively bloodless agitation that would result in the successful attainment of self determination paradigms in the form of states across the hills of North East India.

Roughly a month later, the third conference of the All Party Hill Leaders Conference was convened.

DEMAND DAY

October 24 was fixed by the APHLC as a “demand day”. On this day every year (1960-1968) a *bandh* was observed in Tura, Shillong and Jowai from dawn to noon at which time we took a procession to the Rynghap maidan at Shillong, where we addressed a meeting of 60,000-70,000. Since it was always a peaceful *bandh* and only once in a year the Chaliha government practically cooperated with us. We fixed the *bandh* only one day in a year because we know that *bandhs* were against the interests of the people. While the government ministers, officers, clerks and peons enjoy a holiday, the poor farmers, small traders and labourers suffer.

NEHRU PLAN

During 1960-61 we had many meetings with Prime Minister Nehru and other central leaders over our demand. Pandit Nehru was sympathetic, but hesitating and vague. He suggested a sort of autonomy which came to be generally known as the ‘Scottish Pattern’ of administration. We did not accept and launched a non-cooperation movement. In April, 1961 the APHLC decided to boycott the election

to the Assam Legislative Assembly due to be held in June 1962, we reversed our decision and decided to contest the elections just to defeat the congress candidates and then forthwith resign. This decision was arrived at after several months' controversy within the party. Capt. W. A. Sangma, Mr S.D.D. Nichols Roy and myself were for changing the June decision to boycott the election. While others led by Mr T. Cajec and Mr. H. Hynñiewta opposed the idea of 'changing'. The Aizawl conference of September, 1961 left the matter to be decided by a public debate which was announced to be held in Shillong (Khasi National Durbar Hall) in November 1961. Only two leaders were chosen to speak, Mr. H Hynñiewta and myself. The APHLC supporters in the meeting accepted my reasoning that we boycott the election the opponent will capture all the 16 seats in the five autonomous Hill districts. They will influence their constituent against the Hill state demand. Regarding the wordings of the decisions to resign many members led by Capt. W. A. Sangma were for saying "The elected MLAs should resign when called upon to do so by the party". I proposed "The elected MLAs should resign forthwith". I was over-ruled. Feeling very strongly over the matter, I left the meeting. Mr. S.D.D. Nichols-Roy was absent at that time. Learning about it in the afternoon he came to see me in my residence. "It seemed all right", he said. "The party will call upon the elected MLAs to resign." My reply was that the MLAs would be the most influential leaders of the party then. It would be difficult for them to go for resigning from their five years terms in office. He saw that merit of my point. He went together to the meeting which accepted my draft for 'resignation forthwith'. But that 'forthwith' resignation never happened. It came as late as October 24, 1962, eight months after the election results and that also with only seven. Four MLAs did not resign. Our failure to act as per decision to 'resign forthwith' and the cooperation with the Assam Chief Minister in his call for solidarity against the Chinese aggression disgusted the Mizo leaders who then left the APHLC in July 1963.

NEHRU AND THE CHINESE AGGRESSION

When China invaded our country in October, 1962 the APHLC suspended the non-cooperation movement and joined the all parties' conference called by Chief Minister Chaliha to demonstrate the North-East's people solidarity against the Chinese aggression.

Prime Minister Nehru visited Arunachal after the Chinese withdrawal. We took the opportunity to meet him at the Guwahati airport on his way back to Delhi. We were shocked by the change in his appearance. He looked like a man whose dreams and vision had been shattered. But even then we were selfish enough to press for the cause. He invited us to come to Delhi for discussions. The crucial date was October, 1963. Six of us went – Capt. Sangma, Mr. Nichols-Roy, Prof. Swell, Mr. Bareh and myself. We met Pundit Nehru in his Office. He looked responsive and kind. I was emboldened to complain about his vagueness with us. I reminded the indefinite words he used like “normally”, “generally”, “conventionally” in all his talks and correspondence with us. “You want to be definite? All right” he said, “you sit with my secretary this evening and come back tomorrow”. We sat for several hours with the secretary. Next day the secretary placed before him a definite form which he accepted. Afterwards it came to be known as ‘Nehru Plan’. The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee rejected it as “un-democratic and absurd”. The APHLC, however, accepted it “for trial”.

INDIRA GANDHI AND HER FEDERAL PLAN

From the middle of the year 1966 Prime Minister Indira Gandhi took up very seriously our demand for separate state. She constituted a Cabinet Committee of six members with Home Minister Guljari Lal Nanda as Chairman. He came to Shillong and discussed with us on June 29, 30, 1966. From him we learned a new phrase when he said “we have been furious by thinking about you”. While pleading for a

separate state we also placed before him the one-ness of the entire North-East Region, particularly in the matter of communication, development and trade. We suggested a common structure for all the seven North-Eastern States to coordinate the development of the whole area. The Seeds were then planted for the establishment of the North-Eastern Council in 1973.

Mr. Nanda did not commit anything to us. He advised us to come to Delhi in September, 1966 we found Mr. Y.B. Chavan in the place of Mr. Nanda. It was Mr. Chavan and Mr. K.C. Pant, the then Minister, Home Affairs, that we have had the most intimate negotiations for our hills state demand. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi came to meet the hills people in their own Rynghap Maidan at Shillong on December 27, 1966. About a lakh of people had come from all over Khasi-Jaiñtia Hills to see and hear her. Some even came from Garo Hills. She spoke very briefly. But to us it was most memorable speech. "We have fully understood your aspiration," she declared, "We will re-organize Assam to give the hill people requisite status and dignity." Here came a national leader with a difference. While others came with love, goodwill and sympathy, she was the first to come with love, goodwill and respect.

