

## Negotiating Representation: The Self and Community in *The Story of a Tribal: An Autobiography*

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### Abstract

Literature as a means of representation and understanding selfhood and identity was oral based for the Khasis prior to colonialism but the coming of education via the proselytising efforts of the Welsh Mission led to the development of Khasi literature by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As mode of representation, literature for Khasis became a space of negotiation and of adaptation of foreign modes of expression and representation to reclaim an identity which has been suppressed by the colonial rulers via their discursive practices. This is clearly seen in the trend of the literary production of the community. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a mushrooming of literary production by Khasi writers, with most of them preferring to write in their own language and about their oral tradition. Interestingly, despite this trend, the first autobiography by a Khasi, B. M. Pugh's *The Story of a Tribal* (1976), was written in English. The title of the text itself alerts the readers of the highly politicised term 'tribal' as Pugh himself points out in his Preface and along with the fact that it is an autobiography the implication of issues of representation in terms of identity and selfhood cannot be missed. The text is also historically significant because of the author's articulation of his understanding of identity making in the midst of the cultural and political forces of colonialism and later Indian nationalism especially because it provides a glimpse of the hill state movement that surged in the Northeast immediately after Independence. This text thus gives an eye-witness account of the struggle that the hill tribes of Northeast faced to maintain their political and cultural identity.

**Keywords:** postcolonialism, literature, representation, self, identity, literature, autobiography

The literature of the Khasis, a tribe from North East India, is relatively young, owing to the tribe being oral based. The transcription of Khasi into its written form began with Alexander Lish, Joshua Rowe, Jacob Tomlin with the help of local informants/translators but was completed by Thomas Jones in 1842 (May, 2018). Literary production which began as early as 1842 mostly came from the resident missionaries who wrote mostly primers and books on catechism to serve their proselytising efforts in the Khasi Hills, hence most of these books were useful only for education and religious teaching. Fiction saw the light of day with the translation of the first part of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* by one of Jones' successors, Mrs. Lewis in 1867 (Nonglait, 2005, p. 47). John Roberts' *Second Reader* is another important milestone in the history of Khasi fiction as he includes adaptations of stories from the Bible (Ibid, p. 52). But here too the goal was to impress Christian teachings in the minds of Khasis. Though Roberts' *Fourth Reader* included non-Christian fiction like translations of "Jack and the Beanstalk" and "The Vision of Mirza" (Ibid, p. 57), literature was still not written for

entertainment but for educational purposes. Isabel Hofmeyr's observation within the context of African proselytisation, as education being, "the basic unit of production in the mission arena" to produce "first language converts with whom they work closely" (Hofmeyr, 2004, p. 14) also applies to proselytisation in this region. Education even in its secular form was still very much Christian based because of the control the Welsh Mission had whose sole aim was the conversion of the colonised subjects. Macaulay's *Minutes on Education* also makes this intention clear, that it was to produce "a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (Macaulay, 1835, para. 34). As such any form of literary production also pushed this agenda.

As a means of expression, literature existed only in its oral form for the Khasis. In its written form literature by a Khasi only saw light in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century with the publication of Jeebon Roy's original works *Ka Niam Jong u Khasi* (Khasi Religion), and *Ka Kot Shaphang Uwei u Blei* (A Book on the Oneness of God) in 1897 and 1900 respectively. Roy also made translations of Indian texts instead of the European ones that the missionaries have been producing. Soon enough the Khasi literary scene saw the publication of numerous Khasi texts written by Khasis. The trend of the early Khasi writers (late 19<sup>th</sup>-mid 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) was that of transcripts of folktales and original short stories and anecdotes that were based on the Khasi folk tradition. These publications were a result of the cultural awakening that was then taking place in the community, inadvertently enabled by the Welsh Mission education and the establishment of a locally owned printing press, the Ri Khasi Press in 1896 by none other than Roy himself. The second half of the twentieth century saw the quick maturation of Khasi literature. But the immediate years following India's Independence saw a marked absence of fictional texts; more political booklets were in circulation because of the hill state movement. Moreover the banning of textbooks written by missionaries, after Independence, by Government of Assam made textbook writing the first priority for many prominent writers.

