

ACROSS THE GOLDEN HEIGHTS
OF
ASSAM AND NEFA

With a Foreword
By
VERRIER ELWIN, D. Sc. (Oxon)

BY
J. D. BAVEJA

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I Dedicate This Work
TO
THE HAPPY TRIBAL PEOPLE
OF ASSAM & NEFA

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FOREWORD

By Verrier Elwin, D. Sc. (Oxon)

Adviser for Tribal Affairs, NEFA, Manipur and Tripura

I welcome this little book by Mr. J. D. Baveja for more than one reason. First, because it is the first adventure in book making by a true friend of the tribal people. Second, because it includes within a single cover studies in the tribes of Assam State, the North-East Frontier Agency and the Naga Hills Tuensang Area, and emphasises the essential human likeness between them. Third, because his attitude and approach is one of affection, respect and enthusiasm. He is particularly interested in music and song, and I hope that his remarks on these subjects will help to inspire a greater attention to them by the world generally, and a greater interest in their own traditional—and very beautiful—tunes and subjects on the part of the people themselves. I have always deplored the corruption of much tribal music by the hymn, the harmonium and the 'blues': I think Mr. Baveja agrees with me. I remember once hearing some young men singing a love song in a Naga village; the melody, dry as a good sherry, had not a touch of sentimentality and presently their voices sank to a whisper, as if they were murmuring their words in the very ears of the girls they loved. It was superb and I shall never forget it. By comparison, the modern substitutes, saccharine, sticky, luscious, bad as a sweet port of a non-vintage year, seem vulgar and meretricious. Mr. Baveja has already done much to inspire the tribal music of Assam to return to the right path; may he go from strength to strength!

Mr. Baveja points out that his book is not an anthropological treatise. For those who want a scientific work, there are plenty of massive volumes waiting to be consulted. Mr. Baveja

has tried rather 'to know the tribal heart', which alone has fascinated and captured his imagination. This reminds me of something said to me by a revered Cambridge anthropologist twenty years ago. Don't try to measure heads, he said, 'Measure hearts ; it is much more fun.'

Shillong
1st May, 1960

VERRIER ELWIN

PREFACE .

“Across The Golden Heights of Assam and NEFA” is a short account of my travels to the tribal areas of Assam and NEFA. I have also tried to describe the cultural and social life of the people. Not much is known in our country about these people, who are still living in the past and quite content with their way of life, which I believe is not inferior to ours. Living in democratic conditions and perfect harmony, these are the people of tomorrow.

It has not been possible for me to cover all the tribes in this region who number over two score. This little book is the result of six years of labour and I need another sixty to know the rest of the people !

It is quite likely that my study of the tribal culture may not be found to be very scientific from an anthropologist's point of view. I have tried more to know the tribal heart, which alone fascinated and captured my imagination. I never carried an anthropologist's tape with me !

At the end, I have included two chapters “Tribal Faith” and “Tribal Dances” in spite of the fact that I have dealt with these aspects in other chapters also. These only serve to bring out the unity of tribal outlook in the fields of religion and artistic expressions.

I wish to record here my sincere thanks to Dr. Verrier Elwin who helped me a lot in understanding tribal life and also agreed to write a foreword.

Shillong
March, 1961

J. D. BAVEJA

CHAPTER I

I come to Assam

On a bright Sunday morning in the year 1952, I stood at Amingaon to be ferried across the river Brahmaputra to Pandu. I was eager to have a glimpse of Gauhati town, where I was destined to begin my fresh official life. When I came to Assam, I had very little idea about the state. Of course, I could easily locate it on the map of India. I was also familiar with the wild stories current about the magic of Assam. I was told that women of Assam could turn men into goats and lambs !

I had also heard of Assam from the Pathan students, who often used to come to Shillong for B. T. classes. They used to tell us about the gay life of Shillong and Naga head-hunters. A friend of mine who came to see me off at Delhi railway station, jokingly remarked : "When you come back next year, do bring your head back". With such wild ideas and thoughts I landed at Amingaon. I had expected to see naked men and women with wild looks and spears in their hands. I was surprised when a few Bihari mazdoors¹ entered my compartment to lift my luggage.

The steamer at Amingaon and the tiny train that brought me from Lucknow, also reminded me of my home in the N. W. F. P. Dera Ismail Khan too, like Gauhati, could not be approached from the Punjab, except by river route. The river Sindh (also known as INDUS) by the side of my town is as turbulent as the Brahmaputra. Every year, we used to have floods and suffering humanity. During winters, the river used

¹Porters

to dry up and we could motor down to our town from Darya Khan. But here, the scene is more charming. The sand on the shores is wet and the hills more green and well shaped. The sight of a few hills reminded me of our blue and naked hills. I thought Nature had been more kind to Assam. Except in Abbotabad, where one could come across pines and fruits, the hills in the rest of the area were devoid of any vegetation.

Suddenly a thought came to my mind, "who live across these hills?" I had heard of tribal population of Assam and I was very anxious to know them. During my childhood, I had been to many tribal areas of the N. W. F. P. with my father, who at one time was chief of the Additional police mostly composed of tribal people. The simplicity of tribal life there had captured my imagination and even during the days of long conflicts with the people in the N. W. F. P. I very rarely used to miss an opportunity of visiting a tribal village. I had been even to the hostile villages without any escort.

The story is entirely different in this part of the world. Here, one can travel to any part of the tribal area without fear of being shot at. Of course, here too, one must know how to approach the tribal population. The tribal people are freedom loving and cannot stand swollen heads. Indeed I find a great similarity of outlook between the tribal people of the North West and the North East. Similar environments and circumstances have moulded their characters alike. The people of N. W. F. P. are frank and open-hearted with great traditions of hospitality. No visitor to our side could leave a tribal village without taking at least two meals. Indeed, some Pathans from the interior never felt sure of their guest's welfare, till they saw him suffering from indigestion. Once at Sararogha camp, where my brother was posted as a doctor to look after the local scouts and tribal population, I was forced to eat a seer of meat with six big nans (Pathan chapatties). After that I was confined to bed for three days !

I find the same hospitality here. I came across the same frank and honest people as in the N. W. F. P.

Love For Arms

Both the areas have a fantastic love for arms. The Pathans manufacture their own guns and bullets. They knew this art even before the advent of the British into their area. The Pathans during war days could even make long range guns to shoot down low-flying planes. The tribal people here, however, are still many stages back. The bows and arrows are still used for shikar and defence. Daggers or daos are still popular with them. Almost all the people here like to carry weapons like the Pathans who are never found without a gun or a pistol. The reasons are obvious. In both the areas, the tribes had to indulge in petty warfare to preserve themselves in the initial stages of settlement. Now, when the necessity is no longer there, they still carry these weapons out of sheer habit. In the Pathan area, guns must be brought into use, whether the occasion is a marriage or a mourning. Of course, on such occasions we only hear blank firing. This weapon-carrying habit can cause trouble also. Once as a college student I was asked to attend a Pathan wedding. Now, a Pathan wedding is a great occasion for the village folks, who assemble in large numbers to listen to songs by dancing girls generally invited from the Punjab. It so happened, that one of the elders from the bride's side, took great offence at the bridegroom's party giving more money to the dancing girls. Arguments were followed by an exchange of bullets. I was obliged to conceal myself under a huge charpoy¹ for nearly two hours, till truce was declared and dancing resumed. Luckily no one was injured. However, I have come to believe that the people here are not so hot tempered as the Pathans, perhaps due to the climate and surroundings. In the Pathan area, either it is very cold or very hot, which affects both thinking and temper. Here, the climate is moderate and cannot make people wild. In fact, the heavy rains can disarm people and make them stick to corners of their homes.

¹ Côt

Democracy and Independence

Tribal people in both the areas are democratic and love independence. The Pathan Jirga (tribal assembly) is well known, where all village disputes are settled. Even domestic problems which cannot be solved by the family members themselves are brought to the Jirga. Once a verdict is given by the Jirga, it is very rarely challenged. Here, we have Kebangs¹ in the villages. The Pathans use stones on the floor while arguing a case, while the Daflas use cane-sticks. The Kebang, like the Pathan Jirga, is the supreme authority in the village. There are instances in the tribal areas of Assam and NEFA, where villagers who refused to co-operate with the Kebang were forced to leave their homes. However, there were certain areas here, where there were no Kebangs or like institutions. All the power was in the hands of the village chief. Following the Indian independence such chiefs like the Sailos of Mizo Hills have been thrown out by the people and substituted by village bodies. The tribal people in both the areas don't like to be interfered with. They don't accept any changes which are not true to their traditions. They would not accept a change merely for the sake of pleasing someone as other people might do. In the Pathan area, whenever an officer approached a village to rule only, he found himself aloof from the villagers and could get no co-operation. Here too, if you understand them, try to study their problems and love them, they would follow you. No one can rule a tribal heart. The tribal people in both the areas are very keen on maintaining their traditions, customs and manners. The Pathans have even fought against poverty and disease, as they would fight an enemy and have kept their heads high. The Eastern tribal people too have preserved their free status. This is not so in some other tribal areas of India, where the people have come to be known as mazdoors or tea garden labour. Of course, the Eastern tribal people would not have been able to maintain their status if their areas had not been remote. Most of the tribes here

¹Village Councils

live in high hills and it takes several days to contact them. In this world of sputniks, very few people in the neighbourhood would take the trouble of going to them except lovers of tribal life or traders. The latter, of course, are welcomed in limited areas only. This comparative isolation has been in a way a boon, because otherwise today the world would not have known, either about tribal culture or art, which are indeed superior to the machine civilisation of ours.

Tribal Economy

Both the people depend heavily upon agriculture for their existence. In the North West, however, they cannot live on their own cultivation. The hills are barren and fertile patches, where wheat cultivation can be done, are few. Rainfall is scanty. The result is, that they have to depend very heavily upon the plains people for their food. They also sell skins and hides of wild as well as domestic animals in the plains and buy food. Here, the story is different. The area is fertile and crops very rarely fail. Except in some remote areas, the people are self-sufficient in food. The soil in Assam and NEFA is very rich and can stand years of Jhum¹ cultivation. In these hills so many sweet wild roots are found, that there can be no starvation deaths.

However, there are certain areas in Assam which depend upon trade and commerce for their existence. The situation in the border areas of Khasi & Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills is very acute now. The border people in K and J Hills have vast stretches of land under orange cultivation. After partition, these areas suffered a lot because the natural link with the areas on the other side was lost. These areas are not connected with Shillong by all-weather roads. The result is that due to slow export most of the oranges perish before they reach their destination. I am of the firm belief that trade and commerce are not meant for tribal people. In all the tribal areas, the emphasis should be on cultivation of food crops and not on cash crops,

¹Slash and burn method of cultivation

because the latter can cause economic hardships such as in K & J and Garo Hills. The tribal people are also simple minded and very rarely get the best bargain. In the N. W. F. P. the Pawandas¹ used to descend to the plains in winter to sell dry fruit and hides. A long queue of traders waiting at the border used to relieve them of their goods in minutes at very nominal prices. In the early stages of their stay they used to dispose of the entire stock of dry fruit and would very rarely keep back some for themselves. Whenever they wanted to buy the same from the traders to whom they had sold their merchandise, they had to pay fantastic prices. The simple Pawanda could not understand as to why he was being charged rupees ten for a seer of nuts when he had himself sold it for rupees two !

The answer is obvious. The Pawandas had no direct approach to the people, except through the middle-men. The latter were so organised that they would not let anybody else purchase the goods. It was once a great administrative problem in the N. W. F. P. The Pawandas had to be escorted upto the border and towns like Tank and Dera Ismail Khan were guarded day and night by armed police. These Pawandas were known as tyrants and mothers used to hide their children as soon as a camel caravan was sighted. These fears were based on exaggerated stories spread by the interested traders. I myself had a different experience. Once I lost my way and found myself in the Pawanda Camp. An old man took me to his temporary shed and gave me a lot of things to eat. He loved to see me eat and also filled my pockets. I still remember him saying "eat my son, eat, for this is rare fruit. I will feed you and all the children of the town. By Allah I will not give it to the Bania², who offered me only ten rupees for a maund. Next year I will see him.....the son of a pig...".

My family refused to believe my story and I was sent back to the camp next morning with a police escort. But the man had left. I never saw his face again. Now if the Pawandas

¹A tribe ²Merchant

had enough food and restricted themselves to selling their surplus goods only such situations would not occur. These people go back with an ill-feeling against the plains people. They cannot realise that the masses are not at all concerned with this and they suffer equally at the hands of the traders and go-betweens. In the K & J Hills, if the people had enough food for themselves, they wouldn't have cared if their orange business had failed. I shall give another example of unfair deals at tribal markets. Every year in Assam, a trade fair is held at Darranga near Rangyia. Across the Bhutan border one can have one hundred and fifty oranges for a rupee, while at Darranga the same oranges are sold at double the price. The distance is only ten yards !

I tried another experiment in Garo Hills. Once I went to Rongchugiri¹ on the market day. I saw many businessmen lifting chillies at very cheap prices. I also engaged a Garo, and, after convincing him that the market at Gauhati was very bad, managed to get one maund of chillies for rupees two only. Of course, all the time, the hostile looks of the go-betweens were on me. I knew chillies were selling at rupees twenty to thirty per maund at Gauhati. Of course, I returned the chillies to the peasant and told him the Gauhati price, which surprised him. Similarly at Maibong² in North Cachar Hills, I had to buy a Kachari skirt for rupees seven from a trader, while the real owner had got only rupees three from him. After I had purchased it, I shifted to the next shop. The Kachari lady who had given the skirt to the trader for sale, immediately appeared from somewhere and wanted her money. She thought I had gone away. After she got her money I talked to her. I advised her to sell her goods direct to the buyers. She replied to me in her broken Hindi, "men like you, comes here one day and go. He sit here all the time. He buy even when no buyer...at least we get some money." This sounded very convincing to me. The answer lies in village co-operatives and similar organisations, which alone could protect

¹A village ²A village

the people's interests. In NEFA, the woven articles are purchased by the administration and sold to the public. This is another method of saving the original sellers from exploitation. Of course, personally, I am not in favour of throwing the tribal people into the world of trade and commerce.

Handicrafts And Artistic Creations

In the field of handicrafts and artistic creations, the Pathans are no match for the Eastern tribal people. Indeed, weaving is unknown to the Pathans. The rough rocks of the N. W. F. P. did not provide them any inspiration. I believe, the Pathan, hot tempered that he is, cannot be a good weaver. The charkha¹, introduced by Gandhiji and Khan Abdul Ghafar Khan at Sadaryab (²Khudai Khidamatgar camp) did not find much favour with the volunteers. Weaving requires great patience, which Pathans by nature do not have. You cannot expect a Pathan woman to sit at her loom for two years like a Lushai girl to produce one skirt! Pathans do not have an eye for colour. They mostly wear white shirts and salwars³ and carry a white chaddar⁴. The tribal people of Eastern region are out and out artistic, with a pronounced taste in colours. Most of them are fond of black and red. They find their own permanent dyes from plants. They weave attractive shawls, handbags and chaddars. The carpets of Kameng Frontier Division can easily compare with Persians. The decorated Naga spears and daos⁵ could be designed only by men of great skill and fine tastes. In fact, all the tribal areas here, produce their own cloth. Of course, they get the yarn from the plains. The NEFA administration is doing its best to see that this art does not die out. I have been almost to all the hilly corners of Assam and NEFA; I never came across a tribal girl who does not know the art of weaving.

The Khamptis and Monpas are also expert painters and sculptors. Khampti works are often illustrated with drawings

¹Spinning wheel ²Red Shirt Volunteers of Indian National Congress

³Trousers ⁴Sheet ⁵Daggers

of episodes from Lord Buddha's life. The Monpa temples contain huge clay statues and paintings of Buddha done by the people themselves. Nagas and Wanchos, make their own wooden toys. The Mishmis have now started turning out cane hats which look exactly like sola topis¹.

The tribal areas, which have large followers of Buddhism exhibit greater sense of artistic creations. Indeed, I firmly believe, Buddhism inspired a lot of artistic designs throughout the country. Even in remote areas of the N. W. F. P. one could come across images of Lord Buddha dating back to Ashoka's time.

Religion

In the field of religion a great contrast exists between the tribal peoples of the North West and the North East. Most of the Eastern tribal people have their own tribal gods and goddesses and have deep respect for other faiths. The Pathans, however, are different. Barring a few, who have remained Hindus, most of them have embraced Islam. And, I must say, though they do not follow Islam in everyday life, they cannot be easily converted. The Christian missions in our area could not progress in the tribal areas. They used to operate mostly in the plains, where they found it easier to contact tribal students. Once a well-known missionary who was later my professor, was put a very challenging question by a Pathan from an interior village: "Why cannot you give us medicines or food without talking about your religion?" Of course, the Pathans were never communal and had very friendly relations with the Hindus and other minorities. The Pathan areas kept peace even up to forty seven, when the rest of the country was torn by communal frenzy and hatred. In fact, many Pathans reached their Hindu friends safely right up to the border of India.

Tribal Food

In the matter of food also, the two tribal peoples present a contrast. The Pathans are wheat eaters, while the Eastern

¹ Hats

tribal people live on rice. Pathans are very fond of rice, but it cannot be cultivated in dry climate of the N. W. F. P. The Pathans prepare rice-pulao¹ only on festive occasions as it is considered to be a luxurious food. The Pathans eat beef and mutton. Pork is not touched. The Eastern people have no such taboos. Some tribes relish monkeys and even dogs. In everyday life, a Pathan is content with a chapati and an onion, while a villager here likes rice with a bit of salt and chillies. The Pathans do not use liquor in any form. That is why it was very easy for the Congress ministry to introduce prohibition in the late thirties in the N. W. F. P. Rice-beer or similar drinks are unknown in the tribal areas of the North West. Here it is essential to supplement the ordinary diet of the people. In fact, a recent survey shows that the tribal rice-beer supplies all the vitamins to keep the body healthy. The Pathans also do not as a rule smoke. The reason is, that there has been no tobacco cultivation in the area. In fact, the climate is reported to be not good for tobacco cultivation. Here, most of the tribal people are fond of smoking. In Lushai and Garo Hills, the people grow their own tobacco and smoke the pipe or hookas. The Lushais roll their tobacco in ordinary paper and turn out nice cigarettes. In most of the other areas, somehow the inevitable bidi² has crept in. Except in some parts, both men and women smoke.

Singing and Dancing

Here again the Eastern tribal people beat the Pathans. The Pathan is no singer, though he possesses a rich and a sweet voice. In fact some interior people think it a disgrace to sing! The Pathans do like music and on their weddings send for the dancing and singing girls, but do not like to sing themselves. The Pathan elders always look down upon a man or a woman who gives a musical performance in public. The singer is always considered a low class person!

Dancing is also not popular in the area. Except the

¹Fried rice ²Tobacco rolled in leaves

Balochis, no other tribes participate in dancing. The Balochis do a fine Khatak dance. A few of them form a big circle with handkerchiefs in their hands and take wild turns to the rhythm of drum-beats. However, it cannot compare with Naga wurdances or Garo Wangala¹ dance. The Eastern tribal people dance with more softness and their steps and turns are more artistic. The Adis of NEFA float in comfortable rhythm, with a beautiful song on their lips. The Garos twist and move with ease² and in perfect harmony. The beautiful and forceful Sema songs, sung in low scale, cannot but be admired. All the tribes in the Eastern region are not good singers and dancers, but it is a fact that all of them sing and dance.

Sense of Honour And Friendship

Here, both the tribal people come to a meeting point. The Pathans have a great sense of honour. A Pathan would not do anything in the world which could dishonour his community. Sometimes this extra zeal created many complicated administrative problems also. One village could be at war with another in the neighbourhood for hundreds of years, simply because someone in this village had insulted someone in that village! A Pathan would not rest till he had vanquished the offender. There is a common saying in the Pathan area "If a Pathan becomes your friend, he will sacrifice his life for you, but should he become your enemy, he will sacrifice you for his clan and village".

Once you win his friendship, you do not have to look back. And Pathans make friends very easily. They have to be approached in complete confidence and love. A Pathan is never late in extending his hand for a friendly clasp. I knew of a British officer in the N. W. F. P. who used to go unarmed to a hostile village and live there for days together. He was never harmed, because he was a great friend of one of the villagers. Even the Pathan girls never used to observe purdah³ from him. His secret was simple. He loved the people and never

¹Harvest dance ²Covering of face

betrayed them. In fact he even managed to adjust his official life with his friendship. The villagers themselves used to bring to him an offender, in complete confidence, because they were sure, they would get a fair deal. When he retired from service, he was even requested to stay on in the village. But he had to go, for he would have been misunderstood by the then British administration. I still remember what the Pathans said about him. They said "we love him, because he is brave and honest like us".

I believe this is the secret of friendship with any person from a tribal area. These are the two essentials of tribal society. The Eastern people too are easily won over by these two main qualities. I have never heard of a man coming to grief in tribal territory on account of the tribal people. Indeed, the people are so friendly and hospitable that one can travel to any area with complete confidence.

Sense of Humour

The tribal people in both the areas are a happy lot. The Pathans, however, don't like a joke or cannot appreciate it, unless it is explained to them properly. Indeed, quick tempered as they are, they are very quick at misunderstanding people. And then, they don't like any jokes or small talk about themselves. Even if you were to tell a Pathan out of sheer fun, that you saw him missing his aim, while in a friendly shooting competition, he would not excuse you for that. The Eastern people are different. They love to laugh and love jokes about themselves. In fact in most of the humorous tribal folk tales they depict themselves as simple and useless folks !

The people here narrate themselves how they behaved when they visited the plains and how they slipped on the well tarred roads. I myself sat with them till late in the evenings enjoying jokes with them, about themselves and myself. During Wangala in the Garo Hills, a dance number is performed in which the girls try to upset the turbans of the elders, while dancing. Each fall is accompanied by applause and laughter which echoes throughout the neighbouring hills. The elders also place their

turbans so lightly on their heads that they are easily tilted off with a light push. I believe it is difficult to come across such innocent fun except in a tribal society. The Garo folk tale "Gangbo Raja" truly represents the tribal sense of humour. It was told me by a villager in Bolangiri¹. This tale speaks of a very shrewd man who duped the entire village. He was a very rich man and no Garo ever liked him. One day the villagers decided to burn his house. Now this man had his own informers and ran away with his goods in time. Next morning the villagers saw him collecting the ashes of his burnt house and leave the village. After two days he returned with all his goods. The villagers were surprised. He told them, that he sold the ashes of his house which were needed in Assam to a merchant and he had got plenty of money for them. The simple Garos believed him and burnt the entire village and took the ashes to the market. The rich Garo fooled them every time they tried to ruin him. At last they decided to put him to death. They tied him up in a big cage and started for the nearby river to drown him. It was very hot and they decided to rest a bit, leaving the cage unattended. Now this fellow managed to call a cowherd and told him that the villagers were taking him by force to a neighbouring area to be married to a girl against his wishes. The poor cowherd changed places with him, thinking he would get the woman instead. The villagers threw the cage into the river with the cowherd in it. Next morning they were surprised to see the rich man. They thought they were seeing a ghost. The smart man told them that under the surface of water, there was a very powerful Raja, who had loved to meet a Garo. He had sent him back with many presents and had requested the other villagers to go to him in similar baskets. The villagers after a conference decided to believe him. Next day all of them made huge baskets for themselves and the smart man kicked them into the water very happily. After that he happily lived as the village chief and was known as "Gangbo Raja".

¹A Village

This tale and similar folk tales are very popular in the tribal areas. The people like the art of mimicry. Often in the evenings when they return from the Jhum lands, they love to see the youngsters put up humorous performances. Once in a tribal village I was sitting with a group of villagers listening to their stories and drinking Zu¹. The man who was narrating a folk tale suddenly stopped and went to sleep. I was taken aback. The other villagers motioned me to keep quiet. It was only after a few minutes that I understood the whole situation. My friend was in the habit of going home late after getting drunk. His wife had come to save him and after seeing her from a distance, he had pretended to be asleep. The wife came over to where we were sitting, stood over him for a minute, smiled and went away. She knew her husband was pretending. I was told later that this was a daily affair. There was a pact between them. If she were to catch him talking, he would be obliged to go home early, otherwise not !

I think a better example of tribal sense of humour cannot be given.

Respect For Women

In both the tribal areas of the North West and the North East, women have been given a high place in the tribal society. The Pathans consider themselves to be responsible for looking after their womenfolk and do not expect them to work in the fields. The women busy themselves either with the upbringing of children or cooking food for the family. In the interior villages, where the purdah system is not to be found, the women generally take the cattle out for grazing when the men are working in the fields. A Pathan has different ideas of womanhood. He considers the woman as a jewel of his family, likes her to look after his children and himself. He does not like her to come out in the open and work in the fields. He gladly puts in an extra hour of work if required, but never calls his woman for help. In the Pathan areas marriages are settled by the parents and, except in the interior, there is no bride-price.

¹Rice-beer

Divorce is also easy, but very few cases of divorce occur, because that means clash between the two families and the consequences may be disastrous. Adultery is a serious offence. The persons concerned cannot carry heads on their shoulders for a very long time !

The Pathans are patriarchal and a woman gets no share in the property. However, she gets some household goods at the time of her marriage.

The Pathans show a great degree of reverence for their women. In the fields whenever a woman happens to pass, all the males in the way, get aside and lower their eyes in silent respect.

Boys and girls are not allowed to mix freely. While the boys take their religious lessons from the Mulla¹ of the village, the girls are taught by their parents.

In the Eastern region, though women are given the same measure of respect as in the Pathan areas, they have more freedom. There is no purdah system and the women put in equal labour in the fields. Almost in all the tribal areas, boys and girls are allowed to mix freely and select their life-partners. Of course, the bride-price is there and sometimes too heavy in some areas. Till recently the people used to give mithuns² in exchange for wives. However, since mithuns are becoming rare, marriages are settled on the same price levels. A man is entitled to return of bride-price, should the woman leave him or commit adultery. In certain areas, there is a certain amount of sexual freedom before marriage and the offspring of such a union is not turned out from a village. The tribal people here take a most humane view of the affair and suitable punishment and fines wash away the sin. The Garos, Khasis and Jaintias are matriarchal and all property belongs to women. In the Garo areas, it is the women who compose love songs and make advances. However, in village affairs, men are superior and women are not allowed to interfere. In the Mishmi area, the woman also stands as a symbol of man's wealth. A man is considered to be quite rich if he has more than one wife !

¹Priest ²Wild bulls

Communications

Communications in both the areas are poor. Though in Pathan area, all the administrative camps are connected by good roads, the interior villages have still to be approached on foot. The pony is not of much use, because sometimes there are no regular paths and one has to jump from rock to rock. However, construction of roads in the Pathan areas is not costly. The situation is different in the Eastern region. These hills have more of red earth in their bosom than hard rocks. Landslides are common and often roads are blocked. As the soil is loose, each mile of road building may even cost a lakh. In the NEFA, till recently, most of the Divisional headquarters were not connected by roads. All the supplies had to be dropped by air at a tremendous cost. However, now roads are coming up and, except Along, nearly all the headquarters are connected by roads. These are the usual hill roads, with lot of red earth over them and only a jeep can ply on them. In the interior, the people themselves are experts in constructing cane bridges over nullahas and streams.

Methods of Cultivation

As I said before, the Pathan area is not very fertile. The hard rocks do not easily yield to the plough. The Pathans usually find low valleys near the water sources to do their cultivation. Ordinary ploughs are used in the areas. These are generally pulled by a pair of bullocks. In the Eastern region, most of the tribal people practice Jhum cultivation. They burn a selected area and allow the ashes to turn into manure. Seeds are then put into the soft earth. Each year, they have to select a new site for cultivation. This method is supposed to cause soil erosion and affect the weather. In tribal areas of Assam and NEFA, scientific methods of jhuming and terrace cultivation are being introduced. However, in the past, this was the best method of cultivation the people could possibly introduce in the absence of any knowledge of scientific methods. Indeed, the soil is so soft that certain tribes use their daos for cultivation !

In the hills here, experiments are also being made with cashew nut and coffee cultivation on the Jhum lands.

Health

The Pathans are a healthy people. The dry climate helps them a lot to digest their simple diet of chappaties and meat. Most of the water sources are pure. In fact in some areas, the Pathans drink a lot of water to remain healthy. The situation is different in the Eastern region. The climate is damp and because of frequent rains and other natural causes, pure drinking water is not always available. Goitre and tuberculosis are common in some of the tribal areas. Malaria is also common. In the Mikir Hills a large number of people are reported to be suffering from leprosy. Though all efforts are being made to combat these deadly diseases, it will be a long time before we can overcome them, because I believe the damp climate does not help very much.

Tribal superstitions also stood in the way of doctors in the past whenever they advised precautions against diseases. Till recently, a good number of tribal people would prefer to die unattended in their homes, rather than allow the doctors to touch them. The hostility of the village priests had also to be contended with, for it was they who used to cure all diseases by their charms. The Pathans also in the past never liked to go to the doctor. They themselves could heal bullet wounds. I myself once saw a bullet-riddled man being wrapped in a warm lamb-skin, the lamb having been killed specially for the purpose. And the patient did get well in a month's time after this treatment was repeated thrice. For small ills like influenza and small-pox, the Pathans prefer to depend upon their *Taviz* (charm). It is useless to blame the tribal people for not going to the hospitals, for even in the town areas and modern days, we Hindus never like to give any medicine to a person suffering from small-pox. It is supposed to be a curse of Devi. In the NEFA, some doctors have found a wonderful way of convincing people without losing the sympathy of the priests. Once

a patient was brought to a doctor with serious burns on his body. The case was hopeless because the wounds were quite old and the flesh was rotting away. The village priest was also there in full robes to see what the doctor could do, when he had failed. The priest told the doctor that the spirits were very angry with the patient and were punishing him. The doctor was a smart man. He told the priest and the villagers that he too had learnt the same thing in his dream the previous night. He further told them that he alone could not cure him without the help of the priest. So, both the doctor and the priest began their treatment, the priest with his charms and prayers and the doctor with his lotions. The Patient did get well after three months. The priest after that never cured a patient alone. He always brought his cases for the doctor's blessings. Even this stage is being crossed now and more and more people are seeking the help of the medical science. I believe it will not be long when people are won over and a real war against disease in the tribal area begins. Efforts are also being made to find pure drinking water sources and improve the present ones.

I have tried to compare the people in the two tribal areas of the North West and the North East to show that the tribal people have the same outlook on many aspects of life, though their circumstances may vary here and there.

