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an autobiography

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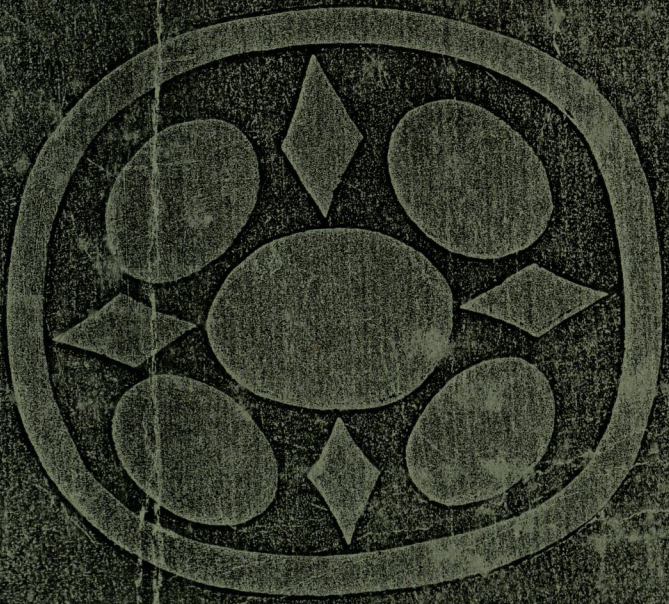

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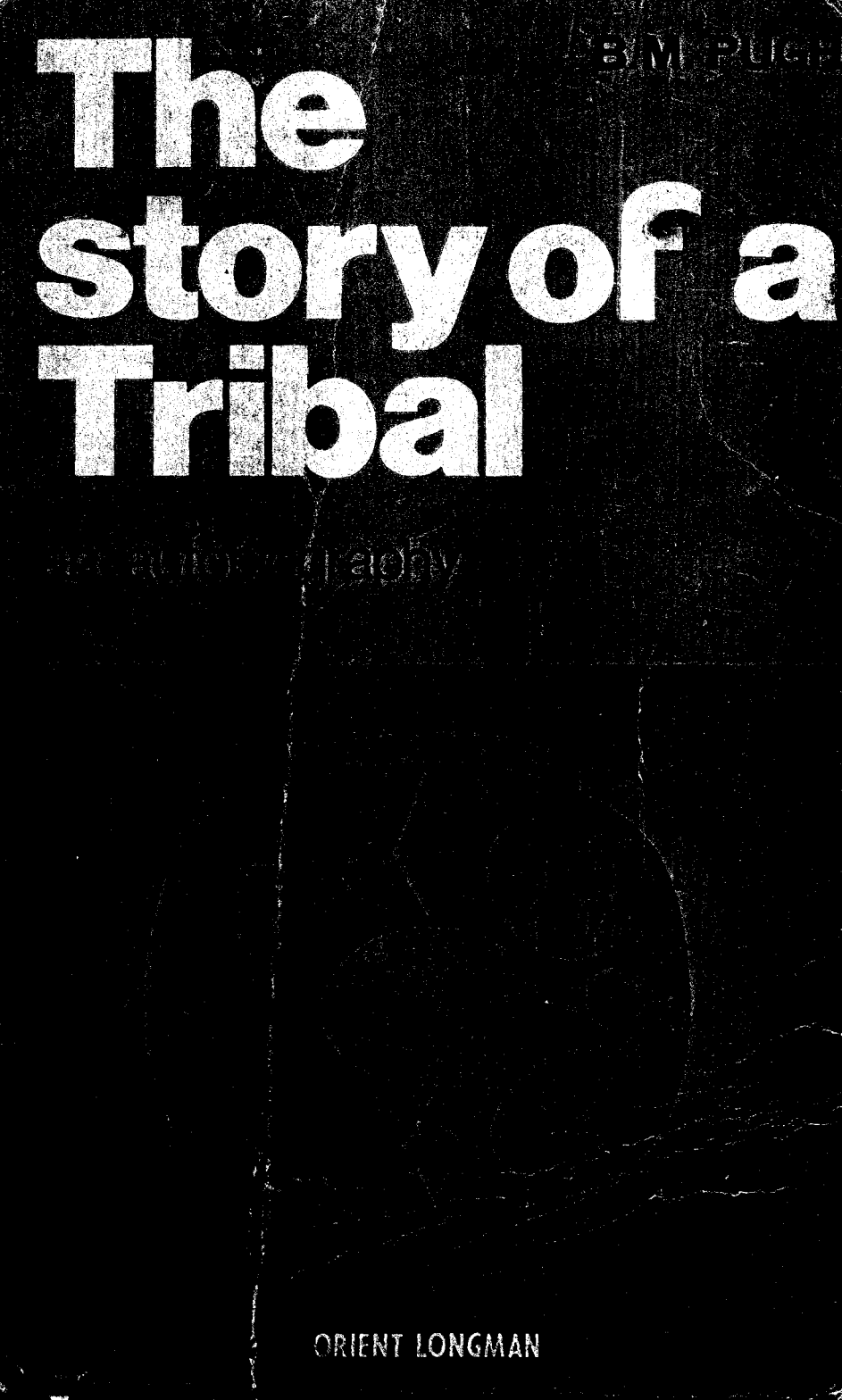

