



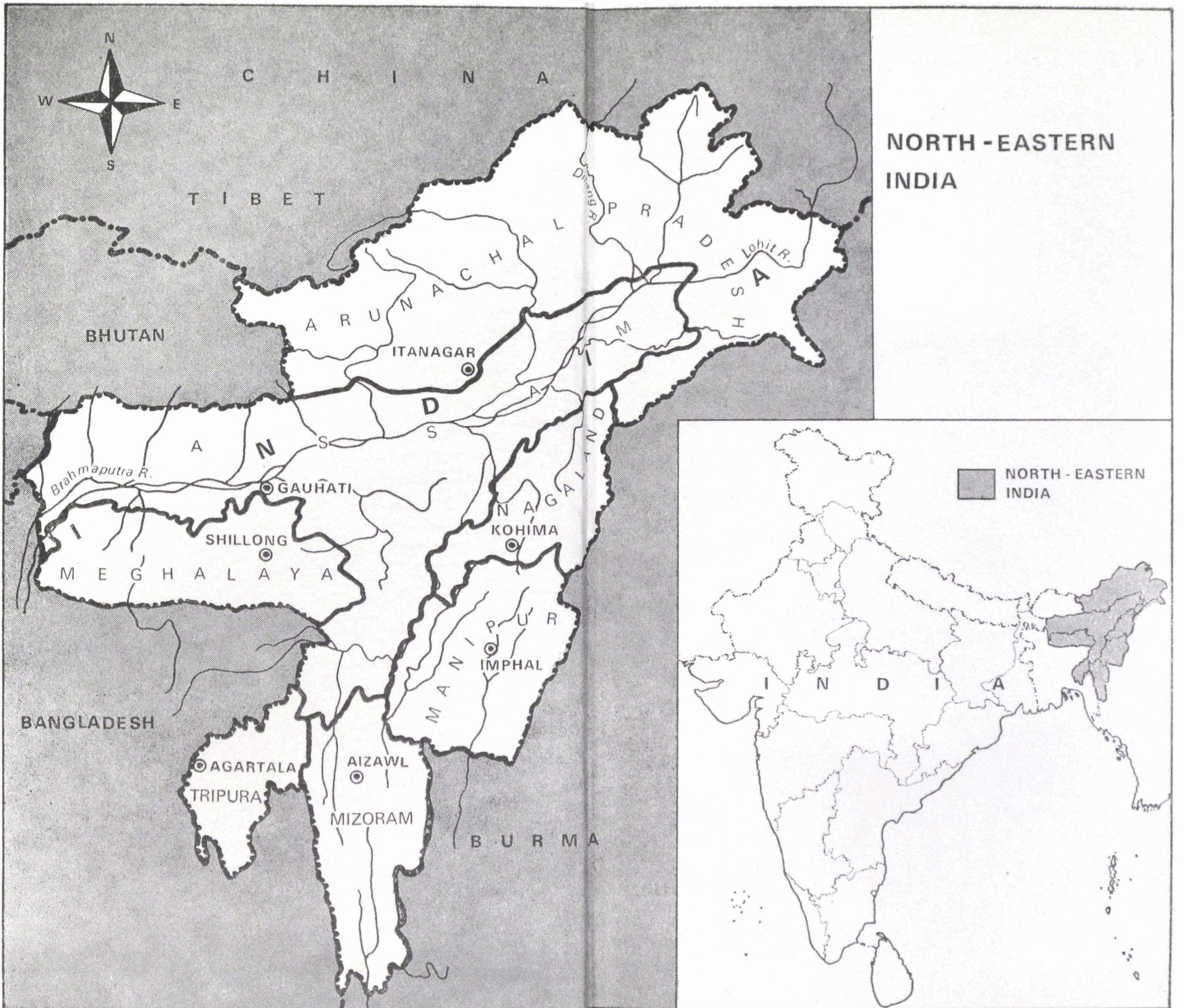
Imperilled Frontiers

India's North-Eastern
Borderlands



NARI RUSTOMJI







Tawang Monastery

IMPERILLED FRONTIERS

India's North-Eastern Borderlands

NARI RUSTOMJI

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For my wife Avi
who has shared with me so much of
sunlight and shadow

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I am especially grateful to Mr B. H. Farmer, Director, Centre of South Asian Studies, through whose good offices the facilities of his Centre were made available to me during my residence in Cambridge. My thanks are also due to the Information Departments of the Nagaland and Meghalaya governments, and more especially to Messrs P. Pal and K. Chakravarty of the erstwhile Nefa administration, for the use of their photographs.

Introduction

Although this book was given birth in the academic environs of Cambridge, it was not conceived as an academic exercise. And although my canvas covers mainly the regions bordering India's north-eastern frontiers, the principles discussed apply with equal validity wherever in the world people at different levels of material, economic and social culture come into contact with each other.

The unrest on India's north-eastern borders has arisen not from want of goodwill on anybody's part but from a failure of understanding. The hopes and aspirations of the Assamese that they could absorb the hill districts of Assam within their own cultural stream were doomed from the very outset. The Assamese did not realize that people, however primitive, resent the imposition of an alien culture. And so, one by one, the hill districts broke away from the parent state. The Assamese have since found themselves in their turn faced with the threat of cultural annihilation. Year after year, immigrants from Bangladesh have been infiltrating into Assam and getting themselves absorbed in the host state. But in getting themselves so absorbed, they have clung tenaciously to their own culture and made no attempt to assimilate with the Assamese. The Assamese have legitimate fears that, if the influx continues, the time will not be far when they will be reduced to a minority in their own state and lose their cultural identity.

In her endeavour to consolidate the unity of the nation by forcing the pace of integration of its several diverse elements, Pakistan succeeded only in losing her eastern wing and, unless she is prepared to learn from the lesson, will find the tribes of her north-western provinces similarly breaking away. This is a forewarning to India lest a similar situation develop on her strategically vital north-eastern borderlands. The movement to secede from India has hitherto been mainly confined to

extremists in the Naga and Mizo hills, but it will quickly spread throughout the frontier states if the apprehension is allowed to fester that their culture is in peril.

Though economic neglect is often cited as one of the causes for the unrest on India's north-eastern frontiers, it is by no means the major factor. Despite a minimum of expenditure on the frontier areas, the British were able to win the goodwill and loyalty of the tribes through engendering a feeling of confidence that they had no interest in interfering with their religion, culture or way of life. Nothing gives rise to so much anger, hostility, even hatred, as the apprehension of cultural aggression. And it is this apprehension that has been at the root of the unrest on India's north-eastern frontiers since the British withdrawal.

Three regions,¹ each with its own distinctive historical background, have been discussed in this book with a view to emphasizing the wisdom of 'hastening slowly' amongst communities that have recently broken out from their shell of isolation. There will be many who will react to this approach as old-fashioned and anachronistic in the world of today, where respect for traditional values is at a discount and held as tantamount to a brake on progress. There are communities, however, that have suffered tragically, and beyond redemption, from well-intentioned attempts to reform them overnight. While, therefore, no community can remain static and while change is an imperative for a community's healthy growth and development, it has to be ensured that the pace of change is adjusted to the community's capacity to absorb such change without detriment to its inherent organism and essential values.

The hill people have been regarded in the past with an attitude of condescension, as simple folk with quaint and curious customs which they will outgrow as they are progressively civilized. Much of the discord on the borders is a reaction to this attitude of patronizing condescension. It has been sought to be shown that heavy economic investment is of little avail in gaining the goodwill of the people of India's north-eastern borderlands and that a strong military presence often creates more problems than it solves. It is only if they can be convinced that their culture and way of life are not in jeopardy and will

¹ Nagaland, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh.

not be undermined by alien pressures that there is hope for a peaceful and secure frontier.

The hills skirting India's north-eastern frontiers are inhabited by a multitude of tribes, the names of which are known to few, save administrators and specialists. Few people outside these fields know of the Pailibos, or of the Akas and Konyaks. Yet each of these tribes has, through the centuries, evolved its own distinct pattern of culture, its own language, its own code of laws, and each has, until recent times, succeeded in maintaining its identity despite the changes taking place in the world around.

At first sight, the tribal people may appear primitive and backward. Many of them are only scantily clad and have no knowledge of reading or writing. Some are to this day nomadic and have no settled home. The first reaction of the inexperienced but zealous young administrator is to set about 'civilizing' the tribal people, and by 'civilizing' he means teaching them to conform to his own pattern of behaviour and thinking. It is only with time and in the light of practical experience that he comes to realize that civilization can be of many sorts.

