

**PROCEEDINGS OF  
NORTH EAST INDIA  
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

**NINTH SESSION**

**GUWAHATI ; 1988**

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NORTH EAST INDIA  
HISTORY ASSOCIATION



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GUWAHATI ; 1988

9

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on behalf of

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## PREFACE

*The ninth session of the North East India History Association at the Gauhati University was indeed the fulfilment of a long cherished objective of the Association to hold a session in the premier University of the region. In fact, there had been efforts on the part of the Association ever since it came into existence in 1979 to hold a session at the Gauhati University. We are thankful to the authorities of the Gauhati University for inviting the ninth session and organising it in an excellent manner.*

*Shri Bhisma Narain Singh, the Governor of Assam, inaugurated the session. Professor D. P. Barooah, Vice-Chancellor, and Professor J. N. Phukan, Head, Department of History, Gauhati University did the Association a great honour as Chairman of the organising committee and Local Secretary respectively for the session. It was presided over by Professor Bhupen Qanungo of the North-Eastern Hill University. More than one hundred and fifty delegates attended the session in which eighty-five research papers were presented and discussed.*

*The present volume is the proceedings of the ninth session of the North East India History Association held at the Gauhati University on November 3-5, 1988. I am thankful to my colleagues Dr. J. P. Singh, Dr. O. P. Kejariwal, Dr. M. S. Sangma and Dr. D. R. Syiemlieh for the help in selecting and editing the papers and publishing the volume. We are also thankful to the Indian Council of Historical Research for the generous financial assistance extended to the Association.*

**J. B. Bhattacharjee**

*General Secretary,*

North East India History Association.

Shillong

The 25 August 1989

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## Two Perceptions of U Tirot Sing

D.R. Syiemlieh

### I

Early this year the present writer had the fortune to locate the exact date of death of U Tirot Sing, late *Syiem* of *Hima* Nongkhlaw. The 'discovery' created a renewed interest in what has been considered as the greatest of Khasi heroes. There is much talk of the man, there are many a plan on the anvil to "more befittingly commemorate" this Khasi. It is in this back-ground that an attempt is made to project the two perceptions of the man, the British perception from the pens of British writers; not necessarily correct and which stands in direct contrast to the contemporary view.

### II

It is not necessary here to give the origins of the Khasi resistance to British penetration into our hills that started with the Nongkhlaw massacre of 4 April 1829. Suffice it to say that the Khasis, both chiefs and people were worried by the manner in which the British had begun entrenching themselves, what with the arrival of soldiers and convicts from Assam and Sylhet to construct the road through the hills, the start of a sanatorium at Nongkhlaw and suggestions for another at Cherrapunjee and the British control of the northern and southern foothills that had since times past been the territories of Khasi *Syiems*. Moreover, the British had cleverly entered into treaties with Khasi chiefs who may not have known the implications at the time of their consent. The official apology for the outbreak has been ascribed to "the false and foolish speech of a Bengalee Chuppra-ssee, who, in a dispute with the Cassyas ...had threatened them with his master's vengeance, and had plainly told them that it entered into his master's plans to subject them, to taxation, the same as the inhabitants of the plains"<sup>1</sup>. All this created a fear psychosis among the hillmen, the expression of which was to involve practically all the Khasi states in a serious and protracted resistance to British rule. Over three years the Khasis fought the *Phareng* with the fortunes

of success and the dispairst of loss occurring to both belligerent groups. With the 'surrender' of U Tirot Sing on 13 January 1833, the British could have pride to say that the resistance was at an end, though Sngap Sing of Maharam continued the struggle till he finally laid down arms in February 1839<sup>2</sup>.