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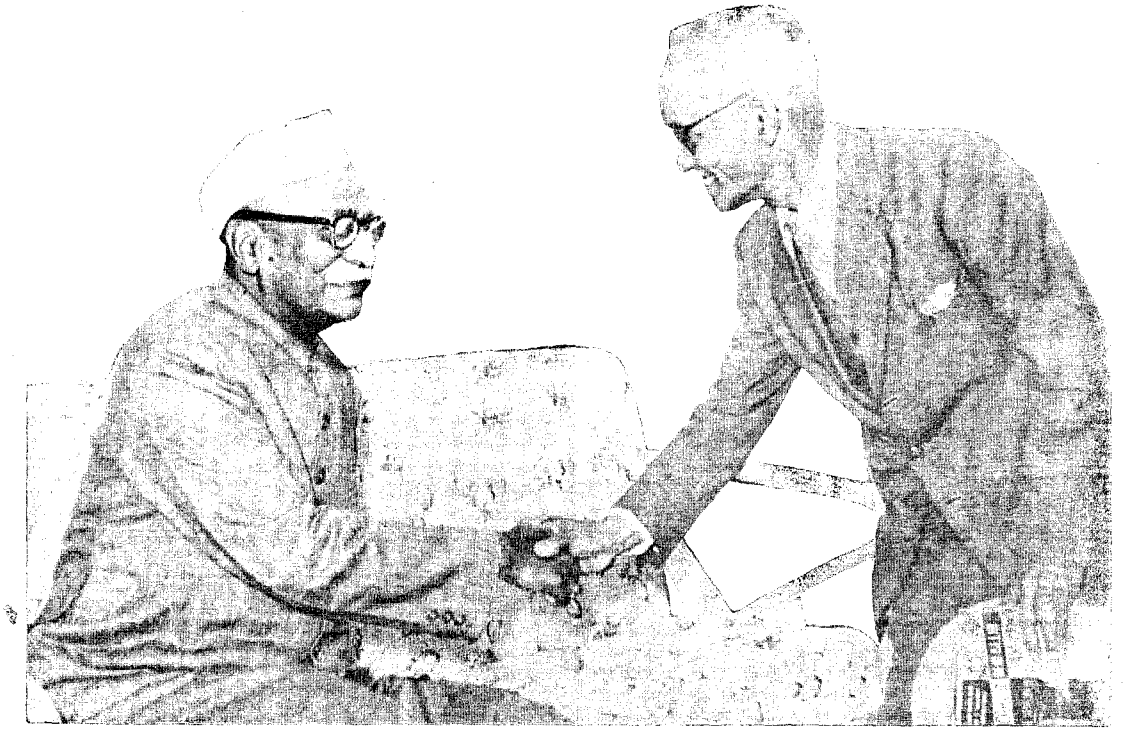

The Author with the First President of India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad.

THE STORY OF A TRIBAL

An Autobiography

B. M. PUGH

With a Foreword by

B. K. NEHRU

High Commissioner for India in U.K.

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To

My Students

who inspired me in my work as

a teacher by their desire

to learn

Foreword

THE STORY OF A TRIBAL is a fascinating account, told with great delicacy, modesty and a gentle sense of humour, of how a young village boy from the remote interior of the Khasi Hills grew into the well-rounded, broad-minded, selfless Indian patriot and humanist, whom we all in North-Eastern India admire and love so well.

This story of his life has a particular attraction for me ; for, in a sense, my experiences have been the very reverse of his. Born and brought up in cities, having lived and worked in cosmopolitan societies and having developed, because of my work, an attitude of mind which made political, racial, ethnic, religious and linguistic differences wholly irrelevant, my coming here as Governor of Assam gave to me a cultural shock greater perhaps than that occasioned by the Rev. Pugh's first visit to Calcutta. For I discovered in North-Eastern India an universal insistence on maintaining the cultural identity of one's own particular social unit, no matter how small that unit might be. The desire to emphasise one's separateness from one's neighbour, which this quest for identity created, was something which I was at first unable to comprehend and am not yet quite able to accept.

The Rev. Pugh says that he never knew that he was a tribal till others told him so. He knew he was a Khasi and an Indian just as there were other Indians who were Bengalis or Punjabis. I sympathise with him, for though apparently he is now satisfied that there is some generic difference between a Khasi and a Bihari, the basis on which that difference is made is still a mystery to me. I have failed to find a convincing definition of what constitutes a tribe, nor any valid explanation of the difference between a tribe and a caste or sub-caste into which the whole of Indian society is fragmented. These castes and sub-castes are still the basic social groups on which the sprawling structure of our Indian society rests. They have, like the tribes, their own ways and

customs, their particular inhibitions and compulsions, their rules of exogamy and endogamy, their customary laws — now happily disregarded — of inheritance of property and very often their own patois. As among the tribes, punishment is meted out by the caste panchayat for a breach of caste rules — the judgement of the panchayat is willingly accepted.

I am told that the essential difference lies in the fact that the tribes are primitive and backward, while the castes and sub-castes are not. This explanation flies in the face of facts and is one I find impossible to accept. It is arbitrary, if not somewhat absurd, to suggest that the Khasis in Meghalaya or the Aos in Nagaland or the Adis in Arunachal, to take random examples, are backward peoples. And when one considers that the rate of literacy in Mizoram is higher than even in Kerala, it is indeed a slur on literacy, one of the elementary conditions of progress, to suggest that the Mizos are a primitive people. The irony of the situation is that it is the tribals themselves who claim to be 'backward', on account of the many privileges our Constitution confers on the backward communities ; this desire to flaunt one's backwardness — which is so prevalent in North-Eastern India — was one major cause of the cultural shock I received on coming here. There is a danger, because of these very extraordinary privileges, that whole societies may find it more profitable to move backward instead of forward. It is only tribal leaders such as the Rev. Pugh, with an outlook wider and more enlightened than is common in this part of our world, who can reverse this process by dispelling a totally unjustified inferiority complex generated by a constant repetition of what by now has become the myth of the backwardness of tribal society. It is for them also to widen and enlarge gradually the areas of identity so that the many individual streams of separateness may ultimately merge into the great ocean of national consciousness.

The Rev. Pugh has been an agricultural scientist, an educationist, a man of religion and for a time even a politician. He is now an elder statesman, highly respected by all classes and segments of society, leaving the hurly burly of political life, as is proper, to his son who is now a Minister of the State of Meghalaya. The Reverend himself devotes his time, always with characteristic humility and self-effacement, to innumerable tasks of construc-

tive social activity. It has been my privilege to have known him for the last five years and to have benefited from his wise advice. It is in tribute to this great son of India that I write this foreword.