After the meeting we followed her to government House. She asked us to come to Delhi for further discussions. We regretted, saying we had a conference next week. She knew the conference would fix a date for starting the non-violent direct action programme. While we were sitting in the conference we received her message through the Governor requesting us to postpone our programme and come to meet her in Delhi. I happened to preside over that meeting. On the second day we received the same message. That time I noticed a change in the mood of the members. It started first among the women delegates. In the end the Conference agreed to put off the date for action and send a delegation to meet the Prime Minister and her colleagues. Chief Minister Chaliha was also in Delhi when we arrived there. After several days of

detailed discussion, the government of India issued the famous 13th January, 1967 declaration of a 'Federal Plan' for the entire North-Eastern Region. All the States including the new one for us will have a common Legislative Assembly for certain Legislative Assembly for certain common subjects. We returned to Shillong and received a warm welcome in Khasi National Durbar Hall. Many people also came to receive us at the Guwahati airport. Moving among the people around Shillong I sensed a double psychology among them. One was a genuine feelings of joy at the achievement. The other was a sense of relief from the painful sacrifices and sufferings that they would have to go through in the event of 'direct action'.

Initially the Assam leaders agreed with Chief Minister Chaliha to accept the federal plan. But later they backed out in the face of opposition from among the rank and file. In this respect I recall an informal discussion we had with general Srinagesh when he was Governor of Assam during the early sixties. When we told him that Mr. Chaliha was a good man but weak, he corrected us by saying, "A weak man cannot be a good man". It was after some years experience in public administration that I came realize the truth of this wise statement.

When the Federal Plan failed, we suggested the simple separate state. We pressed hard but failed. We were forced back to square one. We resigned from the Assam Assembly in June 1968 and convened at Tura where we sat from June 25 to July 1. This time we no longer received any message from Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi during the Conference. A direct action date was fixed for September 9, 1968 by a special 28-member committee. The committee faced one difficult problem. There was a feeling of apprehension whether the youthful chief organizer of the APHLC Volunteers, namely Mr. Hoping Stone Lyngdoh, could be trusted to remain non-violent. With great reluctance the chairman, Capt. W.A. Sangma and the secretary Mr. Nichols-Roy decided to part company with Mr. H.S. Lyngdoh who soon after

organized the Hill State People Democratic Party with Mr. Meshak Kharkongor as president. Mr. However Hynñiewta ex-MP sympathized with him, but did not join the new party. Meanwhile, in Delhi, a new plan was being evolved. The brain behind it was understood to be the varied-minded Mr. Y.B. Chavan.

On September 9, morning, a first batch of 300 volunteers was called. Their parents, grand parents and uncles accompanied them to the Khasi National Durbar Hall at Shillong. Even the grand old *Syiem of the traditional khasi state of Khyrim*, late Olim Sing, brought his grandsons for action. It was a very moving scene in the hall that morning. Many mothers brought rice tiffins for their volunteers sons as if they were thinking or wishing that it would be only for a day. Mr. Nichols-Roy and myself were chosen to lead the volunteers that day. By 9:30 am we had completely surrounded the Assam Assembly. We sang the song, "Eastern Hills will shine to night". At about 11 a.m the District Magistrate, the police officer in vans came. For two hours they just loitered around without saying or doing nothing. Later we came to learn that Chief Minister Chaliha had advised them to wait while he was having telephonic discussion with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. At 1:00 P.M the officers told us to go home peacefully. Capt. Sangma who was then in Delhi advised us to postpone further direct action programme and to meet in a conference on 15th September at Tura to discuss a new plan.

When the autonomous state plan was flashed in the newspaper as 'a state within a state' the reaction in Shillong was sharply against. The *Assam Tribune* carried a front page headline the statement of the general secretary, Mr. Stanley Nichols-Roy who decided that the plan was totally unacceptable. On the morning of September 15 we sat in a conference at Tura. The atmosphere was tense. One delegation after another spoke against the Autonomous State. After two hours I sought permission to speak. I had studied the plan and was convinced that it was good. I spoke on its merits for nearly three hours. Gradually, I saw

a responsive mood among the important leaders including Mr. Nichols-Roy. Mr. P.R. Kyndiah, assistant secretary was sitting near the chairman. He encouraged me by silently clapping his hands under the table. At last only a small minority led by Mr. Hoover Hynñiewta were adamant. The conference decided to consult the leaders of all the APHLC Units in Garo, Khasi-Jaiñtia Hills. After the consultation the conference met again on 15th October, 1968, and decided to accept the Autonomous State “for a fair trial”.

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi came to inaugurate the State on April 2, 1970 at Shillong. There she also blessed the new ministry which included Capt. Williamson Sangma, Mr. Stanley Nichols-Roy, Mr. Edwin Bareh, Mr. Sanford Marak and myself. The HSPDP brought out a big ‘Black Flag’ demonstration all along the five mile route from the helipad to Laban ground. Mrs. Gandhi told us during lunch in Raj Bhavan that all the demonstrators looked peaceful and cheerful waving their flag as if to welcome her. “I saw only one hard-looking man at the bridge just before arriving Shillong”, she said. On the whole it was a very happy day. After lunch we all five ministers called on Mr. Chaliha in his residence. He enthusiastically embraced us all and we felt his sincere joy and happiness.