The road that has led to so much conflict and agony amongst the people of India's north-eastern frontiers has been paved with good intentions all the way. The failure has been, for the most part, not so much in intention as in empathy and sensitivity. And when we speak of failure, it is not in a spirit of criticism or condemnation. Failure and success are relative terms, and if it is deplored that there is so little tranquillity and contentment on India's north-eastern borders, it may equally be argued that the situation might well have been worse! The Government of India's policy *vis-à-vis* the tribal people of the frontiers has been humane and sympathetic. If there has been failure, it has been in an inadequate appreciation of man's instinctive resentment against interference in his inherited and accustomed way of life, however crude and uncivilized it may appear to others.

There has been extensive research on the mysteries and intricacies of tribal lore and custom. It is anomalous however that the stress should generally have been so much more on our responses to the supposed oddities of tribal attitudes and behaviour than the other way round. Much of the misunderstanding

and tension in our relations with the tribals has arisen from the fact that, whereas we are only too ready to react, if not over-react, when confronted with practices and attitudes that do not conform to our standards, we do not sufficiently consider and weigh their reactions to our own more sophisticated perversities. In our righteous indignation at the Naga for taking a few heads in battle, we gloss over the shortcomings of modern culture as manifested in the barbarities of the gas chamber and germ warfare. If more stress were laid on examining in what manner the tribal reacts to the attitudes and beliefs of his self-appointed educators, we might find ourselves more understanding in our approach to his problems and more sympathetic to the realization of his aspirations.

Much is heard of the 'Tribal Problem'. There is, however, no more a 'Tribal Problem' than there is an 'Indian Problem' or 'English Problem'. Each of the multifarious tribes of the Indian subcontinent has had its own history and grown in its own separate way. While, therefore, there may be certain common denominators in their cultural organization, it would be incorrect to generalize too specifically, as though the same considerations applied equally to every tribe. The reasons for variation will be several, partly racial, partly geographical, and partly depending upon the stage and pace at which, as well as the extent to which, they have developed contacts with people and ideas outside their own community and culture. Each one of these factors has to be borne in mind if we are to arrive at balanced conclusions.

My years of frontier service were years of unbounded happiness. And the happiness arose from working amongst people who attracted me, physically as much as emotionally, from the moment of my first meeting with them at the threshold of my career nearly forty years ago. I owe it to them, therefore, to help bring about a wider understanding of their frustration and perplexities in coping with the changes that are so rapidly and haphazardly overtaking their society. I do not propose to justify or find excuses for our many failures. Where there has been failure, I would prefer to accept my share of responsibility and examine what went wrong in the interests of avoiding

similar pitfalls in the future. The problems themselves are as old as the hills and many of the mistakes could have been averted if there had been a keener willingness to learn from the past. All that need be said about the approach to tribal problems has already been said, over and over again, by sociologists and others who have lived and worked amongst primitive peoples in regions as remote and diverse as the South Pacific islands, the Amazon basin and the Himalayan highlands. The misfortune has been that their store of accumulated experience and wisdom has remained the monopoly of anthropologists, administrators and specialists without percolating to the level of the layman. The result is that, where wrongs are committed, the implications remain restricted to a limited milieu and the public conscience is not aroused. The specialists have indeed recorded their findings, but it is most often in a jargon that is not readily comprehensible by the layman. My aim and hope is that, by a discussion in simple terms of complex problems, a wider and deeper understanding may be reached of issues that are vital to the security and happiness of peoples whose whole way of life, traditions and beliefs are so often imperilled by the arbitrary and thoughtless intrusion of alien influences.

I

A Question of Survival

It is given to few to see and feel with the eyes and heart of the tribal, and it was many years before I realized how out of harmony my colleagues and I must have appeared with the landscape and culture of the people amongst whom we were placed. We dressed differently, talked in a different language and were accustomed to different kinds of food and drink. We took it for granted that our own habits of dress, language and diet were more civilized and there were many who poked fun at 'the locals' as having a long way to go before they could aspire to our own elevated level. It was only after I came to know the tribal people more intimately, when they could speak to me as personal friends, that I understood their innermost feelings and attitudes towards the multitude of strangers in their midst. Every tribe has its own word to denote the foreigner or outsider. In Bhutan and Sikkim, where most of the foreign visitors were from India, the term *Gyagar* (Tibetan for 'Indian') came to be adopted to denote the outsider. Though the term was innocent enough in itself, it was clear from the tone of voice and accent with which it was expressed that it conveyed a derogatory, if not contemptuous, sense. One was reminded of the connotations of the word *barbaros* (foreigner) of ancient Greece. Though originally applied by the Athenians to their traditional enemy, the Persian, it was later invoked to brand even the Greek 'foreigner', Philip of Macedon, as a taunt that he was held to be outside the cultural pale of Greece proper.

Tribal populations are thinly spread and, until recent times, their towns had more the appearance of over-sprawling villages. The influx, therefore, of even a handful of families of an alien culture has an immediate impact, psychological as much as physical, on the indigenous population. It is not long before

the outsider sets about 'taking over'. His values are the outgrowth of a different culture, and he proceeds to implant his own peculiar social, religious and recreational institutions, whether they be church, temple, mosque or racecourse. It is only a matter of time before there comes about a complete reversal of positions and the native tribal finds that he is a stranger in his own land.

No community, tribal or otherwise, will readily welcome in its midst the intrusion of a population practising a way of life which is at complete variance with its own. This is well illustrated by the experience of the citizens of Pune, who reacted with dismay and acute apprehension to the establishing in the 1960s of a novel style of ashram in the neighbourhood of their homes. The head of the ashram, a Hindu of wide erudition, who came to be known as Bhagwan, was a person of unusual charisma who succeeded in attracting disciples from all over the world to visit his ashram and sit at his feet. They came to seek the wisdom of the East and found in the ashram a congenial atmosphere, far removed from the tedious asceticism and self-denial commonly associated with India's religious teachers. Bhagwan, their teacher, took a liberal view of sexual freedom and his philosophy of universal love inspired his disciples to behave in a manner that appalled the inhabitants of Pune. They could not view with equanimity the motley groups of Americans, Indians, Britons, Swedes, draped in shawls of silken saffron, all but cohabiting on the roadside sward. Their cultural roots were shaken and they felt abhorrence at the setting in, amidst their homes, of a pattern of life in which there was disregard, if not contempt, for any organized scheme of values.

The citizens of Pune objected to the continuance of the ashram in their city and agitated for its removal out into the country where it would not impinge so much on their day-to-day lives. But the country-folk were no less apprehensive of the ashram than those in the city. Both were unanimous that the devotees, with their negative, if not positively disruptive, attitude to traditional values, were not a wholesome influence and should go back to where they belonged.

What, it may be asked, is the relevance of all this to the tribal context? It is to help uncover the root cause underlying

the tribal agitations against outsiders that are seen to be breaking out throughout the country with increasing frequency. The public reaction to such agitations is that they manifest an unfriendliness and ingratitude on the part of the tribal people and that, in any case, it is anti-national to press for restrictions being placed upon any citizen of India moving about in whatever part of the country he may choose. It is not realized that the question of anybody being anti-national does not arise in such cases at all. The tribal people are not unpatriotic in feeling concern for the survival of their culture and their institutions. The citizens of Pune had no animus against foreigners *qua* foreigners when they agitated for the removal of the ashram. All they sought was that the society within which they had been reared, and more especially their children, should not have to be subjected to what, in their view, were corrupt and alien influences that would undermine their long inherited and deeply cherished value-system. Tribal movements demanding the eviction of outsiders are no more anti-national than the agitations of the gentlemen of Pune. They are the expression of long pent-up feelings that have been building up in the community's subconscious, a desperate *cri de coeur* in defence of a way of life and pattern of values that is being threatened by an aggressive, alien influx. If viewed dispassionately, such agitations will be seen in their true perspective. It will be possible then to identify the seeds of apprehension and suspicion and to take remedial steps to allay hurt and anxiety. As matters stand, the resentment of the tribal people is unhappily exacerbated by insinuations concerning their loyalties. Tribal sentiment is grievously wounded by the misconstruction put on their motivations and by the refusal to recognize that the tribals' behaviour pattern is common to all communities who have a pride and respect for their culture and traditional institutions.