Tirot's involvement in the 'massacre' has not been fully established. An official publication said that he "was prominently concerned in the massacre of two British officers." It was for that incident and the role he played in giving leadership, guidance and direction to the resistance from April 1829 to his 'surrender' in January 1833, that he suffered deportation and imprisonment. One of the first accounts of the origins and cause of the struggle<sup>3</sup> was published in 1835 while Tirot sing was still alive<sup>3</sup>. The author wrote of the incident of 4 April as "an act of the most atrocious cruelty," and in words very typical of British officers then continued, "The vengeance of a savage is never satiated but in the blood of his opponents," for which a general confederacy was formed, "for the extermination of the low-land strangers". Not for a moment imagining the fear of the Khasis that they would lose their independence, he cried out against the Khasis' "atrocious conspiracy", and the "diabolical cruelty" of "these misguided and infuriated savages". Implying the Khasis were far more savage than others they had come into contact with Pemberton continues, "conscious that they had violated every pledge which even savages are accustomed to regard with superstitious reverence (the Khasis) viewed with suspicion every pacific overture"<sup>4</sup>. So well written was the description to his readers that many other writers continued to use these same passages<sup>5</sup> in later books. For instance, the official historian<sup>5</sup> of the period took large extracts from Pemberton's work. So did another official<sup>6</sup> who later took to missionary work. Another missionary, Alexander Lish, who for many years worked in and around Cherrapunji, has in a very informative essay on the Khasis, made mention to the "inhuman acts" of Tirot Sing<sup>7</sup>. One would have expected that such descriptions would have been toned down in time. No, the "savage" refrain continued well into the early years of this century

for such a word continued to be transferred from the official mind into official publications. The Gazetteer of the Khasi Hills described the 1829 event as "wanton outrage" of "treacherous and suspicious Khasis"<sup>8</sup>

The other side of British impressions though are quite appreciative of the Khasis. Robert Lindsay, the Collector of Sylhet in the late 1770's who was one of the first Europeans to come into contact with the hillmen believed, "they are a good set of people with principles far superior to the inhabitants upon the low-lands". The biographer of David Scott who accompanied the Agent to Nongkhlaw in 1826, has immortalised Khasi decorum and principle in the oft quoted passage relating to the meeting of Khasi Chiefs in *darbar* to decide on the construction of a road. Even Scott's impatience to win the decision by an offer of liberal helpings of rum could not be accepted, "until they had come to a determination upon the point at issue"<sup>10</sup>. Some seventy years after the Anglo Khasi war, the arch imperialist Curzon in an address to the *Syiem* of Nongkhlaw dated New Year 1903 said, "Not without courageous fighting and there is much to the credit of your Nation in the regard of the long struggle which, however, lamentably commenced, exhibited the bravery and endurance of Tirot Sing of Nongkhlaw"<sup>11</sup>.

But, were the Khasis with Tirot Sing the only murderers? It is well known how in the later course of the resistance the British used measures to win the struggle by burning villages, blocking the *hats* from where the Khasis procured their commodities and exchanged their wares, in similar manner as would be resorted to in the Jaintia rebellions of the 1860s. Moreover they used the full might of their armed force to suppress what Bentinck and Auckland dismissed as a "bow and arrow insurrection"<sup>12</sup>.

The British constituted a different race with whom the Khasis had come into contact with from the last decades of the eighteenth century. Once the British were in the process of becoming the paramount power their racist attitude was heightened and they became ever conscious of becoming a master race. Europeans generally viewed the Indians with hatred, contempt, dislike and distrust. They boasted of their inherent all round superiority in justification

of their political domination. They indiscriminately applied derogatory remarks to the Indians, calling them niggers, black, savages and so on. They regarded all men as inferior to them in all respects. It included the belief in a natural mission and the often genuine, sometimes hypocritical belief in the duty of the advanced people to bring civilization and good administration to their natives. The most famous phrase of all the imperialist slogans runs:

Take up the White Man's Burden-  
Send forth the best ye breed-  
Go bind your sons to exile  
To serve your captives' need;  
To wait in heavy harness,  
On fluttered folk and wild-  
Your new-caught sullen peoples,  
Half-devil and half-child.

