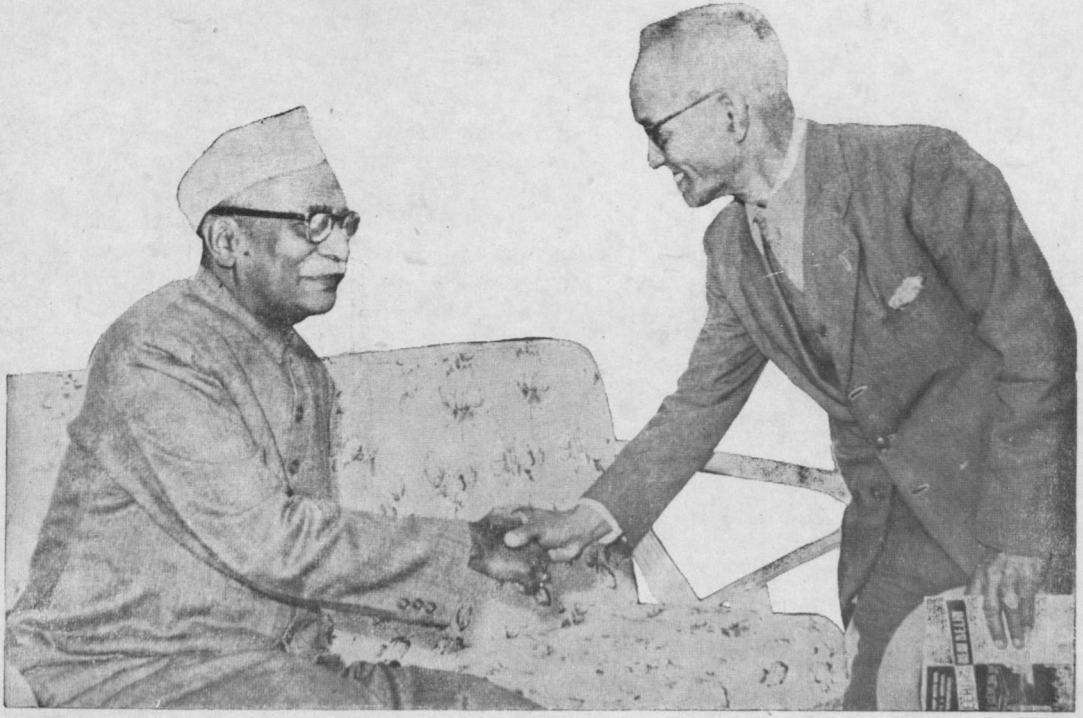
B.M. PUGH

The story of a Tribal

an autobiography

ORIENT LONGMAN



The Author with the First President of India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad.

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An Autobiography

B. M. PUGH

With a Foreword by

B. K. NEHRU
High Commissioner for India in U.K.

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1 My Childhood Days

O little did my mother ken,
The day she cradled me,
The lands I was to travel in
Or the death I was to dee!

—THE QUEEN'S MARIES

AS I BEGIN this story of my life, the above ditty reminds me of my mother who used to tell us stories of how far she had travelled, the places she had seen. She was very proud of her visit to way-off Kynshi, a village about 56 km west of Shillong and 120 km from ours, where her uncle was a school teacher. She had even gone as far west as Markesa, a village five miles farther west of Kynshi. My mother, though, was not as unimaginative as the other women of Cherrapunji. I remember that when I told a woman on my return from the United States that in California the sun rises when it sets in the Khasi Hills she remarked that the place must be deep down in the nether regions of the earth. But when I told an audience in California that Cherrapunji, the home of my wife, gets about 500 inches of rain annually, a man stood up and asked if I realised that that was about 40 feet deep. 'How then,' he asked, 'do people live there ?' Years later, after I had taught for one year in a college in Allahabad, I returned home for the summer holidays and when I told my people that the temperature in that city sometimes rose to about 120°F., they unbelievably asked me how anyone could live there as our body temperature is only 98° !

