

The Making of a Hill Leader



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...y of John Deng Pohrmen

- By Prof. S. Bhattacharyya

Gift

*Dedicated to Bah Min Lyngdoh
Headman, Durbar Shnong Nongtalang
and the People of Nongtalang*

*In Fond Memory
of their Love and Affection
for me during my meaningful sojourn
at Nongtalang for the period from
1993-2000*

S. BHATTACHARYYA
Ex-Principal, Nongtalang College

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Preface

I retired from Lady Keane Girls' College as a Lecturer and Head of the Department of History in February, 1992. My sons and daughter had already finished their higher studies and established themselves in different cities of India-Guwahati, Bolepur-Santiniketan, Kolkata, Mumbai and Goa. My wife also followed them shuttling from one place to another. But I could not leave my beloved city because of my commitment to Honours students who began to frequent my residence for finishing their courses and counselling for examination. Moreover, my expertise and experience was requisitioned by my erstwhile institution and also Shillong College where I had to work as part time lecturer. Meanwhile one journalist, associated with the Shillong Times, Mr. Jones by name, came to visit me in my residence at Upland Road, Laitumkhrah. He told me that Finance Minister of Meghalaya wanted to see me. He wanted me as the Principal to build the Nongtalang College which lay in his Constituency. I had acquaintances with many ministers of Meghalaya because of my association with some socio-cultural organisations. I knew Chief Ministers Purno Sangma, B.B. Lyngdoh, D.D. Lapang and a host of other ministers. But the Finance Minister was unknown to me. The gentleman came on and often and repeated the same words every time. Finally, in the month of October, perhaps, he said to me, "Why don't you accompany and visit the village of Nongtalang once? You may or may not accept the offer. Just go and see the place. What is the harm?". I saw logic in his utterings. At that time I badly needed an outing for relaxation. Busy schedules day after day and lonely nights at home were injecting tiredness and boredom in my life. Casually I said, "Yes, I will go. Fix the date with him".

On the appointed date in the same month Mr. Jones took me to the residence of the Minister at Bhagyakul, Laitumkhrah. It was very near to my house. The Hon'ble Minister greeted me extending his hand with words of welcome. After having tea we got inside the car. Mr. Jones also accompanied us with his Yasika Camera. He was a good photographer. We started at 7.30 a.m. It was a sunny morning and I was feeling fresh.

The car halted at Jowai Circuit House. We had tea and snacks there. Many people were waiting to meet the Minister. Some gave petitions. Some had certain grievances. A few girls wanted employment. The minister gave a patient hearing to each of them. I could not follow what they said. He spoke with all and poked jokes every now and then. He appeared to be a man of jovial nature. He had an elegant way of dealing with his people. All seemed to be very close to him.

After leaving Jowai I came across with places, the names of which were new to me and unheard before-Shkentalang, Jarain, Amlarem etc. At every place the car was stopped by people. I could understand, the man was very popular in these areas. I came to learn that Amlarem was the newly created Sub-divisional town. The road from Amlarem to Dawki was rough and uneven. At many places the top soil including the black pitch was washed away exposing the rugged saffron earth. Along the road side, the children and women were breaking stones. At one point the car left the main road and took a left side turn moving along a fine pitch road. Mr. Jones said, "We are reaching Nongtalang". The car proceeded through the village, rose upwards on stony road and finally stopped near a house where many people were waiting. I heard it was the house of the Minister's aunty.

We were escorted in the drawing room. Mr. Jones escaped with his camera. The village people, including the headman, talked something to the minister to which he was replying. He was not at all tired. There was no sign of fatigue on his face. Pan leaves with lime and kwai came. Tea and biscuits followed. Words and sentences were interspersed with occasional laughter. I wished I could join them in their conversation. But language was the bar. I sat like a fool. Everyone greeted me with words, "Khublei Babu", and shook hands. I smiled and said "Khublei"! That is the only word I knew.

Suddenly the Hon'ble Minister rose on his feet and said to me, "Come, wash your hands and face, we will have lunch". At lunch table, there were three to four big bowls. The items were fish fry, boiled egg, dal, salad, white coloured soup with chicken pieces nicely boiled and a greenish fish curry. The minister pleaded that I should take the fish curry because it has been prepared with a local type of herbal leaves which have good medicinal value. I dared not touch it. I finished my lunch with fish fry, dal, salad and chicken curry. I was hungry and relished the food.

After the lunch I was taken in a Jeep for sight seeing. The village is famous for its natural beauty. It is a table land formed by rocks on the lower ridges of Jaintia Hills which separates northern Sylhet of Bangladesh from Meghalaya. Its three sides is bordered by Bangladesh from Meghalaya. There are spots standing on which one can see the whole panorama of Bangladesh, paddy fields, green vegetation, rivers, the clouds mingling with the horizon. The scenic beauty cast a spell on me. My heart was full of joy. Mr. Jones took many snaps.

We came back to Shillong at 7 p.m. The minister did not tell me anything on the way. Mr. Jones asked, "How did you find the place? I replied, "Wonderful". "You like to work there?" He again asked. I said, "I will think over it."