RAJ BHAVAN
Shillong

B. K. NEHRU

Prelude

I HAVE READ the typescript of Mr. B. M. Pugh's autobiography with the greatest interest. I have known Mr. Pugh for over twenty years, but he is such a modest and self-effacing person that I had never fully realised what a remarkable life he has led and the very wide range of his interests. What has attracted me particularly in his book is his delightful sense of humour. It is this, I think, that has helped carry him smoothly through the storms and stresses of life, apart from his deep religious faith.

For all his scholarship, Mr. Pugh is essentially a simple, God-fearing person, and his simplicity and religious faith are reflected throughout his book. The book is in a way a period piece and constitutes a valuable historical record of the attitudes and feeling of the tribal people in this region during the last thirty to forty years ago. There is a tendency now-a-days for 'tribalism' to be put forward as a qualification for everything upon earth. Although Mr. Pugh is a tribal, he has got on in life through his own efforts and not taken advantage of any plea of belonging to a so-called backward section of society to further his own purposes. And for all his involvement and interest in tribal culture and tribal institutions, he is first and foremost a citizen of India.

I was passing through a very busy period of work when Mr. Pugh was kind enough to lend me his typescript. My original intention had been to read through a chapter or two to get the feel. But I was so captivated by his story that I could not return the book until I had arrived at the last page. This in itself speaks volumes, as I am normally a slow reader and will only race through a book to its end when I am really gripped by it. It was a joy and privilege to have accompanied Mr. Pugh for a while in his journey through life.

CHIEF SECRETARY'S OFFICE
Government of Meghalaya

N. K. RUSTOMJI

Preface

THE IDEA WHICH has given birth to this book originated with Dr. S. K. Bhuyan, PH. D., D. LITT., who was at one time Vice-Chancellor of the Gauhati University. As he was a class-friend of my elder brother, Granville, he suggested to me that I write his biography ; and every time I met him, he asked me if I had written it.

Granville was without any doubt the most worthy son of all the children of my father, and there were twelve altogether — seven brothers and five sisters — for my father married three times. Granville was the eldest of my mother's six children.

When I told my youngest brother, Frank, an author of several books in Khasi literature, about this suggestion from Dr. Bhuyan, he politely suggested that I write one about myself.

In the Khasi family the youngest daughter is the heir to all the property of the parents as well as that of the brothers who die while they are still unmarried. As my younger brother, now 70 years old, is still unmarried, he and my youngest sister are joint-heirs of my parents' property and whatever else my unmarried brothers might have left behind. It was only right therefore that I should have consulted them.

I do not however blame Dr. S. K. Bhuyan alone for writing this autobiography for once while I was in Calcutta making inquiries from a certain publisher on how my agricultural books were selling he, learning that I was a tribal, asked me why I did not write a biography of a tribal since none was available in the market. That was another incitement to this attempt.

When I disclosed to my friend, Sri C. P. Saikia, Secretary, Publication Board, Assam, of my intention to write this biography, he unhesitatingly urged me to go ahead with my plan, as he envisaged that the book would 'deal with matters relating to composite Assam and might form a part of the history of Assam'.

In spite of this encouragement the writing of this book was done very slowly until I received a letter from Mrs. Ann McCormack (wife of Dr. William McCormack, Head of the Department of Anthropology, University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada), an anthropologist who had spent two years in the Khasi Hills studying the Khasis, to whom I had sent the first six chapters of my book. She wrote, quoting only from the first and last paragraphs of her two-page letter : 'With Bill off to a meeting in Toronto for a long weekend, I have (at long last) read the early chapters of your autobiography and enjoyed them *thoroughly*. In fact, I am frustrated that the material ends where it does here, and very much look forward to seeing the balance of the book in due course, whether in manuscript or printed form....

'Your present book will apparently reveal one kind of corner in the history of India, and that has value as such. To repeat, it's fascinating to me, and I eagerly look forward to the balance of the book.'

After I received Ann's letter, I have added more materials which I hope are further embellishments to this story and of interest to Ann and her tribe, the anthropologists.

Without this additional fillip from Ann the book might not have seen the light of day for I am no slave-driver and I certainly am not that with myself. But I must also confess that old age seems to bring with it a disease which gives rise to various kinds of reminiscences ; and once a writer — however diffident he or she may be — is caught with this disease, its only cure is the scratching of the pen.

I have called this story of my life, The Story of a Tribal but, in fact, I never knew that I was a tribal perhaps until the Constitution of this country was being hammered out. I knew, of course, that I am a Khasi ; but that, to me, was the same thing as a Bengali knowing that he is a Bengali, or a Punjabi that he is a Punjabi. That is, I never knew or rather I was never conscious that I was different from any other son or daughter of this country. I never knew that I would be put more or less in the same class with what in India is now called the 'scheduled castes and harijans'. At school where we had Bengalis, Assamese and others, I never considered myself any different from them. I never knew the difference between the 'high castes and the low

castes'. Once I was asked by Chief Minister Chaliha to meet him and Mr. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed (now President of India, but then Finance Minister, Assam Government), and another senior cabinet minister of the Assam Government. As I was probably complaining of differential treatments given to us tribals and perhaps other depressed classes also, this senior cabinet minister, Siddhinath Sarma said : 'You see, Mr. Pugh, we do have in India high castes and low castes and such differential treatments sometimes could not be helped.' I flared up and told him : 'You know, Mr Sarma, I have lived in Allahabad for more than two decades but I never could tell the differences between a high caste and a low caste Indian. You are a Congressman and, I believe, a follower of Gandhiji ; I thought you no longer recognise such differences.' I cannot forget that both Chief Minister Chaliha and Finance Minister Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed made no comment on my observation. When I became a public man, I objected to the then Chief Conservator of Forests calling hill people 'tribesmen' which seemed to me a more derogatory term than even 'tribal'. In fact, I do not like the term 'tribal' at all. But, perhaps, in the last analysis, we are all tribals, that is anyone who belongs to his own tribe, be he an Englishman, a Scotsman, or a Welshman ; and I know that a Punjabi or a Bengali could become a tribal, in the sense that that term is used in this country, if he is suppressed or depressed for generations by a majority or dominant group. In today's world, in my opinion, any people or nation which still considers itself superior to any other belongs to an age that has gone by.