My grandfather was from Shella, near the Sylhet border, and my grandmother was from Mawmluh, a village about two miles west of Cherrapunji. He had three sons, U Mor Singh, U Ngor Singh and U Sngap-Lai. In Khasi society, it is usual to give sons and daughters similar sounding names. My wife's mother was called Ka Siribon, and her sisters Ka Meribon, Ka Laribon,

Ka Niribon and Ka Iribon, all daughters of U Bor Singh Syiem (Chief) of Cherra. The names of all Khasi males are preceded by an article 'U' which also indicates the masculine gender, but given rather arbitrarily to animate as well as inanimate objects. Names of Khasi females are preceded by an article 'ka', again given to both animate and inanimate objects. My father's younger brother was named Sngap-Lai which literally means 'Hush ! Three' or 'Shut up ! Three.' We once asked my father why our uncle was given that peculiar name. He explained that it was because his parents had decided not to have any more children but to stop at three. Why my grandparents should have resorted to family planning in those early days I have always wondered ! My father, however, did not follow the example set by his progenitor, for he married three times. By his first wife, a Miss Saoyan, three children survived up to the time I could remember them — a boy and two girls ; and by the second, a Miss Mawlong, also three — two boys and one girl. By the third wife, my mother, a Miss Marpna, he had six children — four boys and two girls. All survived, though the eldest of us died at the young age of 26. I was the last but one son of my parents.

I was born on September 24, 1897, the year of the great earthquake which shook the whole of this sub-continent. It is on record that while the epicentre of the June 12, 1897, earthquake was in the Sylhet District then in Assam, now in Bangladesh, its tremors were felt as far away as Delhi, and the steeple of the St. Paul's Cathedral, Calcutta, toppled over. Several thousand people in the sparsely-populated area of my district, the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, were killed.

The earthquake changed the fortunes of my father who was a rich landowner in the Shella area of the Khasi Hills, now on the border of Bangladesh. Some of his orange orchards were buried under thirty or forty feet of soil loosened by the earthquake and brought down subsequently by hill streams which converge on the border of the Khasi Hills and the Sylhet District. Shella, once an extremely rich and proud village at the southern border of the Khasi Hills, was destroyed almost completely and it has never recovered. It is no wonder, therefore, that as far as I could remember, all events in the Khasi Hills were spoken of as having taken place either before or after the earthquake.

I was born at the Laitkynsew village where my father was an employee of the Welsh Presbyterian Mission, in charge of the four neighbouring Churches at Mynteng, Ramdait, Nongriat and Nongkroh. Laitkynsew, situated at an elevation of about 1000 metres (approximately 3300 feet) above sea level, is surrounded on three sides by deep ravines which receive water from the Mawsynram-Cherrapunji plateau, a region with the highest rainfall in the world. A dozen or more waterfalls discharging, in majestic grandeur, volumes of water from the numerous hill streams which remain swollen throughout the rainy season from April to October, can be seen from the Laitkynsew village on the other side of these ravines. Some of these waterfalls have now disappeared and others become greatly diminished in size in the dry season owing to the extreme denudation of forests on the Cherrapunji-Mawsynram plateau. To the south of our village the wide expanse of the Sylhet plains stretches out to the horizon. Numerous *bheels* (lakes) and rivers reflect the golden rays of the rising and setting sun, remaining a silvery sheen of water throughout the day except for isolated dark spots of wooded areas where men and animals shelter. At night the glimmering lights of Chatak (now in Bangladesh), a town on the bank of the river Surma, could be seen at a distance while the big lights of the steamers plying on the lazily-flowing Surma river told the story of their constant toil on their journey along the meandering course of the river to Sylhet, or downstream to the river ports of Narayangunge or Chandpur on the River Ganges, or still further south, to the Bay of Bengal. These sights could not but influence the thinking and imagination of a growing boy of that obscure village, several days' journey from the nearest town.

The village, however, had a Middle English School. Its first Headmaster was my step-brother, Eleazar. An elder brother of mine, Granville, had already passed from the school in 1906 at the age of twelve and had gone to Shillong to study at the Government High School. Eleazar died and the school could not secure Headmasters who would stay for long. Eleazar's death, however, did not affect me immediately as I was then in the lower classes where, for two years, I was taught by one *Babu* (Teacher) Niju who took a keen interest in his pupils. The man was so thorough in his work that even today I consider him as one of the very few

teachers who have had a permanent influence on the course of my subsequent education. As far as I can recollect, I got a thrashing from him only once, while some of my class-mates were beaten many times. Nevertheless, the day he beat me my brother Walmsley and I decided to go and throw stones on his thatched house at night. This got us a good hiding from my father. That was not the only time my father gave both of us a beating. On another occasion, Walmsley and I were shooting arrows to see which of us could hit our neighbour's chicken. Unfortunately, my arrow hit the chicken and killed it. Our father gave both of us a severe beating.