Yes, I thought over it, thought and thought. My family was not in Shillong. I was all alone. There was frequent call from my sons and wife to leave disturbed Shillong since my retirement. But Shillong had its special charm and attraction for me. Men are known, students often come to visit me. I was associated with many socio-cultural organisations. NEHU still gave me works and assignments. I was connected with Meghalaya Board of School Education. And I was still doing two part-time. Hence I had no financial problem even though there was no pension.

The new offer at Nongtalang was in no way attractive. I shall be cut off from Shillong. Life at Nongtalang was hard and tough. The place as well as the people were unknown. So far as the College was concerned I had to start from a scratch. On the first day of my visit I took stock of the situation.

Formed in 1988, it existed only in paper. I was supposed to give it a concrete shape with regular students and classes. It was a stupendous task. How much cooperation I would get from the village people who are almost illiterate, posed a big problem for me. I was then plus sixty. Whether my health would permit me to take this arduous task, that was also the question. I wanted to avoid the risk. I thought I must not take a leap in the darkness. I forgot the episode.

During the winter season, I went to Kolkata and stayed with my family. They were happy. I was told to wind up bag and baggage and leave Shillong for ever. I asked for some more time. I must wait till the final examination of my students. I came back to Shillong after the winter and resumed my normal duties. I did not see also Mr. Jones anymore coming to my residence.

Then in the month of April, 1993 something happened. One incident changed my decision, compelled me to leave my routine-bound comfortable life at Shillong against the

wishes of my family and advices of my well-wishers, and pack for Nongtalang to face the hard life with a new assignment. One afternoon after finishing my classes I returned to my residence. One of my neighbours told me to hurry up. The Finance Minister of Meghalaya was waiting in my drawing room. I always maintained a respectable distance from him. I never went to his residence after my first visit to Nongtalang in last October, 1992. Entering my room, I saw the jolly face greeting me with a smile. Taken aback, I exclaimed, "Sir, You!" A gentle, affectionate voice, as if from the Father on the pulpit of a Cathedral, touched my heart, "Yes Professor, I have come to take your words. When are you going to Nongtalang? I have a dream, a vision. I have heard much about your work here. You are the person who can realise my dream. I won't leave your place unless you give me words". There, in front of me, I saw not a minister, but a man, a noble man determined to do some useful work for his community and area. He continued, "You will be given all freedom to build the College. You will be given a personal peon to look after you so that you can engage yourself full time in building the College". In his approach, there was something so intimate, so personal that it was difficult for me to refuse. I accepted the offer forgetting my personal difficulties, thinking that it would provide me an opportunity to share the joy of creation along with him who conceived the idea of setting up a centre of higher education in a backward area among the poorer section of the rural tribals among whom he considered himself to be one.

Hence, on 1st of May, 1993, I accompanied Mr. J.D. Pohrmen with my bedding and essentials to my new destination, a far off village on the lower ridge of Jaintia Hills, called Nongtalang. For the knowledge of my friends at Shillong who thought that I discovered a gold mine or I left the comfort of Shillong for a covetable fat salary, I let everybody know that I accepted only a pay packet of Rs.

4000/- per month which would some how meet the food expenses of two souls - myself and the peon. At Nongtalang, my family consisted of three members, when I picked up a tribal girl student for providing her higher education with free food and lodging.

However, my eight years stay at Nongtalang as the Principal of the College was the most fruitful period of my career. I had enjoyed the most rewarding experience inspite of developing acute arthritis because of wet climate and hard work. Mr. J.D. Pohrmen was the President of the College. As the villagers, although industrious, frank and open hearted, had no knowledge of intricacies of academic administration, I had to take decision myself after consulting the President. In this way, I came close to him and also came to know a lot about the man. I knew what he had done for Nongtalang and the War-Jaintia area. At every stage of building the College I got help from him. We did the work in a missionary spirit without caring for health or personal loss.

After my mission was over and the College was taken over under the Ad-hoc Grant-in-aid Scheme of the Meghalaya Government, I took leave because of my ailing health and also pressure from my family. He bade me farewell with a heavy heart. After my recovery from illness at Calcutta, his affection and the abounding love of the people of Nongtalang always haunted me. Mr. J.D. Pohrmen used to write to me on and often inspite of his failing health. Our bond of affection and trust is of an inexplicable nature. Last year suddenly it came in my mind, why not I write a book on himself as my subject and pay back my indebtedness to him. Perhaps no one had known him so intimately as I have.

This book is the result of that contemplation. To write a biography is a very difficult task. A biography is not just a list of dated records of achievements and failures of a man.

It is a literary piece of writing which tries to unfathom the whole man, the total man, the man in flesh and blood, which lies hidden under the external features of political, social and family life. Man is not what he appears externally. His is a many coloured personality. I have tried to find that man in this biography of John Deng Pohrmen. I have consulted contemporary records, solicited opinion from his close companions, men from different rungs of society and then ventured to write this book.