I must take this opportunity to acknowledge with thanks the encouragement I received from Shri B. K. Nehru, then Governor of Meghalaya and the other North-Eastern States, and now Indian High Commissioner in the U.K. It was his encouragement and abiding interest that helped me to complete this autobiography. I must also thank the Department of Education, Meghalaya, for their help in getting the book published. My thanks are also due to Dr. C. D. S. Devanesen, Vice-Chancellor of the North-Eastern Hill University for all his help in the publication of this book and to Messrs Orient Longman Ltd. for undertaking the work.

B. M. P.

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 Sheila, 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,

2 A School Boy in a Town

Gaudeamus igitur,
Juvenes dum sumus
Post jucundam juventutem,
Post molestam senectutem,
Nos habebit humus.

"Let us be happy while we are young, for after carefree youth and careworn age, the earth will hold us also."

—STUDENTS' SON

ON MY RETURN from that first trip to Shillong I sobbed like a chil on my mother's lap, not knowing why I did so. It was probabl the reaction to being separated from my parents for the first tim But, after a few weeks, when the results of the Middle Englis Examination were declared, I found myself agog with eagerne to go back to Shillong. I am not able to say now whether tha eagerness was really a desire for higher education or just a wis for renewal of friendship with those seemingly knowledgeab school friends whom I met during that examination week i Shillong. The day came when the two of us who had won schola ships had to start on a second trek to Shillong. Fortunately f us, there was in our village a man from Laban, a suburb Shillong, who was returning home that week. He urged us t start early in the morning. With this early start we got to Shillo the same day, reaching there late in the evening. After thi travelling to and from Shillong was not so difficult, and we oft covered 64 km in one day. In those days, walking was almo the only means of travelling in that part of the country. Pon carts had indeed started to do business, but the Cherra-Shillo road, a 53 km stretch, needed constant repairs because of lan slides after every heavy rain.

In the first couple of months in Shillong I lived with my siste in-law, Mrs Eleazar Pugh, in Mawkhar and later with my elde

3 On to Calcutta

The City is of Night, but not of Sleep ;
There sweet sleep is not for the weary brain ;
The pitiless hours like years and ages creep.

— JAMES THOMSON

IN 1916, THE year I passed the Matriculation Examination, there was only one college in the whole of Assam; and that was in Sylhet (now in Bangladesh). I believe the Cotton College at Gauhati had not yet come into existence. At any rate no student from Shillong ever thought of studying anywhere else than in Calcutta. The Scottish Church College in Calcutta was then the home of every Christian student from the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The time finally came when about a dozen of us from Shillong boarded a mail bus of the Commercial Carrying Company to proceed to Gauhati on our way to Calcutta. As I had never ventured outside Shillong during all my four years in the high school, this journey to Calcutta was a never-to-be-forgotten experience. The bus had only two hard benches behind the driver, and behind them there was a van in which mail was carried. On that memorable day the first bench was occupied by girl students and some senior male students who, because of their seniority, had the privilege of sitting with the girls and also the responsibility of taking care of all of us. When the time came for us to start, the bus began to give trouble. The driver told us that it might not be able to reach Gauhati, about 100 km away. As the bus-stand was packed with our friends and relatives who had come to see off the young hopefuls of the Khasi tribe, we were naturally loathe not to proceed. We, therefore, decided that we would take a chance, whatever the consequences. As it happened the bus had to be pushed whenever it had to go up-hill. Since the road was downwards almost throughout, the senior and the stronger students among us had to get down a few times to push

4 A Student in the City

Love is like the measles ; we all have to go through it.

— JEROME K JEROME

ON MY ARRIVAL in Calcutta, a senior friend accompanied me to the YMCA hostel in Machua Bazar Street, now the Keshab Chunder Sen Street. My elder brother, Granville, who had lived in Calcutta as a student from 1909–13, and at the Serampore College from 1913–6, had written to the warden of the YMCA, Mr Melville T Kennedy, an American, for my accommodation in the hostel. This was going to be my home for the next four years. Other students from Shillong were staying in the Duff Hostel. So, in my first year in Calcutta I was the only tribal in the YMCA hostel. But there were a number of Bengalees from Sylhet, quite a few from Orissa, South India, and Ceylon, one from Burma, and the rest were from Bengal. The YMCA insisted on three things : (1) participation in games, sports and calisthenics, (2) attendance in daily prayers and (3) taking active part in weekly debates. What I cannot forget to this day was the evening when I was called to speak extempore in my first meeting of the Debating Society on the subject of 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness'. I quickly left the hall out of stage-fright, went into my room for shelter and thought over the matter for the rest of the night. Mr M T Kennedy called on me the next morning and let me know that I should either take part in the meetings of the Debating Society or leave the hostel. I stated that I could take part in the meeting only if I was given previous notice of what I would be expected to do. He agreed. So at the next meeting I was appointed one of the debaters, and I must have done fairly well as I was soon appointed a secretary of the society. But there were stalwarts in debates even in those early days and I could only look up to them, often my seniors, with a great deal of admiration.

5 Off to America

Adieu, Adieu ! My native shore
Fades o'er the waters blue.

— LORD BYRON

GOING TO AMERICA was not as easy as I had thought. While in Shillong I went to see Mr Cunningham, the Director of Public Instruction, and told him about a scholarship I was getting in America for studying Agriculture. He very kindly promised to pay for my third class fare from any port in India to the USA. Before going I also went to see some of my friends in Shillong among whom was an American who asked me why I did not postpone my going till after the monsoons as the sea was going to be rough at that time. The delightsome thought of going to the USA made me disregard any such advice ; I completely ignored it.