Despite this rich and fast pace literary production, the only recorded autobiography of those times is B. M Pugh's *The Story of a Tribal* (1976). Though Mary Jones earlier published her autobiography in Khasi, *Ka Jingiathuhkhana Shaphang ka Jingim jong ka Mary Jones* (1879), *The Story of a Tribal* still holds to be the first autobiography by a Khasi. Interestingly, unlike most of his contemporaries, Pugh choose to write in English, a significant move in terms of self and cultural assertion within the postcolonial context. Further Pugh seems to understand that as a mode of expression and representation of the self, the autobiography allows for the blurring of lines between reality and fiction, history and story, objective and subjective as well as a vacillation between such binaries. Yet this fluidity is based on claims of truth and authenticity. Such claims can be made because the autobiography is a narrative of witnessing, of it being written in the first person and recording the details and reflections of one's life as experienced with an attitude of reflexivity. Pugh's autobiography provides the kind of historically lived witnessing of the colonial period, the years of Indian independence and the state formation in Meghalaya (and to an extent, of the entire Northeast), that is, it engages with these historic events from a very personalised point of view that is not divorced from the lived reality then, something that cannot be found in history texts books that wrote about these events.

As pointed out earlier, literary production only saw writings in Khasi and while the authors themselves were 'educated', they chose to write in Khasi because they wanted to build up a repertoire of Khasi texts written by Khasis as this kind of body of work was yet to exist owing to the oral nature of this community. But significantly the author's intent in *The Story of*

*a Tribal* seems to be quite different. On reading his autobiography the reason behind Pugh's decision to write in English is shown to be intimately tied with his own political beliefs. To understand this better a little information about his life as written in his autobiography becomes necessary at this point. Pugh had his humble beginnings from a village, Laitkynsew. The year of his birth, 1897, coincided with the year of the great earthquake in the region. He did his early schooling in a Middle English School situated in his village but completed his high school in Government Boys' School, Shillong on a scholarship, where he was also taught by the renowned poet, Soso Tham. He did his collegiate education at Scottish Church College, Kolkata. His academic brilliance then took him to the United States of America where he studied Agriculture in the University of California as well as theology in the Pacific School of Religion on scholarship. Before he joined the Allahabad Agricultural Institute in 1928 to make it his long standing job, Pugh, on returning home from the U.S., applied for a job in the Government's agricultural ministry only to find that a post for which he is eligible was denied to him. Pugh (1976) observes,

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. (p. 49)

This happened to be during the Montagu-Cleves Reforms when agriculture was a transferred subject, under an Indian Minister. While this observation is symptomatic of the postcolonial condition of this community, it also helps in understanding his personal politics. For the "hill tribals" to prefer being under the British even after Independence shows the acute plains-hills dichotomy, a by-product of colonialism and the independence. The "hill-plain binary" came into its existence mainly due to the colonial organisation of political space to fit into the administrative convenience of the British as such the Khasi-Jaintia Hills were separated into different political entities; the Khasi Hills and the north part of Jaintia Hills were transferred to Assam, while the South portions of Jaintia Hills were transferred to Sylhet in the year 1835 (Mills, 1985, pp. 8-9). This reorganisation "relied on notions of ethnicity that distinguished the tribal people who were governed by customary laws from those governed by the general laws, as in the plains" (Baruah cited in Misra 201b, p.168). This led to the "hardening of lines between the hills and the plains produc[ing] demarcated social and political spaces for the former that located them definitely outside the plains" (ibid).

Such geopolitical reorganisations have thus left the Khasis along with the other tribes of Northeast India to have the same kind of sentiment expressed by Pugh earlier. Sangamitra Misra also points out,

...the history of spatial organisation did not stop with the end of the British rule, post-colonial politics of ethnicity in the region continued to reproduce much of the colonial spatial imagination, ignoring the connections of earlier times that shaped local spatial practices... (Misra, 201b, p.201)

It can also be argued that such binary relations can also create a wave of similar forms of binary relations that correspond accordingly, the most obvious being the inside/outside binary that determines the sense of belonging for the individual and for the community as a whole. The post-independence political manoeuvres of the Indian Government made most of the hill tribes of the Northeast have a sense of being on the outside, of not belonging, to the emerging nation.