### III

During British direct and indirect rule over the Khasi Hills little was said of the Khasi resistance and its leaders other than what figured in history books<sup>14</sup> and official reports. Yet tradition of the life of U Tirot Sing remained in the form of oral stories for Homiwell Lyngdoh could trace the antecedents of this *Syiem*. Lyngdoh's *Ki Syiem Khasi Bad Synteng* is even today a valuable source book. This medical practitioner in a very dispassionate manner has left for us a history of Khasi *Syiems*, largely collected from folk tradition. Writing the book at a time when it was not appropriate to focus attention on Tirot, we find, therefore, merely a simple narration in time and space<sup>15</sup>. It is from the oral tradition that writers say U Tirot Sing died of a stomach disorder, and that he<sup>16</sup> was visited by his son and kinsmen before his death<sup>17</sup>. What is very surprising and for which no answers come, is that there is no tradition of the cremation/burial of the Chief or of where his mortal remains were laid to rest. What was his age at the time of his succession and death? Did he marry a Khasi girl or someone related to the *Nawab* of Dhaka?<sup>18</sup> If the bones of the deceased *Syiems* of Nongkh<sup>19</sup> law were by tradition laid in *mawshyieng* at Mawmluh, and if there was contact with the *Syiem* at Dhaka, how

were his bones not also deposited there? How true is it that Tirot's mother, Ka Ksan saved the life of David Scott? Was Tirot Sing forgotten so long that we now have to begin afresh our search for the life of this emerging patriot?

The Khasi states were small in size and population, economically dependant to a large part on the British raj. Anything to revive the role of the man would have been tantamount to conspiracy, particularly during the later part of the Indian national movement when the British rulers would try and prevent the "winds of change" from British India finding its way into the Indian states. Moreover, there was insignificant political activity in these hills for only a small portion came under the direct control of the Crown. Indian national consciousness had little impact in this area and the want of local heroes had not been felt. Would it be correct to say that one reason for the loss we are in is that tradition was not put to written form till only lately? Only with independence and after the tense decision to join India has the Khasis' feeling of being Indian become universal. It is in this background that the new perception of U Tirot Sing emerges.

On 15 December 1952, Jairamdas Doulatram, Governor of Assam, laid the foundation stone of the Tirot Singh Memorial at Mairang. On that occasion he spoke of the "rare courage and dignity" of the man and hoped "that his name would find its due place in the history of India's Independence". He agreed that a commemoration in stone was appropriate but requested a "second memorial" in the form of a very good biography<sup>20</sup>. On 29th March 1954, the same Governor unveiled the monument on what was then believed to be the 120th death anniversary of the *Syiem*.

The background in which the people of Nongkhlaw erected the memorial was that of independent India. Behind them lay the national movement and its success in achieving independence. In this perspective the role of resistance leaders was highly relevant and carried strong emotional overtones.

The legend of U Tirot Sing was growing and it soon found expression in many forms, in songs, poetries, dramas, in biographies and other literature

and in art. Tribute has been paid to this Khasi Chief in the songs of Elkin Swer, T.T. Mukhim, Rana Kharkongor, Lis Syiemlieh, Skendrowell Syiemlieh, and Chosterfield Khongwir and many others. Their songs have done much to relive the life of their subject and has perhaps more than the written word carried the message of the role the man played in Khasi history. Another powerful media that is gaining significance is the perception of U Tirot Sing in the mind of the artist. Three drawings depict what the man could have looked like. Perhaps the first of these impressions was the one in which U Tirot Sing - as someone was heard to comment - looks like a Roman soldier!<sup>21</sup> Another impression in colour gives a much better picture of what he could have looked like, with raised sword, shield, a quiver of arrows, a *jainspang* and costume very typical of what Khasis wore<sup>22</sup>. The third artists' impression came from a demand that a stamp should be released on this famous Khasi hero. The stamp which came into circulation early this year and which was officially released on the 18th July 1988 is drawn on the same lines as the second description above but with a difference; Tirot Sing here has a more round and young face compared to the thin and more aged look of the other impression. These artists, particularly those of the second and third drawings discussed, have come close to what we all can imagine the Syiem might have looked like, tall, robust, fierce and warlike.