CHAPTER II

With the Garos

I started my first journey to the Garo Hills in the year 1956. All this time I was either occupied with my official life at Gauhati or busy studying all available literature on Assam and tribal areas. I also made a point to refresh my memory about my experiences in the tribal areas of the N. W. F. P. As clarity begins at home, I thought my study should also begin about my home. I must say, my knowledge of tribal life in the North West helped me a lot in understanding the tribal people of the North East.

I left for the Garo Hills in summer. I was able to manage an old car, which had almost outlived its utility. Though I could reach Tura in a single day I shall never forget my miserable journey. Garo Hills lie a hundred miles South West of Gauhati. The journey from Gauhati to Goalpara was comfortable as the road is tarred and our Ford did not give any trouble on the way. Our real ordeal began after Goalpara, from where the usual hill road with red earth on it begins. This red earth is the biggest enemy of motorists, for the car can skid at any moment. Brakes are of no use. My driver was also new to the area. Once the car almost slipped into a ditch. But for the timely help of a police jeep, we would not have been able to take it out.

The real hill journey begins onwards from Phulbari, which is about fifty miles from Goalpara. The Goalpara-Phulbari road is generally flooded during summer, as it passes through low-lying areas and is flanked by water-logged fields on both sides. However, as one enters the Garo Hills district, the misery of the uncomfortable journey is forgotten. Almost the

entire route is full of villages. Vast paddy-fields with Garo tree-top cottages welcome you. I was fascinated by these tree-top houses. I stopped my car many times on the way to visit these cottages. They look like nests fixed between the two main branches of a tree. The Garos use a bamboo ladder to climb into the cottages. This was something very new for me. In the Pathan area, the shikaris make such shelters on the tree-tops, but nobody can ever dream of living there for days together. I was told by a Garo, that these houses were generally built on the Jhum lands. Besides enabling them to watch the fields, the tree-top cottages also saved them from the wild elephants. Garo Hills district is well-known for its wild life. Herds of elephants roam about the area after dusk. I was also told that though the elephants could easily upset tree-top cottages, they never bothered to look up. The Garos generally sleep in these cottages at night. They even cook their food there. Living up also saves one from heat. I myself spent one night in a tree-top house. However, I neither saw any wild elephant nor heard any sounds. These cottages are mostly built with bamboos, which are found in plenty in the Garo area.

From Phulbari onwards one has to proceed by gate system. As the road is narrow, only one way traffic is allowed. The cars are allowed to proceed to Tura only at fixed timings. A number of hotels providing the usual lunch of rice and chicken curry, have sprung up at Phulbari. I reached Tura late in the evening. The entire town was enveloped in complete silence. As my bones needed some rest I decided not to call on my hosts. I proceeded straight to the Inspection Bungalow where a room had been reserved for me. But I was wrong about the capacity of my hosts. As I was about to retire, a messenger from the District Council arrived with a chit. I was wanted by the Chief Executive Member of the Garo Hills. I did not bother to change and proceeded to C. E. M's bungalow, which is about half a mile from the I. B. In fact I was happy to go, because I was preparing to go to bed without any food. My orderly was too sick either to eat any food or to prepare some

for me. I was met at the entrance by a thin young man, with bold eyes and a worried face. I at once identified him as Captain. W. Sangma, the youthful and energetic head of the Garo District Council. His drawing room was full of villagers who had been invited to meet me and help me in listening to Garo songs. Sangma impressed me with his informal behaviour and I almost fell in love with him for he too was in pyjamas like me. Our conference ended at mid-night with songs and demonstrations of Garo dances. I tasted the Garo Chu¹ for the first time in Sangma's house. I returned to my bed with a full belly and a light heart.

Next morning I visited the District Council offices. I was surprised to see a fine pucca building with modern furniture. I saw hundreds of Garo men and women in the compound waiting either to appear in the Council courts or to meet the officers. I saw young Garo boys and girls attending to the problems and needs of their own people. I was impressed by the informal behaviour of Garo officers and other office bearers. I saw many villagers in the office rooms, pouring out their complaints and demands. I even visited the Council workshop. The Garo Hills District council runs its own bus service from Goalpara to Garo Hills. I was told at Tura, that the organisation was running efficiently due to the untiring efforts of its chief, Sangma, who being an ex-army man, insisted on perfect discipline and absolute efficiency.

I spent the whole day in making new friends and contacting artistes who could sing for me. I was asked to get ready in the evening to proceed to village Bolangiri, where a big reception had been arranged for us. As I was a new man to the area, Capt. Sangma decided to come with me. My visit to the village coincided with the celebration of Wangala. Wangala is the main festival of the Garos, which is usually celebrated after harvesting. The village is situated about half a mile from the main road. A few villagers met us at the roadside with burning torches and crude paper lamps to take us to the village. From

¹Rice-beer

a distance I could hear the sound of Garo drums. The villagers welcomed us with folded hands and salams. They were in a merry mood. We were led to the dancing ground, where boys and girls were dancing in single rows opposite each other. A love sequence was in progress, where each male dancer tries to find a partner for himself. Coming from the land of traditional purdah this naturally surprised me. The young boys and girls were dancing with complete freedom, innocent smiles lighting up their faces. We were led to decorated chairs. On seeing us the dancers at once changed the number and turned their faces towards us. While the boys stood at their places, the girls moved towards us. Each dancer saluted us to the rhythm of drum-beats. Copying my friend Sangma, I also tried to return their greetings in the same rhythm. I was told that this was the usual manner of welcoming visitors during Wangala. Nearly all the village girls greeted us in this manner. I had to use both the hands so that I could take and give salutes to the entire company! This was also something new for the Garos and I could hear innocent laughter echoing from the girls in the back rows.

The ceremonial welcome did not end here. A few dancers brought gourds full of Chu and offered these to us. An old lady caught hold of my neck and poured a lot of Chu into my mouth, straight from the gourd. I was touched by their hospitality and love. The village chief tied on my head a huge turban with lovely feathers in it. I was then invited to dance. A huge drum was hung round my neck and I joined the boys in the harvest dance. Garo dance is very simple. One must know how to hop to the rhythm of drum-beats. After two rounds of the dancing ground I decided to retire, as the Chu had already started going to my head and I did not wish to make a spectacle of myself in front of my hosts. The Garo Chu is very sweet and mild. But it can make one sick also. As it was getting late, we were asked to go to the Chief's house for our meal. I had a hearty meal of rice and roasted meat, with plenty of chillies in it. The Garos are very fond of chillies.

After food we were led once again to the dancing ground. This time another number was in progress. Two Garos, dressed up as warriors, with swords and shields in their hands, were engaged in a mock duel. They were shouting at each other "Sangma...Marak.. come on" etc. The dancers were also narrating the tales of their bravery. I took the village chief aside to ask him about the significance of the dance. He couldn't tell me much, because he could speak his mother tongue only and knew neither Hindi nor Assamese. Luckily I caught hold of an old Garo who explained to me everything. I was told that at one time the Garos had to struggle a lot for the land they occupy today. They had to fight with many local Rajas who did not like the Garos to settle in their area. Many Garo warriors had been killed in the struggle. They still retained those ageold swords and shields. As they no longer needed war implements, these were maintained for the victory dances, like the one I had the privilege to see. He also told me that the entire Garo history was available in the legends and folk songs of the Garos. I requested him to interpret to me some legend about the origin of the Garos. This is what he told me. "We, the Garos, were once living in Tibetgiri (present Tibet). Our lands became dry and cattle started dying. There was no other way for us, but to leave Tibetgiri. We had heard of the beautiful hills of Assam and we decided to move there. We started moving in small batches, with our wives, children and household goods. We also brought with us our own rice seeds for cultivation. First of all, we settled near the Cooch Bihar kingdom. We had to leave that place as the local Raja would not let us settle there. Some of us went to settle in Sibsagar also. We had good relations with the Ahom kings, with whom we entered into marriage pacts. The Ahoms married Garo girls and Garos married Ahom girls. We lived together for many many years in peace. We ate and drank together and we also hunted together. Then we fell out with Raja Bijni and fought many times against him. We beat him and his friend, the Raja of Cooch Bihar many

times in the battle-field. But there was no peace for the Garos now. Some of us had settled down at Kamakhya Hills also near Gauhati as that was a nice place. Somehow there also we had to face strong opposition from the local people, so that we had to push forward to the present site to live in peace and lead our own lives without interference."

This was an interesting account. However, no written records are available in the Garo area to confirm facts. The accounts also vary from village to village. It is not known as to when the Garos came to Assam. The songs simply say "we came many many years back". I think we can accept their legends and consider Tibet to be their original home. I noticed that the Garo swords were decorated with the Yak tails and Yaks are not found in Garo Hills. The Kacharis also, who have a linguistic affinity with the Garos, claim Tibet to be their original home. Both the tribes belong to the Tibeto-Burman group. In fact, Tibet is the traditional home of many many tribes in Assam and NEFA. An educated Garo, Mr. D. S. Nengmenza, who is the author of several books in the Garo language, has found out many common Tibetan words used in Garo language. He has also done some research into the history of the origin of the Garos. He is convinced that once the Garos lived in Tibet. Mr. Diwan Singh Rongmati another Garo author also gives an interesting account of the Garo history and the migration to Assam. He published a paper on the subject in the July issue of "The Journal of The Assam Research Society" in the year 1933. Besides giving details, he has also translated a Garo song, which speaks of Garo settlement at Kamakhya¹ Hill in the present District of Kamrup. I shall quote him in original.

Garo Song

"Asong Kameka.
Chiga Chironggi,
Ganntini ringringram,
Cheronggini Jingjingram."

¹ Temple of goddess Kamakhya, also known as temple of Devi or mother.

Translation

“The land of Asong Kameka, the water of Chironggi, that is, the portion of river near Kamakhya Hill ; the land where shrill voiced flying insects sing, the water where myriads of black water insects leisurely float about.”

I visited the Kamakhya temple several times. No Panda¹ there could tell me if they had any record of the Garos being the original worshippers of the Devi. But it is commonly believed that at one time they were keen Devi-worshippers. Many historians believe that the institution of matriarchy was introduced by the Garos under the influence of Mother goddess Kamakhya. In fact, they are reported to have passed on this institution to the neighbouring Khasis and Jaintias also.

The song about the history of the Garos also contains a reference to their matriarchal system. This is what the old villager told me. “The song says that once there was a big war conference between the Khasis and Garos. At that time both of us were being pushed out of our homes, while we were struggling to hold out. Many Garo and Khasi warriors were dying in the battle-field and property was changing hands quickly. It was decided therefore to make the women heirs of the property, so that the warriors could be free to go to the battle-field and fight with an easy mind. It was also decided to introduce a system, whereby a man’s nephew (son of his sister) could marry his daughter. This was done to see that the property did not go away to a different clan.”

Thus when a Sangma marries a Momin, the children are Momins and property will pass to the Momin girl. But she in turn is supposed to marry her father’s nephew, a Sangma. Thus the property of the Sangmas remains with the Sangmas, though in an indirect way. Both men and women retain their clans and titles.

I must say, this is a clever device to balance matters and relations between the two sexes. I was told that the Nokma²

¹Priest ²Village chief

is the head of a Garo village, but he holds his rights in the name of his wife. This was something quite new for me and I asked my friend whether they were not afraid of their women, who could dominate them in various ways. My friend was shocked and insisted that the relations between men and women were so balanced that no conflict could ever arise. He felt sure that all the Garo women knew as to why they had been made heirs and they never misused their superior position. He further said that women never disposed of their assets without the consent of the male members of the family. I also questioned many Garo women, who gave similar replies. Indeed in their homes and everyday life, the Garo women don't have more rights than the women in a patriarchal society. Thus it is not correct to call a matriarchal area "the land where women rule".

It is, however, a fact that after marriage the husband has to live with the wife's family. I was also told that it is the womenfolk who compose all love songs in the Garo area. A Tura host when asked, insisted that it was his wife who first liked him and invited him to her place through her parents. The girls on such occasions take great pains in preparing the food themselves to impress the boys. Men and women in the Garo Hills, as in most other tribal areas, share equal responsibility in all spheres of life. They work together in their homes and Jhum lands. A Garo woman can work as hard as a Garo male and the women don't demand any concessions. The Garos have a very high regard for their women. Even at mid-night young girls can go from one village to another without fear of molestation.

By the time my friend had finished telling me all about the Garos, the dances had come to an end. It was very late and my limbs were stiff. I decided to sleep there for the night. In any case I had to come back to the village next morning for listening to Garo songs. I was given a separate cottage reserved for the guests. I had left my bedding at Tura. I went to sleep on the soft straw in the right royal tribal fashion. I woke up late in the morning. As the cottage was pretty dark, I thought

the night had not passed off yet. I saw a few villagers in my cottage who had brought me my morning tea, eggs and the inevitable Chu. My head was still heavy from the effects of Chu taken the previous evening. I firmly but politely refused the fresh dose. But I was advised to take it as my old friend understood me and said "You drink this son, Chu cuts Chu".

I understood this and drank off a glass of Chu! It did really help me and I was ready in an hour's time for my work. My servant was given the same treatment as myself and he was ready with my cameras, waiting for me on the dancing ground. I spent a couple of hours listening to rare Garo folk songs. The Garo folk songs are sung in low and melodious tones. I liked the Garo love song sung by a boy and a girl, in which they expressed their love for each other. Each stanza ended with a rich and melodious cooing "Aya O, Aya O". The Garos at Bolangiri sang their favourite song "Nangorere Gosseram" which speaks of their beautiful land. This song is full of rhythm. I sang this song to many other tribal people. They not only appreciated it, but were able to sing it after listening to it carefully. I myself had started humming the tune while listening to the song. This simple song is very popular with all the visitors to the Garo Hills and nearly all of them can sing at least a few verses, without knowing its meaning. Now this song has been taken up by Tura boys and girls and a local composer has considerably improved upon its original version. The song is sung in nearly all the tribal and village conferences. The entire audience stands up and joins in the community singing.

I also decided to go round the village. I had not been able to see it properly, as I had arrived at night, I found the village encircled by shady trees. There are no more than thirty cottages in the village. A Garo cottage is built high and is fairly large. It is further divided into many parts to accommodate all the inmates as well as agricultural implements. Outside one cottage I saw a few bamboo poles stuck into the earth. The structure was covered with a straw umbrella.

Someone had tried to paint a human face on one of the poles. I was told that this was a memorial to a dead elder. The Garos have great faith in life after death. They follow their own tribal religion and have their own gods and goddesses who look after the human beings. They believe in spirits that dwell in every form of Nature and protect human rights. This interested me and I sat down in a cottage to hear all about the Garo religion. I was fascinated by the story of Goera, the god who causes rain and thunder. This is how the story was related to me : "In the early stages of Garo settlement in Assam, once there was a very beautiful girl amongst the Garos. Her beauty was praised throughout the Garo-land. She finally married her own cousin. She became pregnant in due course. But she carried the child in her womb for seven summers and seven winters. The village priests failed to prescribe any medicine, as this was something new for them. Then a voice came from the mother's womb. "I will not come out till a giant he-goat is sacrificed for me." The relations of the lady were surprised but agreed to do so to relieve her of her misery. After a terrible labour lasting seven days and seven nights, Goera was born. All the villagers assembled to see him, for he was born with a shining face. Within two months of his birth, Goera started walking. One day he went to the village compound and started dancing and beating drums. The mother was surprised and hurriedly took him away to her house. The maternal uncles thought the child was behaving in an abnormal manner, because they had not yet sacrificed the he-goat promised to the child. So one fine morning they left for the nearest market. But they were not destined to reach the market. On the way they were devoured by a huge monster and in due course of time all the villagers forgot about them. Goera was now growing fast and emerged from his adolescent awkwardness a very handsome man. All the girls of the village liked him, but he did not make love to any one of them. He was interested in sports and chasing wild animals. He could easily beat all the village boys and

no one ever annoyed him. One day a village boy taunted him thus. "You claim to be Goera whom no one can defeat, but what about your uncles who were devoured by a monster. You have not done anything to avenge them." This enraged Goera, who at once started getting ready to combat the monster. His mother was very much worried and tried to stop him from this adventure. But Goera would not listen and one fine morning he left for his unknown journey, for no one was sure as to where the monster would be found. First of all he went to a nearby market and ordered a huge bow, which could shoot out many arrows at one time. He then tried his new bow and arrows. The arrows fell like lightning and caused thunder throughout the world. Goera being happy with his performance started roaming the forests in search of the monster. At last he found his quarry sitting under a tree. It was a big monster. The fight between the monster and Goera lasted for seven winters and seven summers. The monster ran from each hilly corner of Assam to the other. But Goera pursued it and finally shot it to death. He cut the monster into pieces to rescue his uncles who were still alive in the monster's prodigious belly and were happy to see him. In due course of time they were nursed back to health. Goera went back home and lived for a long time in his village. But he was hot tempered and destroyed anything that came in his way. The villagers forgot all about his brave deeds and asked him to quit. In fact, they were afraid of him. Goera was annoyed at this suggestion and decided to live in heaven. But he told the people, that whenever it rained, he would always shoot his arrows to cause thunder and lightning. Goera also told the villagers that he would never die like human beings, but would always live in Heaven. True to his word, Goera is still alive."

This was indeed an interesting tale. I, however, noticed that the Garos are very fond of number seven. They consider this to be a lucky number perhaps !

I was also told the story of another god, Gongga, the Garo

god of wealth. The Garos believe that it was he who first introduced Jhum cultivation in the area. He was also responsible for discovering the cotton plant. It is said that he too was born after considerable pain to his mother for seven winters and seven summers. He started playing with gods and goddesses at a very tender age. When he grew up he married two of his cousins, which the other village girls did not like. Gongga was an energetic man. He thought Garos should have some clothes to wear. So he started with his wives for the forests in search of the cotton plant. All through their travel, he and his wives lived on wild roots. Finally one day they reached a thick jungle and decided to camp there. His elder wife felt thirsty and went to the nearby pond to quench her thirst. There she saw a huge white plant, with huge branches under the surface of the water. Gongga was at once informed and he felt sure, this was the plant for which he was roaming the hills for such a long time. But the plant was firmly rooted and the god of wind would not help him to uproot it. Balwa, the god of wind, was interested in his beautiful wives. He desired their company for one night only. Finally Gongga agreed to the suggestion in the interest of the Garos. While Balwa blew off the water, Gongga struck hard at the branches with his implements and succeeded in uprooting the tree. Gongga brought back the branches and planted them in his fields. He himself went to the market to sell cotton. He also taught the Garos, how to weave clothes. But in due course of time, the people forgot about his kind acts and blamed him for allowing Balwa to share his wives. Gongga got very angry at this and left the village and like Goera went to live in the heaven. I was further told that if the Garos had not turned out the god of wealth, Gongga, they would have been richer today. They believe, since he was a kind man, he blessed them from time to time, especially when they planted cotton seeds.

The Garos both fear and worship their gods. They offer sacrifices, whenever sorrows overtake them. They consider

that all the ills of human beings are due to the anger of gods in heaven. Though many Garos have become Christians, they continue to believe in these tribal gods. Both Christians and non-Christians offer sacrifices as in the old days.

The Garos don't wear many clothes. Both females and males remain content with a simple lengti round the waist. I asked an old woman, as to why most of the Garo women did not cover their bosoms. I got a very intelligent reply. "We don't do it, because it is not our custom. What is wrong to you is not wrong to us. If your eyes are not bad, nothing is bad." I think nobody has ever given me a better answer than this. After Garo Hills, I moved to many tribal areas, but I never asked this question again. Of course, now, I myself have got used to moving about in that area during the hot months in half pants only.

Both Garo men and women tie huge turbans on their heads. On festive occasions these turbans are decorated with multi-coloured feathers. The Garos are also very fond of wearing many necklaces and ear-rings. The wealthy Garos use silver ornaments, while others use brass. These are mostly sold to them by Bengali merchants from the plains who attend all the Garo markets and supply the Garos with the articles they do not produce themselves. These merchants have recently introduced black blouses for women, which are in great demand in the Garo Hills. These are machine-made blouses and available at quite cheap prices. I believe this will have an adverse effect on the art of weaving in the Garo Hills. Even the men, instead of wearing the tribal hand-woven lengti¹ have now taken to khaki half pants, which are easily available in the local markets. During Wangala, blouses and half-pants worth thousands are sold to the Garos. At Tura, many tribal women have stopped weaving and depend upon mill-made cloth.

The Garos are a short statured and a dark complexioned people. Both men and women are strongly built. The men

¹Loin cloth

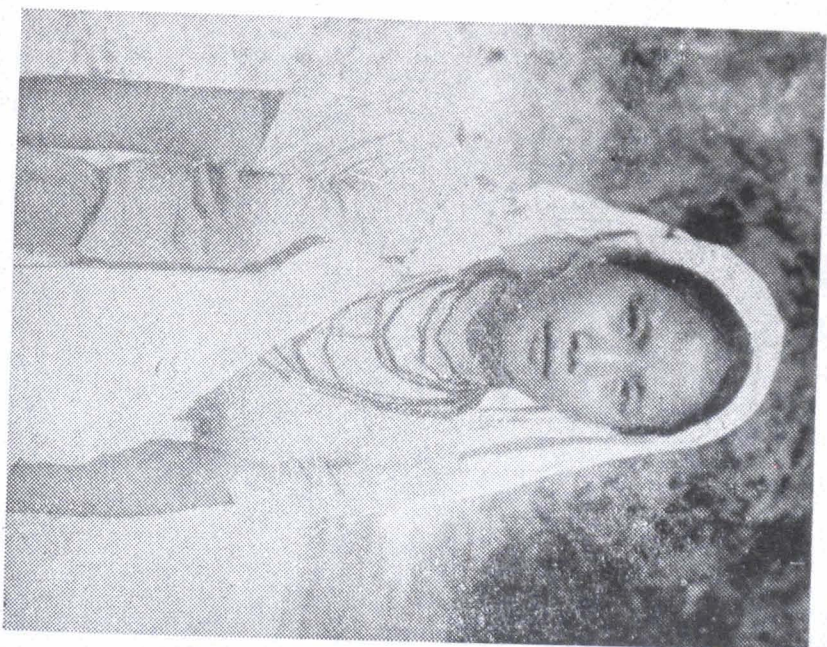
have very little hair on their faces. Many Garo men don't need a shave. They just pull out the stray hair. Both men and women grow their hair long.

When I left Bolangiri, it was nearly evening. The Garo folk tales had kept me busy for more than five hours. We had another round of sweet Chu before starting for Tura. My new hosts insisted on accompanying me to Tura and we spent another happy night together. The Garos like the other tribal people of Assam and NEFA are a very simple minded people and make friends very easily. I stayed at Tura for fifteen days and on almost alternate days my Bolangiri friends used to turn up to say hullo to me.

My adventures took me to many other Garo villages, right upto the border of Pakistan. Everywhere I came across the same hospitality and love. I have visited Garo Hills at least ten times and each time I come back with memories of my new friends. Though Tura is rapidly changing and coming under the influence of the guitar, the villages still continue to provide me with their lovely and melodious folk songs.



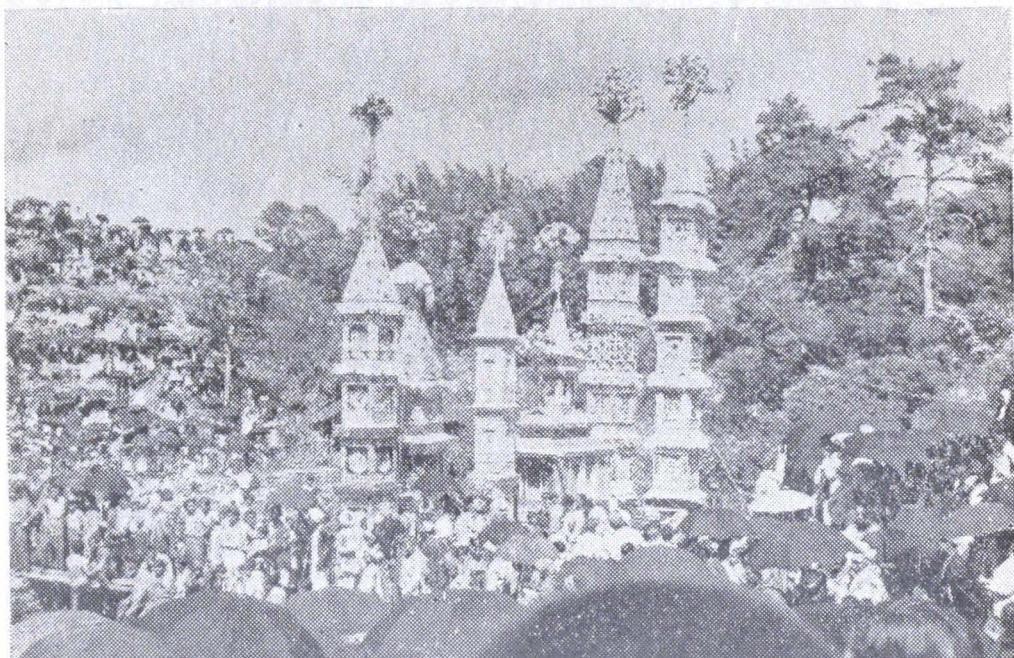
A happy Garo mother



A Garo girl dressed up for Wangala



Khasi girls from Shillong



Paper structures during "Bedinkhallam" festival of the Jaintias

CHAPTER III

The Sister Tribes : Khasis & Jaintias

My repeated visits to the Garo Hills, inspired me to meet the Khasis and Jaintias. K & J Hills have a direct connection with the Garo Hills. Garo legends often speak of their neighbours. At the moment the two districts are connected with a footpath only and the route is rarely used. Some Garos are also living in the K & J Hills, mostly towards Balat side on the Indo-Pakistan border.

Shillong, the headquarters of the K & J Hills is only sixty-three miles from Gauhati and connected by a first class all-weather road. I was at once disappointed with the town. A few days of my stay at Shillong convinced me that I could not possibly find any traces of tribal culture here. It is but natural also, because this town has been the capital of Assam since British times and has all the good and bad points of an urban civilisation. Due to the rapid change in people's outlook, very few could tell me about their customs and manners. Shillong also, could not provide me with folk music, which I was very eager to hear. I was told that the Khasi drums could be found either at Smit or in some villages near Shillong. My information was confirmed by the Seng Khasi organisation of Shillong, which is doing a lot to preserve the traditional Khasi music.

As in the Garo Hills, I decided to knock at the doors of the local District Council. I met the tough old man of Khasi Hills, Mr. T. Cajee, who at once agreed to take me to any village I liked. As luck would have it, I began my tour of Khasi villages also in summer. It was April and Mr. Cajee invited me to accompany him to Mawsynram on Mawphlang-Balat road to see the annual Khasi dance. Mawsynram is believed to be

the wettest spot on the earth. According to the latest information, it has beaten Cherapunji in rainfall. I was not very happy to hear that, because in the rains it becomes very difficult to protect my cameras. When we reached Mawsynram, we were completely wet and shivering with cold. We were at the village gate, met by the villagers, who helped us unload our luggage and move to the village. Mawsynram is built on the top of a hill. But the top is quite flat and the climb is not at all stiff. We were led to the dancing ground, where a few village girls, dressed up in long flowing robes, coral beads and silver crowns were dancing to the rhythm of drum-beats. I watched the dance for more than two hours. The girls don't have many numbers to dance as in the Garo Hills. They stand erect and stiff, with both the arms pressed to their sides. They move their feet only. The movements are sometimes so slow that one feels they are not moving at all. However, dance by the Khasi men is more exciting. They dress up in ceremonial turbans and take swift turns with swords in their hands. Some dancers yell war-cries also. As compared to this I found the Jaintia Laho dance more interesting. In the Laho dance a girl gets in between two boys, with her hands on their shoulders. They float into a comfortable rhythm.

At the dancing ground, they offered us tea and biscuits. Tea was followed by Tamul Pan¹. Khasi betel-nut is very strong and if taken with a pan² full of lime, it goes to the head like a strong peg of rum. However, I had got used to it during my few days' stay in Shillong. Betel-nut chewing in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, is an institution in itself. The nut is passed round on all occasions, whether connected with marriage or mourning. It is offered to all the guests on arrival after every meal. I was told at Mawsynram, that many poor people managed to keep themselves warm with betel-nut chewing during winters. Many people of the border live on its trade.

The dance at Mawsynram ended towards the evening. We were then taken to a house for our meal. K & J Hills

¹Green leaves and areca-nut ²Green leaf

villages in a way are more advanced than the Garo villages. I saw that the house contained all the furniture a modern home could possess. After chewing Tamul Pan, we were offered the inevitable white Ka-Kiat¹. Ka-Kiat is very strong and not at all sweet like Garo Chu. It goes to the head very quickly. The womenfolk did not join us in drinking Ka-kiat. In the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, women as a rule neither drink nor smoke. These are confined to men only.

We were provided with an excellent meal of rice, pork and dry fish. We spent the night in the village. I was given a very comfortable room in a village house. But somehow I terribly missed the soft straw of Garo Hills.

I had not been able to sleep the whole night, because the rain kept on beating on my tin roof. The rain was accompanied by strong wind, which made it impossible for me to close my eyes. I was told that it rained most of the time at Mawsynram. I wondered how the people could stand this. I woke up my host and asked for another dose of Ka-kiat as I thought that would perhaps help me. My host was a merry man and came over to my room with two bottles. I thought I had got my man. I was sure to get a lot of information from him, as he was reported to be the oldest man in the village. He could also talk in broken Hindi and English, with a sprinkling of "Tos and Mos" (these stand for expressions like yes, okay etc.) I was told that he had picked up these languages, during war days. I asked him about God, whom they refer to as U Blei. He told me that the Khasis had a very strong faith in one Supreme Being who alone looked after the human beings. He said, "We Khasis do not believe in idol worship. We believe when man dies, his soul does not die. We always erect monoliths in honour of the departed souls, who bless us for this act. We also believe in evil spirits, who have to be appeased by suitable sacrifices, otherwise they are likely to harm us."