It is therefore in this context that Pugh says in his Preface (1976), “I never knew that I was a tribal perhaps until the Constitution of this country was being hammered out” (p. xiv). Arguably it is also this inside/outside problem that Homi Bhabha says is a site of “hybridity [that generates] other sites of meaning and, inevitably, in the political process, producing unmanned sites of political antagonism and the unpredictable forces for political representation” (Bhabha, 2012, p. 4). What Bhabha seems to suggest of this space being a productive in terms of political representation holds true in the case of most hill states in Northeast India in the immediate post independence when they realised that their only way to achieve proper political representation under the Assam government would be the formation of separate hill state(s) outside the purview of the Assam government. Pugh’s autobiography also seems to be located in this hybrid space not only in terms of the form but also in terms of his views and opinions that were both popular and unpopular; unpopular because such opinions were not something that the Indian government wanted to entertain, and popular because such opinions were something that all the hill tribes had in common against the government. The autobiography focalises on Pugh’s inside/outside position— an Indian but not really given the status of one, but because he is on the inside and experiencing all this, he can talk about all the problems of an insider being outside. This can be empowering in terms of representing oneself with an informed outlook. But because, as Ranajit Guha observes, “[t]he historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism- colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism” (Guha, 1982, p.1), such problems also were blurred by the facade of cultural diversity, a discourse that soon gained momentum with the reorganisation of states.

Pugh’s autobiography balances his criticism of the newly emerging Indian nation with his genuine admiration for our leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. While Pugh recounts to have had a personal interaction with Gandhi when he was still teaching at the Allahabad Agricultural Institute, he seems to have met Nehru on several occasions, before (this included the time when he saw Nehru in jail) and after he became Prime Minister of India. During his meeting with them in the institution (which happened to be an agricultural exhibition of local crops) both show a keen interest in scientific development that was tempered by their Indian spirit (p.62). This patronising tone changes when he comments on “other leaders”, one being Sri K. N. Katju (who became a minister in the Government of India and a Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh later) whose disdain towards a tractor was simply because it was western machinery (p.64). Pugh sarcastically observes their post-independence attitude, “Overnight they became enamoured of western machinery and western industrial methods” (p. 64). Scientific knowledge and advancement of India then did not seem to match the fervour of the leaders. Pugh recalls an educationist who thought genetics was only applicable to studying plants, another who thought that soil erosion was good for India and another, an Inspector-general of Forests, who said that *jhumming* cannot do much damage to the soil and that it could be rationed (pp. 64-65). On his return to Allahabad in 1949 after having come back from Jorhat, where he also helped start an agricultural college, he reports his observations in the following manner,

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 license and giving up all ideas of discipline. (p. 87)

This remark offers his acute understanding of the disparity of expectation and reality post-independence.

Pugh's return to the Northeast to start the Union Christian College in Barapani, Shillong also marks the beginning of his late but fast growing political career. He soon became associated with a political party and in 1956 he was made the president of hills leaders' party, called the Eastern India Tribal Union (EITU) which sought the realisation of a hill state inclusive of all the hill areas of Northeast but out of the purview of Assam, this was followed by him becoming the Chief Executive Member of the District Council of the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills District the following year. His involvement in politics seems to stem from his concern for the tribal communities in Assam.

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....These tribal communities said 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....

Such was the thinking of most of our tribal leaders and of the majority of the people in the hill areas of Assam. So we agitated for separation from Assam.... (p. 100)

According to Pugh (1976), when the memorandum of the EITU was rejected by the State Reorganisation Commission, the hill leaders felt that the Commission "feared that it would be unlike any other States in India— that it would be a Christian State"(p.101). Pugh is also of the opinion that if this hill state had been granted when asked, "the separatist moves among the tribes themselves...would not have developed and their psychological and cultural integration with the rest of India would have been achieved sooner than expected" (ibid). He further sees this refusal to grant statehood for the hill areas as a continuance of the "divide and rule" policy. Such experiences of exclusion, discrimination, rejection and denial do impact the identity of the people of this region, especially when they were already so different from the rest of their Indian brethren and even amongst themselves. It is therefore not surprising that such separatist movements that Pugh talks about often turn today into what Nirmal Kumar Swain identifies as "identity movements" which are "a marginalised discourse that transgresses the dominant disciplinary discourse of the state" whose issues are that of "discrimination, neglect, exclusion and domination" (Swain, 1996, p.81) and taking extreme forms of domestic terrorism that plague the region.