Khasi literature has two important dramas on Tirot Sing. In 1956, was published in English, V.G. Bareh's *U Tirot Singh*. Two short dramas of the Rympei Theatrical Centre, R.G. Phankon's *Ka Sngi Kha-tduh*, and H.A.M. Nongrum's *Ka Kput Kylliang* formed the base for Reginald Nongkynrih's *Ka Bniat Namar Ka Bniat*, Published in 1985, and staged that same year. A Bengali theatrical group from Calcutta staging a drama of U Tirot Sing in Shillong and other urban centres in these hills in the 1940's. That drama would have been the first attempt to kindle interest in U Tirot Sing. The dramatist when writing his script has two points to consider- the stage settings and

his audience. These dramas, excellent pieces of work, however, do have their short-comings which will be discussed presently.

Surprising Khasi poetic imagination has not given any serious attention to U Tirot Sing. There are many poems where he is referred to, but he is not the main subject of such poems. His name is mentioned when the poet appeals to patriotism, bravery and the like. We talk so much of U Tirot Singh, have done so much for immortalising his name to the neglect of some allies and contemporaries of this *Syiem* of Nongkhlaw. This has prompted Jor Manik Syiem, to write his 6 stanza poem 'Syiem Bor Manik II' in which the last four lines laments:<sup>23</sup>

U maw kyrteng la tei ha Sor Shyllong  
Laingut ki khla ka wait buh jingkyngmaw  
Ia phi wat la u trai, hima phi long

H'u Mot oh-shrong kyrteng jong phi kam paw.

It is not that too much attention is being given to Tirot Sing. It is - we have not given sufficient thought to other Khasi personalities of significance.<sup>24</sup> Another poem that takes us to such a direction says:

And four great warriors of East Meghalaya,  
Land of Ki Hynniewtrep: North East India.

U Bormanik Syiem and U Kiang Nangbah,

U Sngap Sing Syiem and U Tirot Sing Syiem  
With reverence in silence, to them homage  
we pay;

Forever may their soul(s) to rest in peace  
we pray.

Daulatram's request for a "second monument" took quite some time before short and longer biographies were published. I have in mind the works of<sup>25</sup> Hipshon Roy, J.E. Tariang<sup>26</sup> and Hamlet Bareh<sup>27</sup>. The foreward to Roy's pamphlet says Tirot Sing "was one of the gems among the patriots" and he is "a martyr by his death in prison"<sup>28</sup>. The author considered U Tirot Sing as "one of the MOST HEROIC but little known figures of the History of India"<sup>29</sup>. Tariang's more detailed study and Bareh's book have both made a fine effort to account for the early life of the *Syiem* and down to his last days. The publication of these two works have enabled a wide section of

people in the state and beyond to read the story of one of the greatest Khasi chiefs. In his concluding remarks Tariang says that "Tirof Sing has become a Cult, a Legend and a Myth all at once."<sup>30</sup> Bareh's book has such a number of appreciative adjectives that it would be quite a job indicating them all in this paper. Books apart, a very informative souvenir was published to 'celebrate' the 150th Death Anniversary of the *Syiem*. A Khasi translation of the articles published in this souvenir has given the Khasis a chance to read in their own language what perhaps is the only small book on the subject in the vernacular.<sup>31</sup>

There are numerous references to a manuscript on this Khasi figure written by late Norman Singh Syiem, of the ruling clan of *Hima Nongkhaw*. We are convinced that the author had much to say on what was nor hitherto known - but still remains unknown because, sadly that manuscript has never been published. It is from stray references to this work that we are told Tirof Sing married into the family of the Nawab of Dhaka. This is true, should be a pointer where next to go to search for even fragmentary information towards increasing our knowledge of the *Syiem*.