I had been told that a student could work his own way to the States and that he could earn part of his expenses while studying in that country. So, soon after my arrival in Calcutta, I went to see steamer companies which might be able to give me such facilities ; but they, one and all, informed me that I would not be allowed to land in America if I went as a labourer or an employee of a steamer company. In those days, the Government of the United States would allow only students, tourists or exporters to enter their country.

As I was planning to return home, Rev Fielder of the American Baptist Mission in Gauhati, who had encouraged me all along to proceed to America, met me in Calcutta. On my informing him that the Director of Public Instruction (Assam) had promised to pay for a third class passage to America, he inquired if I could borrow or raise money right away so that I could proceed. Feeling sure that my father-in-law, a very successful contractor, would not hesitate to advance the money, I was persuaded by

6 My Sojourn in the USA

Breathes there the man, with soul so dead,
Who never to himself has said,
This is my own, my native land!
Whose heart hath ne'er within him burned
As home his footsteps he hath turned
From wandering on a foreign strand.

— SIR WALTER SCOTT

MY STAY AT the Neugass's did not last long, as I could not render satisfactory services. One day Mrs Neugass asked me to get some oranges from the cellar where she had stored them in several baskets. I ran down to the cellar but saw baskets of citrus fruits which we in our country would never call 'oranges'. So I went back to her to say that there were no oranges. She became horrified with my stupidity for not knowing the world-famous sunkist oranges of California — the Navels, the Valencias and their ilk. After I had gone down to the cellar the second time and brought her the valencias, I quietly explained to her that in our country we would never call those citrus fruits in her cellar 'oranges'. She then began to sympathise with me and with all Indians in general for not knowing any better.

Professor Saunders, however, was insistent that I should stay on, and suggested that I prepare *pulao* (a special rice preparation) for the family. Having never cooked anything in my own country I thought it best not to try. But in the evening he brought all the ingredients for a *pulao* and asked me to get started. I tried to cook something but failed to produce anything that might even resemble *pulao*. I then thought it was time for me to quit. As the Neugass's had a young woman who came to help them with their cooking, a Japanese laundry woman, and a Chinese who came once a week to do some cleaning up in the house, my services could be easily dispensed with. I then made inquiries for acco-

7 With the USDA

What we have to learn to do, we learn by doing.

— ARISTOTLE

SOON AFTER MY return home I began to scout around for a job. Since I had been trained in agriculture I went to see the Minister of Agriculture. In those days administration of this country was under the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms and agriculture was a transferred subject, that is, under an Indian Minister. To my dismay, however, I was told that there was no opening for me in that department. Even in those early days tribals seemed to have been discriminated against as the following year an Assamese from the Plains who had been to England for training in agriculture was appointed to the post for which I had applied. Such discrimination, whether there was justification or not, made the hill tribals even two decades after independence still long for those days when British rulers appeared to them to be more just in their dealings than our fellow Indians. With fairness to the Minister I should state that American education in those days was also considered inferior by our erstwhile rulers (English as well as Indian) to that obtained in England or other European countries. My disappointment was all the greater as Lord Irwin, who had just come as Viceroy of India, was said to be a great lover of agriculture. He very soon appointed a Commission headed by Lord Linlithgow to inquire into the agricultural conditions of this country. After Lord Irwin left, Lord Linlithgow became the next Viceroy of India.

As I had also studied theology I tried to get a teaching position in a theological college, but I was not taken in there also as foreign missionaries in Assam then did not look with favour the appointment of any national who might sooner or later replace them. This seems to be a part of human nature ; it required a Mahatma

8 Learning and Teaching

They know enough who know how to learn.

— HENRY ADAMS

ON MY ARRIVAL at Allahabad I was received by the Vice-Principal, Mr W B Hayes, with whom I stayed for a couple of days until his wife, a doctor, returned to the Institute after spending her summer holidays in some hill station. During those few days Mr Hayes would take me out every evening for a walk on the 300-hectare farm of the Institute and although he was a horticulturist, he familiarised me with the crop plants growing on the farm at the time.

It would almost have been impossible to take my classes in Agronomy if I had not had that opportunity to go with him on those long walks on the farm as most of the crop plants then growing on the farm were not familiar to me. I had not seen such crops as *juar*, *bajra*, *arhar*, *guara*, *mung*, *urd*, and many others, either in Assam or in California. Not only the crops but also the time and method of sowing appeared to me to be quite different from those I knew either in my hill district in India or in any agricultural institution in the United States. This was perhaps the reason why the Institute wanted an Indian to teach the subject as it would have been a very difficult task for an American or anybody from the West to start teaching this subject in this country. I knew then that I too was not at all prepared to teach the subject when the classes would begin in the first week of July. So I spent a considerable time during my first week at the Institute to get myself acquainted with what they call in Allahabad the *kharif* (rainy season) crops, which had already started to grow on the Institute's farm under irrigation as the rains that year had not yet started.

Today, as I am writing this story, I am reminded of my

9 More Teaching and Learning

> Desire of knowledge, like the thirst of riches, increases ever with the acquisition of it.
>
> — LAURENCE STERNE

ON MY RETURN to the Institute I was told that I had been assigned to take up two other responsibilities: the librarianship and the wardenship of the hostel. When classes began I was further informed that as we were short of teachers I should also take up the teaching either of Chemistry or Physics in addition to my other duties. I chose the latter.

As the library at that time was open only at night I did not find the work as a librarian difficult. The work in the library made me familiar with all the books which I needed for my teaching duties, while the hours I spent there gave me the opportunity to scan over every useful information that I could lay my hands on.