While the Assamese cannot be categorized as tribal, they share none the less the tribals' feeling of insecurity that they are being overwhelmed by outsiders and may ultimately be reduced to a minority in their own habitat. It was this feeling that was responsible for their launching in 1979 a movement that completely paralysed the life and functioning of the entire north-eastern region. The object of the movement was to put pressure on the central government to stop any further influx

of outsiders into Assam, as also to deport such entrants as had already surreptitiously infiltrated into the state and contrived to have their names included in the electoral rolls. What angered the public of the country as being an anti-national stance was the decision of the agitation leaders to restrict all movement of products from the refineries of Assam at a time when oil was in short supply throughout the country and imports from abroad could only be procured at prohibitive rates.

These developments were the more surprising in that the Assamese are, by temperament, an easy-going people not normally given to reacting sharply to provocations. The first words of the Assamese language that a newcomer to Assam learns are *lahe, lahe* ('slowly, slowly'), an expression that has come to be accepted as summarizing the Assamese disposition of patient tolerance, if not indifference. Until the last century, the Assamese led a comparatively easy life. Land was plentiful and the soil rich. It required little toil to reap an abundant harvest and habits of indolence and lethargy inevitably set in. There was no need for hustle and bustle, food was plentiful, and if things occasionally went wrong, they righted themselves in their own good time. The smoking of opium contributed to the general euphoria of the people and the philosophy of '*lahe, lahe*' gave complete satisfaction.

What has happened, then, to distort this idyllic scene? It is one of the ironies of the human comedy that peace and contentment are so often the seeds of their own destruction. As the population in the adjoining districts of Bengal increased, they cast their eyes upon the vast and alluring expanses of the Brahmaputra valley. Muslims from the heavily overpopulated Mymensing district of Bengal (now in Bangladesh) gradually began to overflow into Assam. They found the Assamese people hospitable and accommodating, and it was not long before Assam was pock-marked with clusters of Muslim settlements. With Partition in the offing, there were indeed serious apprehensions regarding Assam's future in the new dispensation: but in the outcome, it was only the Muslim-majority district of Sylhet that fell to Pakistan's share.

Assam had been traditionally a province of communal harmony and, as long as there was no pressure on their land, the Assamese did not resent the Muslim presence. Their philosophy

of tolerance was also one of the factors making for harmonious relations. Assam was thus spared the atrocities and excesses of the partition of Punjab and, even after the excision of Sylhet from the parent body, the peace and harmony of pre-Partition days was not substantially disturbed. At the level of the two governments, there were certainly tensions and friction. The contiguous districts of Bengal had been the main market for the agricultural produce of the Assam border districts, consisting largely of tribal populations. The Pakistan authorities placed obstacles in the way of the smooth continuance of trans-border trade, with the result that, in the absence of any readily accessible alternative market, the border villagers were left with their produce rotting on their hands and faced with economic strangulation. But governmental provocation apart, the people themselves were not embittered by Partition. The social and economic relations of the inhabitants on either side of the border had been so close and intimate that it took time for people in Assam to look upon East Pakistan as a foreign country.

It was this very spirit of friendliness that stood in the way of vigorous and systematic steps being taken to curb the entry of immigrants from East Bengal into Assam during the years following Partition. The Assamese had indeed been feeling for some time a sense of uneasiness at the growing Bengali presence in their province. The early immigrants, mostly poor cultivators, had mixed freely with the local population and even spoke the local language. The more sophisticated Bengalis, on the other hand, who entered government service or the professions, tended to remain aloof from the Assamese and regard themselves as a superior caste, not deigning to speak the local language or interest themselves in Assamese culture. And apart from this attitude of cultural arrogance, they were seriously encroaching upon the employment opportunities that were developing all over the state with the setting up of new industries under successive Five-Year Plans.

There was, of course, nothing new in all this. It was the British who had originally packed the services with Bengalis, not because they entertained any animus against the Assamese but because qualified Assamese were not then available. With the opening of schools and colleges in the province, however,

there was soon a surplus of Assamese with the minimum qualification for entry into government and other services, and it irked them to find avenues for employment blocked, with so many posts already filled, or being progressively filled, by Bengalis.

The Assamese exercised restraint in giving vent to their resentment in the years immediately following Independence. It was a period of high hopes and aspirations, during which there were many who dreamt that, with the departure of the British, the splendours of the old Ahom empire might once more be revived. It had been a long-standing grievance that the British had clipped their wings and excluded them from the administration of the extensive hill areas comprising the multifarious tribal populations. The hour had struck for the Assamese Renaissance. Assamese culture and the Assamese language would find at last their rightful place in the life of the land and Assam's political boundaries would be restored, as of old, to the remotest extremities of the international frontier with China and Burma.

Within less than thirty years, Assam saw all her grand hopes shattered. Far from her regaining administrative control of the hills, she lost even the symbolic suzerainty that she had exercised during the British era. One by one, the hill districts were excised from the parent body of Assam and constituted as separate states or Union territories. Assam was left a shadow of her former self.

The Bangladesh war of 1971 was a major turning point in the political history of the north-eastern borderlands. Assam and her people had been accustomed enough in their history to the infiltration of foreign and outside elements. But such infiltration had taken place in driblets and, as it had been spaced over a considerable period of time, it had been within the absorptive capacity of the province. The refugees that crossed over to Assam and Meghalaya during the Bangladesh operation entered not in driblets but as a mighty, sweeping flood. If Assam felt overwhelmed, the hill people comprising the newly-formed state of Meghalaya felt even more so. Meghalaya's total population was not much above a million, and if the influx of refugees was not contained, they would lose their identity as a tribal state despite all the safeguards of the

Constitution. Tripura was a glaring warning. The indigenous tribes of Tripura had been reduced by the Bengali influx to a negligible minority in their own state. If this could happen in Tripura, there was nothing to prevent it happening in Assam and Meghalaya.

The dismemberment of Assam,¹ however inevitable under the circumstances, came as a shock and trauma from which she could not quickly recover. And coming as it did at a time when she was being flooded by refugees from Bangladesh, it is not surprising that she lost her balance. For Assam suffers from a sense of deep hurt that the Centre has been primarily responsible for her humiliating reduction to the status of a mini-state, one amongst many under shared governors, and that, too, not *primus inter pares*, but a mere equal.

Assamese discontent has been attributed to the Centre's neglect in assisting her adequately to fulfil her industrial potential. However, it has to be borne in mind that the hasty and premature setting up of large-scale industrial units in comparatively undeveloped regions can often be the source of more harm than good. The implementation of such projects necessitates the enlistment of technical personnel, as well as of skilled and unskilled labour, that are not locally available and have to be inducted from outside. Outsiders, understandably enough, expect enhanced salaries and allowances to induce them to leave their homes for employment in the remotenesses of the frontier, and the granting to them of special benefits at once raises local jealousies. The animus against the outsider has arisen largely from a feeling that the funds sanctioned by the central government for the development of the state are in fact no more than an avenue for outsiders to fill their pockets at the expense of the Assamese people.

The Assamese have repeatedly declared that their movement—and resentment—is not against outsiders *per se* (i.e., non-Assamese), but against 'foreigners' (i.e., persons who are not statutory Indian citizens). While this may theoretically be so, there is no doubt that even Indian citizens who are not Assamese live under a sense of insecurity that they are not welcome in the state. For this, too, the Assamese cannot be held entirely

¹ The Khasi, Garo and Mizo hills were excised from Assam under the Re-organization Act of 1971.

at fault. Until recent years, there has been the most abysmal ignorance in the country regarding the people of India's north-eastern borderlands, and tribals from the Naga and Mizo hills have complained often of the harassment to which they have been subjected through being mistaken by Indian officialdom—as also by the Indian public—as foreigners from China or Vietnam.

The Ahoms originally entered Assam from Upper Burma and, although they have since intermarried with the local population, their features still show traces of their Mongoloid origin. Until the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, Assam was outside the British orbit of influence, and the Assamese have ever held it a matter of pride that, save for a brief period of less than thirty years in the seventeenth century, the Ahoms could successfully resist all attempts by the Moghul emperors to subdue their land and bring it within their dominion. With this background of Assam's comparatively recent absorption in the Indian mainstream, her stance *vis-à-vis* foreigners and outsiders becomes understandable; for if even educated Indians have, until recent times, been so ill-informed as to think of the Assamese as a people beyond the periphery of India, the Assamese can scarcely be blamed for regarding Indians as equally 'foreign' to themselves.