For too long have we believed that Tirof Sing died in jail. This mistaken view was responsible for dramas, inscriptions on monuments and even works of history describing the wretched end of the *Syiem*, far away from home in a dark and miserable dungeon. While we may excuse the dramatist for this fallacy, a historian who quotes from a drama as if the drama were based on facts is unpardonable. Hamlet: Bareh who has extensively quoted from his brother's drama should have carefully verified his 'facts' before incorporating them in his writings on *U Tirof Singh*.<sup>32</sup> He has done this even though he says that biographies "should throw realistic reflections upon such an illustrious personage".<sup>33</sup>

Tirof Sing has not yet found his biographer. Roy's pamphlet may have served the purpose of popularising the man to a wider audience, but it appears that he had a different purpose in writing that pamphlet.<sup>34</sup> Tariang's work could have been better but for want of time, and Bareh's book needs much revision. There are

still so many sources that have not been tapped- for instance, the contemporary Bengali newspapers, Bengali folk tradition and a more vigorous search through Government correspondence.

The modern Indian intellect is often caught in a dichotomy. While he appreciates some of the more positive benefits of our former masters, and often emulates them, he is drawn towards his past before the British impact which directs his attitudes to things around him. This dichotomy is apparent in Khasi perceptions of U Tirot Sing. There is a conscious attempt today to project Tirot Sing as a 'national hero'. Much as many may subscribe to this it should not be forgotten that Tirot fought not for India, the notion of which was not even emerging then; he fought for these hills. Tirot is what Irfan Habib would put it - a local national hero.<sup>35</sup> To this local hero a young Khasi poet says:<sup>36</sup>

The sun writes its first few lines of  
poetry in the morning -  
the sounds and light of earth thread around  
and  
sink into the hilly retreats of peace.

To us, the bond of blood is a reminder  
of the long  
trek of our wandering race,  
and now centuries after,  
we gather into an arm of resistance.

I grew up to the smell of coarse grain  
drying in the sun  
and the taste of dried fish on hurdles,  
and dreams were shaped by the rural  
lanterns lit up at dusk.

Now in an exile, not mine,  
I weep the bitterness of broken  
births -  
return me to my land.  
Give the grass a chance to grow  
again!

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20. **Speech of Shri Jairamdas Doulatram, Governor of Assam, on the occasion of the Foundation-laying of a Memorial Stone to the Late U Tirot Singh**, December 15, 1952.
21. See inner last cover of Hipshon Roy, **U Tirot Singh**, Bombay, 1982 and cover of **U Tirot Singh**, Khasi Cultural Society, 1984.
22. See cover of Hipshon Roy, **op.cit.**, and inner page of H. Bareh, **op.cit.**
23. Jor Manik Syiem, "Syiem Bor Manik II", **Dongmusa**, 15 Nailar, 1986, p.6.
24. L.G. Shullai, "Forever may their Soul to rest in Peace we pray", **The Planter**, 7 December 1985, p. 4.
25. H.Roy, **op.cit.**
26. J.E. Taring, **U Tirot Singh**, Shillong, 1982.
27. H. Bareh, **op.cit.**
28. H.Roy, **Op.cit.**, Foreward.
29. Roy has here quoted the words of R.M. Lahiri, **The Annexation of Assam**, Calcutta, 1975, p.96 with emphasis on MOST HEROIC.
30. J.E. Tariang, **op.cit.**, p. 48.
31. **Shispah sanpnew Snem Mynshwa**, Khasi Cultural Society, (nd.). A Commemoration would have been more befitting.
32. H. Bareh, **op.cit.**, pp. 116-117; **Souvenir U Tirot Singh**, pp. 27-28.
33. H. Bareh, **U Tirot Singh**, p. vi.
34. Read: Our memory is still green about the British plan for a Crown Colony in these Eastern Hills States and if the Khasi Hills, as Robertson planned, had become an European Colony the British plan(ed) in this century of a Crown Colony would have become a reality and the history of the

Indian sub-continent would have been different indeed. Robertson's plan is not dead. The flow of foreign money and interest for the body and soul of the inhabitants of the North Eastern region today may well ultimately had to the fulfilment of Robertson's dream, H.Roy **op.cit.**

35. Irfan Habib, "The Contribution of Indian Historians to the Process of National Integration", **Proceedings of the Indian History Congress**, 1961, p. 357.

36. Desmond L. Kharmawphlang, "The Song of U Tirot Sing", **The Telegraph Colour magazine**, 31 January 1988, p. 15.