I found the Khasi religion quite different from the Jaintia

¹Rice-wine

faith. On a later occasion when I had visited Jowai in connection with the "Bedinkhallam" celebrations, I noticed that the Jaintias were more like the Hindus. I was told that at one time, the Jaintia kings were Brahmins, who had introduced Devi worship in the area. The Jaintias are reported to have brought an image of goddess Jainteswari in the year 1662 from Cooch Bihar. It is quite likely that the Jaintias might have been influenced by Bengalis also, because the Jaintia kingdom at one time was almost on the border of Bengal. I feel they might have come under the Muslim influence also during the Mughal times. The paper structures that are brought out on "Bedinkhallam" look like the Taziyas¹ of the Shia Muslims. These and other paper demons are drowned in the village pools every year. I was told at Jowai, that this was done to ward off evils like plague and skin diseases. History tells us that Jaintias have been in more frequent contact with the neighbouring kindoms. The Jaintia Shukra dance confirms this fact. In this dance, a man and a woman dance with typical Kathak² gestures. In fact when I first saw the dance, I mistook it for a dance from Bengal. It is a court dance and also has no significance like the Laho dance which is out and out tribal and stands for purity of womanhood.

I also asked my host, if he knew anything about the Garo legend, wherein it was claimed that Garos, Khasis and Jaintias had introduced the matriarchal system at the same time. He couldn't tell me anything about that meeting. He only said "Garos are our neighbours, we always consulted each other. We might have consulted each other in the past also." Surprisingly enough, I did not come across even a single legend either in the Khasi or Jaintia area, which could confirm the Garo version. The Garo version on the other hand, cannot be doubted as nearly all the villages in Garo Hills know about it and there are little variations in the details. Amongst Khasis and Jaintias, it is the women who inherit property. It generally goes to the youngest daughter, whom the Khasis refer to as "Ka-Khaddu".

¹Images ²Dance, popular in North India

Like the Garos, they have also introduced a system of checks and counter-checks to balance relations between the two sexes. Amongst these tribes, the clan and not the individual is the unit of the society and eldest maternal uncle is always the head. Men are always associated with property deals. It is but natural because women are not expected to look after their estates without the protective powers of men.

My host told me that as in the Garo Hills, here too, the husband was obliged to live with the wife's family after marriage. However, he could set up a separate establishment after begetting children. I got interesting details of Khasi marriage ceremony. Man and woman are pronounced husband and wife in the presence of a few friends and relations. Very simple ceremonies like the bridegroom and the bride eating food from the same plate and mixing of Ka-kiat from two gourds are performed. Divorce is easy. Adultery is a grave offence and offenders are severely punished by the village society. As I could understand, the Khasi marriage ceremonies are a device to bring a man and a woman under the same roof and there is no question of a wedding of souls as amongst the Hindus. Sometimes a man and a woman start living together as husband and wife, without going through the ceremonies described above. The village society recognises them. But they must behave as a married couple. Of course, it is different now in the case of Khasis who have become Christians. Most of the villages in Khasi Hills have their own Padres and Churches, where marriages are performed.

Next morning I was taken to the Mawsynram Club, where I was to listen to some songs. I was disappointed with most of the singers, because some of them either tried to sing in cheap Western tunes or gave me demonstrations of Indian Classical Music. They seemed to have picked up some classical tunes from the Bengalis in the neighbourhood. These were poor imitations and I decided to do away with them. I also took away their harmonium and gave them a Khasi do-tara¹ instead. The

¹String instrument

local artistes had not forgotten to sing with the do-tara. After that, I was able to hear some excellent Khasi folk music. I later learned from the villagers that harmoniums and clarionets were hurriedly collected the previous evening to please me.

A great amount of effort is required to preserve the folk music of the people in Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The guitar and other Western instruments have attracted nearly all the villages and people are forgetting their indigenous music, which is true to their cultural traditions. These modern instruments require quick rhythms and which have in a way affected the compositions also. The modern fast numbers tend to omit the value or beauty of language. The modern Khasi love songs are not as enchanting as the folk ones, which besides love speak of lovely Jhum lands, Nature and birds.

Besides songs, I also listened to drum-beats. The Khasi drummers at Mawsynram demonstrated a variety of rhythms. One old drummer played almost thirty numbers.

At Mawsynram I was told that some Garos lived at Balat near the Indo-Pakistan border. In spite of rain we started for Balat which is about forty miles from Mawsynram. The road was very slippery and there were many land-slides on the way. We had to halt at every mile either to cool the jeep's engine or clear the road. The Balat road is also very narrow and passes through thick forests. I was told that the road was an engineering feat and many people had lost their lives while constructing it. I paid a silent tribute to the workers and prayed for our safety throughout the way, for, at one stage, the jeep got stuck in mud and we were held up for almost an hour. There was no going back either, because we were informed by a few travellers, coming behind us, that there had been a heavy land-slide immediately after our departure from the place. However, a few P. W. D. mazdoors, who were working on the road managed to pull the jeep out from the mud and we were able to continue our journey.

I found Balat to be quite a hot place. We parked our jeep in the village market and proceeded to the village. I was

happy to see some Garo faces. But I noticed that they were wearing more clothes, than the Garos of Garo Hills. They also folded their hands in greeting like the Hindus. Some of them were wearing dhotis¹ imported from the plains. Here, the cottages too were not built high. It was quite obvious that they had adopted the customs and manners of the Bengalis across the border. But they could sing the Garo folk songs I had listened to at Bolangiri and other villages. They have good neighbourly relations with the Khasis and most of them could speak good Khasi or broken Bengali.

After a stay of about two hours with the Garos, we started back for Mawsynram. Luckily for us, the rain had stopped and the P. W. D. workers had removed all the obstacles from the road. I was surprised to see that the road was absolutely dry after a couple of hours of Sunshine. We were able to go at fifteen miles per hour. I heaved a sigh of relief and insisted on pushing on to Shillong, the same day. We stopped at Mawsynram for a cup of tea. I was not prepared to be caught in the rain again, as the jeep hood had started leaking and I was afraid of damage to my film rolls and cameras. As we had anticipated the entire route from Mawsynram to Mawphlang was dry. We were able to go at a good speed. At Mawphlang, we halted to refresh ourselves at Captain Hunt's bar. Some friends, who have been to England, compare this bar to the best country pubs there. No tourists to this part of the country forgo a session at Mawphlang bar. After a stay of about half an hour, we left for Shillong.

During my short stay at Shillong, I visited many Khasi homes. Due to the rains I had to cancel my trips to the villages for the time being. At Shillong I also got an opportunity to see the Mawlai dance celebrated by the Seng Khasi organisation. The same dance numbers that I had seen at Mawsynram were repeated. I also paid several visits to the Bara² Bazar, which is mostly conducted by the tribal women. This bazar is reduced to ashes every

¹Loin cloth reaching upto the toes ²Big

year, causing misery to the petty tribal shop-keepers. Now cement constructions are in progress. In this bazar, you can buy anything, right from pins to the second hand American clothes ! Once a week, a big market day is held. All the villagers from the neighbourhood bring their produce to sell in the market. Business worth thousands is transacted on that day.

I also visited the Bara Bazar tea stalls. These are also maintained by women. I found these stalls very clean. The Khasi women always boil the cup before pouring tea into it. Such tea stalls come up in Shillong and other places on all festive occasions.

Since I was held up at Shillong for many days, I decided to learn the language also. I found Khasi difficult to learn. Beyond "Khublei" which stands for "How do you do", "welcome" and similar expressions I could not proceed far ! As compared to Khasi I had found it much easier to learn Garo. The Khasi language has no affinity with any other tribal dialect in Assam and NEFA. The Khasis and Jaintias are sister tribes and believed to be of Austro-Asiatic origin. Research scholars have found out that a similar dialect is spoken in certain parts of Cambodia and Malaya Peninsula. This also throws some light on the original home of the Khasis. We do not find any reference in history, as to when the Khasis and Jaintias came to this part of Assam. The history of Assam speaks of clashes between them and the powerful Cooch king, Nar Narayan, in the 16th. century. The Jaintias were frequently involved in warfare with the Ahoms, till the end of their rule. The Jaintias, because of nearness to Sylhet and contacts with the Bengalis, had greater conflicts with the Koches, Ahoms and finally the British, who became the rulers of Assam one after the other. The Khasis first came in conflict with the British in the year 1826, when the British wanted to construct a road through their area. This led to regular warfare till the year 1833, when all the Khasi chiefs were subdued. The Jaintias

never forgave the British for occupying their territory. Even now there are some persons in Jowai who don't eat potatoes. Potatoes were for the first time introduced by David Scot, the first Commissioner of Assam !

I also went to Jowai to witness the "Bedinkhallam" festival. I can correctly describe this as the festival of rain ! In fact, the Jaintias pray for the rains during the festival. On this occasion people dance and sing virtually in mud. The dancing on this occasion can be called free style swinging. Everyone moves his limbs according to one's mood. Hands fly in the air and legs sway to the rhythm of drum-beats. People dance in the water pools also and throw mud at each other. On this occasion people generally fill themselves with Ka-Kiat. Though the official organisers don't allow open drinking, the merry-makers often leave the dance and rush to their homes for a dose. Outside the town a few road-side stalls also spring up, which supply local drinks. I found this at Smit also, where every year, the Syiem¹ of Khyrim state holds the annual thanks-giving dance "Shad Nongkrem". I did not notice anything on my first visit to the village. On my second trip, I happened to walk from Shillong to Smit. I saw many Ka-Kiat stalls on the way. The Syiem does not allow any drinks at Smit during "Shad Nongkrem". However, I never came across any drunks either at Jowai or Smit

Both Khasis and Jaintias live by agriculture as in the other tribal areas. The crops raised by them range from paddy to pine-apples, potatoes, areca-nuts and pans. They also practice Jhum cultivation. The Khasi oranges are very sweet and have a good demand throughout the state. However, it is not always easy to export them due to lack of proper communications.

The Khasi dress has undergone a great change in recent times. Pants and half-pants have invaded the villages. Men no longer tie the Khasi turbans. Blue knitted caps and

¹Chief

topis have appeared. However, the Khasis and Jaintias do dress up in dhotis and wear large turbans, while participating in dances. Khasi and Jaintia women have, however, retained the original dress to some extent. Though they wear long frocks and petticoats, they cover them with the traditional upper cloth and shawls. Except the most modern ones, most of the women wear long sleeves. True to the Pathan traditions, they generally leave their hands and faces exposed!

The Khasi women are also very fond of wearing ornaments. If they can afford it, they like to wear gold only. I found gold chains for wrists very popular with them.

The Khasis and Jaintias are short statured people with fair or brown complexions. The women are more handsome than the men. Indeed, they are well-built and capable of very hard work. In the interior villages I saw women carrying more load than the men. The Khasi and Jaintia women never speak loudly.

During my several visits to the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, I found the people as hospitable as the Garos. They can be easily approached. I always compare them in my mind to their hills, which are very easy to climb and don't tire a man!

CHAPTER IV

To The Land of Stars

During my repeated visits to Shillong, I once happened to go to Happy Valley.....the Assam Regiment Centre. I was invited by an officer of the Regiment to witness a variety show. This Regiment is composed of tribal people from all the areas of Assam. I got a unique opportunity to meet many tribal families. I was invited to a Lushai home and entertained with Lushai rice-beer and music. I was most impressed by the dress of Lushai women. Almost all the Lushai women I saw at Happy Valley, were wearing blue skirts with white stars on them. The stars at once decided my mind. I thought my next trip should be to Aijal.

The Mizo Hills have a direct route from Shillong, through Jowai. The journey takes two days. I started for Aijal in the month of September, when I thought the rains would not bother me. But I was wrong. It is very difficult to predict weather conditions in this part of the world. A few stray clouds may clash at any moment and time of the year and pour down. Either it is summer rain or winter rain, the rainfall is generally there. I left Shillong early in the morning for Jowai by jeep. Journey upto Jowai was comfortable as the road was constructed a few years back and the soil has settled down due to constant traffic and care. But my real ordeal began from Kherihat, a few miles from Jowai, from where the new Badarpur road to Silchar begins. I found the road very slippery and the jeep-hood no protection against the rain. A few P. W. D. men working on the road asked us to proceed carefully, as there might be land-slides on the way. Luckily, there were no Land-slides. But I found it very difficult to drive

across the bridges. Most of the bridges on Jowai-Badarpur road are constructed with bamboos, and when a vehicle goes over them, they groan and sway in agony !

These bridges have to be crossed very slowly at the speeds dictated on the sign boards. Throughout the journey I always looked straight ahead and never sideways for fear of losing control over steering. After going about twenty miles, I thought it prudent to hand over the car to the driver, because I could not stand slow and careful driving in the hills. We reached Badarpur late in the evening. This area too was flooded and we had to cross many pools and swamps. Before reaching Silchar, we had to put our jeep into a ferry to go across the river, over which there is no bridge. We arrived at Silchar very late in the night. Silchar Bazar was closing. However, we managed to get some food at a stall. We halted at the Inspection Bungalow. I could not sleep the whole night. Silchar was still quite hot and mosquitoes made my life miserable. I found Silchar hotter than Gauhati. Early next morning, we made an early start and reached the foothills at about seven. It did not rain that day. We were able to make good speed. The Aijal road passes through thick green forests. Sometimes, our jeep had to cross through burning Jhums on both sides of the road. Indeed, we had to rush through such spots, as there was always a danger, that the petrol tank might catch fire !

Midway, we had our lunch. There is a nice hotel at Kolaseb, which provides food and shelter to travellers. On the way we took tea after almost every fifteen miles at the stalls set up by the villagers. As in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, here too, the tea stalls are maintained by women. I reached Aijal towards the evening. I saw long lines of Lushai men, women and children going to the Church. The Church bells were ringing, as it happened to be a Sunday. The Lushais are very keen on going to the Sunday service and very rarely miss it. We had to halt repeatedly for an aggregate of about half an hour to allow the people to cross the road. Nearly all of them were

dressed in their best clothes and moving in complete silence. I was fascinated by their discipline. On other occasions, whenever a traveller arrives, he is immediately noticed and discussed. Aijal is a remote place and unless people have some urgent business there, very few people visit it. There is the transport problem also. If one has not got one's own car or jeep, one has to avail oneself of either a public truck or a public jeep. These vehicles are in very bad condition having perhaps been purchased during the war. I had seen many of them stranded. But I must say, nearly all of them manage to reach Aijal, sometimes on time too. The local drivers can drive really fast.

Before proceeding to the Circuit House, I decided to refresh myself with a cup of tea. We stopped our car in Bara Bazar and entered a tea stall. Somehow the news about my arrival had spread far ahead of me. The first tea girl I met in Aijal showed me a paper addressed to me. I was surprised. I had written to a few friends only about my visit. I later found out that my friends had approached each and every Lushai for allowing me to photograph them. At Aijal I came to be known as "Photo Master."

At the Circuit House, late in the night, I was surrounded by Lushai boys and girls, who wanted to sing for me. I am sure I must have become a nuisance to the local administration, for the very next morning I was handed a chit, in which the Assistant to the Deputy Commissioner had complained that the previous evening, when I was visited by hundreds of Lushais, some flower beds had been trampled. He further explained that these flower seeds were specially brought from somewhere far away. I was very sorry for the flower beds, but I could not possibly give the administration the names of my visitors as I hardly knew them. However, even if I had known, I could not have been sure as to who destroyed the flowers. I was upset and spent half a day in writing a long letter to the Assistant concerned. However, I spoke of my misery to a few Lushai friends who had arranged to send me the artistes. They at once took the burden upon their shoulders and after that I never

bothered to inquire about the flower episode. This incident is not very significant and travellers may come across similar circumstances. I have narrated it, because this happened to reveal to me the true and honest nature of the local inhabitants. Nearly all my visitors suspected themselves and all of them returned to apologise to me. "O, I am sorry I might have done it."

At Aijal I visited nearly fifty per cent of the homes. Besides "Vailos"¹ and Lushai rice-beer, I could not get very far. Here, very few Lushais could provide me with the beautiful rhythm of mithun horns or Lushai drums. I had not risked my bones to listen to second hand versions of "Beautiful brown eyes" and "You are my Sunshine". Aijal is becoming a miniature Shillong and there too very few people could tell me about the Lushai customs and manners, which I very much wanted to study. I decided to visit the nearby villages. I had great difficulty in talking directly to the villagers, as they speak neither broken Assamese nor bazar Hindi. A young Lushai friend volunteered to accompany me to the villages. After that it was easy for me to speak to the villagers through my interpreter. The Lushai area is remote and it is but natural, the people do not speak either Hindi or Assamese. It is true that a large number of Lushai students can be met both at Gauhati and Shillong, but majority of the people have had no occasion to cross the frontiers of their land. In fact when the Silchar-Aijal road was not there, it was easier for them to have contacts with the people on other side of the border. I was told at Aijal that many Lushais are still serving in the Burmese Armed Forces. Sale of smuggled Burmese combs and similar articles proves that the route to Burma is still open. Of course smuggled goods cannot stand as a symbol of cultural contacts between the Burmese and Lushais. Speaking in terms of history, the Lushais are recent migrants to their present homes. According to Gait, the well-known historian, the Lushais made their appearance "on this frontier about the year 1840."

¹Local cigarettes

However, I believe they could not have been far off. The difficult terrain and almost no communications helped them in shutting themselves off from the events in the rest of Assam, till they crossed swords with the advancing British forces. From 1840 to 1892, the Lushais continued to resist the new rulers and after that settled to peaceful ways. Though the Lushais look very mild, they can be very tough also when occasions demand. I was told at the Assam Regiment Centre at Happy Valley that Lushais were good and tough soldiers. I noticed that the Lushais are a short statured people. They have typical Mongolian features and are very stoutly built. The men, like most of the tribal people in this region have very little hair on their faces. The Lushai women are generally better looking. They either leave their hair loose or tie them into a knot at the back. The fashion varies from village to village. Of course, at Aijal more of the women now cut their hair in the Western style. The women wear homespun jackets and lovely skirts. I was told at Aijal, that a good Lushai skirt, with its many designs and colours, takes almost a year to make. Almost all of them weave their own products. In the villages I saw a loom in each home that I visited. In the villages, the Lushai women still pierce their ears and decorate them with ivory or similar rings. Both Lushai men and women have shining eyes and I believe the Lushai women, with their multi-coloured skirts and blouses, easily outcharm all the women in this region. The men wear a single cloth round their waist, which is similar in design to that of women's skirts.

I also visited the Lushai Jhum lands. As in the other areas, the Lushais also live by agriculture. Their main crop is paddy. They also rear pigs and mithuns.

The Lushai villages are very neatly laid out on the hill-tops. The villages that I visited in the neighbourhood of Aijal were not very big. They consisted of mostly thirty to forty cottages. In the villages, I listened to the past history of the Lushais and an account of their lives under their chiefs. Before the

District Council abolished the system of chiefs, these were the virtual heads of the village society. The village chief alone had the power of distributing land to the villagers for cultivation and was in return entitled to a levy in kind. He also used to decide all village disputes with the help of his advisers or Upas. A chief could maintain slaves also. These were generally the orphan children brought up in his house. These slaves could buy their freedom on agreed payments. The Lushai chiefs were more powerful than the Garo Nokmas. The latter hold land in the interest of the community and have no power of life and death over their subjects. The Lushais under their chiefs had almost no powers and they could not do away with a chief, even if they did not want him. At best, they could move away to other villages and be under the care of another chief.

I gathered from the villagers, that, in matters of courtship and marriage, the Lushai boys and girls are given considerable freedom. They are free to mix and select their life partners. Usually it is the boy, who has to begin negotiations for the hand of the girl he wants to marry. This he does with the help of his parents or common friends. The father of the girl has to be paid a bride-price before the marriage can take place. The bride-price may either be in cash or kind. It can be paid on an instalment basis also. In case of a wife becoming unfaithful after marriage, the husband is entitled to the refund of the price he had paid for her. Divorce is also easy and marriages can be broken by mutual consent. However, I gathered that cases of broken marriages in the villages were not many. In every day life, the relations between the husband and the wife are governed by the golden rule of non-interference in each other's affairs.

I was also told that Lushai girls and boys are forbidden to enter into intimate relationship during the course of courtship. However, in the event of a girl becoming pregnant, the father of the girl is entitled to suitable damages and the claim is backed by the entire village. But in case the boy agrees to

marry the girl, he has to pay nothing more than the usual bride-price. The Lushais are very broad-minded and such affairs are not at all talked about. The Lushai society believes suitable amends can wash away the wrongs. In the field of religion, a great change has come in the Mizo Hills. Traces of the original tribal faith can be found only in very remote villages. Most of the Lushais have become Christians and churches and chapels have replaced the tribal altars. The indigenous Lushai faith believes in the existence of a Supreme Creator, named "Pathian". It is also believed that the Creator has no time to look after the men and women he created. As a result of this, a number of evil spirits and demons get a chance to cause misery to the people. These demons have to be warded off by suitable sacrifices. The Lushai villagers attribute crop failures and other similar misfortunes to these demons. Recently, the original Lushai faith came once again into limelight for a few days. In the Mizo Hills, the bamboos started flowering, which, according to the original faith, portends acute misery and famine. In the North Cachar Hills also I saw bamboos flowering. I was told by an agricultural expert that these flowers were liked by rats who in turn multiplied and caused famine.

According to the Lushai faith, the soul does not die. It goes to heaven and is reborn in due course of time. As amongst the Apatanis and Daflas of NEFA, the Lushais also believe that the spirits of warriors and hunters are able to go to heaven in comfort and are reborn quickly. This belief demonstrates the tribal spirit of adventure and bravery. The people are constantly told to be brave and be without fear and are promised a place in heaven and an easy rebirth. It is very interesting to note that according to the Lushai faith, women do not go to heaven, unless their husbands decide to take them! I could not get any satisfactory explanation for this. I believe this is a device to make the women faithful and true to their husbands, who alone could take them to heaven. Amongst the Hindus also, a great amount of literature

has been written about husband-worship. Many Hindus believe that a faithful wife could have spiritual powers also ! In the villages, I was able to take a number of pictures of Lushai life and also listen to rare folk music. The Lushais generally sing in groups. Drums and mithun horns provide the one beat music. I saw many Lushai dances also. The Lushai bamboo dance is a very difficult number to perform. It still surprises me how Lushai girls manage to hop in and out of gaps between the bamboos, banged to the rhythm of music by a few boys. I was told that this dance helped to keep the young girls light in weight !

A dance in which a boy dances on his toes in a circle, while a few boys sit around him singing and clapping, is very popular. The boys on this occasion wear plumes in their turbans and sport attractive shawls. At a village party I also participated in a "Khaulam" dance, in which the participants with flying hands take very gentle turns. Since we had no shawls, a few girls offered us their skirts. I found the dance easy to perform. In fact all tribal dances are free-style community dances and do not require much skill. With a few minutes of practice, one can pick up the steps and movements.

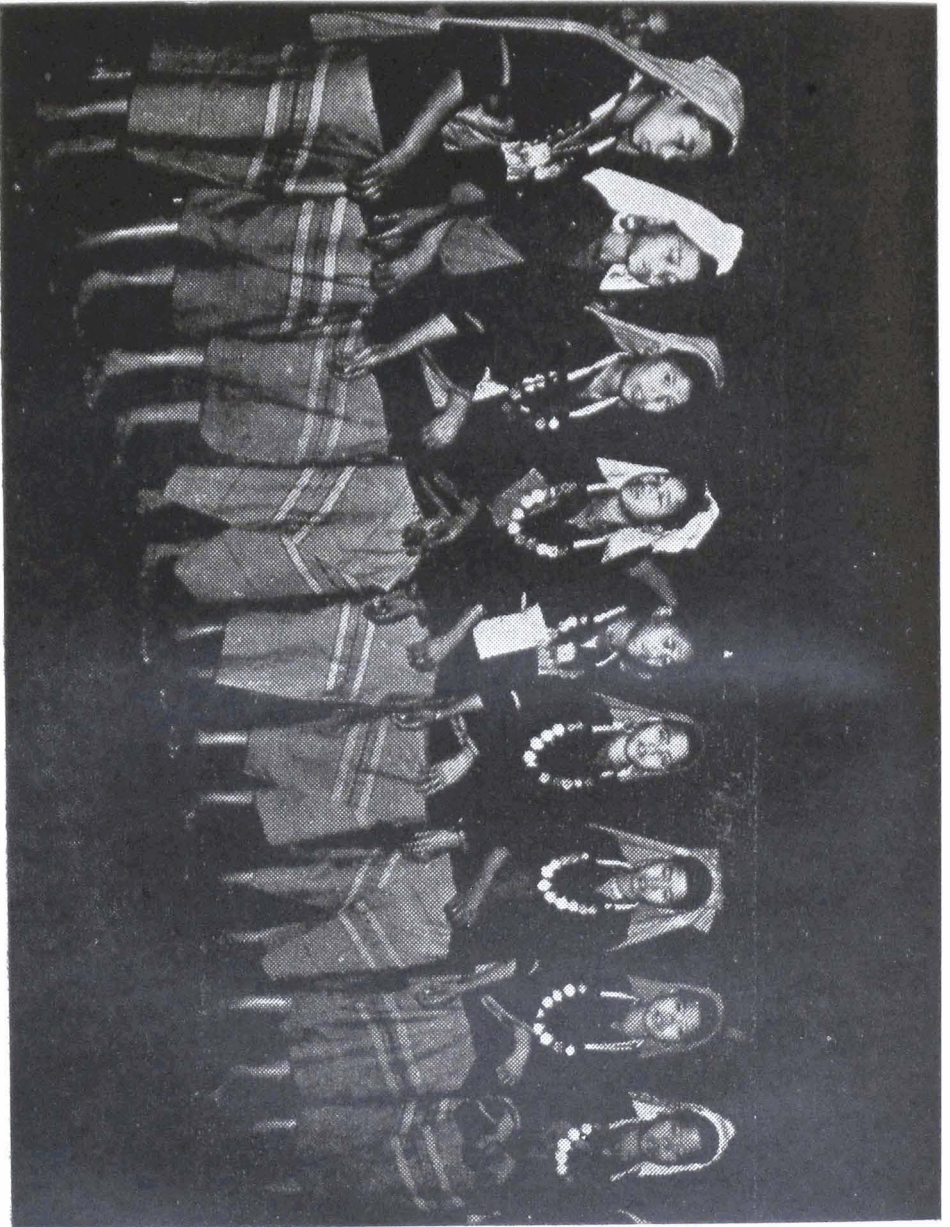
The Lushai folk songs as compared to Naga and some other tribal songs are sung in soft and low tones. However, I noticed that the young people could not sing those songs. Some of them can sing only hymns. The Western tunes have got mixed up with their tunes. A Lushai boy after singing a Christmas song told me that it was a folk song ! The guitar has also found a place in Lushai music. But I must say there are still many people in the villages who are keen on preserving their traditional music. However, in certain villages, a few traditional songs have been banned by the present society, on the grounds that the songs involve drinking of Zu, from which they must be saved. I think this is a very poor way of introducing prohibition and very much at the expense of folk traditions. The Lushais were once known as head-hunters.



A Lushai grandmother



A Khampti girl at her loom



Adi girls in a popular dance number

Now they have very quickly changed to peaceful ways. The percentage of literacy among them is very high. I was told that most of the Lushais can read and write. They use the Roman Script. Credit for this goes to the Christian Missions in the Mizo Hills. This liberal and almost free education on a mass scale has given the Lushais a tremendous amount of self-confidence and faith in themselves.

The Lushai villages suffer from acute water shortage. Unlike the Garos, the Lushais did not settle down at the water sources. As water sources are away from the villages, the Lushais use bamboo pipes for bringing water. These pipes are carried in baskets. The Aijal town itself mostly depends on rain-water. At Aijal I could not take my bath for two days as water was rationed and issued to the visitors on permits !

On my return to Aijal from the villages, I had the unique opportunity of attending a Lushai marriage. After a simple ceremony in the Church, a big feast was held. We all ate from a huge wooden plate, placed in the middle of a big room. This is what the Pathans do in their everyday life. This way of eating may not be found to be very healthy, but it avoids wastage of food. Whatever is left by the first group is devoured by the next one.

My return journey was quite comfortable. It had not rained for many days and the road was dry. However, we had to face elephant menace on Jowai-Badarpur road. In the early hours of the morning, wild elephants walk about on the road and uproot many trees. We had to remove such trees at many places where they blocked the road. However, we did not see any elephants en route. In the early hours of the morning, when there was little traffic on the road, one could see very beautiful birds. Many times huge hornbills flew quite low over our jeep.

CHAPTER V

To Lohit Frontier Division

My visits to the tribal areas now pass the frontiers of geographical contiguity. I went to areas, where I could find some friends to help me meet local people and study their life. I started for Teju the same year. I had to halt for a night at Tinsukhia in upper Assam. The NEFA jeep was to pick me up for my onward journey. This also gave me an opportunity to see Tinsukhia which is a big market for a variety of merchandise. Indeed, it is an important industrial town. As the town is near many tea gardens, I was told the shops here kept huge provisions, even tinned food.

Early next morning I started for Saikhwaghat from where I had to continue my journey by a motor-boat. I do not like motor-boat rides as once I had quite an experience. I had gone to Amingaon from Pandu by a country-boat. The boat had started leaking in midstream and the boat-master had quietly warned us that we might be required to swim! Luckily nothing happened as everyone in the boat including myself helped to scoop out the water. I did not want such an experience again. But I was told by the NEFA driver that I had no cause to worry and a first class motor-boat had been arranged for me. Though the motor-boat was in a very good condition, I was quite happy to feel the soil under my feet at New Sadiya after about two hours. On our way to New Sadiya, the motor-boat crossed the old Sadiya town! The Sadiya town was washed away by the mighty river, Lohit, in the year 1954. I was surprised to see the New Sadiya town, which is again very close to the river-bank. I wonder how many years it will stay, for the rivers in Assam are unpredictable

and change their course during floods. I think people have got used to the floods and do not mind shifting every twenty or thirty years ?