The root of discontent on the frontiers is clearly the apprehension of cultural annihilation, whether the people concerned be Assamese, Nagas, Mizos or Meghalayans. The Assamese are not an unreasonable people, and the first necessity is to recognize that their apprehension is justified. They have seen that, for all the administrative measures devised by the government—the sealing off of the borders, the establishing of frontier check-posts, the constitution of tribunals to weed out and deport foreigners—the influx of outsiders into the state continued unabated. This has led them to conclude that the Centre is not sympathetic to Assam's aspirations nor serious in its assurances about checking the inflow of outsiders.

It is late, but not too late, to restore the situation. But if the situation is to be restored, it will not be by doubling or tripling the Centre's grants for Assam's economic development. The Centre has to create a feeling of confidence amongst the Assamese—as indeed amongst all the people of these sensitive

frontier regions—that their land, culture and way of life will be secure from any future inroads of population from outside, whether from Bangladesh, Nepal, or elsewhere. The Assamese and the tribals are humane and practical people who will not insist on the summary eviction of bona fide settlers. The rehabilitation of refugees is, however, a national responsibility and they are entitled to expect that, if commitments have been made regarding their acceptance, the burden of their settlement should fall equally on the country as a whole and not only on those states that happen to be contiguous to Bangladesh. It is, moreover, unjust that those very regions that have been defined in the Constitution as requiring special safeguards for their economic and social survival should be subjected to population pressures which, if not restrained, can only result in their cultural annihilation.

The Mongoloid Fringe

For many in India, the term 'tribe' connotes the somewhat backward forest and hill communities of Central India, such as the Gonds and Bhils. While this is not the occasion to enter into a discussion of racial origins, the tribes of Central India would appear to be remnants of pre-Aryan, perhaps even pre-Dravidian, races who were forced to take shelter in the hills and forests on the usurpation of their original homes in the plains by foreign invaders. For some time, they succeeded in maintaining their identity, living their own separate lives in the remote fastnesses where they had sought asylum, neither interfering with nor being much interfered with by the world outside. Progressively, however, their isolation was breached. The ubiquitous moneylender inveigled his way into their lives and made them captive. In their original pattern of living, trade was in kind and their needs were limited to the few essentials of clothing, utensils and ornaments that they themselves produced. Step by step, the foreign trader began tempting them with the blandishments of the city and, with the succumbing to temptation, there arose the need for cash to acquire the 'essentials' that were really no essentials at all. The moneylender was only too ready to oblige with funds and even more ready to appropriate, on failure of repayment, the land, huts and crops that he had cleverly arranged to be mortgaged to him. The trader also encouraged the tribals to cultivate a taste for distilled alcohol in preference to their own home-brewed beer, which was not only cheaper to produce but also more nutritious and less heady in its after-effects. The process of economic, moral and cultural degradation gradually set in.

The advent of the British did little to improve the situation. The opening up of communications resulted in as much harm

as good, as it hastened the breach of the isolation that had been one of the main natural defences of the tribals against outsiders whose only interest was economic exploitation. With the British came also the Christian missionary and, although their intentions may have been highly estimable, it is questionable whether the impact of a completely unfamiliar set of ideas on a culture that had evolved through the ages to fulfil the needs of a community geared to a particular pattern of life was the most salutary. If the Indian trader was responsible for the economic enslavement of the tribal people, the Christian missionary must share the responsibility for the social and cultural degradation that has befallen a people that was once so full of the joy and beauty of living.

It is not that the British were unaware of the likely impact of a too sudden or heavy alien presence upon primitive cultures. The British administrator was traditionally sympathetic towards the minorities. The minorities, if only because of their multiplicity and the variety in their way of life, stood out as bright, refreshing oases in the vast and seemingly static panorama of India. It would have required superhuman endeavour to convert or make much dent on Hindu society with its ever-increasing millions. The Hindu substratum was too deeply entrenched, and it had infinite capacity for absorbing within itself and impressing with its own stamp any beliefs or religious system with which it might be implanted. Administrators preferred to address themselves, therefore, to such sectors of the population as they felt would be more amenable to their influence.

Such British administrators as had studied and taken special interest in the tribes of Central India did not fail to foresee the disastrous effects that outside contacts could have upon a primitive community unless some measure of protection was accorded and unless such contacts could be reasonably contained. The administrator and Christian missionary were, however, often working at cross purposes. This could be due to egocentric reasons, each feeling resentment that the other was encroaching upon his own rightful preserve. But there was also a deeper reason. The seasoned administrator, being guided by rational considerations, was inclined to be cautious and hesitant about setting into motion processes whose final outcome was so un-

predictable. The missionary, on the other hand, was convinced that all would be well, as long as he put his trust in Christ. He worked as one possessed, in the faith that he was answering a divine call and that no harm could therefore result from his actions.

As against the tribes of Central India that have become so 'detrribalized' through outside influences that they have practically lost their character *qua* tribes, that is, as communities with a code of behaviour individual to themselves and a vital interest in the art of living, the tribes of India's north-eastern borders are mainly of Mongoloid origin and have remained protected over a longer period by their isolation. The vigour of their culture is still therefore alive and fresh. It is important to bear in mind, however, that their first contacts with outsiders, whether with administrators or missionaries, took place not at any one single juncture but at different periods extending over a prolonged stretch of time. The British made tentative advances into the Naga and Khasi hills as long ago as in the first half of the nineteenth century, soon after the expulsion of the Burmese invader from Assam. It was not until the latter half of the century that they established themselves in the Lushai (since designated as Mizo) hills, whereas the tribes north of the Brahmaputra and along India's borders with Tibet were left undisturbed until as recently as a decade or two before India's Independence in 1947.

The fact that the first contacts of individual tribes with the outside world were established at such widely disparate times would go to show that it was not in the natural course of their evolution that such contacts came about. Most of the tribes along the frontier had been at approximately the same level of cultural evolution, and purely fortuitous circumstances outside their control dictated that the tribes of a particular region should be brought within the embrace of the administration and 'civilized', while their neighbours, whose level of cultural development was neither lower nor higher, remained untouched and continued in their pristine isolation.

The 'fortuitous circumstances' could be of various kinds, but were mainly economic, political or strategic. The growth of the tea industry and the exploitation of minerals, including coal and oil, resulted in the earliest contacts with the tribes along

Assam's eastern frontiers during the nineteenth century. It became essential to establish friendly relations to ensure against controversy over lands acquired for the newly-founded industries being claimed by the tribes as their exclusive property. As important as land was the question of forest and water rights. Disputes over land, forest and water rights led often to raids by the hill people on tea gardens and mining areas, necessitating reprisals by the police or paramilitary formations such as the frontier rifles.

In course of time, as China proceeded to entrench herself in Tibet and gave indications that she had reservations regarding the validity of the McMahon Line as the international frontier between China and India, it no longer remained possible for India to allow the vast belt of mountains stretching out northwards from the Brahmaputra valley to remain an unexplored, neglected and undefined void. Strategic considerations necessitated the construction of a network of communications for the movement of troops and provisioning of supplies in the event of an attack from the north. And it became no less essential to cultivate the goodwill of the frontier people so that they should lend their support to the administration and the armed forces in time of need.

The Indian Constitution provides extensive safeguards for the protection of tribal interests. With the transfer of power in 1947, a Sub-Committee of the Constituent Assembly was specifically appointed and charged with the responsibility of recommending the constitutional arrangements best suited to promote the interests of the tribal people. The Sub-Committee took its responsibilities seriously and did not spare itself. It visited the tribal areas and, after hearing the evidence of the tribal people and their representatives, submitted a fair and objective report incorporating recommendations that, *prima facie*, should have satisfied tribal aspirations. The administration of a very wide field of subjects in each hill district was to be the responsibility of a popularly elected District Council with extensive legislative powers. No laws passed by the Indian Parliament or the Assam State Assembly would have effect in the tribal areas failing the passing of a resolution by the District Council specifically making such laws applicable to the hill district concerned. All this was to ensure that, as far as possible,

the tribals of the hill districts should be allowed to run their own affairs and not be subjected to outside interference. Assurances were also forthcoming at the highest level of government that the development and prosperity of the tribal people were the country's first concern and that constraints of finance would not be allowed to come in the way of the fulfilment of this objective.