If the readers find pleasure in reading this book, that will be the only reward of my labour. If they find out some fault in the book, that would be undoubtedly mine and I seek apology for that. I hope I would be forgiven. After all, I am a non-tribal, attempting to reach the greatness of a tribal genius, his work, I do not know, whether anybody had attempted before.

SHYAMADAS BHATTACHARYYA

KOLKATA
8th AUGUST 2002

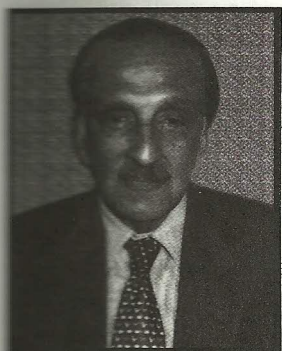
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Message



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January 29, 2004



The publication of Sri. John Deng Pohrmen, brought out by S. Bhattacharyya depicts a saga of historical developments, social and political set up in the area during the early days when Sri. John Deng Pohrmen played his role to make the lives of the people and the state fruitful and worthy. The book deals with the inspiration he got from Rev. J.J.M. Nichols Roy during his

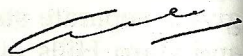
early days while he was a student and the birth of an independent nation, and the nationalist outlook he got during his early days is well depicted. The partition of India, and its effects on the lives of the people in the War-Jaintia areas, particularly when they lost their main market for agricultural produce in Sylhet, to them is described, in the book. Events after independence, including the constitutional guarantee protecting the tribal areas by incorporating Sixth Schedule of the Constitution is well brought out in the book. John Deng Pohrmen had a remarkable career who had started his life, working and at the same time undergoing studies. He felt for the poor plight of the tribals under Assam Government and he was attracted by the Hill State Movement when Capt. William Sangma, B.B. Lyngdoh and others led the Movement. He evinced keen interest in the movement and joined the agitation which finally forced the Government of India to give a separate state, Meghalaya, carving out Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills out of composite Assam.

The book gives a vivid description of the formation of District Council in 1952 and his interest in the cause of people especially the upliftment of Border areas, John Deng Pohrmen joined active politics. He started a weekly paper in 1956. When he got disgusted with the then political set up, he opted to join Swatantra party for a while which was formed at the instance of C. Raja Gopalachari, Prof. N.G. Ranga and other senior freedom fighters of the country. He always championed the cause of linguistic minorities. The language Bill of 1960, making Assamese the only official language did not go well with John Deng and many other tribal leaders. John had served the people in many respects, as an M.D.C. in the District Council, as an M.L.A. in the state, and later Minister holding important portfolios of Public Work Department (PWD), Finance and other important Ministries and at one time served as the Deputy Chief Minister. The book gives an account of his various achievements as a political leader in the Council of Ministers as well as his European tour to study the scope of industrialisation. One of his achievements the building up of a college, Nongtalang is a feather in his cap always remembered by the people. John Deng Pohrmen has proved to be a man of the people, through his actions over a period of time. His house is open to the common people, to come and get their grievances presented and relief sought. It is widely said that he is a most accessible peoples' leader. He believed in the Christian principle of love and charity.

His interest to see Meghalaya gets the best of education make him to support the setting up of a Central University 'NEHU' in Shillong, to give a national awakening and national outlook for the youth.

This book has a unique character. It gives an account of the birth of a nation, birth of a new state, partition of India and problems of people living in Border areas, the Second World War, 1971 War and of refugees flooding War-Jaintia area and other parts in Meghalaya, and the gradual development of Khasi-Jaintia Hills and the people of the state as a whole. Above all this book is attempted to highlight the life history of a great son of the soil, Sri. John Deng Pohrmen.

I am happy to present the book before the readers.



M.M. Jacob



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Prof. S. Bhattacharyya, Author of the Book does not need any introduction to the students of Meghalaya in general and scholar-intellecutuals in particular. An educationist par excellence, he dedicated himself to the cause of education in Meghalaya for about 40 years and for his outstanding services, achievements and culture and enrich human

resources he was felicitated at New Delhi with the prestigious National Award of "Bharat Jyoti" (Light of India) in 2001. He was associated with many literary and cultural associations of Shillong and had extensively written on various subjects.

Many of his scholarly articles have been published in the distinguished journals of the country, including the Proceedings of North-East India History Association of which he is a Founder-member. Besides writing several books on History, he also authored a few books on Education like Psychology of Human Developments, Development of Educational Thought and Educational System in India all of which are widely acclaimed. Another product of his wisdom is "Man and Environment".

Serving at the far end of his career at Nongtalang as the Principal of Nongtalang College, he came in close contact with Bah John Deng Pohrmen, the architect of War-Jaintia area. His intimate knowledge of tribal life and love of the people for him have brought out this Book which is not only the life history of Bah John Deng Pohrmen but a literary piece of abiding interest, weaving out the inner growth of the Man round the social, economic and political history, in a turbulent period of unrest and transition, which is not only interesting to read but also instructive for all generations.

THE MAKING OF A HILL LEADER

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