From New Sadiya to Teju I had to continue my journey by a jeep. The road to Teju is quite good and passes through low areas. There are no hills on the way. After about two hours of motoring I found myself at Teju. Teju is the headquarters of Lohit Frontier Division and almost an official township. To meet the real inhabitants of this area, either one has to go up from Lohitpur, which is about eight miles from Teju or travel back on the Teju road, where there are a few Mishmi villages. After a cold bath, I decided to see Teju. I went to the market. I was surprised to see a large number of Marwari and Punjabi traders. These traders not only supplied provisions to Teju, but also thrived on trade with the tribal people. Though the economy in the Mishmi Hills is organised on agriculture in the upper areas, the people near the plains areas depend very largely on trade and rearing cattle. Passighat in the Siang Frontier Division is another area which is full of traders from the plains. Though trade in these centres is regulated through official channels, one cannot expect the traders to refrain from a bit of underground activity ! One can get anything at Teju. While rations and similar articles are sold at controlled prices, as black marketing in them would be easily detected by the administration, the other goods are sold at exorbitant prices. I myself bought a roll of one twenty film at rupees ten. I had to buy it, because I had exhausted my stock. This also revealed to me how people cashed up on the necessities of others. At least I do not call this trade or business. I was told at Teju, that these businessmen had established themselves there during the British rule, and were so rooted that it was not possible to get rid of them, without seriously affecting the whole economy of the area. Besides traders, a few smiths have also found a place there. They make silver pipes for the Mishmis. The tribal bamboo pipe is much more healthy and costs almost nothing, while a silver

smoking pipe can cost anything from rupees ten to rupees thirty. These smiths also make other silver ornaments in demand in the Mishmi area. I am sure, it is they who must have taught the Mishmis to wear coin necklaces.

After a day at Teju, I left for the nearby villages. In one particular village, I spent about eight hours listening to the village chief's account of Mishmi life. As usual he too offered us the Mishmi rice-beer. I found it very confusing to study the Mishmis. The three main Mishmi clans have very many common points, but present a great contrast in the field of language, customs and manners. The three Mishmi clans are, Chulikatas, Digarus and Mijus. The Chulikata Mishmis are known so because they cut their hair. In Assamese "Chulikata" means, "one who has his hair cut". I believe this is how they were identified in the early stages of contacts with them.

The Digarus and Mijus grow long hair. The Chulikata Mishmis are associated with the Padams, though they are distinct from them in the cultural sphere. It is believed that the Mishmis belong to the Tibeto-Burman group of tribes. They are reported to have migrated to their present homes from Burma.

The Digarus and Mijus are closely linked with each other, though there are variations in dialects spoken by them. However, I found that their customs and manners are almost the same. The Mishmis are very tough people. The history of Assam is full of clashes between them and the Ahoms in the years 1673-1675. Though the Ahoms, who were ruling most of Assam, always succeeded in punishing them, they could never bring them under their rule. During the early British rule also they exhibited rare resistance. Events had reached a climax, when a French Missionary bound for Tibet was murdered. He had earlier crossed to Tibet from the Miju country in the year 1854. This followed an attack on the offending village, whose chief was captured. Though with the help of Khamptis, the British tried to rule them, the Mishmis continued to resist right to the early part of this century.

I visited the Mishmis near the plains areas only and found that they had not organised their agriculture and depended to a large extent on trade with the plains areas. The Mishmi area provides medicinal herbs which find a ready market in the plains. Some of the people go down to the plains to work as cane-cutters, an art at which they are pretty good.

I was also interested in their tribal faith. I was told about numerous gods and goddesses who look after the human beings. They also believe in evil spirits to whom they offer sacrifices. The altars in the Digaru area are very simple. These are generally built under shady trees. I saw a Mishmi altar which consisted of a few bamboo sticks and bowls made out of bamboo shavings. Most of the village priests perform their puja there.

Though the Mishmis never came under the influence of Hinduism or Buddhism, certain legends do suggest their associations with the Hindu thoughts. These legends are popular with the Mishmis near the plains areas. According to these legends, the Mishmis are the children of princess Rukmani, who lives in heaven with the Supreme God of the Mishmis known as "Khynjim". Rukmani is not supposed to be married to him. In fact some Mishmis believe that she is the mother of all human beings. To me this belief in Rukmani seems to be a later addition to their original tribal faith. The Hindu history records the elopement of Rukmani, the daughter of King Bhisamak, at one time the ruler of Sadiya, with Lord Krishna. The Hindus believe that the great saint, Parsuram also visited the area. A pond, only a few miles away from Teju, known as "Parsuram Kund" is associated with him. The spot is regarded as sacred both by the Mishmis and Hindus from the plains who visit the place in thousands every year. It is quite likely that the Mishmis picked up tales about Rukmani from the pilgrims to this spot.

In the villages that I visited I also met the priests, who hold a very important position in the society. All religious rites are conducted by these priests. In the Mishmi area,

almost anyone can be a priest. Priesthood as in other tribal areas is not a full-time job. The priests have to look after themselves as other villagers. But before a man can become a priest he has to exhibit some skill in performing religious ceremonies. A priest besides performing pujas is also supposed to tell the people about the future ! In the Mishmi area mostly birds are offered in sacrifice.

Polygamy is common among the Mishmis. The village chief to whom I talked about the matter told me that he himself had three wives and was thinking of getting another one ! The fact is that the social status of a Mishmi is judged by the number of wives he has. Cattle are an additional wealth. Bride-price is also common in the area. I was told that no religious ceremonies are performed at the time of marriage, but the priests are generally associated with the deals. Man and woman are pronounced as husband and wife after payment of the bride-price. This is usually followed by a grand feast and a round of merry-making. Ordinarily a man's wives live with him, but during confinement they are sent away. A mother is to stay away for ten days in case of a boy and eight days in case of a girl. I was told by a villager that this was done to allow maximum comfort to the mothers.

Divorce is also easy in the Mishmi area. But if a wife leaves her husband without his consent, he is entitled to full repayment of the price he paid for her. On a man's death, his wives are divided amongst the male members of the family. A man becoming infirm and very old, can also distribute his wives to the male members of his family. The Mishmi wives generally stick to their husband, as the price of running away can be heavy and not likely to please their parents, who are taken to task and are supposed to refund the bride-price. However, I could feel after a few days stay in the Mishmi area, that the wives very rarely allow their men to get out of hand and indeed have very tight apron strings ! During a visit to a village, I was not allowed to photograph a chief, except in the company of his wives. The poor fellow was pulled up by his

women in the cottage. I was only too glad to photograph everybody !

The Mishmis generally weave their own clothes. The Digaru and Miju men wear large turbans. A long embroidered coat like that of the Adis is worn by them which reaches upto the knees. The men wear loin-cloths. The Chulikata Mishmis wear round cane-hats, which are supposed to protect them from the flying arrows also. The dress of the Mishmi woman is most picturesque. She wears a coloured skirt which reaches right upto the toes. The bosom is tied with a sash or a breast cloth. The waist is left exposed. The Mishmi women are well-known for their hair style. They roll up the hair and fix them at the top of their heads. As in other tribal areas, the women here too pierce their ears and wear heavy silver tops.

Both men and women are fond of tobacco. They generally smoke their tobacco in long pipes which they obtain from Tibet. Now these pipes are also being made at Teju.

I also listened to the Mishmi songs. Most of the Mishmi songs are either about agriculture or their religion. Most of the time, the verses are recited and not sung in the true sense of the term.

My visit to Teju coincided with that of the then Governor of Assam, Shree Fazl Ali and the former NEFA chief, Shree K. L. Mehta. I thus got the rare opportunity of meeting almost all the tribal people of the area, who had come from far off areas to welcome the Governor. I found the Governor very obliging. He even danced for a while with the Adi dancers. I also took my turn to join in the dance.

Besides others, the Khamptis were also there in large numbers. Their leader, Shree Choukhaman Gohain (the only M. P. from NEFA) invited me to his village. I gladly accepted and left for Choukham the very next day. The village is about thirty miles from Teju. The last eight miles have to be walked. At certain places, the path is intersected by the river and one has to have a boat-ride also. The road stretches through picturesque surroundings. On both sides it is hedged by bushes

and trees culled by Nature's own hands. On the way I had to cross many bamboo bridges. At places, I had to walk over a single bamboo structure. Here, military training in the college days stood me in good stead and I was able to cross over without difficulty.

I covered eight miles in about two hours. I proceeded straight to Mr. Choukhaman's house. Mr. Choukhaman had chalked out an elaborate programme for me. First of all I was to go round the village. I welcomed the idea and after a cup of tea started my visits to the Khampti homes. I found the Khampti cottages as dark as other tribal structures. But the Khamptis leave enough room in front of their cottages, to enable the family to sit in the evenings. I found the village streets quite broad and well kept. I also went to the village dispensary, which was recently improved. I met the staff, most of whom were girls from the village. I was told that the people had welcomed this step of the administration. I saw a recently trained Khampti nurse washing a wound in quite an expert manner.

My most interesting visit was to the Buddhist temple there. I was welcomed by the priests and taken inside the temple. Huge statues of Lord Buddha occupy the centre of the temple. I was also shown Khampti works. Most of the Khampti works are illustrated with drawings. I photographed these drawings. The Khamptis are good artists and many of them know the art of drawing and painting. I was also offered a cup of tea by the monks. We sat for another hour in the temple, listening to the local band. A few boys played typical Khampti tunes on instruments like pipes and bells. I also listened to the Khampti prayer songs.

As it was nearly evening, my host suggested a walk by the river side. I saw the nice and strong suspension bridge constructed over the river by the villagers themselves. I also saw rice-mills run by the currents of water. While returning to my temporary place of residence, I saw a long line of elephants returning from the jungle. I was told that these

elephants had been out to catch more elephants. The Khamptis are expert hunters and take great pains in training the elephants for shikar¹. The elephants are also trained for lifting timber and allied works.

At night I was provided with an excellent dinner of rice and chicken curry. Of course this was preceded by Khampti Zu, which is quite sweet and better than the Mishmi rice-beer. After dinner, my kind host invited a few girls and boys to sing some songs for us. While there was no difficulty in listening to songs by men, we had to persuade the girls at least for half an hour. Finally they agreed to sing. I was told by the villagers that generally the Khampti girls do not sing in the presence of men, but since I had come from a long distance, the girls had agreed to oblige. They sang excellent love songs in soft, low and emotional tunes. We listened to the Khampti songs right till mid-night. The girls and boys left after promising to come again in the morning to enable me to photograph them.

I woke up early next morning and after a dip in the cool river returned to load my cameras. As there was still time for Sunrise, I decided to walk over to the temple to talk to the priests. Luckily I was able to meet an old priest, who could talk to me in broken Hindi. I asked him about the Khampti people and their original home. He told me that the Khamptis were a branch of the Thai people and their culture was based on the truthful and beautiful teachings of Lord Buddha. He also said that the Khamptis had brought their faith with them to this part of the country. Indeed I found them ardent followers of Buddhism. They had taken great pains in making the grass stupas in the village. I was also told that all actions of the people were judged from Buddhist-standards. The Khamptis have their own script which is similar to Tai.

Though Khamptis are Buddhists and devoted to the cause of peace, they have not forsaken their traditional bravery. The Khamptis had given a brave fight to the British at Sadiya,

¹Hunting

during the early stages of British regime's expansion. According to the monks, most of the Buddhist works were destroyed in that battle. These were the original works brought over by the people. However, they were quick enough to recreate some of the works, so that link with the past was not lost.

The Khampti area is very fertile and people are self-sufficient in food. The Khamptis are very fond of growing vegetables. I was told by my host that they were quite keen on introduction of modern methods of farming in their area.

The Khamptis are short statured and can pass off as Burmese or Thais. Both men and women wear short blouses and the Burmese *Lungi*. The women also wrap themselves in chaddars. They mostly wear white chaddars.

I found Khampti women shy as compared to Mishmi women. However, they are not unfriendly. It is they who compose most of the love songs while working in the fields. The Khampti girls are given complete freedom to mix with the boys and select their life-partners, but marriages cannot be performed without the consent of the parents. However, I was told that the village elders always preferred arranged marriages.

When I returned from the temple, my friends were waiting for me. I must say, the girls were very co-operative. I was able to finish two rolls of film in about half an hour. Of course I could not persuade them to change over to coloured chaddars, as the white ones throw a bad reflection on the film and also affect quality printing. Of course they had not understood me as I was speaking from purely a photographer's point of view !

After a hurried lunch, I decided to go back. Mr. Gohain suggested an elephant ride to which I agreed. I had some experience of camel riding in the N. W. F. P. but my elephant riding was limited to only a few yards in Calcutta zoo ! My return journey was very miserable, for the elephant insisted on leaving the regular path and pushed through bushes and swamps. By the time I reached the river bank, I was a sick

man. My back was almost broken. But my ordeal did not come to an end there. The animal is also a substitute for a boat where the water is not very deep. The elephant took me across the river after a bath lasting about half an hour. By the time I reached the other bank, I was thoroughly soaked. I saluted my friend and happily climbed into the NEFA jeep, which was waiting to take me to New Sadiya.

CHAPTER VI

Flight To Ziro

I was not destined to reach Gauhati for another fifteen days. I proceeded straight to Jorhat from Tinsukhia, to catch a plane for Ziro, the headquarters of Subansiri Frontier Division. I had to wait for a couple of days at Jorhat as flying conditions were not reported to be good in the Ziro area. Ziro is twenty minutes' flying distance from Jorhat. But I believe, in those twenty minutes, one gets all the experience of a flight to moon. The aeroplane invariably flies very low to avoid the hill tops. At places, it suddenly starts soaring up. There are numerous air pockets and sometimes one feels the kite is falling. Visibility is also poor in the area. Only very experienced pilots can fly to Ziro. I happened to get a lift in a passenger-cum-frieghter plane. Next to me were two bags of onions. The smell saved me from getting sick !

However, the misery of the journey is forgotten, as soon as the plane reaches the Ziro area. A large number of closely erected cottages and vast paddy fields seem to spring up from the earth. At this stage, the plane flies so low, that one feels like touching the house-tops. The arrival of a plane is still a matter of excitement both for the officials and the tribal people in the area. For officials, the arrival means letters from home, rations, newspapers and sometimes visitors and new faces. Within twenty minutes of flight from Jorhat I found myself in a different world. It was quite chilly at Ziro. When I got out from the plane, I was met by the Political Officer, Major Kaul, and another officer whose name was also Kaul. I was happy to see people from Kashmir and I thought my stay was going to be a comfortable one. I had once

crossed over to Kashmir on foot from Gari Habibullah in N. W. F. P. I also met a few Apatani and Daffa interpreters, who charmed me with their loud "Jai Hinds". As the Political Officer's residence was a little distant, I decided to stay with the other Kaul, because he was nearer the rice-fields and villages. After a wash I decided to go round the place. I walked over to a hill and climbed a few feet. The entire bowl shaped valley, with villages on one side, headquarters buildings on the other side, divided by rich rice-fields, looks like a dream-land. I saw a few Apatanis working in the fields. They were standing in knee-deep water. The Apatanis are keen agriculturists and I was told that they don't waste an inch of land.

In the evening I walked over to the Hari village, to meet the village headman. He was sitting in front of his house. I too joined him after climbing a shaky bamboo staircase. He welcomed me with a loud "Jai Hind" and asked me various questions as to how I was and whether I was comfortable. While he was talking to me, I could hear some giggles coming from inside the cottage. Obviously, these were the women of his house, who were enjoying the conversation between me and the headman. I had great difficulty in talking to him. He mixed his Hindi with Assamese and Apatani words. I also tried to tone down my chaste Hindi and accompanied my words with gestures. However, after a few minutes of conversation, we were able to understand each other. I asked him to take me round the village, to which he at once agreed. The village streets were full of mud and but for my hill-boots I would not have been able to walk. The village is quite big and one passage leads to the other. I was later told that the Apatanis lived very close to one another from the defence point of view. I noticed that it was quite easy to jump from one cottage to another. In front of one cottage I came across a bamboo structure. A few egg shells were fixed on the top of bamboos. I was told that a Puja¹ was going to be performed for the welfare of a family. I decided to stay on and watch it.

¹ Religious service

Since the priests had seen a camera in my hands, they were reluctant to let me watch the proceedings. I told them that I had come to study the life of the Apatanis and I would be greatly disappointed if I was not allowed to watch the puja and take pictures. At this stage, I was surrounded by a large number of girls and boys who did not understand what was happening. An old priest who had blood-shot eyes, held a hurried conference. At last it was decided to let me stay there and take pictures. They laid down a condition that I must send them a copy of each photograph I took. I at once agreed to that. So, the ceremonies began. Two priests stood in front of the altar and started chanting their mantras¹. In these mantras they named various Apatani gods to whom sacrifice was being offered. After about half an hour of chanting, the old priest produced a cock from his bag and held it in his hands in front of the altar. He continued to chant fresh mantras. Then he produced his dao and killed the bird. The blood was smeared on the altar and at this stage their recitations became louder. This was the final stage in the ceremonies. The priest was to find out now whether the sacrifice had been accepted or not. The bird's stomach was ripped open and the priest looked into the remains carefully. He suddenly broke into loud chantings. I was told by the village chief that the priest was now thanking the gods who had accepted the prayers and sacrifice. After about an hour and a half the ceremonies came to an end. I was told by the village headman that the Apatani priests had supernatural powers and could tell about the future after performing the pujas. The older priest who was the master of ceremonies, was in a trance and at once left for his home without talking to anyone. I noticed that the villagers who had crowded to see me, respectfully made way for him. I decided to meet this priest and ask him about the Apatani religion. I was told that this could be done only next morning as he would not be willing to talk now. I agreed to that and met him the next day. After the puja, it suddenly started

¹ Sacred words

raining and I decided to go back. I made similar trips to many villages in the neighbourhood during my stay at Ziro. Later I visited some Dafla villages also. I found the Apatanis have a very fertile memory. There are still many Apatanis who remember the early expeditions into their area and contacts with the administration. Many books have been written about the Apatanis. I was glad to meet the living heroes mentioned in the works.

The Apatanis have lived in this area since time immemorial. I was told by an officer of the administration, that they number about nine thousand souls and almost all of them live on agriculture. As compared to the Hill Miris and Daflas, their immediate neighbours, they are better off and quite content with their way of life. I was told in the villages, that before the administration was established in their area, they were regularly raided by the Daflas. The reason is obvious. The wealth of the Apatanis was always an eyesore to the neighbouring tribe and being peaceful, the Apatanis very rarely defended themselves or their cattle. Indeed the Apatanis used to pay ransom to get their men and cattle back. However, this was somewhat a convenient situation, as otherwise contacting the Subansiri tribes would have been a difficult affair. The administration was established with the help of Apatanis, who were interested in safeguarding their interests. It was from Apatani bases that the Political Officers had contacted the warlike Daflas and brought peace to the area. As the Apatani area is quite fertile, I am sure influx of more people could not have disturbed their economy. This could not have been done in the Dafla area, as they live on Jhum cultivation and are not as well off as the Apatanis. Even now the Apatani villages sell eggs and chicken to the officers and men at Ziro. They can also supply rice. Apatani rice is very sweet and one cannot eat much. The Apatanis are not a very handsome people as compared to the Daflas. But they do look picturesque in their multi-coloured blankets and cane tails. The villagers could not tell me the reason of wearing red tails. I suppose it is to enable them to sit on the ground and

protect their buttocks from the mud ! The men tie their hair into a knot and fix a brass pin in it. The women also tie their hair into a knot on the top of their heads. In this hair style they look like "Rishi-Kanyas" (daughters of Saints) as we find in the old Hindu illustrations. They wear blouses and skirts and wrap themselves in blankets like men. Some women don't wear blouses and use blankets only. The Apatani women invariably decorate their noses with wooden plugs. Both the nostrils are generally pierced. They also wear ear-rings. Both men and women wear a number of necklaces. Tibetan beads are very popular with them.

Though the Apatanis have come to realise the value of coins, a man's wealth is still counted by the number of mithuns he has. The mithun is a valuable animal. It is used for their sacrifice to the God "Yulu" who is supposed to be their most powerful god. Mithun is also exchanged for a wife. The Apatanis never like to sell their land. But they consider a sale, if they are offered mithuns in exchange.

The Apatani women enjoy quite a high status in the village society. However, freedom offered to unmarried women is greater. They are free to mix with boys of their age and nobody takes seriously any casual love affairs. Adultery is a grave offence and punishable with heavy fines. As a result of this, life in general is quite clean and orderly in Apatani homes. Apatani women make good housewives and besides taking care of their homes, work very hard in the fields. They are also supposed to look after the cattle. The women are industrious and never sit idle even for a moment.

I found out from the old priest that the Apatanis worshipped a number of gods. Some gods like "Yulu" and "Moloku" are worshipped because they bring benefit to the human beings ; others are revered out of fear. "Kharam" is supposed to cause trouble if he is not worshipped. They also worship the Sun and the Moon. The Apatanis bury their dead. According to the popular belief murdered men and women go to heaven.

The Apatanis spend their full energy in living well. They till their lands with extreme care and preserve the produce in

an efficient manner. During spring, when they are free from the fields, they celebrate the "Moloku" festival. Boys and girls put on new garments and visit their relations and friends. Meat and rice-beer are consumed in great quantity during the festival. The game "Bobo" is very popular during "Moloku". A T shaped pole is erected and a cane rope fixed to its top. The other end of the rope is fixed to the ground. One or two boys climb the rope and swing. Many tricks are performed. The Apatanis perform a number of dances. The one, in which a number of boys group up on the assembly platform and imitate the movement of a snake is very popular. The Apatani men dance in a circle with daos in hands.

When I visited the Apatani area, the villagers were getting ready for the "Moloku" festival. There was still a month left for the ceremonies to begin. But the "Moloku" spirit had already got them and I was made to drink their rice beer. Somehow the Apatani Rice-beer did not agree with me.

No account of Apatani life can be complete without a study of the neighbouring Daflas. The Daflas have had a longer spell of contacts with the plains people. They are a tribe of warriors with no compact society as that of the Apatanis. They rear mostly mithuns and pigs. For their rice, they depend upon the Apatanis. They are Jhum cultivators and their produce is not enough to feed them round the year. This is one of the reasons that prior to establishment of administration in the area, raids by them on the Apatanis were a regular affair. In a way, the Daflas have been more enterprising. They were the first to establish their contacts with the plains people and border areas of Tibet. Of course the Hill Miris were also quite known to the administration. The then British Government had set up a practice of giving them a subsidy to keep peace in the area. This was a familiar practice with the British authorities which they often resorted to in the N. W. F. P. also. However, the remoteness of their country had cut them off till the year 45-46 when regular contacts were established with them.

I found the Daflas a handsome people. A Dafla's headgear is a prized object. It consists of a skull cap decorated with a hornbill beak. A few feathers are also fixed on the cap. They tie their hair into a knot with a brass pin in it. The Dafla women take an equal care of their hair. They either leave them loose or try to curl them. Both men and women wear a lot of necklaces. Though the women wear ear-rings, they don't tattoo their chins like the Apatani women. A Young man from the Dafla area remarked to me that the Apatanis destroyed the beauty of their womenfolk, so that "we the Daflas may not take them away!"

As this was a delicate matter, I kept the information to myself and did not question any Apatani.

There is nothing certain about the origin of Daflas. But there is little doubt that the Tibetans have influenced them in many ways. I was able to find out some familiar Garo words used in the Dafla dialect. The Garos of Assam claim to be early Tibetans. Here are the common words :—

Garo	Dafla	English
Chi	Ashi	Water
Naa	Nun	You

Many such common words can be found. The Apatanis have no such ties with the Daflas. The Daflas are a romantic people and can marry as many times as they like, unlike the Apatanis. Amongst them also, adultery is punishable. The woman is heavily fined, while the man is let off with a warning!

Today both the Apatanis and Daflas are living in peace. They have maintained their economic ties, minus the feuds of the past. Of course, the sturdy Dafla still likes to keep his hand on his dao, while talking to a stranger. This I believe is out of sheer habit and in memory of the past days.

After a week's stay I returned to Jorhat. As the sky was clear, the trip was comfortable and minus the bumps of air pockets. On arrival at Jorhat, I felt like a man recently returned from heaven, with fresh memories of the friends I had made there.



Dafla girls from Jorum



A cane bridge in NEFA constructed by the people themselves



Monpa girls from Dirong Dzong in traditional clothes



Monpa girls with modern hairstyle

CHAPTER VII

And Then to Passighat and Tirap Frontier Division

I halted at Jorhat for a day to buy fresh provisions for my trip to Passighat. From Jorhat I proceeded to Dibrugarh, from where I was to catch a plane for Passighat. Passighat which is in Siang Frontier Division of NEFA is at a flying distance of twenty five to thirty minutes from Dibrugarh. My flight to Passighat was comfortable and I did not experience any hardships as in my trip to Ziro. Here the kite is not required to dodge many hill-tops and the air pockets are also limited.

I reached Passighat towards the afternoon. The landing ground was much better than the one at Ziro. A few tribal porters helped me carry my luggage to the Inspection Bungalow which is very near the landing ground. My first impressions of Passighat were rather mixed. Immediately on my landing I had seen a few girls at the aerodrome, dressed in silk saris. They were trying to walk properly in their high-heel sandals. Though they could not conceal their innocent Adi faces, I at once doubted whether they were really Adis. I even asked the aerodrome officer, whether we were in Passighat. Indeed we were in Passighat and the obliging officer remarked that those were Adi girls, who had been to the plains for further studies and had obviously brought back with them some fashions from the plains. I thought they were trying to beat the plains people also. Very few Assamese girls use cosmetics and their attire of Mekhala¹ and Chaddar is most simple and attractive. I was also told by the officer, that such girls in Passighat numbered about half a dozen. I am against modern cosmetics from

¹ Assamese skirt

many points of view. My main objection is that these beauty medicines cost too much money and leave the skin dark and unhealthy. The tribal herbs are much more healthy and do not spoil the skin. In the Frontier Province of the North West, the women use a tribal herb on their cheeks as well as lips and the effect lasts several days. The herb also fills up any scars on the skin.

I am also very much against mill-made saris for the tribal women. If these are allowed to invade tribal areas, the tribal art of weaving will die and seriously affect the tribal economy. The Adi skirt is much more beautiful than a Bangalore or Bengal sari. These saris cannot capture the multi-coloured tribal patterns.

In the evening I was invited to a disgusting performance in the local hall. A variety show was arranged by the Adi boys and girls. These students did not show any Adi dances. Instead they tried to please their audience with forced dialogues and humorous skits. They began and ended their show, with the boys and girls standing on the stage, with folded hands and the usual theatre songs. Both boys and girls were under thick paint !

I was thoroughly disappointed with the town life of Passighat and next morning left the place for Mebu, which is about seven miles across the river from Passighat. I left early in the morning, by a motor boat. It took us about twenty minutes to reach the other bank. Sitting in the boat, I had a lovely glimpse of Adi Hills. The river seemed to be kissing their feet. On arrival at the other bank, we began a march to Mebu. The path passes through a thick jungle. The area is full of leeches and blood stains on my clothes revealed to me that at least ten of these were sticking to me. A few Adi friends who had joined me at the other bank, managed to pull them out. I reached Mebu in about an hour's time. I was almost exhausted. I would not have walked fast, but for a few Adi girls in my party. They were also going to Mebu and had joined us on the way. These girls were carrying loads and walking ahead

of me. I was ashamed of myself. I thought I was carrying only a camera and had no reason to lag behind. Their speed touched my vanity and I reached far ahead of my party. But this effort had caused me a lot of energy and I promised not to repeat this performance.

On arrival at the village, I had to climb a bamboo staircase to enter the village. I was told that the Adis always kept the village gates closed from defence point of view. Of course, the bamboo fencing now helped to keep the cattle from straying. Immediately on my arrival I called on the Base Superintendent. He was very kind to me. After a cup of tea I was shown my cottage. As I was exhausted I thought a bit of rest would do me some good.

After about half an hour's rest, I got out of my cottage and went round the village. The village is built in a huge circle and most of the cottages face each other. The cottages are built high and contain long apartments. I visited many cottages. I saw many Adis cooking their food in the apartments. The hearth also provides light. I visited the Bachelor's dormitory also, which too is built high. The *Miri* was also there. *Miri* is an important man in the village. He is the leader of all dances and knows by heart all songs and legends of the Adis. He is a perfectly trained man. I made friends with him and he promised to organise a dance for me the same evening. I later went to his cottage and shared the Adi "Apong¹" which I found quite sweet. I also called on the village head-man. He is an important man in the village and presides over the "Kebang" or village council.

The dance was organised late in the evening, when all the boys and girls had returned from the fields. The performance was held in the village compound. My new friend, *Miri* carried a sword, with metal discs attached to it and which on movement provided the necessary rhythm. The girls, dressed in short coats and multi-coloured skirts and joined hands, moved in a circle and sang after the *Miri*. The Adi dance is very

¹ Rice-beer

fascinating and full of light and measured steps. I was surprised to see uniformity in the dress of Adi dancers. I was told they were in their everyday attire. I loved this free open-air performance. The villagers got into a merry mood (I believe Apong had also to do something with it, because I too was in a merry mood and later sang to them some Pushtu¹ songs) and after the dance, I listened to some excellent Adi songs. A village boy sang in soft and loud tones a love song which moved the entire audience. He was singing about a girl, who would not marry him for some reasons. In the Adi area, marriage is always by courtship, generally followed by consent by the parents. I was later told that the parents very rarely withheld their approval.

After the dancers and singers went away, I detained the *Miri* for another half an hour and requested him to tell me something of Adi way of life and religion. He told me that "Doini Pollo" was their Supreme Being who was all in all. They also believed in good and evil spirits. In fact I had read something about the Adis in a book by a *Miri* author Dr. N. Pegu who says "the history of the Miris is essentially the history of Mishings, Minyong, Pasi-Padams and any other Hill tribes, who profess the cult of Mirui, worship Donyi (Sun) Polo (Moon) as their principal deities..... etc."

I stayed another two days at Mebu and kept myself busy in taking photographs of the people and listening to their songs and legends. On the fourth day, I decided to go back to Passighat. That was a terrible day in my life. In fact the local conditions were not known to me, otherwise I would not have insisted on marching to Passighat. When I left the village it had started raining and the path was very slippery. On the way while coming to the village I had crossed many dry stream-beds. I never thought, the rain-water could fill these up and make it impossible for us to wade through. We were stuck up for two hours at the fourth mile. The path was nowhere to be seen. I saw only a foaming stream, which was

¹Language of Pathans

impossible to wade through as the currents were very strong. A few Adi young men felled a tree and with the help of bamboos constructed a bridge over the stream. We were able to cross over quite comfortably. But as the last man was crossing, it gave way. Luckily the man was not far away from us and we were able to pull him ashore. The next two miles were also comfortable. However, when we were at a mile's crossing distance from Passighat we were held up again. The stream water here was deep and the currents were very strong. There was no question of constructing a bamboo bridge as the distance was not less than hundred feet. We held a council and it was decided by all of us that we should wade through. A villager volunteered to go first and feel the depth of water. He carried two bamboo sticks to balance himself. As he happened to be a swimmer nobody objected to his finding out the facts for us. He was able to reach the other bank after a great difficulty. This encouraged us. He waved to us to cross the stream at certain points only. We had many Adi women in our party. They decided to stay back. But one Mishmi lady would not agree. She said she would be able to wade through. She was carrying heavy loads also. Two more from our party crossed over to the other bank. It was now my turn. I also carried two bamboos in my hands to balance myself. When I was in the mid-stream, the bamboo stick in my right hand gave way. I could not balance myself. I felt myself being lifted up by the strong currents. I could not touch the stream bed also. It was impossible to swim. I thought I was lost. Many stones and logs carried by the currents hit me and for a moment I was a dead man. Suddenly I opened my eyes and heard someone shouting my name. This brought me to my senses.