The teaching of Physics, I found, was helpful in my other subject 'Soil Science and Climatology' which I taught at the Institute for as long as I was there. Never having studied Climatology I was at first astounded when asked to teach that too. Not knowing of anyone who could help me I went over to the Allahabad University to see Dr Meghnad Saha, then Professor of Physics at the University. When I told him my problem he assured me that Climatology should not be difficult to teach since I was already teaching Physics at the Agricultural College. With that assurance from him and with the help of books on Climatology which I had enough to start with at the Institute library, I took up the subject and in the end did not find it very difficult. From this experience I was able after some years to write a book on the subject which was used as a textbook in many agricultural colleges in this country. In the writing of this book my emphasis

10 Growing up with the Institute

'Tis not in mortals to command success,
But we'll do more, Sempronius, we'll deserve it.

— JOSEPH ADDISON

THE ALLAHABAD AGRICULTURAL INSTITUTE in 1928–9, the year I joined it, was teaching only the Intermediate Science in Agriculture and a two-year course for the Indian Dairy Diploma. In those days it was not easy to convince the public and perhaps the then government also that Agriculture could be a university-level subject. As a result, the Institute was not allowed to open a degree course in Agriculture. As the Institute is also located at a distance which is less than five miles from the Allahabad University, the Act of the University did not allow the starting of any degree college within a five-mile radius from the University. It was not until 1934 that the Institute was upgraded to a degree college.

In order to be more acquainted with the systems, methods and the progress of agriculture in other parts of the country I made special trips to many places as far as Bombay and Baroda to the west and Hissar and Ambala to the north and in that way I prepared myself for the teaching of degree classes in agriculture. After teaching B.Sc. classes for two years we decided to start specialisations in three agricultural subjects : Agronomy, Horticulture and Dairying. That meant a more intensive and more advanced study of these subjects. In order to prepare myself for this special course in Agronomy I took a year's leave from my Institute and decided to spend the time under the guidance of Mr J B Hutchinson (later Sir Joseph Hutchinson), a geneticist and botanist of repute, then working at the Institute of Plant Industry, Indore. Of all the Britishers who came to India, Mr Hutchinson was by far the most outstanding agricultural scientist.

11 The NEFA Interlude

> O Joy, lovely gift of the gods, daughter of paradise,
> divinity, we are inspired as we approach your sanctuary.
>
> —FRIEDRICH VON SCHILLER

ON MY ARRIVAL in Shillong I met some of the Khasi leaders and in the course of my conversation told them about the political situation in the country. The first one I met was an old lawyer, a Rai Sahib, very loyal to the government, who refused to believe that the Britishers would ever leave India. One promising young man who had spent a week at my home in Allahabad some years before and whom I had asked then why the Khasis were planning to see the Simon Commission and not the Butler Commission, was reminded of this on seeing me in Shillong. The Simon Commission was appointed by the British Parliament to find out what further political advancement might be given to the then British provinces which were directly under British rule, and the latter was to do the same for the so-called native states, that is, those under Indian rulers. The Simon Commission, as it turned out later, could not proceed with its inquiry as our Indian leaders had decided to boycott it ; the slogan 'Go back Simon' blared forth from all leading nationalist papers and reverberated throughout all the big cities and towns of the country. The Butler Commission also died a still-born death : it probably never even left the shores of the British Isles. The young man convened a small meeting of senior leaders consisting of Rai Bahadur D Ropmay, a former magistrate, Dr H Lyngdoh, a retired Government Civil Surgeon, and Wilson Reade, Headmaster of a school, and himself so that I, who had just come from Allahabad, might have the opportunity to tell them of the political situation in the country. I told them that the British would soon leave India because (1) India would

12 Starting an Agricultural College

> Whoever grows two blades of grass wherever one grew before,
> I consider him as the benefactor of humanity.
>
> — UNKNOWN

IN ORDER TO start the proposed Agricultural College at Jorhat in the beginning of the academic year 1948–9, the Assam Government wanted me to join its service about six months before July 1948, when the session was to begin. I joined along with M N Bora, now Dean at the newly established Agricultural University, and D K Goswami, now Chief Engineer, Agro-Industries, Assam Government. After we had completed all the paper-work necessary for starting the college we moved to Jorhat in April to take over the building which had housed a unit of the American army during the Second World War. We remodelled it and cleaned it up, got furniture for offices and class-rooms, secured more lecturers to complete our teaching staff. By July we were ready for the admission of students. As we had decided to admit only thirty students to the first year class there was no dearth of students. In fact we had to admit some students under pressure from the government leaving out others who, I thought, were better qualified. When the Chief Minister, Mr Gopinath Bardoloi, came to visit the college I suggested that we might be allowed to admit some more ; but he was not sure that the government would be able to find jobs for more than twenty or thirty graduates every year (the college, now a university, is admitting about 100 a year). So, that question was dropped. Taking advantage of this visit of the Chief Minister I went round with him to see the grounds of the college which were about 300 acres, and at the end suggested that Government might acquire more land for the college, particularly in the land adjoining the Dairy Farm which extended towards the Jorhat Jail. On hearing that I had made such

13 The Return of the Prodigal

> I said to a man who stood at the gate of the year : 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.' And he replied : 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than a light, and safer than a known way.'
>
> — MINNIE LOUISE HASKINS

I HAD ALWAYS wished to return to Shillong after retirement. So, while I was still at the Agricultural College, Jorhat, I bought a small property just outside the municipality there and built a house. On my leaving Jorhat I left my wife there in Shillong and proceeded alone to Allahabad where I once again established a home to which my wife came a year later.