The stage seemed set for an era of fruitful advance. The start could not have been under fairer auspices. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's Prime Minister, was recognized as an internationalist, an idealist and a visionary; here was no hidebound bigot out to impose the blanket of Hindu orthodoxy upon the rich and varied tapestry of India's multifarious tribes with their freedom from the inhibitions of the so-called more advanced societies. 'I am alarmed', he had observed, 'when I see how anxious people are to shape others according to their own image or likeness, and to impose on them their particular way of living. We are welcome to our way of living, but why impose it on others? This applies equally to national and international fields. In fact, there would be more peace in the world if people were to desist from imposing their way of living on other people and countries. I am not at all sure which is the better way of living, the tribal or our own. In some respects, I am quite certain theirs is better. Therefore, it is grossly impertinent on our part to approach them with an air of superiority, to tell them how to behave or what to do and what not to do. There is no point in trying to make of them a second-rate copy of ourselves.'

Despite such a splendid fanfare as prelude, despite the conscientious and well-meant resolution of the framers of the Constitution, the story of India's tribes since Independence has been far from cheering. The country has been faced with armed rebellion from at least two of the major tribes along her frontiers, the Nagas and the Mizos. Many of the tribes of the former province of Assam have since severed themselves from the mother body to form separate states of their own. And the safeguards enshrined in the Constitution notwithstanding, the tribes have come to harbour suspicions that there are powerful elements in the country that do not favour the continuance of their political or even cultural identity and who would prefer to see the tribes formally and forcibly merged into what is loosely classed as the 'mainstream of the nation's culture'.

There has been a spillover of this sentiment of mixed suspicion and apprehension in the neighbouring areas of Sikkim and Bhutan. Sikkim has indeed been since incorporated within the Indian Union and now stands on the same constitutional footing as any other Indian state. While the people of Sikkim and Bhutan are not technically 'tribal', there are many features in their way of life and attitudes that bear parallel with their neighbours on the Assam frontier. The inhabitants are predominantly of Mongoloid stock and have little in common, either linguistically or in matters of customary usage, with the plainsmen of India. Like the tribals of India's frontier hills, they have remained, until recent years, isolated from the outside world and have been shy, if not apprehensive, of an over-friendly embrace from their neighbours either to the north or south.

It is vital to India's security to have a friendly and loyal people along her north-eastern frontiers, and it is unfortunate that the assurance of constitutional safeguards and the generous financing of projects for the welfare of the people should not have earned return in terms of goodwill and co-operation. Certain sections of the Indian public have indeed been critical of the tribal people for their seeming ingratitude to the nation. Millions of rupees are being injected annually into areas whose revenues are so meagre that they cannot bear even a fraction of the expenditure incurred on the promotion of educational, medical and other social welfare services. 'The tribes are being spoilt' is a cry that is often heard, 'cut off funds and let them try running their schools, hospitals and engineering services out of their own revenues; only then will they understand how much they have to be grateful for.'

Such an attitude reveals a basic misunderstanding of the deep-rooted causes of the feeling of unsettlement amongst the tribal people. For it has to be remembered that it was not the tribal people who took the initiative in seeking and establishing contacts with their neighbours outside their habitat. It has been the latter who, for purposes of industrial development, strategic necessity or other considerations of self-interest, have initiated contacts that were at the outset neither intended nor desired by the tribal people themselves. Such contacts were, moreover, pursued in complete disregard of the stage of cultural evolution

reached by the tribe at the time or of its capacity to stand up, at such stage, to the forces of change without detriment to its own social structure. With the Chinese threat to India's borders and subsequent invasion in 1962, a wide network of strategic roads was rushed through on a top-priority, money-no-consideration basis in regions that, until a few years before, had never seen an outsider. The sudden influx of engineers, army personnel and hordes of labourers was bound to have its impact on an area geared to sustain only a sparse population—and the impact was far from beneficial. It was the Japanese, twenty years earlier, who had invaded Manipur and the Naga hills causing widespread devastation. The Japanese entry into World War II in 1941 had posed a grave threat to India, as it very soon became clear that, after overrunning Burma, the Japanese would set their sights to a full-scale invasion of the Indian subcontinent across its north-eastern frontiers, more especially the Naga hills and Manipur.

Time and again, the hill people of the frontiers have found themselves becoming involuntarily involved in and fighting other people's battles. The Naga villager knew nothing of Hitler, Mussolini or Hirohito, not even their names, and yet it was the homes and fields of the Nagas and not of the policy-makers in Delhi that were destroyed before the Japanese attack could be stemmed. It is little wonder, therefore, that the hillman fights shy of outside involvement and prefers to be left alone to manage his own affairs according to his own lights, and at his own pace.

Nagaland: Phizo and Rebellion

There has rarely been much concern whether the stage of evolution reached by a tribe would justify its subjection to the strains of the change in its pattern of life that contact with outsiders and the impact of an alien culture would necessarily impose. The prime consideration has been whether the contact was in the interest, whether economic, political or strategic, of its initiators, with no thought about the consequences, whether for good or evil, for the tribe itself.

Of the many tribes along India's north-eastern frontiers, the Nagas have attracted wider notice, partly on account of the gallant part they played in stemming the Japanese invasion of India in World War II, partly by reason of their prolonged struggle for independence after the transfer of power from British to Indian hands in 1947. The Nagas are amongst the earliest of the frontier tribes over whom the British extended their jurisdiction from the first half of the nineteenth century and it will be useful to seek out the reasons for which, of all the numerous tribes, the Nagas should have posed such intractable problems to the Indian administration.

A brief historical sketch will be helpful in setting the Naga situation in clearer perspective. The rulers of Assam, before the British occupation, had been the Ahoms, a semi-Mongoloid people, who had invaded Assam through upper Burma in the thirteenth century and took over control of the country from its former kings. The Ahom rule was comparatively enlightened and efficient in its earlier years, but gradually fell into corruption and became so weakened by internal dissension that the Ahoms found themselves eventually compelled to call upon the

British for assistance in repelling the invasion of Assam by the Burmese in the first quarter of the nineteenth century.¹ The British began, as was their wont, by administering Assam indirectly, through the agency of the already subsisting native rulers. Step by step, however, the native rulers were superseded until all the districts in the plains were brought under direct rule on the pattern of the 'settled districts' in the rest of India.

The policy of the Ahom rulers *vis-à-vis* the tribes had been one of conciliation. Their concern was that the hill people should confine themselves to their habitat in the mountains and forests and that no provocation should be offered that might cause them to raid the villages in the plains. On the few occasions that the Ahoms despatched a punitive expedition into the hills, they did not meet with signal success; to track down and capture miscreant tribals in their remote mountain fastnesses was as impractical a proposition, as they found to their cost—and as they picturesquely put it—as for 'an elephant to enter a rat-hole'. The growing corruption and inefficiency of the Ahom administration, however, provided increasing opportunities to the hill people to raid the villages in the plains for plunder; and as they could do so with impunity on account of the virtual breakdown of governmental authority, their spirit of aggression progressively increased.

In taking over control of Assam from the Ahoms, the British followed, by and large, their predecessors' policy *vis-à-vis* the tribal people in the hills. The British interest was primarily commercial, the development of the tea industry and, later, the exploitation of oil, mineral and forest resources. Their concern with the hillmen was strictly limited—that they should not come in the way of the acquisition of land and forest areas required for establishing tea gardens nor interfere with the functioning of such gardens when established. There were disputes from time to time over boundaries and over forest and water rights. Such disputes might provoke a raid by hillmen upon the offending garden, to be followed by a government punitive expedition by way of reprisals. The British however were soon made as aware as their Ahom precursors of the risks and complexities of police operations in the hills and forests.

¹ It was after the defeat of the Burmese and the signing of the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826 that the British proceeded to take over the administration of Assam.

The British elephant was as cumbersome and ineffective as the Ahom in a rat-hole, and it was considered wisest to forestall against occasions for friction by a policy of least possible interference with the people of the hills.

Despite this genuine intent to exercise restraint, the British became increasingly involved in the affairs and disputes of the Naga hillman, with the result that they ultimately found it advisable to establish administrative and police outposts in the Naga hills with a view to cultivating more friendly relations with their inhabitants and exercising a sobering influence on their aggressions. It was also considered necessary, for administrative reasons, to improve the very primitive line of communications running through these hills to the frontier state of Manipur on India's border with Burma.