I saw I was drifting to the main river. The stream meets the river at a certain point. I released my hands from the camera. It seems, when I had started drifting I had tried to save my camera, which was hanging on my left shoulder. I managed to put the camera into my coat pocket and tried to swim. My

clothes were too heavy for that. Luckily I banged against a floating tree. This was my last chance. I caught hold of the branches with my hands. My friends were also not sitting idle. My Adi guide was running all the time along the bank with a bamboo stick. He had planned to rescue me at a convenient point. He was a strong man. The tree was quite near the bank and he managed to jump on it and pulled me up. Our porters also joined in and with their help I crossed to the Passighat side. I was happy to be living and listening to the musical sound of running stream! I thanked my stars and lay down on the shore. Suddenly I heard shouts from my party. The Mishmi lady who had come with us from Mebu was drifting. She had tried to cross the stream all by herself from another point and nobody had noticed her disappear in general confusion. She was in a sad plight. I saw her rolling from side to side. Everybody thought she was dead. Her head was bleeding. A fresh rescue began. We were able to pull her out from the spot, from where I was rescued. She was still alive and after half an hour's rest she was able to walk. She had lost everything except her blouse. We gave her a chaddar to wrap herself. She was badly injured. I felt very sorry for her. The poor woman had lost even her money, which she had kept in the basket. She was shivering with cold. After crossing the river, we went to the Inspection Bungalow. I pulled out my first-aid kit and dressed up the Lady's wounds. A shot of brandy helped her and she went away after about an hour. I was not badly injured and able to recover in two days time. The Mishmi lady was still in bandages when she came to return me the chaddar. My camera was ruined. I felt sick at the thought of going away from Passighat without any pictures of the land and the people. But my case was hopeless. My entire stock of roll films which I always carried in my pockets was lost. I stayed at Passighat for four days to recover my balance of mind and to take complete rest as my nerves were badly damaged. While at Passighat, I had also a unique opportunity to listen to Miri songs and see Miri dances.

There is a Miri village only sixteen miles away from Passighat. Miris combine the rhythm of Hills and plains in their songs and dances and the fusion is a very happy one. They have even preserved the Bihu dances of the plains and have indeed perfected them. The Miri girls quiver to the rhythm of drum-beats in Bihu dances.

After a stay of four days, I flew back to Dibrugarh and halted there for a day to purchase some roll films and borrow a camera from a friend because I had planned to visit Tirap Frontier Division, after my visit to Passighat. I was rather keen on visiting Tirap, because I had heard of great progress being made there. The tribal people themselves had volunteered to construct roads to their villages. This meant, that a lot of money would go to them. They had not only improved their standard, but had created certain new traditions of self help.

From Dibrugarh, we motored down to Marghreta. I reached Marghreta at about eleven in the morning. It was a pleasant day and I thought I would be able to push on to Khela. Neither myself nor the driver had ever been to this side. We went to the NEFA office at Marghreta to find out the route to Khela. The officer at Marghreta pointed to us the way and then remarked "You cannot go to-day, the road is newly constructed and if it rains on the way, you will be held up somewhere."

The driver looked at me. I was always more sure of things on land, as long as there was no water on it as in Passighat! We decided to move. I did not want to spend a night at Marghreta, which is almost a dead town. We thanked the officer for his kind advice and drove off. The good road left us after about four miles. We were now moving on the hill road. The mud had settled down and our jeep could move without skidding. But some of the curves are pretty narrow and high and almost remind one of Khyber Pass. The jeep is expected to shoot up and then descend. I am sure it was a terrible experience for our driver, who had never driven on such roads. When we were nearing Changlang, after a journey of about four hours, it suddenly started raining. The red earth became still more

red and at narrow curves, the jeep started skidding. When we were near Changlang the jeep came to a halt and almost turned its nose to Marghreta. This was a sound warning to us. We went another mile and decided to halt at Changlang. It was no use risking our necks. We halted for the night at the Inspection Bungalow. This also gave me an opportunity to meet the Tangsa people. I called on the Assistant Political officer, in charge of the area, who agreed to help me and personally escorted us to the village. The village is built on the top of a hill and we had to climb about half a mile to reach the chief's house. Though I was wearing crepe sole shoes I was able to climb with the help of a bamboo stick. In NEFA you must always wear hill boots, otherwise it is difficult to walk about, without having a fall or two. I had not put them on now, because it was only half a mile of climbing and I thought I would be able to make it. But I was much mistaken. The loose soil is difficult to grip with flat soles. In fact you should have shoes with grips like that of jeep tyres !

From a distance I could hear the sound of drums and bells. I was told by the A. P. O. that Tangsas were celebrating their Bihu and we were lucky to arrive almost on the first day of the festival. We were indeed lucky as the entire village was in a merry mood and gave us a big welcome. We forgot the misery of the hill road for the time being. We met the old chief of the village, who was enjoying his rice-beer in the company of a few villagers. His compound was full of girls and boys dressed up in their best clothes. At the very outset, I thought the Tangsas must be either Burmese or Thais because most of them were wearing short blouses and Lungis as I had seen in the Khampti area. My guess was correct. I was told, the people were of Burmese origin. The Tangsa girls were dressed up in coloured blouses and skirts upto the knees. I saw that almost all of them were wearing necklaces. They had also tied strips of cloth round the calves. I was told later that these helped them in climbing the hills. I was indeed fascinated by their charming and bright faces. I noticed all of

them had alert and bright eyes. The village chief could not tell me as to when his people had come to this part of the country. All he could say was "we came long long back from Burma border. Our brothers, the Kachens are still there". I could not get any further information from any Tangsa. Since no written records are available, it is indeed difficult to find out the year of their migration to Tirap. But I personally think, it could not have been later than the last part of Ahom rule in Assam as their contacts across the border are still fresh. The village elders that I met still speak of their homes in Burma and follow the same customs and manners. The Khamptis also claim to be Thais but have not been able to maintain their ties with the parent tribe due to considerable passage of time. Of course, they too remember their homes, but they have been helped in this direction by their written religious records. Therefore speaking in terms of history, the Tangsa migration is only a recent one. Indeed NEFA is a little world, not only a "greater Assam", for here we meet people of many races, with their own cultures, manners and customs. Circumstances have grouped them and they have learned to live together in peace. A great cultural fusion is in progress which will ultimately contribute a lot to the unity of Indian outlook.

The Tangsas also dance very well. Their steps are as simple as those of the Adis and they also dance in circles with joined hands. The Tangsa girls impressed me with their charming and very soft artistic movements. I was told by the village chief, that Tangsa girls were free to mix with the boys and select their life-partners. The boys and girls get good chances to meet each other during Bihu celebrations and marriages are fixed during these days. But there is no hard and fast rule in the Tangsa society that marriages and affairs of heart must be settled during Bihu, as amongst the Assamese people. In the villages of the plains, girls and boys not only select their life-partners, but run away from the villages. They have to be found out and after consent of respective parents, the marriages are performed. However, under the influence of urban civilisation

these romantic marriages are being replaced by arranged ones.

After the dance we were invited by another village elder for a cup of rice-beer. I knew, in a tribal home, a cup of rice-beer stands for mugs of rice-beer and as I had anticipated we spent about three hours with him, drinking his rice-beer and listening to the Tangsa legends. He narrated to me Tangsa legends at my request because I wanted to know whether these people had also come under the influence of Buddhism, as did some of the tribes coming from that side. I was told that they were not Buddhists. They have their own tribal religion which speaks of Nature worship. They believe that different aspects of Mother Nature rule and guide human destiny. "Longjum" is the god who causes rain and feeds the fields. "Rangphi" is the god of fire and "Yangban" is the god of forests. Like Apatanis, Daflas and so many other tribes, they too sacrifice animals while worshipping their gods. Tangsa religion is free from any rigid rules. The society does not impose any sanctions on the people. According to Tangsa customs, an offending person is just left alone till he comes round. I think this is a remarkable way of dealing with persons. In the plains we create another hell for such persons and I believe make it impossible to reform themselves and come on the right path. But such an attitude requires a well-knit and a strong society like that of the Tangsas or other tribal people. I don't think the expanded town or city life can visualize such a society.

The Tangsas are ardent Jhum cultivators. The loose soil of the hills I believe does not allow any other kind of cultivation. They grow mostly rice which is their staple food. According to the information available, the circle of Jhuming in Tangsa area is nine years. In some tribal areas of Assam, the people have to return to the same jhums after three or four years with the result that they do not get much produce.

The Tangsas do not have any property system as far as the land is concerned. The entire area belongs to the village and

the villagers can cultivate the selected spots. However, household goods and agricultural implements are owned by the people and on a man's death, these go to the male children. The girls are given a portion of the property at the time of marriage. If a father dies before the marriage of his daughters, then it is the duty of brothers to give something to their sisters. However, this should not be mistaken for dowry system, for there are no demands from the other side.

It is reported that at one time the Tangsas were head-hunters. However at Changlang, I could not find any signs of it, as can be found in some of the neighbouring Nocte villages where the people have still preserved some heads which remind them of their past days. In fact the Tangsas might have turned head-hunters out of necessity in the early period of their settlement in this area. The Garos of Assam were also known as head-hunters. However, they never indulged in it as some sort of sport. They only used to remove the heads of the dead enemies and hang them outside the village. It was not so with some of the Naga tribes who used to organise head-hunting expeditions either to establish their reputation as warriors or to win the hand of a beautiful girl. The Tangsas are too mild and soft and I am sure they could not have been potent head-hunters. They too, like the Garos might have taken to hanging the heads of their enemies. Even some civilised nations behave in this manner towards their enemies. During the early stage of the British-Pathan conflict in the N. W. F. P. the British officers used to bring the dead bodies of the enemy from tribal areas and parade them. Sometimes the dead bodies were kept outside the towns for the public to see and "learn a lesson" not to cross swords with the British regime. I once spoke about the horrible matter to a British military officer. He told me that though they themselves did not like it, they had to do it in retaliation as the Pathans used to do the same, whenever they captured a dead body. However, this is a moot point and out of context here. These are supposed to be war tactics. What I mean to say is, that before we give currency

to the alleged wild nature of the Assam and NEFA people, we should study their peculiar circumstances.

It was quite late in the evening, when we left the Tangsa village. After promising to the people that I would send them copies of pictures taken by me, I returned to the Inspection Bungalow. I could not sleep the whole night. That night it rained terribly. A few holes in the thatched roof kept me awake. However, we started for Khela early in the morning. I hate to be held up anywhere. As the road was new, the earth had not settled yet. We had to proceed very carefully. We possibly could not make more than five miles an hour and at places the driver had to use all the gears provided in the jeep !

We arrived at Khela in the afternoon. I was provided a little cottage. Almost all the NEEA officers live in similar cottages like the people of the area. The porters detailed by the administration provided us the much needed firewood and drinking water. Our cook was able to give us boiled rice and dal¹ in about an hour's time. After calling on the Political Officer, Col. Raja, I thought I must rest for the day. There is little to see at Khela. It is just an official township. However I was happy to see a few friends whom I had met in Lohit Frontier Division.

The very next morning, accompanied by an Area Superintendent of the administration, I began a march for Nocte village, Laptang. According to the NEFA officials, Laptang is only six miles away from Khela. I don't believe so. It is not less than eight to nine miles and the the climb took me almost three hours and twenty minutes. It was indeed a tough climb. It might not be so for the NEFA officials, who learn to walk about the area almost like the local people, but for us climbing of a couple of thousands of feet is quite a difficult affair. It is more so because of the loose soil. I had not met this difficulty in the N. W. F. P. where the soil is hard and there is no danger of slipping. On my way to Laptang I saw huge trees and bushes. We also crossed many Jhum lands. The

¹Pulses

surroundings help to refresh one on the way. Immediately on my arrival at Laptang, I called on the local Raja who happened to be the elder brother of our guide. The Raja was sitting in his cottage in front of a hearth talking to a few villagers. He met us warmly and all of us sat around the fire. I noticed that he was sitting outside the main living room and his bed was also near the hearth. His portion was decorated with the heads of wild animals killed by himself and other villagers in hunting. The Noctes are very fond of hunting. I also noticed four crude type of guns lying by the chief's side. I was interested to know that the Noctes know the art of making their own muzzle loading guns. These old type of guns are still in vogue. According to the Raja of Laptang, they knew the art of making guns even before the British came to Assam. While this a matter for research, it is not particularly surprising. The Pathans knew this art long before the British came to their area. Of course, they had long contacts with the Mughals and Sikhs and could have learned something from them. In Assam, the guns were introduced for the first time in the reign of Ahom king Suhungmung in the Vaishnavite period. The art was introduced by the Muslim prisoners of the Ahoms. It is quite likely that from Ahoms this technique might have passed on to the Noctes. As I shall explain later in this chapter, Noctes had very good contacts with the plains and some of the villages have even retained a crude form of Vaishnavite cult of the Hindus of Assam.

I examined the guns in the chief's house and found them quite good. Of course, these were much inferior to the guns, I had seen in the tribal areas of the N. W. F. P. The Pathans have not only perfected the muzzle loading guns but had introduced conventional guns too during the war days. They even learned to manufacture Russian guns with short muzzles. These guns had a long range and carried a magazine for loading a number of bullets. In some areas the Pathans used to make pistols also. A Pathan friend of mine once gave me a local made pistol which could be easily concealed in a coat pocket.

Of course, I had to surrender it to the police as soon as I was out of the tribal area because I had no permit for the same and at that time I was too young to get a license.

The Laptang chief was told of my interest in tribal music and taking pictures of the people. He at once agreed to help me and called a few villagers to contact some singers and dancers in the village. The Raja or chief occupies a very prominent position in the village and his word is generally respected. He is the recognised head of the village society and with the help of village elders conducts all affairs of the village. The system of chiefs is obviously liked by the people because the chiefs here are kind and always look after the people. They are not a burden on the people as the Lushai chiefs. I saw the Rani¹ of Laptang working in the fields like any other villager. In fact when we went to the chief's house she was not there. I was told she had gone to the Jhum land.

The dancers and singers could not be contacted right till the evening as most of them had gone out for work in the fields. I decided to wait for them till late in the night. After refreshing myself at the chief's house with a mug of Nocte rice-beer I decided to visit the village. I saw a few old men and women who were working in their homes. Most of the villagers had gone to the Jhum lands. I got a good chance of visiting most of the cottages with my guide. The Nocte cottages are built high. A Nocte cottage can easily accommodate about eight to nine persons. As almost in all the tribal homes the Noctes also cook their food in the living room. I saw, most of the cottages were decorated with fancy baskets of many kinds and heads of the animals killed by them in hunting. I did not see any human head. According to my guide the villagers had destroyed them long back. I also visited the bachelor's dormitory. The Noctes don't lock their houses when they go out. There are no thefts in the villages. I met the village priest also, popularly known as Gossain who had not gone out to the fields that day as he was not well. He showed me the simple Nocte Namghar².

¹Chief's wife ²Temple

The Namghar was almost empty except that in a corner a book wrapped in a silken cloth was lying over a raised platform. I wanted to see the book but he told me that this could not be done now as he had yet to say his prayers. But I could gather from him that it was a Vaishnavite work and recently presented to them by a Satra¹ in Upper Assam with which they have occasional contacts. The priest was able to tell me of centuries of contacts with the plains people. The Noctes have preserved a crude form of Vaishnavism which was introduced in Assam in the 16th century A. D. Shree Shankar Dev was the father of this movement who introduced this cult to the plains people of Assam. For the first time in the religious history of Assam he introduced a method of spreading his message through roving missionaries. Though in the later part of Ahom period his cult suffered set-backs ; it did take the common masses into its fold. The people preferred it, to the left-hand practices of the Saktas². Shree Shankar Dev's message was not confined to the plains people alone. There is evidence to show that he had many followers from the tribal areas also. Shree Narotum Gossain introduced this cult to the Noctes. I could not find out whether the great Vaishnavite disciple ever visited the hills, but it is believed he at one time lived near the foot hills at Naharkatiya where he contacted the tribal people who used to come down to the plains for trade. Today, the Noctes have preserved this cult in its original form. An ardent Vaishnavite, however, would be disappointed to study their cult because it is minus some of the hard and fast rules of Vaishnavism. The Nocte Vaishnavism speaks of One God and Lord Krishna ; the latter they know only by name, never having seen a statue of him. Though the reformers did not believe in image worship, they were not averse to depicting scenes from various religious works. This aspect of preaching is happily missing in the Nocte area. Here Shree Narotum Gossain shows a complete study of Nocte mind. The priest told me that they could appreciate workings of Nature, but could not afford to

¹Monastery ²Worshippers of Mother goddess Kamakhya or Kali

see God in humn form. I also asked him as to why there were no Satras in the Nocte area as in the plains. His answer was simple and very convincing. He said that Nocte boys had to work hard in the Jhum lands and possibly could not devote their time to learning and teaching. At the time of Jhuming and harvesting not even a single hand could be spared. Even the priest and the Raja had to work. A Satra would have naturally stood in their way. I also did not hear any Bargeets¹ in the area. The Noctes have composed their own songs instead. This sort of mixture and adaptation is quite natural. Once at Gauhati, during Durga² Puja I saw a group of people singing Vaishnavite songs in front of an image of Devi Durga !

Vaishnavism did in a way bring some sort of revolution in the Nocte way of life. The priest while talking to me about this cult insisted that, it was due to the Vaishnavite teaching that they had ceased to be head-hunters. Some villagers have still preserved these heads, but most of them have destroyed them under the influence of their new cult. I quite believe this. However, the cult could not influence their old customs and manners, which they follow to this day.

There was still some time left for the singers to meet me. I decided to visit the nearby Jhum lands. When I reached a field, a few Noctes were already getting ready to return to the village. I talked to them for a few minutes. The Noctes are a very hard working people. As in most of the tribal areas, the people leave for the Jhum fields early in the morning after a meal of boiled rice. They have another meal in the fields, which is prepared there as they have no time to return to the village. They return to the village late in the evening. Even small children accompany them to the fields. I saw many mothers working in their Jhum lands with the children at the backs. The people have developed a very fine way of carrying children. A child is carried at the back and a chaddar is passed around it which is fastened to the neck of the mother. This chaddar is tied in such a tight manner that the child cannot

¹ Religious songs ² Goddess Durga

slip out of it. The tribal children learn the lessons of patience at a very tender age. They learn to cry for milk at appointed hours. Constant movement of the mother also helps in lulling them to sleep. The children also learn their songs from their mothers who generally sing in the fields. This is the only stage of life where I believe, the tribal children are very near their parents. Because as soon as they are able to walk, they are left in the fields to play by themselves. After sometime they are sent away to their respective village dormitories. Of course, the age at which a child goes to the dormitory varies from village to village and area to area.

I noticed that most of the Jhum lands had fruit trees also. I was able to eat five peaches from a tree. The soil is very fertile and I believe if peaches can be grown, experiments can be made with other fruit trees also. Besides working in their own fields, some Noctes go down to the plains also for working in the tea gardens. Some of them do trade also with the plains areas. But their number is very small and most of them like to work in their own fields. I was also told that there was no problem of soil erosion in the area ; the area for Jhuming being very vast.

The Noctes dress in a very simple manner. The usual tribal *Lengti* is still popular with them. Now some men have taken to shirts. Most of the Nocte women also remain content with the *Lengti*. But blouses are also becoming common now. These are made mostly of cheap cloth and purchased from the plains. I noticed at Laptang and Khela, that some girls who had either been to the plains or had come into contact with the people from the plains areas, had taken to wearing Mekhlas and chaddars. White brass bangles are very popular with the women-folk and almost all of them wear these bangles. Of course, in the extreme interior these articles are not found. Nocte women leave their hair loose. The men grow long hair at the back of their heads. This style is reported to have been introduced by the Vaishnavites.

Vaishnavism does not seem to have influenced their marriage

customs also. I was told by my guide that runaway marriages were still popular amongst the Noctes. Girls and boys are free to select their life partners. The bride-price is also very nominal and not at all exorbitant as in some of the areas.

As it was getting late, I decided to walk back to my cottage near the Laptang school. When I returned to the cottage, the village boys and girls were waiting for me. It was a great pleasure to talk to them in my broken Assamese and Hindi. A girl was carrying a small steel wire with a red thread attached to it. I was told that this was a musical instrument and was known as "Gongona". I had heard "Gongona" in Garo Hills also. The girl on my request started playing it. The instrument is kept in the mouth like mouth-organ and tickled with a finger. It produces a very melodious sound. The girl at Laptang could play various tunes on it. Later a few others joined her and I listened to the beautiful "Gongona" music. When the two or more people join in "Gongona" playing, the effect is marvellous. The instruments leave deep notes and a melodious echo. After this I listened to some enchanting love songs by the boys. These are usually recited and not sung, but they are not without rhythm.

We sat late into the night talking of music and other village matters. The boys also showed me lovely baskets, they were carrying. These baskets are decorated with goat's hair. The hair are dyed mostly in red. They produce their own dyes from the plants. I was also shown Nocte walking sticks decorated with dyed hair. The Noctes also make spears. In another village near Khela, I came across a very old cone-shaped hat, decorated with the tooth of a wild animal and hair. I was told that such hats were worn in the past by the Noctes at the time of wars. Now they were used by the dancers.

Early next morning, I called on the Raja. I went to say goodbye to him. I had decided to start early so that I could take pictures of the people working in the Jhum lands. In the village it is very difficult to take pictures because the people leave very early and return when it is dark. The Raja offered

me a glass of rice-beer and obtained a promise from me to come again to the village and for a longer period.

Our return march to Khela was comfortable and we were able to reach the place in about two hours. As it had not rained, the path was quite dry and we could maintain a good speed. On the way I took pictures of the Jhum lands and the people.

I stayed at Khela for a week and made frequent trips to the nearby villages. I was impressed by the people's enthusiasm for work. It was for the first time in their lives that they had participated in road construction which besides offering them opportunities for employment in their spare days had revealed to them a brighter side of community life. The villagers had come to realise that by working together they could do a lot to improve their economic conditions. Indeed, the Noctes have set up a fine example for the other people of NEFA. The road to Bomdila has also been constructed by the local people. (When I went to Bomdila in 1958, there was no road. The road was completed in early April last year.)

My return journey to Marghreta from Khela was comfortable. The road was dry. We could reach Marghreta the same day. We had however stopped at Changlang for about half an hour to meet our Tangsa friends.

CHAPTER VIII

And Now To Kameng Frontier Division

My walking trips in the Khampti and Nocte areas gave me some courage and I accepted an invitation to visit the Kameng Frontier Division of NEFA. I had heard a lot about this picturesque area of NEFA from the NEFA officers. I was told by them that the couplet

“If there is heaven on earth,
This is it, this is it...”

could easily apply to this division also. I had seen the heaven in Kashmir and I did not want to miss it here !

All this time I was avoiding a trip to Kameng, because there were no roads and the area required a stay of at least fifteen to twenty days if one wanted to see it properly. I had planned to go there after visiting other Divisions. The invitation came at the right moment and I accepted it gladly. On a wet morning the NEFA jeep picked me up from Tezpur. I had heavy luggage with me as I was carrying rations for a month. In about three hours time I was at the foothills. The Tezpur-foothills road passes through a lovely thick forest which is full of wild elephants. At the foothills I was held up for nearly three hours. We had missed the gate. In fact it was my fault. I had delayed my departure from Tezpur by a couple of hours. I did not know that the traffic was regulated by gate system. I spent these two hours in playing chess with the incharge of the camp at foothills. I spent another hour with a few military officers who have their own camp there. We were allowed to leave at about three after all the vehicles from the other side had arrived. Road from foothills to Chaku, the base

camp is very fine and by four thirty in the evening I had arrived at Chaku. We were nearly at seven thousand feet above sea level. It was raining at Chaku. I was informed by the local officials that it rains there throughout the year and they very rarely saw the Sun. After supervising unloading of my luggage I walked over to the Inspection Bungalow. I got my first taste of climbing in the Division. The path to the Bungalow was terribly slippery and I had to walk through deep mud.

It was very chilly at Chaku and indeed the cold cuts one like a knife. I thought Chaku was an apt name for the camp. "Chaku" in Hindi means knife !

The rain never stopped throughout the night. I felt my two blankets and a quilt were no protection from the damp cold of Chaku. The NEFA officials came to my rescue and arranged to provide me with a typical NEFA chimney. This NEFA chimney consists of a converted bath hamam¹ and a long pipe for passing the smoke. Fire wood, which is available in plenty in NEFA is burnt in this chimney. The chimney helped me a lot and I was able to sleep for a couple of hours.

Early next morning when I was still in the bed I heard a few voices outside my cottage. My harassed cook came running to me with the information that the NEFA porters had arrived and wanted the loads. They wanted to start early, for they had to come back with other loads. I was forced to get out of the bed. After a hurried cup of tea I was ready for the march. I was glad to find a pony waiting for me outside the Bungalow. I was told by the porters that the pony had arrived the previous night from Bomdila to pick me up. It was a local pony and named "Rupa". Rupa is the Sherdukpen village. I found the pony quite strong and healthy. After a few minutes of ride I became quite friendly with it. But I found the ride very uncomfortable. The tribal ponies have a fantastic habit of climbing by the edges of the hills. The rider feels uncomfortable. If the pony happens to slip, there is little space for it to balance itself. I thought it prudent to walk. I thought the

¹Tub

pony could follow me and I could ride on it when I was unable to walk. I was able to reach Pari-La in about an hour's time. Pari-La is about three miles from Chaku. Pari-La is about ten thousand feet above sea level and reported to be full of wild life. The porters had arrived ahead of me. I saw them sitting there, smoking bidis. Most of the porters in NEFA are Nepalis and they are very good at climbing. They can also carry a lot of loads. Indeed they do several trips in a single day. The NEFA administration besides giving them daily wages also provides them rations. They are very well looked after.

After half an hour's rest at Pari-La I left for camp Jabrang which is not more than two miles from there. March to Jabrang is easy as one has to descend only. Though the path is slippery and one has to walk carefully, the bamboo sticks kept on the path help one to get a sound grip. Camp Jabrang has a fine wooden rest camp which I was told had been constructed recently. We halted there for an hour to take our meals. In NEFA one eats food at convenient spots. There is no question of observing lunch and dinner hours. In fact during my trip to Kameng, I learned to take my meals early in the morning. It is better to stuff oneself with plenty of food to be able to walk well.

From Jabrang onward the pony is not of much use. One has mostly to descend to reach Rupa, the Sherdukpen village. Jabrang is a lovely place from where you can see Rupa as well as Bomdila. The area is also full of pines. The area reminds one of Khasi and Jaintia Hills. After descending about five miles I again sat down for a short rest. I sat down on a few rocks. In front of me was a stone structure which housed paintings of Lord Buddha on stones and other Buddhist inscriptions. This interested me and I stopped there for sometime to examine them. I wondered why these had been left there. I was told by a porter that these were for the safety of travellers. Later I came across many such structures and Buddhist prayer wheels and flags throughout my journey to Rupa, Bomdila and

Dirong Dzong. Still, being used to seeing these creations only in museums, I, in my mind could not imagine, how these could be left uncared for. I was mistaken. I was told by the porters that nobody ever dared to take them away without the consent of the local people.