On my return to Uttar Pradesh in 1949 I found that the change I had expected would take place after independence was not visible anywhere. In fact I thought that there were signs of deterioration. This was perhaps the period of transition when Indians everywhere thought of freedom as licence and gave up all ideas of discipline. It was probably during this time that Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru scolded the Collector of Allahabad who went to meet him with a dilapidated tri-colour on the bonnet of his car. It was about this time also that Mrs Sarojini Naidu, then Governor of Uttar Pradesh, said in her neat and perfect style : 'The greatest need of India today is discipline.' She was indeed a remarkable woman who had impressed me even in the pre-independence days by her extempore speech which she delivered as a guest at one of the functions of the Home Science Department of the Allahabad Agricultural Institute. Lady Haig, the wife of the then Governor of Uttar Pradesh, was the chief guest on that occasion and read out her speech. What a contrast, I thought!

The students at the Allahabad Agricultural Institute, however, seemed to have developed more confidence and were able to

14 A College in a Rural Area

I wish I loved the human race ;
I wish I loved its silly face.

— SIR WALTER RALEIGH

MY DECISION TO return to Assam was the result of my long-felt desire to start a rural college which would serve particularly the tribal people of the North-East of India. About the time I returned to Assam both the Ford and the Rockefeller Foundations had promised very generous grants to the Allahabad Agricultural Institute. But knowing fully well that the needs and the opportunities for quick development of the tribal areas in Assam were greater than those anywhere else in India I felt that this new offer might open up an opportunity to start such a college. Leaving Allahabad in March 1952 I took up my duties as Principal of the Union Christian College in the beginning of April of that year.

On my arrival in Shillong, the Rev Edward Sinha (who years later met with a tragic death and whose body was found near the Barapani Lake which now gives such a beautiful setting to the Union Christian College) said : 'I am glad you have come ; now I can hand over the baby to you .... Did you see the ivory towers at Barapani (the College site) when you came up from Gauhati ?' A day or two after that I went down to the college site located at a distance of about 12 miles from Shillong to join the volunteers who had come from the Pynursla area of the Khasi Hills to camp there for a week, in order to help build thatched houses for the Principal and Staff of the college. The ivory towers the Rev Edward Sinha referred to were three huts (did not this remind me of the proposed three tents on the mount of transfiguration ?) meant to be class-room buildings. They were built at a somewhat higher spot by an earlier group of campers under the leadership of the Rev R G Beers of the American Baptist

15 In the Political Arena

Man is by nature a political animal.

— ARISTOTLE

IN ASSAM I found that the tribal minorities, particularly those of the hill areas who did not speak Assamese, the language of the majority community, were not getting a fair deal at the hands of the Government of Assam. I felt that the Khasis in particular, a tribe more advanced than the other hill tribes such as the Nagas, the Garos, the Mizos, the Mikirs, the Cacharis, were being discriminated against as they were the closest rivals of the ruling community, the Assamese. I felt that the treatment of the less backward tribals was better and that there was a subtle attempt to deprive the Khasis of the opportunities which the members of the Assamese community enjoyed freely. I also felt that our hopes for a better life which we had thought would come with the attainment of independence from the British were belied, as the Assamese were endowed with the new power which had come to them. In British days, before the Bengalee-inhabited district of Sylhet went to East Pakistan, the Bengalees were more dominant in the affairs of the British province of Assam. With the Partition the Assamese found themselves in the majority and, as such, the power to rule went to them. Drunk with power they became blind or at least indifferent to the claims of the small tribal communities of the hill areas for a share in the fruits of independence. These tribal communities said that they were being treated as second class citizens in a country in which all its peoples and communities had joined Gandhiji in the struggle for independence. Had Gandhiji not promised, they asked, equal opportunities to all — to the least and the greatest among us ?

Such was the thinking then of most of our tribal leaders and of the majority of the people in the hill areas of Assam. So we

16 A Tribal Chief

> Whatever mitigates the woes or increases the happiness of others, this is my criterion of goodness ; and whatever injures society at large, or any individual in it, this is my measure of iniquity.
>
> —ROBERT BURNS

SOON AFTER I was elected Chief Executive Member of the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills District Council, I got an invitation from the Government of India to go to Delhi as a 'tribal chief' in connection with the week-long Republic Day celebrations. I thus found myself in the company of tribal chiefs from the Andaman and Nicobar islands, Ladakh, Manipur, Tripura, the Nagaland, Mizoram, Mikir and North Cachar Hills. Obviously the term tribal chief, for purposes of these Republic Day celebrations, is not quite appropriate from the accepted appellation of anthropologists !

As guests of the Government of India we were invited one morning to the Prime Minister's home 'Teen Murti' where we also met his charming and talented daughter, Mrs Indira Gandhi. During the week the government made arrangements for our sight-seeing. One of the places we visited was the famous Bhakra-Nangal dam. One day I did not accompany my friends on a sight-seeing trip to the world-famous Taj Mahal as I had seen it many times on the various educational tours with the Allahabad students. Instead I sought an interview with the Prime Minister which was readily granted. This gave me the opportunity to air my views on the backwardness and the lack of development in the hill areas of Eastern India. One of the projects I suggested we take up immediately was the setting up of a leather factory at Mawlai in the suburbs of Shillong. Such was the interest of the Prime Minister in the welfare of our tribal people that on my return to Shillong I found a letter from the

17 A Public Man

> Character is a by-product ; it is produced by the great manufacture of daily duty.
>
> — THOMAS WOODROW WILSON

HAVING ONCE BEEN a public man, I have realised it is not easy to shirk one's responsibilities. In fact, as the Chief Executive Member of the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills District Council I was put on various district, state and all-India committees. I have continued in some, and have been put on new ones even after I ceased to be an ordinary member of the District Council.

Being perhaps a tribal and an agriculturist I was put on the All-India Lac Cess Committee and continued to be its member for several years and was, towards the end of my term, appointed Vice-President of that Committee. Not having been intimately connected with the production of lac, whether in Uttar Pradesh where I was a professor of agriculture for about twenty years, or in my own hill areas in Assam (including Meghalaya), and not having been associated in any way with the manufacture or marketing of lac products, I would say that my membership in that committee was very ineffective. I had even wished to visit Ranchi to see for myself the research work carried on there at the Central Lac Research Institute but that opportunity never came ; and when it did come, I missed it. I am, however, grateful to the Central Government for their confidence in me in appointing me a member of that committee.