It will be clear from the above that it was not the Nagas who initiated the moves that led to the establishing of road communications and outposts in their hills. The British advance, reluctant and hesitant though it was in its earlier phases, was fiercely resisted by the Nagas, and it was only after heavy fighting and at the cost of many a gallant life that the British succeeded, in 1878, in setting up a Civil and Frontier Police headquarters at the Angami Naga village of Kohima. Once established in the Naga hills, the British enjoyed comparatively peaceful relations with the Nagas up to the time of their final departure in 1947.

Throughout these seventy odd years, save for the brief period of the Japanese invasion, the British were able to maintain order in the Naga hills, an area of over 3,000 square miles, with the aid of a single battalion of the Assam Rifles, a paramilitary force constituted for the patrolling and policing of the hill districts of the Assam frontier. No less than thirty times this strength has had to be deployed in the Naga hills during the years following Independence. It is ironical that the India of Mahatma Gandhi, with her high ideals of non-violence, should have had to depend upon armed strength on such a massive scale and over such a protracted period for the maintenance of law and order amongst tribal communities, many of whom are still in a primitive state of civilization.

Were there any special circumstances favouring the British, it may be asked, whereby they were able to maintain friendly

relations with the Nagas at so little cost of life, military armament and financial outlay? Or were they possessed of some special skill in the arts of administration that has been lacking in their Indian successors? The Nagas, as we have seen, were initially opposed to the British advance into their hills; they killed the first political officer, Colonel Damant, on his visit to the historic fort of Khonoma and all but succeeded in besieging the newly-established station at Kohima. But the British were thereafter able to inspire sufficient confidence to convince the Nagas that it was in their interest to coexist peaceably with their former conquerors.

It is understandable that the Nagas should have been initially suspicious and apprehensive of the successor Indian government. Their experience of the plainsmen had been their experience of the trader, whose sole interest in the Naga had been to exploit him. They had heard, moreover, that Hindus worshipped the cow, and were afraid that they might be deprived of their main source of sustenance, beef, if the slaughter of cattle was banned by the new government. It might reasonably have been expected, however, that these suspicions and apprehensions could have been allayed by bringing the special constitutional safeguards for the protection of the tribal people to the notice of their leaders and by assurances at the highest level that such safeguards would be scrupulously honoured.

While most of the tribes initially accepted the new Constitution and appeared satisfied with the statutory safeguards provided to protect their special interests, the Nagas made it amply clear from the outset that they favoured a separate status altogether. Their spokesman at the time was Zapu Phizo, whose fanatical feeling of Naga nationalism may be gauged from his previous record of collaboration with the Japanese and the I.N.A. (Indian National Army) in their projected invasion of India via Burma and Assam. For Phizo is reported to have agreed to assist the Japanese by supplying intelligence of the Naga country through which their path to India lay on the condition that, after the defeat of the Allies, the Nagas would be allowed to enjoy complete independence as a sovereign state.

During the British period, the major part of the Naga hills formed a district of Assam. Constitutionally, however, the dis-

tract was an 'Excluded Area', that is to say, its administration was 'excluded' from the jurisdiction of the popularly elected Assam Ministry and fell within the direct responsibility of the Governor of Assam. In exercising this responsibility, the Governor acted not on the advice of his ministers but in his personal discretion.

The district was lightly administered, with none of the complex administrative paraphernalia of a plains district. The District Head (Deputy Commissioner) was a Jack of all trades saddled with responsibility for *all* the multifarious activities of government and not simply for revenue and law and order, as in the normal 'settled districts' of the country. He organized the construction of bridle tracks, offered guidance in improved techniques of agriculture and village crafts, kept a check on the supply of medical stores—there was no field of activity that did not come within his purview. But this was possible only because the fields of activity were kept strictly limited.

The British policy—and herein lay its success—was one of least possible interference. It was the missionary, and not the administrator, who was the main harbinger of change in the religious beliefs and way of life of the tribal people. And if there was sometimes conflict between the administrator and the the missionary, it was over the former's apprehension that the missionary was bringing about changes that would prove detrimental to the cohesion and vitality of tribal society and culture. Governmental apparatus was skeletal, and save for a handful of technical officers, such as doctors and engineers, the main bulk of the administration was carried on through the tribal people themselves. But then, what was this 'bulk'? Judicial cases, whether criminal or civil, were settled amicably by the tribals themselves. On the rare occasions that it was found necessary to confine a Naga in a jail, the detention was nominal and the convict might even be granted leave from jail to see his family or to attend to some urgent business in the confidence and certainty that he would be bound by the constraints of his social organization to return on an agreed date. Throughout the British period, there was a deliberate and determined endeavour to restrict the administrative apparatus to a rock-bottom minimum.

It has been mentioned that during the British period a *part*

of the Naga hills had been constituted as a district of Assam. This was the part that was closer to the plains and where there was need for some machinery, however rudimentary, to oversee the conduct of relations between the people of the hills and plains and settle boundary and other disputes as might from time to time arise. The British were content to leave unattended, or virtually unattended, the remoter Naga areas extending up to the Burmese frontier, which had little contact with the Assam plains and posed no problem to the peaceful development of the tea industry or to the progressive extension of governmental activities in the plains. It was only when Nagas from these remoter, unadministered areas raided villages in the regularly constituted, settled districts in the plains that cognizance was taken and a punitive expedition despatched against the offenders lest they assume that they were at liberty to commit raids on British territory with impunity. The Nagas of the unadministered areas were free to commit raids and take heads to their heart's delight within their own habitat, and a blind eye was turned upon their frolics, provided they committed no trespass.

The Assamese of the plains had never been happy with the arrangements under which the Naga hills, although constitutionally a district of Assam, were excluded from the political and administrative jurisdiction of the Assam Ministry. They felt slighted that the responsibility for their administration had been vested in the Governor acting in his personal discretion, with the implication that the Assamese were held not competent to be entrusted with such responsibility. They also considered it anomalous that European and American missionaries should be permitted to reside in the Naga hills and preach a 'foreign' faith, while they themselves were barred entry. The Assamese suspected that this discrimination was part of a mischievous scheme to keep the hill areas permanently separate from the plains as the exclusive monopoly of the British. Why, they protested, should a foreign language (English) and a foreign script (Roman) be encouraged amongst a people whose *lingua franca* was a form of simple, pidgin Assamese? This could be no less than a stratagem for diverting the Nagas from their true and natural cultural roots, which had affinities with the Assamese, to an alien and anti-national outlook. With the departure of the

British, all this must, in the Assamese view, be reversed and the Nagas reunited, politically, culturally and administratively, with their long-lost brothers and sisters of the Assam plains.

There was indeed much substance in the Assamese claim and, if only they had given expression to it with more tact and discretion, they might well have averted the secession of the Nagas from the mother state. It is indisputable that, on account of the prolific diversity of the various Naga languages, the Nagas had in fact come to adopt as their *lingua franca* a dialect that is basically Assamese, with only a slight Naga admixture. There have not infrequently been sessions of the Naga Legislature at which debates have been carried on not in English or any Naga language but in the rough-and-ready brand of Assamese that has come to be known as Nagamese. Apart from language, there are other natural links with Assam, as in the area of commerce and communications. The pooling of raw materials for the setting up of joint large-scale enterprises, such as paper and plywood industries, the sharing of water resources for the implementation of multipurpose river projects—such ventures would have contributed substantially to the building up of a strong, economically viable frontier state. Sir Andrew Clow, who was Governor of Assam until shortly before the transfer of power, was convinced that the future of the plains and hills of Assam lay in their remaining united within a single administrative framework. Sir Andrew did not conform to the traditional Indian Civil Service mould. Essentially God-fearing, humane and liberal by temperament, he could not reconcile himself to the indefinite conniving at of practices such as head-hunting and slavery in a civilized society; and he apprehended that keeping the hill districts isolated from the plains would perpetuate the old order and retard progress to more enlightened ways. The hill districts were, moreover, sparsely populated and their revenues inadequate to pay for their barest administrative needs, let alone provide the investment required for exploiting their abundant natural resources. Every logical consideration pointed to the desirability of the hills and plains continuing as a single political, economic and administrative unit. But at root, the hillman suspected the plainsman, while the latter, for all his outward protestations of affection and historical affinities, had little respect for the hillman's culture

and way of life. The Naga was looked down upon as a 'naked' primitive and 'dog-eater', while his freedom from sexual inhibitions and unashamed passion for a carouse were frowned upon by the more orthodox plainsman. Suspicion and arrogance, abetted by administrative ineptitude, have been, as we shall find, the main ingredients that made for the separation of the hills and plains areas of Assam, rendering both equally unviable.