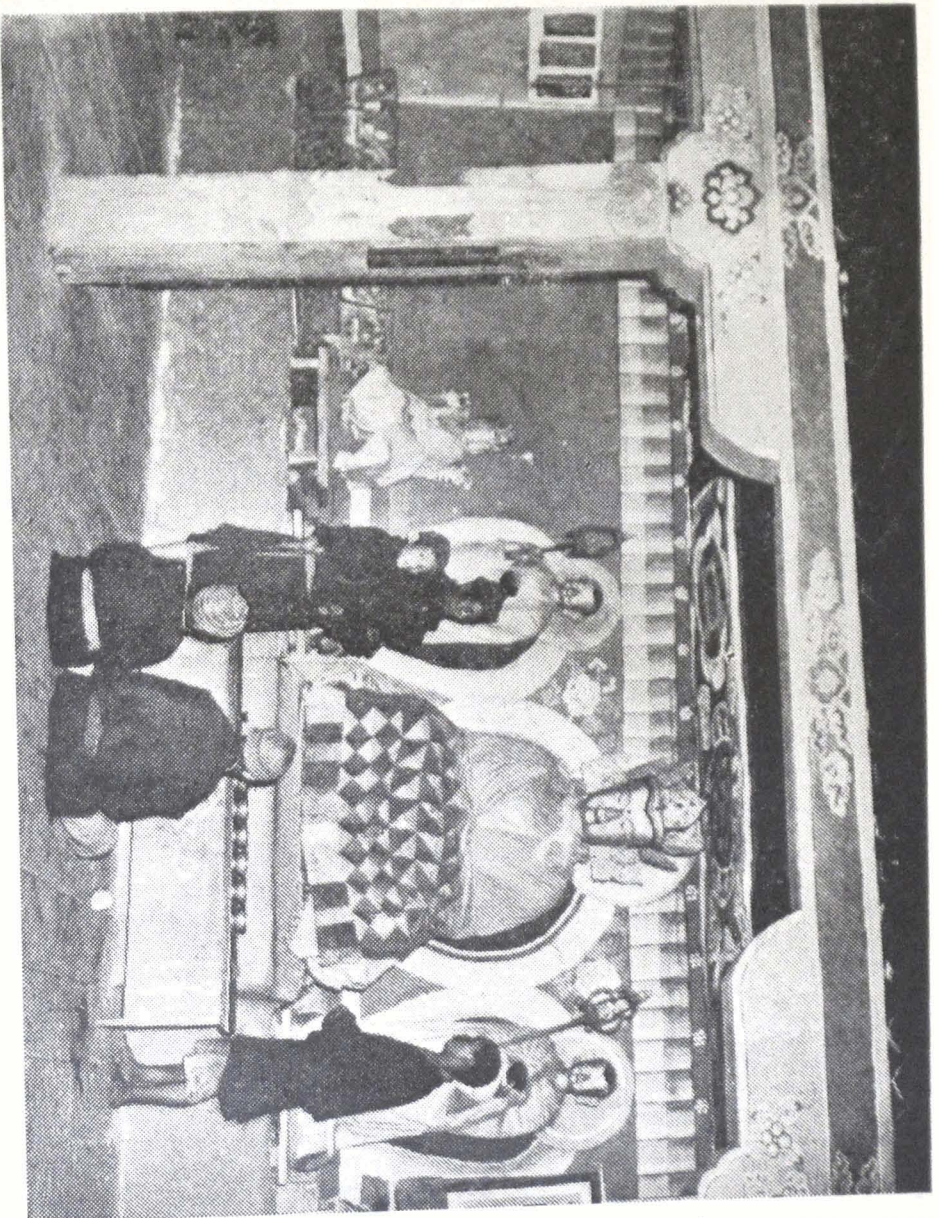
I arrived at Rupa towards the afternoon. I saw from a distance a big village of mud and stone houses. The entire route to the village was full of prayer flags. I had a strange feeling of peace and comfort. I thought I was entering some holy place. Indeed I was. When I crossed the village gate, known as "Kakaling" I paused to look at the rich and impressive paintings on the gate walls. I was in the land of Buddha and artistes. In deep reverence I too moved a prayer wheel and left for the rest camp. The rest camp is near a fast flowing stream. I went there to wash. In the evening I called on the Gaonbura¹ of the village. The village chief had not come back from the fields. I took this opportunity to go for a walk in the nearby fields. Sherdukpens live by agriculture. They cultivate the land available in the village area as well as do Jhum cultivation on the nearby hills. I found the village fields quite dry. There had been little rain in the Sherdukpen area. I then walked over to the sacred enclosure which not only contains the village temple but also houses Buddhist inscriptions and paintings of Lord Buddha on stones and scrolls. These scrolls and paintings are not very old. The Lamas from Dirong Dzong and Tawang keep on helping the Sherdukpens and replace the scrolls and repaint the pictures from time to time. Still I thought the scrolls needed better care. I saw that these were wrapped on prayer wheels and exposed equally to rain and Sun. A very funny incident occurred at the Gompa². I was going round the place all by myself. Suddenly the wind started blowing. Something struck my head. I caught hold of it. It was a Tibetan paper and I could see that it had been blown off from a huge scroll from the open prayer wheel in the Gompa. I quietly placed it in my pocket. I was happy to get it. I thought it an act of Lord

¹Chief ² Temple

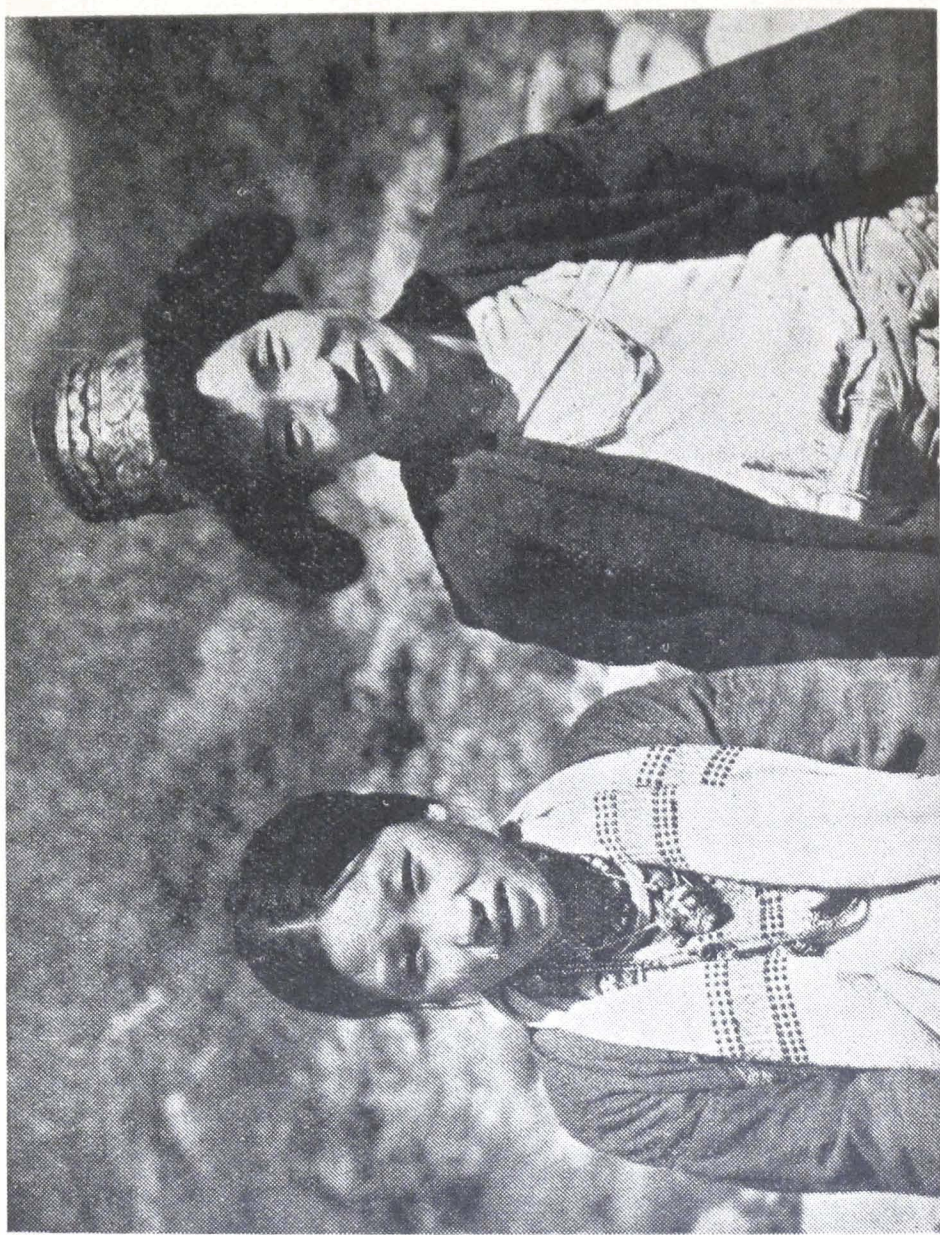
Buddha himself. With my treasure in my pocket I went back to the village to see the chief. I found him in the cottage. He had just returned from the fields. I found him an interesting man who knew a lot about his people. Indeed he himself claimed to be a direct descendant of the first Raja of the Sherdukpens. He gave me interesting details about the origin of the Sherdukpens. This is what he told me :—“We, the people of this area are Tibetans. We used to live in Tibet. The present area was ruled by a Tibetan prince named Besengchanggamu from village Debalajari in Tibet. He had brought with him many followers whose children are still living today. This ruler extended his kingdom right to the border of Ahom Kingdom in the plains. He used to levy taxes on the neighbouring people for his existence, as the life in Sherdukpen country was quite hard. The forces of Ahom King failed to subdue him and he continued to tax the people. The Ahom king at that time was busy in fighting other enemies also. Our ruler thought this was the best time to bargain with him. A big conference was held in the Ahom capital in Upper Assam and there it was decided to recognise the ruler of Rupa. It was also decided to allow him to tax the neighbouring people. The ruler not only accepted the agreement but also married an Ahom princess who accompanied the agreement. We, the Sherdukpens have both Tibetan and Ahom blood in our veins. Of course, the children of the followers of the original Tibetan prince are different and we do not intermarry.”

A large majority of Sherdukpens claim to be the descendents of this Tibetan prince and Ahom princess. I did not come across any mention of this marriage in the history of Assam. I believe the Ahoms Buranjis¹ are also silent about it. But the story may be true for the Ahoms did form alliances of this kind. But I believe the princess who accompanied the agreement might not have been from the ruling family, as an important event like that would not have been missed by the Ahom historians. Ahoms were a shrewd people and instances

¹Historical records



Lord Buddha's image in the Gumpa at Dirong Dzong



A happy couple from Kameng Frontier Division

are not lacking in Ahom records, when the kings married off daughters of ordinary citizens as princesses to gain political ends. But if the incident occurred in the very early stages of Ahom invasion of Assam, it is quite likely that the historians might have missed it. However, this is a matter for research.

There is another interesting story associated with the Sherdukpens. This was told to me by another villager. According to this story the Sherdukpens were at one time living far off in the holy land of Tibet, far away from Tawang. One day a member of the clan came down to the Khowa country for trade. On his return he took a lot of beads with him. He gave the beads to his people and other members of the clan. The women liked the beads most. The high priest of the people did not like this. He said that anybody wearing these beads would be ex-communicated. But still the people did not listen to him and continued to wear necklaces of beads. The high priest got very angry at this and cursed them. He asked the people to go away from the holy land and live with the Khowas and Akas who used to wear such beads. The clan decided to leave the place and together with many families came down to live at Rupa ! This myth exhibits a great sense of humour. The Sherdukpens claim to have lost a kingdom and founded another one for the love of beads !

There is little doubt, however, that the Sherdukpens are of Tibetan origin. There are two classes among them. The descendants of the ruler are considered to be nobles while those of his followers who accompanied him, are considered to be low class persons. The latter have to work free for the nobles. I found that among the Sherdukpens the idea of masters and servants was very deep-rooted. The princely class always expects better treatment and does not like to be disobeyed. Of course, now they can do little about it. I gathered from the village that a few Khowas who at one time were under the Sherdukpen rule, still worked for the princes in Rupa. I was told that the Sherdukpens never forced them now as the circumstances were changed, but the people still continued to come at the time of

sowing and harvesting. Somehow some of these customs have yet to be broken. But I am sure this must have made the Sherdukpens dependent on other people for many of their needs. The Sherdukpen chief complained to me of poor harvests and bad economic life. I asked him as to why they had not been able to utilise the water which was flowing past the village instead of waiting for rains. I thought this water could be utilised at least for the village fields. The chief told me that it could not be done as the fields were on a slightly higher level than the stream. I do not think the Sherdukpens tried any experiments with the stream water like the Monpas of Dirong Dzong, who are a very hard working and imaginative people and have harnessed the stream water for various purposes. I am sure depending upon free labour in the past must have taken away the spirit of working hard from the people. I was also told that every winter the Sherdukpens go down to Doimara. They also trade with the plains people. It is reported that some tribes of the plains living nearby look after their interests and requirements. The village chief of Rupa insisted that once these tribes used to pay taxes to the Sherdukpens and now looked after them without any pressure.

However, my view that free labour had made them a bit easy going was confirmed by the village interpreter who is himself a Sherdukpen. He said, his people could not fix their minds on working a bit more hard to tide over the crises. He gave me an interesting example. He said, that the previous winter he had a great difficulty in persuading the people to return from Doimara, after the season was over and cultivation time was approaching. He further said that the administration had to insist on their coming back to their villages. After all if their crops had failed the administration had to step in. I was told that the Sherdukpens had left Doimara in ill humour. It is indeed not their fault. Their circumstances have been such. I believe things will change in due course of time.

I could also gather from the village that the Sherdukpens were not very keen Buddhists like the Monpas. Unless a fire

breaks out or some calamity overtakes them, they are not likely to bother themselves about religion. In fact their faith is mixed up with local traditions and customs. However, they get their religious inspiration from Dirong Dzong and Tawang. The Lamas from there supply them religious works and stone inscriptions from time to time. In fact those people put in a lot of effort to see that the Sherdukpens don't lose their faith or lag behind. Tawang also supplies them with many of their needs. For example I wanted a Sherdukpen cap made of yak hair. I was told it could not be had at Rupa. I obtained it at Dirong Dzong. At Rupa I had gone from house to house to find out if anyone had a spare cap. All of them invariably said "I got only one from Tawang last year...you will also get from there." Tawang also supplies them Tibetan boots and other woven goods. Of course, Sherdukpens themselves are good weavers and can weave carpets like the Monpas. But they very rarely produce enough and depend upon the neighbouring Monpas for their needs.

At Rupa I also wanted to meet the artist who had painted the pictures of Lord Buddha on the walls of Kakaling. I was told that these were done by an artist from Bomdila and under instructions from the administration. This was at the request of local people who wanted to have a Kakaling in their village, but it seems were not keen enough to make it themselves. I believe this loss of keenness of the Sherdukpens is due to their past circumstances which I have discussed earlier in this chapter. Of course, this is my personal opinion and I stand to correction.

The Sherdukpens are a people of short stature and have wheat complexions. Their womenfolk however are better looking. The married women grow long hair and comb them back. The virgins however cover their faces with their long hair swept down from the crowns of their heads. I was told that this was done to identify them. Moreover the Sherdukpen girls are not allowed to look straight into the eyes of men especially strangers. I had great difficulty in persuading a girl

to part her hair slightly so that I could photograph her. In the Sherdukpen society boys and girls are free to mix with each other. Ordinarily no bride-price is paid. Adultery is a grave offence. However, unmarried mothers as amongst the Monpas are not treated with disrespect. They are not ex-communicated and the children are brought up like the other children of the village. Polyandry is unknown in the area, while a Sherdukpen male can take any number of wives.

I told the village chief of my interest in folk music of the people and taking pictures. As usual a musical performance could be arranged only late at night when everybody had returned from the fields. I agreed to this and promised to come back to village after dinner. Though I had enough provisions with me, my cook had managed to catch some fish from the nearby stream and I remember I had an excellent dinner. I had eaten with good appetite. After dinner I walked back to the village. It was arranged that the artistes would meet me in the school compound. When I reached the place there was no one to be found. I waited there for sometime and thought of my future plans. Suddenly I saw a long line of lamps coming towards the school. I guessed there must be not less than fifty people. I was correct. The Sherdukpens had gathered in numbers to meet me. A few of them were dressed up in masks and ceremonial robes for the religious dance. I also saw them carrying two wooden planks. The villagers formed a ring. The dance began. The Sherdukpens dance that I saw was a long one and lasted for an hour. It was performed by three boys who were dressed up in rich robes and masks portraying the various characters. It was explained to me that on the occasion of construction of a bridge the king and his queen were dancing in happiness and praying to the Lord for the long life of the people who made it. The necessary rhythm was provided by two accompanists who besides singing the thematic song, played on instruments. One of them was playing on an instrument which very much resembled a bat and covered with leather. Two thick strings with hard ends were attached to this

bat. The bat was moved to right and left to produce the necessary music. The other accompanist was tolling a Tibetan bell. After the dance the charming Sherdukpen girls entered the ring. They stood on the planks and sang beautiful songs about love and agriculture, the themes which are very popular with them. They produced their own music by banging their feet on the planks. I noticed that they were wearing soft padded Tibetan boots. As usual they kept their faces concealed by their hair. They had rich and melodious voices. I noticed that unlike other tribal songs they indeed sang their songs. The rhythm was also quick. The girls sang for about two hours. The villagers got into a merry and a musical mood. Nearly all of them wanted to sing. The chief asked me if I would like to hear everybody. I gladly agreed to that. The villagers formed themselves into singing groups and we sat upto three. Sleep had left me and I wanted them to go on. But as dawn was approaching I thought we must end up since the villagers had to go to the fields also. I returned to the Bungalow and straight away went to bed.

I had a wonderful dream that morning. A Lama appeared in his full robes and asked me as to where I had kept the paper which I had got from the village Gompa. I remember to have removed it from my pocket and handed it over to him. I still remember him saying to me "Do not take this away for this is a holy land, from where things cannot be removed." Even in my dream I remember to have argued with him that I had not stolen it and I had kept it back for getting it framed and keeping it in my drawing room. He then cursed me and went away. After a few hours when my cook came to give me my morning bed tea, he found the paper in my right hand. He knew about it because I had discussed the matter with him. In the tribal areas the cook was my constant companion and I always confided in him. He had advised me to return the paper to the Gompa. Being a Nepali he had heard a lot about the curse of the Lamas. I told him about my dream and I remember he was terribly afraid. I was sure I

was under the effect of previous night's performances. I talked about the matter to the school master who at that time was in charge of the administrative unit of the area. He did not laugh at my dream and advised me to return the paper to the Gompa. Since a tough journey lay ahead of me, I too felt sick at the thought of facing the Lama's curse. I went to the spot and kept the paper back. It was a wonderful experience. I believe it was the result of the atmosphere and circumstances. I ordinarily do not believe in these curses. Though I believe in God I never go to temples and indeed never say my prayers. In my childhood my mother had tried in vain to teach me the "Gayatri¹ Mantra". I could never learn it by heart. Instead I was keen on reciting Persian verses. My mother always thought I was under the evil influence of my father who was fond of Persian poetry and never went to the temples.

Therefore this new attitude of my mind surprised me. However after returning the paper I was a happy man. With a song on my lips, riding on a pony, I began my journey to Bomdila. I think this is the easiest route in Kameng. After a mile's climb we reached a flat portion. The rest of the four or five miles can be climbed very easily and without much effort. The pine trees, wild flowers and hill streams help to relieve the monotony of a ride or a march. When I went to Bomdila, a jeepable road was being constructed. I went by that road on my pony. The portion was not more than a mile.

Bomdila is an official town and houses the headquarters buildings and cottages for officials. I went to see the NEFA museum and cottage industries training centre. I saw many Monpa girls and boys doing paintings of Lord Buddha. A few girls were engaged in weaving lovely Monpa carpets. I bought a few painted wooden bowls for myself and my friends. In the evening, I went to the Bomdila club. The club is a very live spot in the official town. People gather there not only to play indoor games but enter into a lively competition in singing tribal songs. I listened to a Monpa song sung by the

¹Hindu prayer

wife of a doctor who at one time was posted at Tawang. I could gather that the NEFA wives were quite keen on mixing with the local population and indeed learned the local dialects quickly as compared to their husbands. At Dirong Dzong also I had seen an Assamese lady teacher dance and sing with the local Monpa boys and girls. I was told by the Monpas that though she had arrived only recently, she had picked up their language and could sing like any other Monpa. At Bomdila I was glad to find a lot of men from my side and one of them happened to be from my own town, Dera Ismail Khan. I was able to discover Khurana, the tough little man by his accent and informal behaviour. He also happened to be looking after the communications in the Division. Transport was his problem. I asked him for a pony and a new team of porters. Everything was arranged in matter of minutes. It seems they knew about my arrival. The Political Officer was out on tour but he had left instructions to help me. I also discussed the transport problems with the official concerned and asked him why on an earlier occasion my trip was cancelled by his department. His reply was very convincing. The NEFA administration had to look after the needs of all the visitors. All efforts were made to make their journey extremely comfortable. The administration not only supplied ponies and porters but rations also, to those who happened to come without them. There are no shopping centres or hotels in NEFA. If many people come at the same time it would be difficult to look after them. I understood the problem and learned to be patient in planning my friendly visits to the NEFA people.

Bomdila is a very chilly place. I kept the chimney burning throughout the night. But the climate is healthy and one feels very strong and full of energy. I got up very early next morning. I wanted to get ready before the porters arrived. By seven I had finished my meal and was ready for the march. I had planned to visit Dirong Dzong, the main Monpa village which is about eighteen miles from Bomdila and generally covered in two days.

I left for Rahung, the first camp on the way at about eight in the morning. Though the pony was there, I had to walk as due to heavy rains the path had become very slippery and ponies could not be expected to have sound and firm footings. The first two miles from Bomdila have to be climbed. The climb is very tough. When I went there the path had almost disappeared in the mud. Though the last miles are not very difficult, as one has to descend only, the slippery path does tire one. Often my hill boots failed me and I found myself lying in deep red mud. The porters taught me to walk on my heels. After that I felt a bit comfortable. The path passes through a very thick forest which is full of orchids and flowers. I also saw bushes of wild cherries. The cherries tempted me a lot and many times on the way I paused to collect them. I must have eaten quite a lot, for I felt a terrible pain in my stomach. My cook is also a greedy man like me and had eaten more than me. I had never seen such big cherries in my life. In spite of pain in my stomach I never failed to pluck and eat some cherries whenever I came across a bush. The porters had warned me and advised me not to eat too many. But I had refused to listen to them. I was carrying many tins of milk with me and I thought I would be having a nice sweet dish of milk and cherries after my dinner. We collected about two seers of cherries. But I was not destined to eat the sweet dish. My stomach was terribly upset and I had to lie down many times on the way to allow the attacks to pass and to take rest. I reached Rahung late in the afternoon. The porters had reached far ahead of me. I had allowed them to go ahead as they had to cook their meal also. My cook fell back to accompany me. By the time we reached Rahung we were sick men. I decided to miss my dinner that night. However, we made another mistake. The chowkidar of the rest camp suggested the local drink "Arrack¹" which he said could relieve the pain in stomach. I obtained a bottle from the nearby

¹Local wine

village. It did not help me at all. Of course under its soothing effect I was able to sleep well but in the morning I felt my stomach burning. I was so unwell that I could hardly walk. In spite of my illness I decided to start for Dirong Dzong. Rahung was no place for a man to fall ill. I decided to forget my illness right in the NEFA way and forced myself to take my usual morning meal. Luckily after that I felt a bit better. The food had put some life into my limbs. I enjoyed the pony ride from Rahung to Dirong Dzong. The climb is not difficult and the path is also very good. On the way I came across a pine forest which was full of blooming orchids. I have never seen so many orchids in my life. I marked some plants. I planned to take them along with me to Shillong, while coming back from Dirong Dzong. Dirong Dzong is about thirteen miles from Rahung. I am never sure about NEFA miles. I am somehow under the impression that a traveller is never given an exact account so that he or she does not lose heart. Whenever I am told, such and such place is only a mile from here, I always am prepared to walk two to three miles !

We reached Dirong Dzong in the afternoon. The sky was clear and I could see the prayer flags fluttering on the house-tops. Before proceeding to the inspection Bungalow which is far away from the village, I wanted to see the village. I went straight to the Jang Ghar which is the village guest house. I was told that at one time, the so-called Tibetan Governors used to stay there. The Jang Ghar at Dirong Dzong is huge and has at least nine big rooms which can easily accommodate at least thirty to forty persons. I was impressed by the Monpa houses which are built mostly with stones and mud. The stream passes right through the village. The Monpas have themselves constructed many bridges in the village. I called on the village chief. He welcomed me with "Arrack" the local Monpa drink. This was given to me in a lovely wooden cup. I had to take at least three cups before he would leave me. The Monpa

drink is very strong and generally drunk neat. It goes to the head very quickly. On my way to the I. B. I found my Nepali cook walking ahead of me and singing Nepali songs. I guessed he too had taken some "Arrack". Indeed I saw him carrying a bottle in his bag. The kind villagers had presented him one. He was also carrying eggs and a chicken which he had purchased from the villagers. He told me he had paid twelve annas for the chicken and a rupee for ten eggs. He was indeed happy at Dirong Dzong and shouted at me "Sir, why not stay here for sometime. You are always on the march. There is plenty to eat here."

I at once agreed with him. The very sight of the village had pleased me. I halted at Dirong Dzong for four days. My original plan was to stay for two days only. Even while going back I was feeling sorry and inclined to stay on. But I had planned trips to some other areas and my further stay would have upset the entire arrangements.

After a refreshing bath at the I. B. I went back to the village to spend my evening there. I had told the village chief that I would be back shortly and would like to visit the Gompa about which I had heard a lot. He was waiting for me at the Gompa. He took me round the temple. It is a two storeyed building. The lower portion contains huge statues of Lord Buddha. Even the walls are painted with pictures and scenes from Lord Buddha's life. The upper portion of the building houses one hundred and eight volumes of Buddhist works which are neatly placed in wooden boxes. I was also shown the Monpa wooden printing plates. They print their own works. The letters are carved and impressions obtained on local made paper with local dyes. I found the local paper very thick and crisp. The paper cannot bear many folds. Most of the Monpa works are on loose sheets which are kept in the boxes.

At my request the village chief who also happened to be a Lama of the Gompa agreed to let me listen to the Monpa orchestra. A few trained Monpas brought out their musical instruments and produced enchanting Buddhist music. They

mostly blew huge and long Tibetan pipes and played on drums. The music and chantings attracted many villagers who turned up to listen to the soft and melodious music. I requested the village chief to arrange a few songs also since many people had gathered. He agreed to this and requested the singers and dancers to enter the Gompa. All of us sat at the feet of Lord Buddha to listen to the Monpa songs. Women and children volunteered to sing first. They sang mostly religious themes and banged their feet on the wooden floor to create the necessary rhythm. A few villagers from a neighbouring village who happened to be there followed next. They were dressed in fine clothes. Most of them were wearing coloured jackets, Tibetan breeches and padded boots. Some of them were wearing Monpa Yak caps. They sang lovely love songs and danced on the wooden floor. I noticed that they never missed a step and all the dancers banged their feet at same time. The dancing feet create very lovely rhythm. They also sang a humorous song which very much pleased the audience. The village chief could not explain the song to me. After repeating a line of the verse he would start laughing and comment in his broken Hindi "Bahut Acha bat hai" (It is a good song etc.). Though I had not understood the song I could not help joining their laughter. The villagers thought the village chief had explained to me the song and felt quite happy at my joining them. It was later explained to me that the song was about a Monpa who had grown very fat !

From the Gompa I went to the chief's house at his request. He took me to his front room which was decorated with paintings of Lord Buddha. He told me that these were done by the village artistes. I found the paintings very realistic and Tibetan in style. I was also told that the Monpas used their own paints which they obtained from the plants in their area. All of us sat in a big circle. The chief's wife produced wooden bowls full of heated "Arrack". We were given the drink in red wooden cups. These cups are also made by them in the village. We were also given Tibetan tea to drink. I preferred

the "Arrack" to their tea because I could not stand the smell of Yak butter which they put in the tea. However, to please the lady I accepted a cup of tea. After that I stuck to the bitter drink ! We talked till late into the night. The village chief was not drinking "Arrack" since he happened to be a Lama also. He told me that Lamas as a rule abstained from drinking. I was impressed by their faith in Buddhism and its teachings. In fact the Monpas are a source of inspiration to the neighbouring tribes, many of whom do not believe in Buddhism.

The Monpa library is a living proof of their faith in Buddhism. They also live upto Buddhist ideals, though certain tribal customs like the dowry system, bride-price and meat eating have survived. Their marriages are performed according to Buddhist rites. A dead body is cut into a hundred and eight pieces and thrown into the river by the Lamas. The Monpas visit the temples regularly. In fact the Monpas of Dirong Dzong get their inspiration from the Lamas of Tawang who in turn hold the Dalai Lama of Tibet in high esteem. There is a regular contact between the Lamas of Tawang and Dirong Dzong. The Tibetan influence can be seen in Monpa life. According to a popular belief the Monpas claim their descent from the Tibetans and Bhutias. While this may be true, the Monpas have evolved a cultural pattern of their own and they can easily be described as improved versions of Tibetans and Bhutias. But the fact remains that at one time, events, customs and manners in Tibet did influence them. It is no secret that some of the Monpa areas till recently were under the illegal occupation of self-styled governors. It is reported by the Monpa villagers that those Tibetans were real despots who not only demanded free food but free wives also for specified periods. Those so-called governors always tried to hide their misdeeds under the religious cloak. The Monpas somehow tolerated them because the despots happened to be from the holy land of Tibet. However, with the dawn of Indian independence those rulers thought it prudent to pack up for

good. The Monpas now lead their lives in their own way. I am positive that those so-called Tibetan governors did introduce certain unhealthy practices in the area. The Monpa villagers told me that they were sick of those people. Their unruly manners and exorbitant taxes had upset their economic and cultural life.

The Monpas have some revolutionary ideas about relations between a man and a woman. While adultery is frowned at, the unmarried women are given considerable amount of freedom. Sexual intercourse before marriage is not minded. I was told that a woman may give birth to three children before marriage, but the fourth one will invoke the wrath of the society. The children of the unmarried mothers are described as the children of forest and no stigma is attached to them. I believe they must have picked up this custom from the Tibetans.

I found the Monpas an artistic people. Besides making statues of Lord Buddha, they weave their own clothes. Their carpets are very attractive and lasting. Indeed, all the Monpa women know the art of weaving. The Monpa houses are very strongly built. These are made of stone and mud. They generally construct two storeyed buildings. Their rooms are big and they also make arrangements to let in sufficient air and light. Almost all the important houses in Dirong Dzong are decorated with huge paintings of Lord Buddha.

I also inspected their latrines. In most of the tribal areas, there are no latrines and people generally go out to the fields as in other rural areas of India. In some tribal villages, pigs are the natural sweepers. In the Monpa area the people construct the latrines in their houses. A big hole is made into a thick wall which serves as a lavatory. Once a month this hole is cleared off from outside and the night-soil is used as manure. The Monpas do this themselves. There is no sweeper class in any tribal area. However, it is quite an art to use these latrines. Some houses have very big holes. If a person does not fix himself properly he can find himself below also !

I noticed that the Monpas like the Sherdukpens have taken

to the Tibetan dress. The Monpa women wear long gowns and generally tie a sash round the waist. They wear lovely cloth caps. The women are generally heavy in built but have very light feet. Their broad faces sparkle with energy and youth. They grow long hair which are tied at the back. Indeed, dressed in a flowing gown, with a sash tied at the waist, a Monpa woman does look a biblical figure.

The Monpa country is also very rich as compared to that of the Sherdukpens. The hard working people have improved it to a great extent. They not only use the stream for catching fish but have diverted the water to some of their fields and villages. The thick forests give them enough fruits and wood. The Monpas make fine wooden cups.

I was told by the local NEFA official, that life in Monpa country was very peaceful. There is little doubt that the Buddhist philosophy of love and peace must have helped them in this direction. Indeed, they have preserved a faith which we in India lost centuries ago.

It was very late in the night when I left the village for the I. B. We had been talking for several hours about the Monpa life. I remember the "Arrack" had also made me very hungry. Before leaving the village I very gladly agreed to eat with my host. I was given huge balls of ground maize in a wooden bowl. I couldn't eat more than two of them as the food is quite heavy.

When I reached the I. B. it started raining. I had a very comfortable sleep. Next day I could not go to the village as the rain never stopped. I spent the entire day in my bed. Towards the afternoon I went out for a walk. We collected mushrooms from the fields. I found the mushrooms very tasty. Indeed, throughout my stay I used to have a dish of mushrooms.