After the summer rains we would fly kites and when winter approached, the cold winds from the north would carry our kites so high that the thread would automatically snap and our kites were carried southwards to the plains of Sylhet. My brother and I would then go home, feeling certain that by nightfall the kites would have flown across the plains and alighted in the blue hills of Tippera (in Tripura State). My attachment to Walmsley was deeper than to any of my other brothers and sisters—although he, to this day, does not know it. Whenever I think of him, the old Negro song .

When I was playing with my brother,
Happy was I ;
O! take me to my old kind mother.
There let me live and die.

which we learned in our childhood, always comes to my mind. I know, I did fight with him once or twice, but that does not make any difference.

In 1905 a great religious revival swept all over the hills and valleys of my district. Then a boy of eight, I was awakened one night by a group of singers who came to our house singing with such religious fervour that my mother also joined them. The singing continued throughout the night and, as far as I can remember, throughout the following morning as well. That was the only occasion on which my mother somewhat demonstrated her religious emotions. Mother was, however, deeply religious, as I found out later in life. Father, of course, had always been considered a religious mentor of all the people in the Shella area,

a confederacy of some twenty or more villages. In his early days he had worked in the Government Press in Shillong and for some time was one of the elders of the Church at Mawkhar. He very often narrated with pride the gift of Rs 500 by Lord Northbrook to the Mawkhar Church when the great Lord visited Shillong. On giving up government service my father served for many years at Mawphlang and other parts of the Khasi Hills before he finally came to settle at Laitkynsew.

During this religious revival I used to accompany the elders of the family to church and also to cottage meetings at night. One night, however, as the singing and dancing was going on far into the night, a friend and I decided to sleep on a bench at the back of the church. When the religious service was over, all went home except a few who felt called to continue singing and praying throughout the night. When dawn came, they too got ready to leave. The snoring of the two boys at the back of the church after the lights were out made those religiously high-strung and superstitious people wary. Discovering my companion and myself, they took both of us straight to our homes, much to the chagrin of our families who had left us behind in the church.

This religious revival brought many new adherents to the church. Such an upsurge of emotions, however, resulted in the falling from grace of many a young man and woman who lost all control of themselves. I cannot ever forget the sight of one young woman who had been beaten and literally dragged and brought before my father by another more elderly woman. The young woman, a much talked-of revivalist, had become implicated in an affair with the husband of the elderly woman. On discovering the two together near a stream, the wife fell on both of them. The husband ran, leaving the young woman at the mercy of the wife who beat her up and shoved her into the water until she was thoroughly wet. I was horrified when the wife asked my father's permission to cut off the nose of the young woman. The permission, of course, was never given. That incident gave me second thoughts about this religious revival which had been lauded as the working of the divine spirit.

Life in the village was on the whole interesting. Our parents owned about a dozen cows and we helped to look after them. We also had a bull of which we were very proud. Bull-fights

were always exciting. It was a pleasant duty to go out in the evenings to meet our herd of cows as they returned through the village. One year my mother wanted to buy a sewing machine and we had to sell the bull to get her a 'Singer', which became for many years our most precious possession. Anyhow, we had bull-calves that were growing up with the family.

One year my sister, Marion, went to Calcutta for nurses' training at the Dufferin Hospital. At the completion of her three-year course, she wrote back home to my father to say that she wanted to go for Medical training at the Campbell Medical School, also in Calcutta. If father did not agree to this proposal, she wrote, he should allow her to claim that she was an Anglo-Indian, as Anglo-Indian nurses were then given as good salaries as Indian doctors. To this latter suggestion my father could not agree but urged her to study medicine at the Campbell Medical School. It was at this time that Marion asked my father to allow her to register at the school as Marion Pugh instead of Marion Singh. Pugh was the last name of Eleazar, our eldest brother, while Singh was my father's last name. As Khasi or Indian names were considered primitive or not befitting the times, and Anglicised names considered modern and sophisticated, my father agreed to this proposal. This was later adopted by all his children.