There was moreover a lurking apprehension amongst the tribal people on attainment of Independence that India's teeming masses would overflow into their habitat, disrupting their traditional way of life and depriving them of their most precious possession, their land. The tribal does not possess a great deal in the shape of material assets and is therefore all the more fanatically attached to his land. It is the land that provides him and his family, year after year, with their essential source of sustenance, and it is the land that supports the livestock upon which he depends. While, however, other tribal communities accepted the safeguards enshrined in the Constitution for the protection of their culture and their land, it is significant that the tribe that had suffered most from the impact of the Japanese invasion, the Nagas, were not only dissatisfied with the statutory safeguards but launched an armed rebellion to break away from the Indian Union and set up an independent state of their own. The question that arises is whether it was the traumatic shock of the Japanese invasion that was the reason for this extreme posture or whether there were other causes that were at the root of their discontent.

The course of history can be deflected by the personality of a single powerful leader, and many have held that, but for Phizo and his relentless stand, the Nagas would have settled down in course of time and co-operated in working the Constitution. It has to be borne in mind, however, that although Phizo was undoubtedly the prime driving force at the start of the Naga insurrection, he found himself later compelled, in order to evade arrest, to seek refuge abroad and has been physically far removed from the Naga scene for over twenty years. Phizo must, therefore, have been the focus and symbol of forces that were deeply and inextricably rooted in the Naga matrix, as else, with his prolonged, self-imposed exile, the movement he inspired would by now have weakened and died.

Sir Akbar Hydari was the Governor of Assam during the critical years of transition from British to Indian rule. After holding protracted and heated discussions with the Naga leaders, he entered into an agreement¹ with them whereunder the existing administrative arrangements would be continued for a period of ten years, after which the Nagas would be asked whether they wished the agreement to be extended for a further period or a new agreement drawn up regarding their future. The Nagas interpreted this agreement to concede that, if they so wished, they were free to opt out of the Indian Union after ten years, whereas the government took the stand that, whatever might be the revised arrangements agreed upon after ten years, they would have to fall within the four corners of the Indian Constitution.

Phizo left nobody in doubt as to his own interpretation and intentions. He instructed the Nagas not to participate in elections under the Constitution and, although the machinery for conducting elections was duly set up by the government, the Nagas obeyed his call and refused to cast their votes. Phizo, on the other hand, organized his own non-official referendum on the issue of whether or not the Nagas should remain within India, and on conclusion of his referendum, produced plebiscite documents to substantiate his claim that 99 per cent of the people of the Naga hills favoured independence and separation from India.

Up to this juncture, there had been no overt resort to force of arms, both sides professing outwardly to be motivated by Gandhian principles of non-violence, whatever might have been their inner convictions and reservations. There was no doubt in anybody's mind regarding Phizo's hold over the people. He was an astute and indefatigable organizer and succeeded soon in setting up a parallel government and realizing taxes. This amounted to open rebellion and the Government of India reacted by inducting massive armed force into the Naga hills. The feeling had for some time been growing in certain circles that Naga affairs had been mishandled and allowed to drift through the inexperience and soft-peddalling of administrators who had shown over-much indulgence in their approach to the tribal situation. What these hardened tribes of head-hunters needed,

¹ Known as the Nine-point Agreement of 1947.

in this view, was not honeyed words but the iron fist. The Indian public had, of course, no knowledge whatsoever of the tribes of the Indo-Burma frontier. The term 'frontier-tribes' conjured up in their minds Kiplingesque visions of Pathans of the North-West Frontier and exciting tales of ambushes, military expeditions and raids on fierce tribesmen by fighter and bomber aircraft. The British, in the popular view, knew what they were doing when they appointed officers with a strong army or police background to posts in the Political Service involving dealings with savage tribesmen. Such officers would have known better than our soft-spoken Indian officers, with their Gandhi-oriented philosophy of non-violence and tolerance, to handle the Nagas or whosoever else dared to challenge the authority of the government. It followed from this reasoning that the army must be commissioned to crush the Naga rebellion.

While there is no conclusive evidence, as there has never been any impartial non-governmental enquiry, there can be no denying that, for a period of two to three years commencing from 1955, the military applied themselves with full-blooded vigour to the business of 'softening up' the recalcitrant Naga. But there can never be only one-way traffic in such situations. There was soon retaliation from Phizo's private army and it was not long before it was a matter of doubt as to who was softening up whom. It will serve no purpose to revive bitter memories, but it is recognized, to everybody's shame, that this was one of the darker chapters in the history of the Naga hills. Phizo, when he was so minded, could be devastatingly ruthless, even to the extent of committing barbarities, if it suited his purpose, upon his own relatives and one-time devoted and loyal supporters. Fierce and relentless revenge was the main motivating force during this black and senseless period. And when at last, from sheer exhaustion and the realization of the utter futility of it all, the curtain was lowered, there was no applause for either side. The seeds of hatred sown during this era of mutual brutality, mercifully brief though it was, have borne in the years that followed and up to this date the only to be expected fruit of deep-rooted bitterness and distrust.

It may well be asked how such a ghastly tragedy could have been enacted at all with civilized and intelligent human beings at the helm of the administration. Part of the blame may be

ascribed to the tradition of decision-making by precedent inherent in the administrative processes and inherited from the predecessor government. It was generally assumed, during the earlier years of Independence, that the British technique of dealing with a situation was necessarily the correct technique, forgetting that the circumstances of the situation might be entirely different and necessitate a totally different approach. It was unrealistic to expect the Naga to respond to the Indian administrator in the same frame of mind as he would have to his British predecessor. The British established themselves in the Naga hills when they were at the peak of their power and prestige. The Nagas, we have seen, resented their presence, but were compelled to accept the logic of might being right and resigned themselves to imperial rule as an unavoidable necessity.

It would be wrong to assume however that the Naga had resigned himself to perpetual bondage. Though, in popular image, he was no more than a 'naked head-hunter', his passion for freedom remained strong and ardent despite the British yoke. When, in the 1930s, the Simon Commission set out to examine and make recommendations for the further devolution of power from British to Indian hands, the Naga representatives were fully alive to the implications of such devolution and were not prepared to let their case fall by default. They had fought against the British and accepted defeat, together with the consequences of defeat. They shared the fate of innumerable peoples who had been forced to bow before a mightier power. But the British, they argued, were unashamed imperialists, who took pride in empire and their imperial role, whereas the Indians had consistently decried the ideology of empire, branding the British as exploiters of the weak and underprivileged. How, in good conscience, could the Indian now assume the imperial role and lord it over the Nagas? Besides, the Nagas had had no connection with and owed no obligation to India. Their sole allegiance had been to British officers and a British Governor acting in his personal discretion. If the British were to withdraw, the natural and logical consequence in their view was that the status quo ante the British occupation should be restored and the Nagas left free to manage their own affairs.

The Nagas might well have drawn up a balance sheet of gains

and losses under the British occupation. True, they could now live under a greater sense of security, with less fear of raids by head-hunters. But then, head-hunting had been a way of life and its disappearance had also coincided with the extinction of other features of Naga life which had given zest and joy. There was pride, in days of old, in bringing home an enemy head as qualification for winning a bride. It was not quite the same to present the beloved with the skull of a monkey or a pig as the enlightened new administrators were advocating. The Naga also recalled with nostalgia the traditional 'Feasts of Merit'. These were offered to the community by its more prosperous and influential members and entitled the donor to wear a distinctive shawl so that the entire community might know of his importance and generosity of heart. The missionaries had discouraged these feasts as being occasions of riotous and unseemly drinking and merry-making, and substituted the singing of psalms in their stead, which was never *quite* the same! But all this apart, the Japanese invasion pointed out to the Naga the dangers of becoming involved in other people's affairs. It was one thing to lose a head or two periodically to a hostile neighbour. But why, they asked themselves, should they be despoiled of their entire homes, crops and possessions on account of quarrels between countries over causes with which they had not the slightest concern? Once was enough, and, if the British were on their way out, the Nagas were certainly not prepared to let anyone else in, however insistent might be their professions of love and friendship.