I spent another two days in the happy company of the Monpas. The time had come for us to depart from the village. On the fifth day we started for Rahung. The villagers came to see me off and many of them walked with me for about a mile. The village chief had also provided me with seven ponies

to carry my luggage. The porters who had come with me had gone away the very next day as they were requisitioned by chief someone else travelling in the area. I was assured by the village chief and the local NEFA official that I would be able to get enough ponies from the village to carry my things. On my way to Rahung I stopped at places to pick up the marked orchids. But I could not trace them. I selected new ones and put them in my bag. I also selected some pieces of wood for hanging them. My journey was quite comfortable and I was able to ride on the pony throughout the way. I reached Rahung in the evening. After a cup of tea at the rest camp I decided to walk over to the nearby village. Unfortunately, I could meet very few people as most of them had not yet returned from the fields. The village chief was also out. A few villagers took me to their homes and entertained me with "Arrack". By this time I had got quite used to the Monpa drink and could drink like a local man.

I spent a comfortable night at Rahung. When I got up early next morning, it had started raining. I knew I was in trouble once again. The pony could not possibly be used during rains as the path becomes very slippery. Moreover climbing also becomes difficult when one is overloaded. I was carrying an umbrella besides wearing a rain-coat. I also wear glasses. I had to stop every five minutes to wipe the lenses. Finally I decided to do away with the rain-coat and my glasses. I asked my cook to walk ahead of me so that I could follow him and did not land myself into trouble. When I was near Bomdila I was an exhausted man. I halted to take some rest and to march to Bomdila slightly refreshed. I did not want to confess to my friends that the journey had been exacting. They would not have believed me. As I said before the NEFA officials learn to walk like the local people. I had met one gentleman on the way who was making for Bomdila from Dirong Dzong in a single day. And he had no pony either. He was carrying his own bag.

The journey had been too much for my cook also. He had forgotten his Nepali traditions long back. When we reached

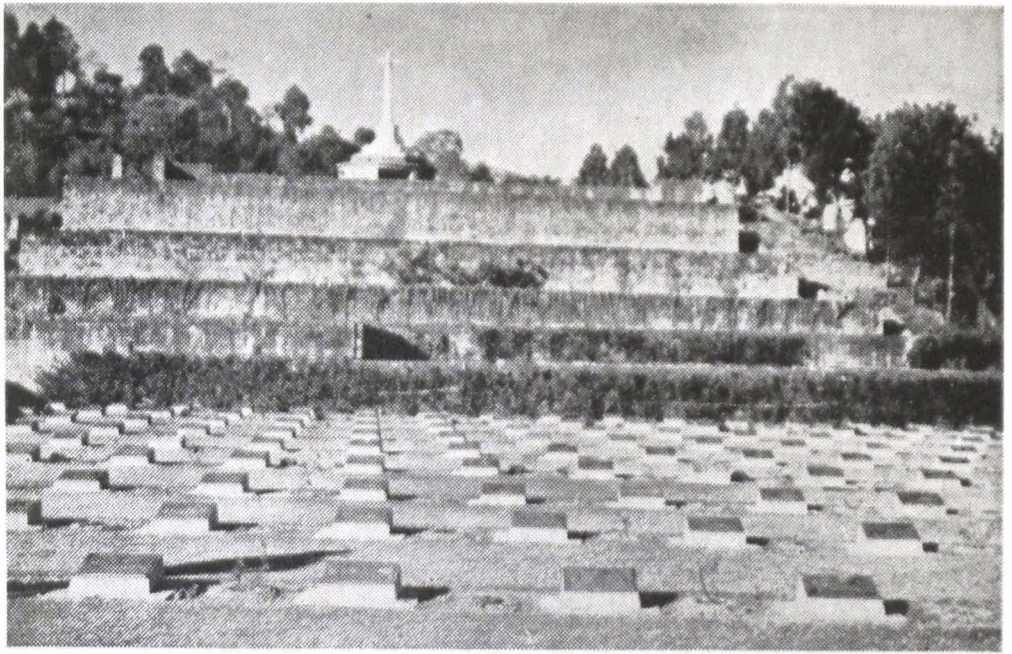
Bomdila he was a sick man and running low temperature. I wrapped him up in all the blankets I carried with me. The kind NEFA doctor cured him in two days.

The local officials very tactfully never failed to invite me for meals. These officials there lead very useful and busy lives. Besides planning and executing development projects they undertake frequent and long tours to the interior. Their wives also accompany them. They keep their children mostly at Shillong and Gauhati for schooling. The children join their parents during holidays. These contacts on the family level with the local people are very useful. In fact the womenfolk understand the local problems much better and do quite well in the field of social service. I won't be surprised if one day we have a lady in charge of some political area.

On the third day I said goodbye to Bomdila with a promise to come back again. I halted at Rupa to meet the village chief and other friends. After spending about an hour with them I started for Jabrang and Chaku. By this time I had got used to riding on the pony and I knew I would be quite safe on horse-back, even if it decided to walk by the edges of the hills. It was still raining at Chaku. I found out that it had not stopped raining for the last fifteen days. As it was quite late in the evening I had to halt at Chaku. Next morning the NEFA jeep took me back to Tezpur. Now there is a road to Bomdila and the thrill of marching and climbing is gone. Recently the Dalai Lama travelled by the same road to Tezpur. I have been told by a few travellers that the road is quite good. This road has been constructed with the help of local people.

In spite of this road most of the interior areas have still to be reached on foot. I am told there are plans to extend the road to Dirong Dzong and even beyond that.

When I reached Tezpur I missed the cool air of Bomdila. I had returned with fresh ideas and thoughts. Even my cook wanted to go back !



International cemetery at Kohima



Angami girls from Khuzama village



A Group of Naga dancers from Tuensang



Konayak girls from Mon

CHAPTER IX

The Naga World

On 26th January 1959, I found myself at Kohima watching the Republic Day parade. I was in the land of the Angamis. I had heard a lot about the Naga way of life and was anxious to meet them. In the plains I had seen many Naga dances and I was charmed by their exuberance. After my return from Kameng I had got an opportunity to visit Mokokchang in the Naga Hills. But I was not able to go to the villages because of rains. Mokokchang too, like Shillong is changing fast and one has to go to the villages to meet the people. Of course I met a lot of people coming for trade to the town but that did not give me any idea regarding their way of life, manners and customs.

Most of the Nagas look alike. I only distinguish them by their dress and designs of their clothes. Though various dialects are spoken by the people, they have a great unity of outlook. They have almost same ideas of war and peace. Their war dances are similar. At Mokokchang I had seen many Naga dances by Aos, Semas and Sangtams. Almost all of them danced with spears in their hands and yelled war cries. I saw a dance by the Naga women. Though the steps were original I found that they had quite modernised their dancing clothes. Most of them were wearing cheap ribbons purchased from the local market. I was told by one of the dancers that in the villages they wore wild flowers. I thought I should see the wild flowers and not cheap plastic ribbons. But I had to return from Mokokchang to my official world. On the way I saw some Ao villages but had no time to visit them as I was travelling with a convoy and our stoppage was limited.

At Kohima I got a unique opportunity to see some of the best Naga dances by the Angamis. But I felt that they were not dancing with the same amount of ease and comfort as they do on the occasion of their festivals and in village fields. It is but natural because atmosphere is very necessary for all artistic expressions. I decided to stay back and visit the people in their natural environments. At Kohima the only spot that interested me was the international cemetery where soldiers of all the nations lie buried. An old Angami Naga who had seen action in world war II accompanied me to the spot. I listened to the pathetic stories about the young men who had lost their lives in Kohima while fighting against Japanese. I paid homage to the dead heroes and promised in my mind to follow the beautiful inscription :

“When you go home
Tell them of us
and say
For their to-morrow
We lost our to-day.”

I also visited the Kohima bazar. There is nothing much to see there because it is as good a market-place as you might find one at Gauhati or Tinsukhia ! The local Nagas are also found in Western clothes. I had not come to see readymade pants and sola tops. To see the splendour and beauty of Naga clothes one has to go to the villages, where life still flows the glorious way. I had a letter of introduction from a Naga friend from Shillong. I decided to call on his people at Kohima village which is about three miles from the Kohima town. Luckily it was a Ghenna day and the villagers had not gone to the fields. Ghenna was declared for the Republic day. During Ghenna or taboo, the villagers don't go to the fields. This is an old institution and a device to declare holidays on certain occasions. It was not difficult to find my friend's *Khel* (the village is a very big one and divided into many *Khels* or areas) as almost every Naga knows where the other lives. It was a clear day and we sat down in the open to bask in the Sun. My

friends at once brought out a big jar of Naga Zu. Naga Zu is very sweet and does not go to the head. It is indeed a healthy drink and contains most of the vitamins not found in the ordinary diet of the Nagas. Nagas have a very peculiar custom. They do not allow your glass or bowl to remain empty. As soon as you sip, the lady of the house pours more. I did not know this till I found things for myself. The Nagas do not like to be refused. The speed at which I was offered Zu by my friends I thought I was expected to finish the whole of it in the jar. But after sometime, I learned to sip a little only and emptied the bowl before my departure.

At Kohima village I was told some very interesting folk tales about the village. An old Naga told me the story of *Khels*. He said "Once upon a time we were living far off in the jungles. Our homes were far away from this place. A party of Naga warriors set out one day to select a new site for the village. They came to this place and liked it. They rolled up a few leaves and marked the place. They decided to settle here. They went away to bring their families. Whenever we select a place we put such signs there so that it should be known to others that the land had been selected by some people. This is respected by the other Nagas. So, when the villagers came back, they found a lot of ants in the three portions of the leaves. On the two sides were white ants and black ants. In the middle were found red ants. The village elders read some heavenly signs in it. It was believed that the people of Khel in the middle would not be as strong as the people of the other *Khels*."

I was also interested in head-hunting tales. I asked them about this institution. I was told that head-hunting was a matter of the past and now was almost unknown in the area. I was told that the Angamis always used to bring the heads of their enemies, as warriors could thus prove, that they really had killed their enemies. In the Naga villages, a warrior is still appreciated. He is not only given a big feast, but by his brave actions, he is the most honoured man in the village society. This bravery also entitles him to marry the most

beautiful girl in the village. I had heard some head-hunting tales from a Naga in Shillong, Shree N. L. Murrie, who had accompanied Dr. Haimendroff, to the first Pangsha expedition against the Naga head-hunters, who had destroyed many villages beyond Tuensang. The head-hunting tales are still popular in the area and I collected a most representative one. These are mostly in verse and sung by the village people on festive and other occasions. The tale that I collected truly represents the Naga mind. This is how, it was told to me. "Many many years back two villages were on war with each other. They refused to co-operate with each other. Both the villages were full of brave warriors, who were looking for a chance to show their bravery. One day a few warriors from the village A came to the village B in the evening, fully armed with spears and daos to fight. The villagers of village B were away to the Jhum lands. Only some women and children were left, including a most beautiful girl in the village, who had not gone to the fields. Some very old men were also there, but they could not possibly resist the young warriors. The warriors from village A destroyed the village property and took many heads. They also captured the beautiful girl and ordered her to go with them. In the village feuds, the womenfolk are generally not killed as the Nagas have a great respect for women. This beautiful girl refused to accompany the warriors. This was thought to be a great insult by the warriors and they in anger killed her and took away her head. When the villagers returned from the fields, they were very angry at what they saw. Now, this girl had many brothers and they wanted a volunteer, who could accompany them to bring the head of their sister back to the village. One young man came forward. In the past, this young man had strained relations with the brothers of the beautiful girl. He said, since it was a matter of prestige of the village, he would go. But he asked to be allowed to go alone. This wish was granted by the village elders. So, the very next day, he left for the other village. The villagers there were busy in celebrating their victory, with the head of the

beautiful girl hanging on a pole. Now, this young warrior could speak very well the dialect of the other village. It was late in the night when he joined them in their ceremonies. Like them he too danced and drank plenty of Zu. At night, he shared food with them and talked to them nicely. He was mistaken for a local man. He slept on the floor like others. The head of the beautiful girl was still there. When all had gone to sleep, he quietly got up and removed the head. Before his departure, he removed the heads of all the sleeping warriors. He started for the village at once, with the head of the girl at his back. He wanted to reach his village as soon as possible. The village was far away and on the way, he felt sleepy. He put his head on a rock and went to sleep for a few minutes. He saw a wonderful dream. The girl whose head he was carrying appeared in lovely garments. She said "I am happy with you for bringing back my head from the enemies. But why are you travelling with my head at the back. This discomforts me." The Nagas generally carry the heads of their enemies in baskets at their backs. The young warrior then changed the position of the head and marched to the village. He was given a big reception by the villagers and a great feast was held in honour of the head."

I was told that the Nagas removed the heads in wars but there were some people in the past who used to indulge in head-hunting to increase their prestige in the village. In the past the Naga girls, especially the beautiful ones used to prefer the warriors for romance and marriage. Sometimes, the beautiful girls used to move from one friendly village to the other in search of warriors. Of course, now this institution is dead.

I was also given interesting details about the Naga marriage customs. I was told that after the marriage is settled by both the parties the bride's younger brother goes to the bridegroom's house with his sister and a spear in his hands. This initial ceremony is followed by merry-making and culminates in marriage at the boy's house. In most of the other

tribal areas the ceremony takes place in the bride's house. I was also told that there was no system of bride-price in the area. The girls and boys were free to select their life partners but parents were generally associated with the marriage deals. Adultery is a grave offence and punishment is heavy. Divorce is also easy and marriages can be broken by mutual consent. A girl who happens to get a child before marriage must name the father. The society puts a lot of pressure on her to reveal the offender. Generally the offender has to accept her in marriage. In any case he has to take her under his roof for some days so that the child is not fatherless and no stigma is attached to it later in life. In the Angami area such a child is referred to as an "Echo's child". I was told that the people were very sympathetic to such a child. But during Ghenna the mother must go away from the village for a few days.

I also asked the Angamis about their original faith. I was told, they believe in one God who is referred to as "Ukepenuopfau" who alone is to be worshipped. There are no restrictions on food of any kind. The Angamis like pork and beef. Dogs are also eaten in some villages. The Angami men leave a tuft of hair at the back which is the symbol of their faith. Unmarried girls shave their heads. They are allowed to grow hair as soon as marriage is decided. I was told that there was no religious significance in this custom. This system was introduced in the villages to identify the virgins. However, the Angami girls have to wait for better looks till they get married. I was told that regular shaving of heads also pays rich dividends in the long run. The hair afterwards become healthy and are immuned from many diseases. Of course, the Christian girls don't shave their heads.

The Angamis are also keen agriculturists. Like most of the tribal people they also do Jhum cultivation, with very good results. But I was told by the villagers that terrace cultivation on the extreme hill-tops was not possible. Jhuming was considered to be much easier. As in most of the tribal areas these Jhum lands belong to the entire village and the villagers are

free to cultivate any area they like. Only agricultural implements and household goods form property and are inherited by the youngest son. I was told that the Angamis too celebrate harvesting festivals. "Sekrenya puja" which is celebrated in the month of February is the biggest festival of the Angamis. On this day Ghenna is declared in the village. Each male member of the family kills a cock. The cocks are usually strangled to death. They also read interesting signs in this cock-killing ceremony. Should the cock at the last stage of dying cross its right leg over the left one, it is thought to be a sign of good fortune. The person concerned expects better crops in the coming years. In many tribal areas the people look into the intestines of the sacrificed animals to know something about the future. The Angami puja is marked by merry-making and Zu drinking. On this occasion the village boys dress up in attractive clothes. They wear cotton crowns at the time of dancing in the fields. The Angami loin-cloth which is worn on this occasion is of a very beautiful design and takes months to weave. I have seen the Angami dance. They also dance with spears in their hands like the other Nagas. There is more softness and exhibition of gentle strength as compared to the Sema dances wherein the participants jump high into the air and make terrible faces. The Angami war-cries are also not so loud as that of the Semas or Aos. Angami music is soft and sweet. The songs are generally sung in low scales. They exhibit a wonderful capacity to control their voices according to the theme of the song. A few Angami songs are sung so low that sometimes a person sitting only a few yards away cannot hear them. I found the Angami girls more keen on singing. They generally do not play instruments. The necessary rhythm is provided by a few persons who stand behind the singers. Only in one village I came across a one string instrument which very much sounds like a Khasi do-tara.

I spent a few happy hours with the villagers. I also went round the village to take pictures and to talk to the people. I

found many girls weaving the attractive Angamj shawls on their simple looms. The Angamis are very keen on weaving their own clothes. They obtain the colours from the local plants.

I noticed that most of the cottages had tin roofs. I was told that after the war the then British government had given a lot of C. I. sheets throughout the Naga area. Indeed most of the villages have tin roofs now. In one Khel of the village I came across a rusted Japanese helmet. It reminded me of war days in Kohima. I was told by the villagers that sometimes they hanged these helmets in the fields to scare away the birds.

I returned to Kohima in the evening. Next day I left for Khuzama village which is about ten miles from Kohima and on the Kohima-Manipur road. I had informed the village chief about my visit to the village. He met me near the village gate. He received me in a typical Angami style. He shouted a big welcome to me and jumped high into the air. While he was not known to me, he was quite friendly with an officer of the administration who had accompanied me. I too jumped high and yelled a war cry in the true Naga fashion. He was very glad at this and shook hands with me very warmly. I paused to take a picture of the village gate which depicted a Naga warrior with a spear in his hands. The head-hunting motif was also there. I then accompanied the village chief to his cottage. The cottage was decorated with heads of animals killed in hunting. I was told, there were no human heads in the village now. We sat round the hearth to talk and warm ourselves. The chief's wife appeared from a corner with a large mug of Zu. The jug was bigger than the one I had seen at Kohima. As I had anticipated the lady of the house sat down next to me to fill my bowl at intervals. I found the Khuzama Zu very cool and refreshing. I thought I had gained enough experience in Kohima and could sip only and empty the bowl at the time of departure. The chief was a smart fellow and at once saw through me. He insisted on my drinking to the last drop before his wife poured fresh Zu into my bowl. The village

chief told me about his village customs and manners. He also confirmed that they had left head-hunting long back. We nearly finished half the jar of Zu. I felt the stuff was going to my head and I needed some fresh air. I requested him to show me round. We went round the village and visited various cottages. We were followed by a large number of boys and girls who perhaps could not understand my desire to visit their cottages. We walked over to the village field and sat down to take rest. I was feeling very heavy. Many villagers also came down from the village and I sat there quite for some time talking to them in my broken Assamese and Hindi. I was interested in listening to the Khuzama songs. I was told that this was the best village for songs and dances. I asked a girl to sing a song. She was quite bold and asked me to sing first. I am no singer and I was faced with a request to sing a song ! I recited to them some Persian verses I could remember. My recitation must have sounded funny to them but all of them remained silent throughout my performance. After that the villagers formed themselves into small singing groups and I could listen to some lovely Angami songs. Meanwhile I had failed to notice that the jar of Zu was quietly brought to the field by someone. We sat there for a long time drinking Zu and listening to the songs. The hours passed by very quickly. It was getting dark. I decided to go back to Kohima. The village chief made a farewell speech in Angami and I replied to him in suitable words. We promised to be good friends and I embraced him in the Pathan style.

I visited many other villages in the area. Everywhere the people met me warmly. They were very hospitable to me. The Nagas are a very friendly people with deep ties to the soil. They like to be loved and respected. They are very bitter when cheated or mis-represented. In the latter event, they take offence very quickly and very rarely look back. I have met many Naga people, Aos, Angamis, Lothas, Semas, Sangtams, Changs and many others in their homes. I found it very easy to get along with them. If you approach them in a frank, friendly and a brave manner, they would always love you for that.

CHAPTER X

North Cachar Hills

A people that I constantly kept on missing till recently were the Kacharis. I had crossed North Cachar Hills several times on my way to Silchar, but I never stopped at Haflong, because I thought the area was close and could be visited at any time. Indeed I should have begun my trips to their area much earlier. The Kacharis are the original inhabitants of Assam. At one time they ruled a good portion of the country, with their capital at Dimapur. They were subsequently thrown out by the invading Ahoms and the people had to take shelter in the jungles. After Dimapur they established their capital at Maibong, which too suffered a lot at the hands of the enemy. But the Kacharis never gave up their claims and kept on fighting for their rights throughout the Ahom rule. Gait, the historian says about the Kacharis :—"The ruins of Dimapur, which are still in existence, show that, at that period, the Kacharis had attained a state of civilization considerably in advance of that of the Ahoms. The use of brick for building purposes was then practically unknown to the Ahoms, and all their buildings were of timber or bamboo with mud-plastered walls."

The Kacharis have been the victims of fate. Due to invasions by foreigners, they were reduced to the status of poverty and forced to live in the jungles. But the changing times have not been able to destroy their culture and traditions.

I reached Haflong on a bright morning, by train from Gauhati. The tiny train left me at the foothills. I had to walk up to the town which is about two miles from the Haflong Railway station. I had arrived at four in the morning. I proceeded straight to the Circuit House, where a room had been



Zemi Naga girls from North Cachar Hills



Zemi Naga boys dressed up for a community dance

reserved for me. Haflong is a modern town and one cannot find any traces of tribal culture there. I made it my base, from where I was to begin my movements into the Kachari villages. Many Kachari villages are connected by roads and one can reach them easily. I called on the S. D. O. and the District Council to help me visit some Kachari villages. The Secretary of the District Council agreed to accompany me since I did not know the local language. The Development officer, who was scheduled to visit many villages for exhibiting films also joined us. I was assured of meeting many people. The very next morning, we left for Bara Wophu, a village, about ten miles from Haflong. The Gaonbura had been informed by the S. D. O. about us. A few villagers were waiting for us by the roadside. The village is about two furlongs away from the road and the jeep cannot go there. The local people helped us to carry our luggage. The Gaonbura, who is the chief of the village invited us to stay at his place. The village has no guest house and visitors generally stay in the school building. I welcomed his suggestion, because I thought that would give me a good chance to study the village life. The Kacharis like the other tribal people of the area, too, believe in welcoming their guests with their local made Zu. The chief took us to his cottage and made us sit in a circle. Out came a few bottles of Zu. The Kacharis drink their Zu in metal vessels, which they obtain from the plains. They do not like to use any other utensils. These bell metal utensils are quite costly and I think the Kacharis must be spending a fortune to get them from the plains.

By this time I had learned to drink Zu like a local man and my Kachari friends were happy to see me drink five to six cups of their Zu in about ten minutes of time. For a while we talked about the qualities of Zu. A Kachari villager told me an interesting story about Zu. He said "we taste it when we are born, we grow while drinking it, we exist by it in old age and have a last sip, before we die."

Indeed, in all ceremonies and on all occasions, Zu is brought into use. It helps to keep them healthy. The Zu was followed

by a quick lunch of rice and roasted meat. I could not bring myself to taste some sour vegetables which were procured from the jungles. The Kacharis, like the Nagas and Garos, love to put a lot of chillies into their food. With our lunch, we were given Zu to drink. According to the Gaonbura the Zu helped to digest the food.

After our lunch I requested the Gaonbura to show me round the village. Bara Wophu like other Kachari villages is built on a slope. The Kacharis, unlike the Nagas do not like to live on hill-tops. Moreover it is easier to obtain water near the slopes. A little stream runs by the village which provides them drinking water. They also catch fish from the stream. Bara Wophu village is neatly laid out. The cottages are generally divided into three big portions. The front portion is for the guests. The second portion, which is usually a big one, used as a living room. In the third and the last portion, they usually keep their agricultural implements and other household goods. The Kachari homes are dark. But the front portion is not so dark ; some space is left for the air and light to come in. I was interested to know that the Kacharis do not like their living room to be visited by outsiders. I did not know this. I was about to enter a living room when I was quietly told by the Secretary of the District Council not to do so. This naturally surprised me. The Gaonbura saw this and said he would explain the whole position to me. I was given conflicting opinions by the villagers. I reached the conclusion that the Kacharis regard the living room as the symbol of their culture and do not like it to be invaded by outsiders. I was told that after they had lost their kingdom, this rule was adopted. I think it is quite likely that some cases of sabotage might have taken place in Kachari homes during the days of war. It was my first experience of this kind in any tribal area and I was very much upset. The Secretary, Mr. Daulaguppu, who is a Kachari himself came to my rescue and took me to another home. There, his relations lived and he was able to persuade them to let me see the living room. In fact in a stay of a single

day I made good friends with the Kacharis and after that I was always provided meals in the living room. My capacity to drink Zu like a Kachari charmed them and the Gaonbura insisted that I must be a Kachari ! It is very easy to make friends with the tribal people. You must learn to do what they do and try to follow their customs and manners. They would love you for that.

I noticed that there were many pigs in the village. These helped to keep the village clean. I also noticed that the Kacharis had built small bamboo houses for them. After visiting the village we returned to the Gaonbura's cottage. I wanted to talk to him about Kachari culture and their past history. It is interesting to note that like the Garos the Kacharis also claim that at one time they were living in Tibet. I was also told that the Kachari language had affinity with that of the Garos, Chutiyas, Lalungs and Morans. In fact they believe that they come from the same Tibeto-Burman stock. Kacharis are short statured people, with dark complexion and well-cut Mongolian features. The men don't have much hair on their faces like the Garos. In the entire village, the village chief was the only man I could see, who had flourishing moustaches !

The villagers wear *Lengtis* or short dhotis. Of course, now they have taken to shirts. The Kachari dancers wear huge turbans like the Khasis. One portion of the turban is allowed to hang at the back and which sometimes touches the ground. The women dress in a single piece of cloth which covers them from their bosom to their ankles. The shoulders are exposed. They also cover their heads with a short white cloth. I was very much interested to see the hair style of Kachari women. They usually have long and healthy hair which are swept back and tied into thick knots at the back of their heads. The Kachari women are healthy and very handsome. They are good weavers. The Kachari women usually weave lovely flowers on the borders of their clothes. The dancers wear multi-coloured chaddars. These chaddars have all the colours of a rainbow. The women are very hard working. Besides

working in the Jhum lands it is they who run the homes. The Kachari girls are free to mix with the boys. I was told that there was no taboo on love marriages but the parents must be brought into the picture who conducted the main ceremonies. I was given interesting details of Kachari marriage ceremonies. The Kachari marriage is a very lengthy affair and performed with great pomp and show. The father of the bridegroom has to go to the bride's house for preliminary negotiations with a gourd full of Zu. If the present is accepted by the parents of the girl, this has to be done thrice to confirm that the parties concerned have not changed their minds. The marriage is held in the bride's house in the presence of many relations and friends from both the sides. The bridegroom has to put up with a lot of opposition by the bride's brothers and other relations before he is finally allowed to approach her. I think this is an original idea which at one time was very popular with the tribal people. The bridegroom was supposed to be a warrior and expected to take a wife by show of force. Even now, among my people, the bridegrooms are dressed up like warriors. A bridegroom is also provided with a well decorated sword. Before proceeding to the bride's house, he is expected to cut down his enemies. Now that there are no enemies and no opposition from the bride's family, he cuts a branch of a tree on the way, with his sword! No priest is associated with the Kachari marriage ceremonies as amongst the Hindus. The Kacharis had adopted a lot of Hindu customs during the last days of their rule due to the Brahmanic influence. The Ahoms had also become Hindus to satisfy the local people. It is believed that at first the royal family of the Kacharis was converted. Gait says "in 1790, the formal act of conversion took place; the Raja, Krishna Chandra, and his brother, Govind Chandra, entered the body of a copper effigy of a cow. On emerging from it, they were proclaimed to be the Hindus of the Kshatriya caste, and a genealogy of a hundred generations, reaching to Bhim, the hero of Mahabhart, was composed for them by the Brahmins.'

I found the Kacharis still believed in many tribal customs apart from their Hindu belief in one God. Like the Hindus they burn their dead but raise memorials in their honour which is not done by the Hindus. Hinduism also could not take away from them, the meat eating habit.

The Kacharis also practise Jhum cultivation and are selfsufficient in food. The Jhum lands belong to the entire community as in other areas and I was told no disputes on account of that have ever occurred in the Kachari areas. The Kacharis have a fine system of inheritance. They have improved upon both the matriarchal and patriarchal systems. The cottages and agricultural implements go to the male children while the girls inherit the property of their mothers. They usually get ornaments, weaving implements and other household goods. Both men and women claim their own clans. I was told that the Kachari society puts a lot of emphasis on equality between men and women and I believe this is the only way.

I talked to the Gaonbura and other villagers for about three hours. Besides telling me about their customs and manners, they also told me about their legends which contain references to their kingdom and how they lost it. I must say, the Kacharis have very fertile memories. These legends are in the form of verses and usually recited by a few village singers. Some of them keep on composing new songs. Kachari songs are very long. I listened to a Kachari duet which lasted nearly forty five minutes. It was a love song and both the persons laughed and sobbed according to the theme. The Kacharis have many musical instruments but these are used on ceremonial occasions and provide music for dance.

As evening was approaching we went out for a walk. When we came back, the village field was full of villagers. Men, women and children had gathered in large numbers to see a cinema show being arranged by my friends. The Kacharis have very simple minds and a great capacity to laugh. A reel about military recruits amused them a lot and they kept on

laughing long after the show was over. The villagers were in a merry mood. I asked the Gaonbura if a dance could be arranged. He said he would ask the villagers. He left me for a while to talk to the people. In fact he wanted to surprise me. He had already arranged with the villagers that after the cinema show, there would be a dance. In about five minutes, after the show, I heard sounds of drum-beats. A few girls emerged from somewhere in multi-coloured clothes. The men were also dressed up in clean dhotis and black coats. All of them were wearing huge turbans. I was interested to see the long Tibetan pipes and bamboo flutes which provided the music. The dancers formed a big circle and moved slowly to the accompaniment of music flowing from the pipes and flutes. Their steps are simple and they take soft turns with flying arms. The Kachari girls exhibited delicate movements. They also danced in complete devotion. The Gaonbura insisted that I should also join the dancers. I agreed to that. A huge turban was placed on my head. I could hardly carry it. I was used to wearing a turban in the N. W. F. P. but the Pathan turban is very light and not as heavy as the Kachari one. I joined the boys and tried to follow them. I could not do well because somehow the loose end of the turban would get mixed up with my feet and I had to pause every three minutes to free myself from it. It is quite an art to keep one's head straight under such a heavy burden. The villagers were amused with my performance and wanted me to go on.

The dance ended up at eleven in the night. We had forgotten about our dinner and so had our host. The dance had attracted everybody and all the housewives were in the field. Zu had made us very hungry. The Gaonbura offered us more of it and kept us busy till one in the morning, to enable his family to cook some food for all of us. Kacharis are very hospitable people and they do not mind entertaining the guests till late in the night. I had told the Gaonbura, I could go to bed without food. I did not wish to annoy his family. He was quite upset at my

suggestion and refused to listen to me. Indeed, after I talked to him he instructed his people to make many dishes for us.