As an educationist and public man I was also appointed by the Assam Government as its representative in the Board of Governors of the Regional Engineering College at Durgapur in West Bengal, where the Chief Minister of that State is always its Chairman. My acquaintance with Shri Ajoy Mukherjee, then Chief Minister of West Bengal, made me wonder how this mild-

18 A Return to Academic Life

> Don't part with your illusions. When they are gone, you may still exist but you have ceased to live.
>
> —MARK TWAIN

HAVING SEEN THAT the Union Christian College, Barapani, way out in the rural area and far from the populated part of a town or a village was doing well without being too much of a burden on the thriving Presbyterian Church of the districts of Khasi and Jaintia Hills, its Synod or the Church Council began in 1962 to consider rather seriously the sponsoring of a Church College under its own auspices. A committee of five, of which Mr Wilson Reade, a veteran educationist of about 60 years standing was the Chairman, was appointed by the Synod to prepare plans and publicise the idea, so that the college could be started in 1964. I was also called to be one of the members of the committee. When the Synod finally decided in the early part of 1964 to launch the project it was found that it would not be possible to start it in 1964 but in the academic year of 1965–6. So at the age of 68 I was again called to be the Principal of this new college. As we did not have a building of our own we approached the government to allow us to start the college, for night classes only, in the Shillong Government High School. Permission was readily granted as the Welsh Presbyterian Mission (now the Synod) had leased the High School to the Assam Government for a period which had already lapsed except that the government had not been able to move out as it was not able to find an alternative site.

As the High School is situated almost in the centre of the town and in a very populous part of it, it was not difficult to get students although there were about five or six other colleges in other parts of the town.

19 A Retired Life

> I vow to thee my country — all earthly things above — Entire and whole and perfect, the service of my love.
>
> — ARTHUR CECIL SPRING-RICE

WHILE I AM today living a retired life I cannot say that I have bade goodbye to the varied responsibilities which came to me with my official duties or as a public man. I am still a member of at least six different bodies of the Gauhati University, like the Court (Senate), the Executive Council (Syndicate), the Construction Committee, the Faculty of Science, the Committee of Courses (Agricultural Botany), the Committee of Courses (Khasi), etc. Recently I have been selected to serve as a member of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research, New Delhi. I am still a member of scores of committees at the state, district, sub-district, the town and even at the village level.

As I was writing this part of my story the secretary of the village Executive Committee of which I am a member called an urgent meeting of the Executive to consider a complaint from one of the women of the village that she had been beaten by another woman and her 13-year old son while she was going to round up her goats which had gone out grazing in the fields nearby. The meeting was convened to meet at 6.30 a.m. in order to enable members of the executive Committee to attend to their work after the meeting. Most of the members were clerks in government offices except one or two including the headman whose business is plying jeeps on hire on the Shillong–Gauhati road. Fearing that there might be a commotion during the sitting of the committee, the wife of the headman perhaps advised him to have the committee meet in the open space in front of her house. When some members of the committee arrived, a crowd of villagers, many of them relatives of the two parties, had already

20 My Home

> Marriage is the greatest earthly happiness when founded on complete sympathy.
>
> — BENJAMIN DISRAELI

MY WIFE'S MOTHER sold her house and property a few years before she died. So although my wife was the only surviving daughter she practically inherited no property from her mother. Knowing full well that after my retirement from Allahabad I would have to return to these hills I built a house in Shillong which thus became my wife's home and property. As long as she and I lived together that was my house also. That is the system in the Khasi society. But never even once, as far as I can remember now, did my wife ever say to me that that was her home and not mine. In fact I always said half jokingly in presence of my guests that I was the master of my house in which my wife always acquiesced. My three children also, perhaps because they were brought up in Allahabad, accepted the fact that this was my home. Perhaps with rebellious children in Khasi society they can, especially when the mother is no more alive, tell their father to leave the house. That certainly is expected of the father if he should decide to marry again into another family. If the father decides to marry a younger sister of his wife the aunt may be acceptable to the children as their step-mother and she may be allowed to continue in the house of her sister.

But though the Khasis are matrilineal there are very few husbands, if there are any at all, who feel that the wife is the head of the home because she is not and does not exert any authority over her husband. In fact, I know of no society in which the husband and even members of his family are as much respected as in the Khasi society. The mother's mother is known to the children as 'mei rad' or 'mei ieit' which means a 'loving mother' but the father's mother is known as 'mei kha' or 'the mother that

21 My Religion

> It is well said, in every sense, that a man's religion is the chief fact with regard to him.
>
> — THOMAS CARLYLE

MY FATHER MUST have been born when the Welsh Presbyterian Mission first came to these hills and he was probably among the first converts to Christianity. So it was that he and his family became Christian. That to a very large extent explains why I am a Christian today. After all for most of us, the religions we profess, like the languages we speak, are accidents of birth.

As a boy I used to accompany my parents and my elder brothers faithfully to church. As a schoolboy in Shillong also I attended churches regularly and was considered an exemplary boy. In college, however, in spite of my being a member of the Student Christian Movement, the study of science and the influence of some of my closest friends who had taken up philosophy gave a terrible shakeup to my boyhood faith and beliefs. Later when I went to America my study of biology and geology further upset me. But my boyhood faith and beliefs changed radically after my studies at the Pacific School of Religion in California. The critical study of the Bible revealed that the earliest books contained in the Bible had a composite authorship. They were not only not written by one man but by several persons or groups of persons who revised or modified the contents of those books in succeeding generations. Hence it was that the story of the creation of the world itself as we find in the earliest chapters of the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis, was an attempt to reconcile two different versions of the story.

Without this knowledge of the Bible it would have been impossible to reconcile my belief in the 'Special Creation' of man as told in the Bible and the story of the evolution of man from