Stanley, Bedwenley, Granville and Walmsley, my four elder brothers, all adopted the surname Pugh. I followed suit, and so did my younger brother Frank and my two younger sisters, Dwiss and Beatrice. One day an old Khasi lady came to see my father. In the course of their conversation she pointed out that his sons' names were extremely bad. Stan, Bed, Kran (for that is the way she called my three elder brothers Stanley, Bedwenley and Granville — 'Kran', because no word or name begins with 'G' in Khasi) sounded so bad that she did not think any modern girl would marry anyone of them. She thought my name, which my father had christened Brandon, after some British officer who had been his boss at the Government Press in Shillong, was particularly repulsive. 'Bran' in Khasi means 'quick' and 'don' means 'to have'. As Khasi names were very unpopular at that time and as she did not have anything to say about Walmsley, I quickly decided to change my name to Bransley. The letter 's' seemed to the Khasi ear to be always associated with the language of our

rulers, the British. That name has continued to be mine to this day.

However, when my brother Granville was in college, Khasi college students studying in Calcutta had begun to change their attitude towards Khasi names. Some had even prominently adopted their mothers' clan name as their surnames, as the matrilineal system prevails in my Khasi tribe. Perhaps, in Calcutta too, names which had been anglicised such as Paul and Mitter were beginning to change back to Pal and Mitra. Granville added our mother's clan name Marpna to his name which became Granville Marpna Pugh. As American names with only an initial for the middle name were becoming a novelty in those days, he preferred calling himself Granville M Pugh. He did this, like most of his Khasi friends at that time, in preference to the British way of writing the first name with an initial and the second name fully. Granville's younger brothers and sisters followed him and the initial 'M' from that time on appeared as our middle name. My name thus became Bransley M Pugh.

Archery was then one of my favourite sports. I recall a friend who would go with me outside the village to practise shooting arrows. He would carry his bow and arrow in one hand, and with the other he would hold up his pants. Every time he shot an arrow, his pants would drop and he had to bend down and pull them up again before we went and looked for the arrow in the grass.

But a new world with new vistas was opening before us. My heart began to throb with new-fangled desires for education, for an opportunity to go away from the village, to become something more than what the people in the village were, to become even better than my elder brothers and sisters. These were the ideals which my father in his quiet way was instilling into the children of the village. With practically no formal education he taught me English and arithmetic. He brought me an English Bible and made it a rule that I should make use of it every Sunday. I followed the stories in English while someone in the family read the portions in Khasi. That was one of the ways I began to learn English in my childhood. When I could not work out some of the sums given in my arithmetic book, father would ask me first to study the examples already worked out in the book itself. He knew that every good arithmetic book provided a key to the

understanding of the sums given later in the text. Thus, quite early in life I developed a respect for his uncanny knowledge and wisdom.

Granville passed the Entrance Examination in 1909 and went to Calcutta to study first in the Bishop's College, then in the Scottish Church College and later in the Serampore College. Both Marion and Granville wrote letters to me in English, perhaps to fan that holy desire in me for higher education. I was rather slow in absorbing all this. Early in 1911, Rev and Mrs J M H Rees came as missionaries to Laitkynsew. They naturally took charge of the Middle English School which had been running for some years without a Headmaster. Rev Harries Rees taught English while his more brilliant wife taught us Mathematics. A few months later one of the promising young men from the Shella area, U Monkonjo Roy, who had sat for the Matriculation Examination of the Calcutta University, offered to take up the headmastership of the school. In the five or six months that he taught us he must have done a good job. When two of us were sent from the school to compete in the all-district Middle English School Examination in Shillong in November that year, we found ourselves among the first three successful candidates who won the government scholarship of Rs 5 a month. No one from the schools in Cherrapunji or Jowai was among the successful candidates, and only one from Shillong was found to have come anywhere close to the boys from Laitkynsew. That was a remarkable achievement for Laitkynsew, especially as these two young hopefuls had walked all the way to Shillong, a distance of about 64 kilometres, and arrived there only the evening before the examination. Their worn-out bodies, the strange experience of life in a town, unfamiliar surroundings were all enough to disrupt the minds of the unsophisticated boys from some remote and inaccessible area of the Khasi Hills. But our keen interest in all things around us saw us through that week-long ordeal and, to our surprise, we came out with flying colours. This was necessary as my parents could not have sent me to a high school without this aid from the government. In those days the Welsh Presbyterian Mission used to give a Rs 5 stipend to some students in the high school who were expected to return without completing the matriculation to their villages for church work or as

school teachers. Mission stipendiaries were not allowed to take up Latin, a subject which was compulsory for those who went up for a university examination. If I had not succeeded in getting the government scholarship of Rs 5 a month, I might have become a village school teacher and remained one to this day.