The fight for a Hill State was renewed when the Assamese-speaking community, decided to agitate to make Assamese the official language in 1960, a move detrimental to the minority communities. The hill areas responded to this by forming the All-Party Hill Leaders' Conference (APHLC) in which Pugh was once again president. Like in other regions in India, language played an important role in state formation. The adoption of Assamese as the official language then was not feasible owing to its composite and varied constitution, but neither was Khasi or any other local language, and although the memorandum sent by the APHLC promised a gradual transition to Hindustani it still seems quite impossible because language homogeneity in a place where there was so much of cultural heterogeneity is implausible. While this kind of language preference already put the tribes at a disadvantage in terms of official appointments and had serious effects on the minority cultures, it also badly affected students as most schools and colleges were using Assamese as a medium of instruction, and for Pugh the educationist, this was one of his great concerns. Thus Pugh suggested Lal Bahadur Shastri, when he was still the Home Minister, to grant them permission and funding to start a

University in the region with English as the medium of instruction. Although this request was not immediately granted, it sowed the seed for the establishment of North-Eastern Hill University that we have today. It is in this context Pugh's preference for English as a medium of articulation for his autobiography is located. The politicised nature of language within the nationalist discourse of nation building is something that the text grapples with as it talks about the years immediately after Independence. In an effort to bring about unity, the consolidation of language has only caused further divide and has even led to the preference of the colonisers' language which have gained universal status. Apart from its oppressive connotations, it is this universality that makes it accessible for the colonised people to subversively use it as a means of self expression and articulation. It is therefore not surprising for Pugh to personally prefer writing his autobiography in English. But most importantly, it is this impasse with language that led to the refuelling of the hill state movement.

Pugh's political disillusionment began as early as his time with the EITU when the Nagas under Phizo wanted no part in it. Even when he was part of the APHLC, he felt that they were never going to succeed because of the squabbles amongst the leaders themselves and this apprehension was justified when the Congress soon backed out as they "could not join a local political party without the concurrence of the Pradesh Congress Committee" (p. 122) only for them to rally their own hill state movement for a separate state for the Khasi and Jaiñtia districts as the momentum of the movement grew throughout the Northeast. While there were other historical events of the hill state movement that could have led to his political disillusionment, Pugh's disappointment stemmed from the development of a separate hill state movement for the Khasi Jaiñtias. He gave up his public life and once again returned to academic life to start yet another college in 1962 known as Synod College. So by 1972, when Meghalaya achieved statehood Pugh had given up his public life.

Pugh's subtleties can be missed by some readers. Aware of the depreciative annotation of the term "tribal" Pugh subversively uses it in his title to project it at a larger context. In his Preface (1976) Pugh reiterates his understanding of a tribal as a being like any other, "I never knew that I was a tribal....I never knew or rather I was never conscious that I was different from any other son or daughter of this country" (p. xiv). Sometime later in the Preface he also says,

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 a dominant group. (p. xv)

Pugh wants to show that a Khasi is no different from a Punjabi or a Bengali as these two are also tribals by virtue of being from their respective sense of belonging to their own community and that the word tribal has become an ugly word because of its association to backwardness, oppression, lack of progress of a certain group of people, all a result of the discrimination practiced against them based on superficial features that set them apart as well as the colonial perspective of them being different from their Indian brethren. Early on in his Preface Pugh also narrates an incident which became part of the reason why he wrote his autobiography, which is that he was prompted by a publisher in Calcutta to write a biography on a tribal as there was none in the market then. To further add to this, that Pugh choose to get published under Orient Longman, a national publisher, and not follow most of his Khasi contemporaries who were using publishers of their own community, can be seen as Pugh's drive to push his agenda to a larger platform. This intention is not missed by his publisher whose back-cover

review reads, “*The Story of a Tribal* is not only the story of a man overcoming obstacles through hard work and perseverance but of the awakening of an entire people— the tribes of north-eastern India.” (Pugh, 1976, backcover). This subversive use of the term tribal shows Pugh’s acute understanding of issues of identity for a minority population in the larger Indian context and identity in the context of being more personally experienced which in turn can stand apart from the all subsuming Indian identity. And that he chose a wider range of dissemination for his text as well as using English as his medium of articulation points to his agenda of self representation within a larger literary context not limited by a community, language or region.

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