Early next morning, we were ready for our journey to the next village. I had got up quite early. I wished to have a bath in the nearby stream. The water was very cool and refreshing. It helped me to wash off the effects of the previous night's Zu. Kacharis are very clean people. I was joined by many villagers, who too, like myself had got up early for a bath.

I went to the Gaonbura's cottage to thank him for his hospitality. The old man was up and getting his cottage cleaned up for us to sit. He would not let us go without food. He said he would be annoyed if we left his village without eating anything. I told him that it was quite early and we had our breakfast. I was carrying some biscuits and tinned milk with me. He refused to listen to me and said this was not the Kachari way. I agreed to it and we settled down for another two hours. He provided us with boiled rice and roasted chicken. Of course, the meal was accompanied by Zu. It was quite a heavy meal and I felt very sleepy.

Our next halt was at Gunjang. This village is quite big. We were welcomed by the villagers. I decided to stay in the I. B. as too much Zu had made me sick and I wanted to avoid drinking it. I am sure if I had stayed in the village I would have been given another Zu bath !

We stayed the night at Gunjang and listened to some lovely Kachari songs. I wanted to see a Kachari market. Next morning we left for Maibong which at one time was the capital of Kachari kings. We went straight to the market. It was a market day. Many villagers had come to sell vegetables and fowls. I found a lot of Bengali shopkeepers selling cloth to the tribal people. They also sell cheap plastic goods and beads. I was interested in purchasing a Kachari skirt. I had to buy it from a local Bengali shopkeeper who was the middle-man. I had not wanted to buy it from him because I knew he would charge a fancy price and keep more than half for himself. It was not possible to eliminate him because we were late in

coming to the market. The villagers had already handed over their goods to him. I had to buy from him and at the price dictated by him.

I also went to see the Community Development Block at Maibong. I was told that the Kacharis had liked the idea and were very helpful to the project people.

We did not stay at Maibong and proceeded straight to Mahur, a neighbouring village. I wanted to visit Laisang, the Zemi Naga village which is about twenty four miles from Mahur and thirty eight miles from Haflong. At Bara Wopu and other Kachari villages I was told about the Zemi Nagas who lived on the hill-tops. In fact the North Cachar Hills have in their bosom many tribal people, like Kukis, Zemi Nagas, Khasis and many sub-groups.

We halted at Mahur that night. As we had arrived pretty late in the evening, we were exhausted. I decided to go to bed early. We were to make an early start for Laisang, as the road had been constructed very recently and very narrow at places. Our driver had been warned to proceed very slowly and carefully. The road to Laisang passes through a thick forest, full of wild flowers and bushes. The road was indeed very narrow and we were not able to go beyond five miles per hour.

We reached our destination after an exacting journey of five hours. The road came to an end and so did our ride. But we were still away from Laisang. I was told that the last two miles would have to be climbed. I was not prepared for climbing. I opened my suitcase and took out my hill-boots. The hill-boots help a lot in climbing. There is no regular path to the village for the first one mile. One is expected to climb over the rocks and bushes. There are almost no footholds. I was later told by the villagers that the Nagas liked the approach to the villages without regular paths from defence point of view. The history of the Nagas is full of raids and warfare. The Nagas are great warriors and never rest till they have taken revenge. They had even fought the invading Ahoms. In fact, they had suffered a lot in the first encounter. The Ahoms had

killed many Nagas. The ones who were captured were roasted alive and their relations made to eat the human flesh. This had not broken the backs of the Nagas, who continued to fight the Ahoms, right till the end of Ahom rule. The Nagas had tough fights with the early British administration also. In 1854, check-posts were first established at Asalu prior to the British occupation of the neighbouring Angami country. During the Ahom rule, the Nagas were pushed into far off jungles. But the Ahoms were never able to rule them. Among some Nagas, there is a legend that many Naga chiefs, in raids on Ahom territories, had brought Ahom girls and married them.

After climbing one mile I saw a few Nagas waiting for us. We were still a mile away from the village. The village elders had come to meet us. They greeted us with folded hands and made us sit on the rock. I was given a banana leaf, which was folded like a cup. The eldest amongst them filled the leaf with Zu. According to the Naga custom we were given Zu three times. After resting for a few minutes we started for the village. Now the path was good and we were able to walk faster. But after half a mile we were stopped for another ceremonial welcome. This time the young men from the village had come to greet us. We had to drink their Zu three times. A young man presented me with two eggs which were placed in a tiny basket. Accompanied by our new friends we reached the village in about twenty minutes time. We were taken straight to the Gaonbura's house for another round of Zu. There, we were given Zu in wooden bowls. It is difficult to drink Zu from a leaf. One has to hold it in both the hands and slowly bring it near the mouth. The Gaonbura then reached us to our cottage where arrangements had been made for our stay. I was informed by the Gaonbura that it had been decided to kill a goat for our dinner. He would not listen to my protests and finally I had to agree to let him have his way.

I was anxious to see the village. A few villagers who could speak broken Hindi agreed to take me round. Laisang is built

on the top of a hill. The cottages are built in neat rows opposite each other. Almost in the heart of the village, there are two big cottages with the roof-tops pointing to the sky. These cottages are meant for the boys and girls of the village. According to the Zemi Naga customs as soon as the children are able to walk, they are sent away to the respective dormitories. Here they learn to live the community life. The men who look after the dormitories also teach them singing and dancing. I was told that in the Zemi Naga society the boys and girls were free to mix with each other and select their life-partners. They also worked together in the Jhum lands. The bride-price in the area is also very nominal. The Zemi Nagas are great lovers of feminine beauty. I was shown a house at Laisang which stood under a shady tree. I was told by the villagers that this tree had been planted by the owner, years back, when he had succeeded in getting the hand of a beautiful girl in marriage. The Zemi Nagas can have any number of wives but have the right to plant trees in respect of beautiful ones only. I was told that it was not compulsory for the husband of a beautiful wife to plant a tree. This was done more for the sake of fun. I found the Zemi Naga women very charming and beautiful. Their Cleopatra style of cutting hair adds to their natural charm. They also, like the Kacharis, wear a single cloth, which covers their bosom and reaches up to the knees. They have a great fancy for black colour. I saw almost all of them were wearing black skirts with white borders. They also keep their shoulders exposed. They are very fond of wearing necklaces and purchase the beads from the local market. I saw some of them wearing silver coins. The Zemi women are good weavers. Men work in the fields and do not weave. I saw beautiful multi-coloured shawls woven by Zemi Naga women which the men wear while dancing. I also saw a few women wearing flowers in their hair.

At the bachelor's dormitory I stopped for sometime to talk to the boys. Since they had heard that we would be

coming, most of them were wearing dancing costumes. Most of them had horn-bill feathers in their hair and had painted their legs with rice dust. I saw a large number of horn-bill feathers lying in a corner. The boys were sitting round a hearth. They welcomed me with smiles. Two of them knew broken Hindi and told me that they were getting ready for a dance in the evening. Most of the tribal people in North Cachar Hills speak broken Hindi. I was surprised at this because in most of the areas the people speak broken Assamese and very little Hindi. I was told that the local people had picked up the language from the Pathans who had been brought in large numbers in the early part of this century to construct the railway line in North Cachar Hills. I was told that even now there were a few Pathan families at Haflong who had not gone back.

The village Laisang is always short of water. The water sources are far away from the village. They manage to divert the water to the village with the help of bamboo pipes. I did not find this arrangement very satisfactory because the flow is not constant. The bamboo pipes lead to the centre of the village, where water flows into a wooden channel from which the villagers get water. It takes almost an hour to fill one jug of water from this wooden channel. The villagers take their bath also there. They can hardly afford to take a proper bath because the water is needed for drinking. I asked the villagers why they were living far away from the water source. They explained that in the past the Zemi Nagas were involved in wars with other tribes in the area. This site was selected as it was on a hill-top and the enemy could not approach without being observed by the villagers. I told them that the enemy could cut off the water supply. They said they did not bother much about that as the Naga wars did not last more than two days. I also asked the villagers whether they had been head-hunters in the past. They said that there were some head-hunting cases in the Zemi Naga area in the past, but now the institution was not known to the people.

I visited many homes. I found the women either cooking food or sitting with their children. Some of them were weaving. I noticed that each family had stocked plenty of firewood in the front portion of the house. In front of one of the cottages I saw a bamboo stick stuck deep into the mud. The stick was decorated with bones and some pieces of cloth. This was a memorial in honour of the dead. I asked them about their faith. The Zemi Nagas too, like most of the tribal people, believe in spirits who look after the human beings. They believe that the soul does not die and wanders to look after the welfare of the near relations and friends. The soul is greatly comforted if a memorial is raised. Now, many Nagas, due to contacts with the neighbouring Angamis have become Christians. But their number is very small and most of them follow their tribal faith.

The Zemi Nagas are Jhum cultivators. I could see some Jhum lands from the village. I was surprised to see that they could do Jhuming on hill tops and slopes where there were almost no footholds. They manage to crawl on the hills for burning the trees and bushes. I was told that the circle of Jhuming in their area was very limited and they were living under great stress. They complained that the Kukis were expanding fast and their Jhum fields were limited now. They also said that after some years they would have to go away from this site.

I also noticed many men and women suffering from goitre. It pained me to see many young boys and girls with swollen necks. Indeed their living conditions are poor. I was told that due to poor communications nothing much could be done for the people. Now all efforts were being made to improve their lot.

After visiting the village I returned to my cottage as it had become suddenly quite hot. A few patches of clouds which protected us from heat had vanished. I promised to be present in the village field to see the Zemi Naga dance and take pictures of the villagers. I was told that for the evening dance, all the

village girls and boys were getting ready. Hearing about the dance at Laisang, the dancers from two neighbouring villages had also decided to participate.

In the evening when I reached the village field I found many girls and boys dressed up in their best clothes. They were waiting for me. In a few minutes of my arrival many more from other villages turned up for dancing. I decided to take pictures first because there was still some light and I wanted to make the best use of it. The villagers were very co-operative and in about half an hour, I had exhausted three rolls.

The Gaonbura then asked me to sit on a raised platform and gave a signal to the dancers to begin dancing. The dancers, each boy with a girl, lined up in neat rows. A drummer started beating the drum. The boys were dancing with horn-bill feathers in their hands. The girls were swinging with raised hands. Their movements were soft and slow. In the first part they moved in a cricle. Then they closed up and moved backwards. Here, the movements became fast and the dancers also joined the singers in war cries. The singers stood in a corner and provided the theme song. After each dance the leading girl accompanied by a boy, came to me and greeted me with folded hands. I did not know the meaning of this. This was something new for me. I simply smiled at the first couple. I was then told by my Naga friends to bless them. I did not fail them again and blessed the next couple with a war cry and a raised hand. I felt like a holy man sitting on a rock blessing young girls and boys !

I asked the villagers about the significance of this act. The Gaonbura told me that the Nagas loved and respected their guests. They felt that the guests had the power to bless the villagers. The dancers also felt happy about it. Another interesting incident occured when a dance number was in progress. One very young girl broke away from the dancing ring and entered a cottage. A few girls immediately ran after her and dragged her out. The little girl had felt thirsty after dancing for a long time. But it was against the village customs

to leave the dance ring in this manner. The girl was brought to me. She was still holding the wooden bowl from which she was drinking water. I was told by the girls that I alone could pardon her for her bad manners. I felt very sorry for the girl and at once pardoned her. In fact I had not seen her leave the dancing ring. I not only excused her but gave her a basket of eggs which had been presented to me by a few villagers.

It was quite late in the evening, when the Nagas ended their dance. I was not allowed to get up from my stony throne. I was supposed to be exhausted and drink Zu to refresh myself. The village elders sat round me and told me interesting stories about Zemi Naga life. They also spoke to me about their problems. I was presented with many bottles of Zu and at least fifty eggs. I distributed them to the villagers and left for my cottage quite late in the night. I slept very well that night. Early next morning, I had planned to go back to Haflong, as I had promised to meet the Kukis. I got up quite early and after a round of the village, started for the road. I thought we would be able to reach the jeep quickly, because we had to descend now. I was much mistaken. The Gaonbura was sitting in the middle of the path, with few other villagers. I saw the Zu bottles with them. The leaf cups were ready. I was told I could not leave the village without this essential ceremony. We were delayed by another hour. The villagers accompanied us upto the road. I shook hands with each one of them and promised to come again.

I reached Haflong late in the evening. I was terribly exhausted. My morning Zu on an empty stomach had affected me and I was in no mood to walk another three miles to meet the Kukis. But the Kukis accepted my excuse and came to the Circuit House to meet me. I was able to take their photographs for my album. I had met a lot of Kukis at Happy valley in Shillong. I always liked them for their soft manners and polite ways. At Haflong, I listened to some Kuki folk songs. These are like Lushai folk songs and sung to the rhythm of mithun horns and drums. In the fields of language, culture and artistic.

expressions, the Kukis are very near the Lushais. In fact most of the Kukis can understand Lushai.

I was told that most of the Kukis in North Cachar Hills had become Christians and were quite ahead of other people in the field of education. I promised to visit them on my next tour to their area. After thanking my hosts at Haflong, I left for Gauhati next morning with fresh memories of days and nights that I had spent with the happy people of North Cachar Hills.

CHAPTER XI

The Tribal Faith

Assam and the neighbouring areas have been a home of various forms of religious beliefs, since time immemorial. While the plains have always been under the influence of cults prevalent in other parts of India, the tribal areas, except in a few cases have remained free from them. Religious revolutions did not reach the tribal people, due to lack of communications and proper contacts with the people. Though some people, like the Kacharis of Assam and Noctes of NEFA, came under the influence of Hinduism, majority of them, stuck to their original faiths. Some people in the tribal areas are Buddhists. These people brought their religion with them at the time of migration to this part of the world. Buddhism flourished for a few years in Assam and in limited areas of plains. It is the tribal people, like Monpas, Sherdukpens, and Khamptis who have preserved Buddhism in the hills. Most of the people in the hills have their own gods and goddesses. In tribal areas, one finds signs of unity in the main theme of various creeds. To understand the tribal way of thinking about supernatural aspects of Nature, it is necessary to stretch one's imagination. Their faiths are the results of their uncommon circumstances. Most of the people live in deep hilly areas, surrounded by thick forests, wild life and mighty rivers. The hills are composed of loose soil. Often land-slides occur. It also rains heavily in the areas. The rainbow, with its charming and fantastic colours appears and casts its magnificent shadow on the hills. Now, the people could exercise little control over these workings of Nature. Without the support of any alien agency, their wise men undertook to interpret these various aspects of

Nature. I think any man living in such circumstances would think on the same lines. Thus they attributed the rain to a god of thunder and fire to a Lord of fire. When their fields are destroyed by pests and rains, they feel some supernatural power is punishing them and they must appease it and offer sacrifices. Nearly all the tribal people believe in the existence of spirits that move Nature and guide human actions.

But they give different names to them and worship them in their own distinct way. Let us for example take the Garos of Assam. They have an exhaustive list of Garo gods. They believe that some power has allotted a god for each wonder of Nature. Thus there is a god who causes thunder and there is one who looks after the wealth of the people and agriculture. They very rarely talk about the power, who allotted these tasks to the gods. They are indeed silent about this aspect. They devote their full energy in worshipping the various gods. Indeed in the Garo area, there are interesting legends which reveal that these gods first lived among the people. They came in human form to show them the right way and help their people. The Garos also believe in life after death. They offer sacrifices for the welfare of the souls of their dead elders and other members of the family. Indeed all the people believe in life after death. The Khasis, during "Shad Nongkrem" which is a thanksgiving ceremony, always pour a gourd of homemade wine in honour of the departed souls of their elders. In the Garo Hills, a corner is generally reserved for them. Similarly the Khasis have the practice of erecting monoliths in memory of departed souls. In most of the tribal areas I came across such memorials.

All the tribal people do not believe in idol worship. This practice varies from area to area. For example, amongst the Garos, Khasis, Zemi Nagas and various other people we do not find any statues of either their gods or evil spirits. But in Monpa, Sherdukpen and Khampti areas, large images of Lord Buddha can be seen. Jaintias also on the occasion of 'Bedinkhallam' make paper images of their devils and drown them in village ponds. I think the people in general are not

opposed to idol worship and appearance of idols in the areas depends upon the artistic capacity of the people in general or the priests. However, in most of the areas, simple bamboo altars serve the purpose of sacred places.

The priests occupy a very important position in the tribal society. No ceremonies are performed without them. Amongst many tribes, the priests are called upon to read the future. Some priests look for signs of future events into the remains of sacrificed animals. Many use egg shells for this purpose. However, the priests are not idlers and they have to look after themselves like the other villagers. They have to work in the Jhum lands and they are not given any rations for the rainy days ! Their priesthood is an extra service to the community. No man in the tribal area likes to live on charity. On important events and fixed days the priests perform the ceremonies and after an hour or so can be found in the fields. Only a part of the sacrifice goes to them.

Unlike in the plains areas, animal sacrifice is popular with the people in the hills. According to their belief, gods have to be worshipped with their favourite animals. For example "Yulu" the Apatani god likes mithuns and "Moloku", the spring god of the Apatanis is fond of pigs and goats. Dogs are also offered in sacrifice in some areas. Animals are sacrificed on important occasions like harvesting or religious festivals. In fact animal sacrifice is not something new to the humanity. The Hindus of Bengal and Assam still sacrifice goats in honour of Kali and Kamakhya.

Personal relations are not governed by any religious rules. The tribal religion does not say "you must do this and not that otherwise you will lose your faith." In fact there is a give and take system in the tribal areas. If you do wrong to someone, you have to compensate him and this act can wash off the wrong. Adultery is a crime against the society and the same can be cleared off with suitable amends. The persons involved are forgiven and no stigma is attached to them. Indeed the people very rarely talk about such matters afterwards. The tribal

society is not vindictive and a man is not denied the right of decent living simply because he was once a criminal. In the tribal areas there are no exaggerated stories about sin against gods and goddesses. The supernatural powers get angry or remain happy according to their respective moods. Suitable sacrifices can please them. The sins are sins against society and community life.

The tribal people have very open minds and have a great regard for other faiths. In fact their faiths are so liberal that if they adopt some forms of other faiths, these do not affect their original cult. This I believe is one of the reasons, it has not been difficult for the Christian missions in Assam to convert some people to Christianity. Of course, there are other factors also. They were the first people to approach the tribal population. They gave them education and medical benefits. But I believe, with all these, they would not have been able to work unless they had been helped by the broad outlook of the tribal people. I have stated in Chapter I, how the Christian missions failed to convert the tribal people in the N. W. F. P. There also, the missions opened schools and dispensaries and some of them even risked their lives by contacting the most hostile tribes. But they did not succeed. Ninety three per cent of the population in the N. W. F. P. believes in Islam and they are very keen on their religion and would not exchange it for anything in the world.

The tribal people have preserved their faiths without any texts except in some cases. These are mostly in the form of legends or verses which pass on from mouth to mouth. It is interesting to note that for generations the people have managed to remember the names of their gods and goddesses. The people have very fertile memories. The evening gatherings also help to revive the folk tales and legends which contain a lot of material about their tribal faiths.

Though most of the people in the hills have remained free from the influence of Hinduism, the main religion of the plains people in the neighbourhood, in certain areas the religion did

cross the hills and rivers and found a home in the tribal traditions. This has happened mostly in the areas where the people had good contacts. For example the Mishmis in the lower region speak of Lord Krishna (Khynjim) and Rukmani. Though they do not regard them as Hindu gods, the stories that I heard about Khynjim leave no doubt in my mind that the Mishmi god has all the qualities of Lord Krishna. As stated before, I am sure, they must have picked up these stories from the pilgrims to their area. The Mishmis in the upper region, who have had little contacts with the plains people have no such traditions.

The Noctes of NEFA also got their Vaishnavism from the plains. In this case, the work was done by the Vaishnavite missionaries who worked near the foothills and contacted the people coming down from the hills for trade. I believe that Hinduism is a way of life and Hindus in general are shy of converting other people to their faith. Except on very rare occasions, the Hindus have never tried to organise missions or fought wars in the name of religion. In Assam, only the Vaishnavites spread their teachings through their missionaries.

Some tribes like the Jaintias and Kacharis came under the influence of Hinduism due to the Brahmins and local conditions prevalent at that time. History records that Hinduism was first taken up by the ruling Jaintia and Kachari families and later on the traditions spread to the people.

I believe, the tribal faiths are not inferior to the main cults in other parts of the world. These continue to rule the tribal homes, from heart to heart and mouth to mouth.

CHAPTER XII

Tribal Dances

Dancing like singing is another rhythmic expression of joys of life. Since time immemorial human beings have given it an everlasting place in their lives. It is more so in tribal areas of India where community singing and dancing are established institutions. These have not died because the tribal people are still living their fine community life and dancing on all occasions is still popular. In the plains areas where the civilisation has advanced considerably from the community's tribal days, community dancing is almost unknown. Though some people try to revive it from time to time in variety shows and stage performances, these lack the charm of community dances in the fields. It is natural, because the urban life does not offer the same open-air conditions as are available to the people living in the remote villages in their peculiar circumstances and traditions. But it is also a fact that besides lack of open-air facilities in the urban life, the people too have lost the traditions. For example, on the occasion of Bihu in the plains, the masses do not dance. Bihu is the biggest dancing festival of the Assamese. Instead, the people organise variety shows and send for the village dancers and watch their dances with interest. But they do not think of dancing themselves. The problem is very simple. The modern life has cut off the people from each other. Sometimes we do not know who is living next to us. *He* is surely bound to laugh when *he* observes us kicking our legs into the air. The fear of being laughed at by *he* is, I believe,

the biggest obstacle which is standing in the way of community dancing in the urban areas. When I went first to the tribal areas, I too was dogged by the same *he* complex and fear when I was invited to join some tribal girls and boys in a community dance. I still remember I too had looked round for Him and not finding *him* danced in great joy.

The tribal people of Assam and NEFA have happily preserved the institutions of community singing and dancing. In fact some people have made them a part of their faiths. On the occasion of "Shad Nongkrem" the Khasis dance. In fact it is a religious ceremony and dancing has become a part of it. Indeed in most of the Khasi villages these thanksgiving dances are held. April and May are popular months for it. Nearly all the villagers assemble in an open field and dance to rhythm of loud drumbeats and Shahnai¹. Besides being a religious and a dancing occasion, the ceremony also helps to bring the people together. It helps to bind the people into a community life. It is a fact that the Khasis are not a dancing tribe like the Adis of NEFA. The Khasi dance movements are monotonous and devoid of fast rhythm as far as girls are concerned ; question arises, is its popularity on the wane ?

The answer is, No. The people do not mind dancing the same steps again and again because it helps to revive the community spirit. The Jaintias of Assam also dance on the occasion of "Bedinkhallam" festival at Jowai. They have no special mode of dancing on this occasion. Each participant moves his limbs freely and to the rhythm of loud drumbeats. On that day the entire town is lost in merry-making and groups of boys move from home to home and street to street with flying arms and dancing feet. However, the Laho dance of the Jaintias is more interesting. Though there is no religious significance in it, it does stand for purity of womanhood. In this dance, a girl gets in between two boys. They float in a comfortable rhythm. Usually a few boys beat drums and sing the theme song. The Jaintias have another dance which is popularly known as

¹Local pipe

“Shukra dance.” In this, a girl and a boy dance as if in the court of a king. I am told this was at one time very popular in the Jaintia court. The steps in this dance require some skill and all Jaintias cannot perform this dance. It is so, because, this is not a free style community dance and reported to have been imported from Bengal. In fact the tribal form of dancing is not based on any rigid rules. Any one can participate in tribal dances. The Adis and Tangsas of NEFA also dance on religious occasions. The Adi boys and girls dressed up in colourful clothes form a big circle with joined hands and dance with quick steps. The leader, who is usually the *Miri* takes his place in the middle with a dagger in his hands and sings. The Adis can be easily described as a dancing tribe. In the Kameng Frontier Division, the Monpas and Sherdukpens have various dances which are inspired by their faith.

Besides dancing on religious occasions, the people also dance at the time of harvesting. Agriculture has a very vital place in their lives. Their whole economy depends upon it. In fact most of the tribal songs centre round agriculture. The Garos of Assam celebrate the “Wangala” festival outside the house of the village chief after harvesting. This dancing festival lasts almost for a month. The Garo dances have many numbers, in which, both men and women take part. On this occasion they wear large turbans and decorate them with feathers. It is only on this occasion that Garo women don blouses imported from the plains. The men dance with large drums and provide the rhythm. The number in which each drummer slowly moves to the line of dancing women and selects a bride for himself is very amusing. Harvesting means prosperity and freedom from hard work for many months to come. The people get into merry moods. In the villages of the plains, during Bihu, girls and boys select their life partners and get married. In fact the marriages are performed mostly during the Bihu festival. Though it is not necessary that marriages should be performed after harvesting, in tribal areas, the boys and girls get plenty of chances to see and meet each other and there is naturally a wedding of

hearts. Harvesting festivals do serve as an excuse for getting married !

The Garos also perform a dance number in which harvesting is imitated in a perfect manner. The Miris of Assam have also dance items with agricultural themes. They are another dancing tribe of this area. Miris dance in a exciting manner and have very swift movements. While dancing, their hands fly in the air and their hips sway to the rhythm of drumbeats. They have wonderfully preserved the Assamese Bihu dance. During this dance, the Miri girls tremble and quiver like leaves swept by a strong wind. However, they excel in romantic themes. A dance number in which a Miri girl exhibits her plight after being left by her unfaithful lover is full of drama and can move people to tears. The Miri girls put their souls into their dances and do not mind even shedding silent tears if the theme demands it. The Miris belong to the same stock as the Adis. They have good contacts with the villages of the plains. As a result of this, they have considerably improved upon their forms of dancing. The Miris have many musical instruments like flutes and drums. In some dance numbers the dancers also sing while dancing. They pause every now and then to sing a few verses and then depict them in dance.

War implements have an important place in tribal dances. This aspect has a long history behind it. Before administration was established in tribal areas, the people indulged in petty village feuds. At the end of each feud, the victors used to dance in the village fields with daos and spears in their hands to celebrate their victory. Amongst the Nagas, the people had the right to celebrate victory dances if the warriors brought the heads of their enemies. The Nagas still celebrate victory dances if a warrior is successful in a hunting expedition. On this occasion the warriors used to dance in the past with war cries and shouts. They also used to narrate how they vanquished their enemies. This used to be done for the admiring audience. These dances of the past have survived and performed on all festive occasions. The Sema Nagas still dance with daos in

their hands and jump high into the air with terrible war-cries. A mock battle also takes place in which two dancers take part. This is a very tricky dance and has to be performed with a great skill, for the thrusts (always with real weapons) sometimes get very close. Almost all the Naga tribes dance with spears in their hands. These spears are decorated. Though they have many dance numbers, the war theme is very popular with them. The Garos of Assam have also similar war dances. Two persons stand opposite each other with swords and shields in their hands. They call each other and shout threats. But with them, the threats take more time than the actual action. The Daflas of NEFA are another tribe of violent dancers. With daos in their hands, they jump high into the air and yell war-cries. Indeed I have noted that the dances depend upon the circumstances of the people. Amongst those people who used to be engaged in warfare, the dances are preserved in the same war spirit. The areas which settled down to peaceful ways, have soft dances. I am sure the circumstances also help in moulding the people's artistic expressions. For example, the Kacharis, Lushais and many others, who had little to do with war after the British came in, have very soft dances, which reflect the minds of the people.

In Assam and NEFA nearly all tribes dance. But all of them cannot be called as dancing tribes. Community dances are popular with them, which they perform on all occasions. Some of the tribes have musical instruments like drums, pipes and flutes.

In some of the tribal areas of Assam the Western instruments have reached. Guitar is gaining popularity in the villages of Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Mizo Hills. In the Garo Hills also the young boys and girls have learned to make these guitars, besides playing on them. Of course, Tura is the only affected place. The villagers still like to blow their horns and beat the drums. In Mizo Hills, the bamboo dance is now performed to the accompaniment of music by piano accordion which has been introduced by the local missionaries. I am against the intro-

duction of these instruments into the tribal areas because these tend to eliminate the traditional instruments and also make the lyrics cheap and sometimes meaningless as I submitted before. The tribal songs and dances are beautiful which portray all themes that have place in human lives.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to give a true account of the tribal life in Assam and NEFA. Though my primary object in writing this book was to tell the readers about the customs and manners of the tribal people, I did however, in the process, comment on their peculiar problems also.

During the interval that the book was in the press, I got a rare opportunity of visiting MON in the Naga Hills Tuensang Administration area. In Mon and the adjoining villages, live the Konayak Nagas. Some authors have referred to the Konayaks as the "Naked Nagas". Indeed, naked they were in the past and naked they remain even to-day. The Ang (Chief) of Chui village told me that they had no desire to waste their energy on covering their bodies. They were concentrating on producing more food. Many Konayaks told me, they had no desire to send their children to the schools. They were convinced, they could not spare any hands. An intelligent villager asked me very boldly, "Please tell us, what are you going to do with us after making us learn, how to read and write?"

I had no answer to give him. This is a very complicated problem, which the local officers are trying to solve. Since then I have asked this question from myself several times.

The solution indeed lies in slow and steady development of tribal areas. A speedy plan is likely to upset their way of life and create new social problems for them and indeed for rest of the country. Detribalisation is bound to come. The problem is, how it is brought about. In tribal areas of Assam, we have had a chance to study the speedy process of detribalisation brought about during the British regime. In these areas new social problems were created. The hard economic life of the people remained where it was. In fact, after Independence, the enthusiastic Indian administration is trying to improve the economic lot of the people. And it has succeeded to a great

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extent. I am of the firm faith that we have, to begin with, no right to disturb the people's way of life. We should try to remove their economic hardships and after we have succeeded, leave them free to face the modern problems of life. But before that, we certainly cannot neglect them, otherwise we are likely to see very different men and women !

I do not stand for isolation for any community in India. But I do advocate protection for selected people whose economic life requires pruning. In this process of protection, there is a danger of a few people being isolated. That stage has also to be overcome. A middle path has to be found out.

With the coming of Independence, the tribal people have seen a new ray of hope and I am sure in a few years from now on, the people would be able to take their rightful place in the community of races that live in this vast country of ours.

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