It would be wrong therefore to attribute the vexations of the Naga problem to administrative ineptitude alone, although this played a not inconsiderable part in sharpening and aggravating discontent. There were deeper forces at work, reaching far back to the time of their first conquest by the British, and it is questionable whether, administrative ineptitude apart, the subsequent troubles and tensions could have been altogether averted.

Assamese Irredentism

It is an irony that it has been the plainsman's well-meant efforts to woo and 'uplift' the hill tribal people that have been so largely responsible for engendering separatist urges. The Assamese felt it incumbent upon themselves to atone for the supposed injury done to the tribal people by the British through their policy of 'excluding' the hill districts and so isolating them from the rest of the province. The hill tribals on the other hand, and the Nagas in particular, were nervous at the prospect of the Assamese embrace. The culture of the tribal people had already suffered shock from the advent of the British a hundred years back. They had scarcely adjusted themselves to the impact of one alien intrusion before being threatened by another.

It could not have been easy for the primitive Naga to understand and accept the mores of the first European entrants. The structure of the English language had no affinity with any of the Naga languages and the very concept of literacy was foreign. The Christian dogma again, which the missionaries were bent on introducing, was at variance with tribal ideas of the supernatural. The general belief of primitive tribal communities was in a host of spirits, mainly evil and hostile, which had to be appeased if the community was to survive. The idea of a loving God sending his son to atone with his blood for the sins of man was too novel a concept for the tribal mind to readily apprehend. And then, on top of it all, the hillman was subjected to the rigours of schooling in the hieroglyphics of the Roman script so that he might be enabled to ingest more thoroughly the holy word.

While all this indoctrination was initiated in the nineteenth century, it took time for its ultimate message to penetrate the remoter frontier areas where, after a considerable effort of

adjustment, the inhabitants were gradually beginning to see the glimmerings of the new light. What they had been so laboriously taught was assuming meaning at last and they were looking forward to enjoying the fruit of their toils. But now, at the threshold of their enlightenment, they were being told by the Assamese that they had been misled all this time, that they should have been taught not English and the Roman script but Assamese and the Assamese script so that they might have enjoyed freer and easier intercourse with their 'brothers and sisters' in the plains. Whom were they to believe? Were they to unlearn everything they had worked at with such earnest effort and start again the long and tedious process of grappling with yet another language and yet another script? And suppose some great leader came from Delhi a few years later and told them that Assamese was of no use and that they should better learn Hindi so as to be able to participate more fully in the mainstream of India's culture? How many languages and scripts were they going to be asked to learn and unlearn? And how often were they going to be advised to change their gods? They had been persuaded once already to give up the beliefs inherited from their forefathers and to put their trust in Christ. They were now hearing talk of the religious teachings of Sankardev and Ramakrishna being more suitable for their spiritual well-being, not to speak of Vishnu, Ram and the infinitely complex hierarchy of the Hindu pantheon. The bewilderment of the tribals was total and it is surprising, in retrospect, that there were so few at the time to appreciate and sympathize with them in their predicament.

Assam was fortunate in having at her helm at this critical juncture an astute Governor, Sir Akbar Hydari, and a Chief Minister, Gopinath Bardoloi, of wide and liberal outlook. As Hydari was a Muslim, the tribes enjoyed a sense of security, albeit temporary, that they would not be subjected in the immediate future to any massive Hindu proselytization. To counter the Assamese complaint that they were being debarred from the governance of the tribes, Hydari asked Bardoloi to submit to him a panel of names of Assamese officers and selected the most efficient of them for appointment to key posts in the Naga and other tribal areas. This allayed for a while the Assamese feeling of resentment that, even after the departure of

the British, their policy of excluding Assamese from the administration of the hill areas was being perpetuated.

Despite this carefully planned scheme to create a climate of confidence between the people of the hills and plains, Assam found herself bereft, within less than thirty years, of all but a bare handful of her hill tribal population. The Assamese had looked forward to the departure of the British as the opportunity for the creation and consolidation of the 'Greater Assam' which they envisaged as the union of the plainsmen of the province with the entire hill tribal population extending to the international frontier with China, Burma and East Pakistan. Hydari and Bardoloi could never have foreseen that their plans for bringing the hill people closer to Assam had precisely the opposite effect and were in part responsible for Assam's final disintegration. For the hill tribals apprehended that all this talk of integration was nothing but the prelude to a wider and fiercer cultural campaign in the future. Hydari and Bardoloi were, after all, birds of passage, and while their more enlightened and liberal approach might be helpful in mitigating the harshnesses of an apprehended Hindu domination, they would be powerless to stem the tide.

Within two years of projecting the vision of a Greater Assam, the principal architects, Hydari and Bardoloi, were dead. Popular pressures had meanwhile built up to such an extent that, even in cases where, under the Constitution, the Governor enjoyed discretionary powers, he found himself in practice being pressurized to act not in his own discretion but on the advice of his popularly elected ministers. Hydari was able by virtue of his commanding personality to exercise a restraining influence on his ministers and give them sound and helpful guidance. With his passing away, the weight and prestige of the Governor's office diminished to the proportionate gain in favour of the Chief Minister. Bardoloi's successor, Bishnuram Medhi, was his direct antithesis, shrewd, narrow-minded and parochially Assamese. In his view the integration of the hills with the plains needed to be brought about immediately, if necessary by force. It soon became abundantly clear to the tribal people what he was about and they reacted as their interest dictated. The leaders of those tribal districts (e.g., the Khasi and Garo hills), which had experienced longer and closer association

with the Assamese and were already to some extent 'detrribalized', made a final effort at coexistence with the Assamese. Their representatives were accommodated in the Assam ministry and they harboured hopes that, through progressive increase in their political weightage, they might yet succeed in holding their own against Assamese pressures. The Nagas had less vested interest in the continuance of the status quo and to this extent felt free to make an immediate break. While there were moderates among them who held that a break with Assam would suffice and that it was in their interest to continue as a separate state within the Indian Union, there were extremists who advocated total independence. It was not long before even the tribal districts which had originally agreed to give a trial to coexistence with the Assamese within a single state found disillusionment. In 1962, the Assam legislature passed a bill prescribing Assamese as the official language for the entire state. This, for the tribals, was the point of no return; for with Assamese as the official language, the tribal minority would at once be placed at an unfair disadvantage. Admission to the public services, universities and training institutes, the grant of scholarships and governmental patronage were likely to depend increasingly, in the future, on expertise in the Assamese language, and the tribal people, however hard they might try, could not expect to stand successfully in competition against plainmen for whom Assamese was their mother tongue. It was Assamese chauvinism, ironically enough, that diminished Assam and lost her her tribal population.

It is anomalous that the Assamese failed to anticipate the reactions of the tribal people to the imposition of Assamese when they themselves were so sensitive over the issue of language. Their sensitivity may be gauged by their stance, soon after Independence, on the occasion of the inauguration of Assam's first radio station at Shillong. As broadcasting was a central subject, the arrangements for the inauguration were organized by officers of the central government, who rightly took the view that the proceedings should commence with the playing of the Indian National Anthem. The Assamese have a very beautiful song of their own in praise of Assam, her culture and her people, which is often performed during ceremonial occasions. A demand was voiced that the inauguration ceremony should start

with the performance of this song and not of the Indian National Anthem. Processions paraded the streets of Shillong, brandishing flags and shouting patriotic Assamese slogans in support of the demand; but the organizers stood firm and regretted their inability to concede to it. As the Governor rose to deliver his inaugural address, there was violent stampeding at the studio portals and the distinguished guests feared that at any moment the doors would be forced open and the raging crowd surge upon the assembled gathering. The Inspector General of Police at the time was an elderly Englishman, one of the few Europeans whose services had been retained by the successor Indian government in recognition of his deep affection for Assam and freedom from racial bias. It was this venerable stalwart who personally stood guard at the entrance of the hall and succeeded, by skilful deployment of his force, in ensuring a safe retreat for the Governor and Chief Minister on conclusion of the function. Bardoloi was gravely shaken by this unseemly demonstration of Assamese irredentism and there can be no doubt that the tribals were also duly taking note. When the time came, they did not miss their cue but reacted as spontaneously to the decision to introduce Assamese as the official language of the state as had the Assamese to the singing of an anthem in a tongue other than their own. And so the gap of understanding between the hillman and plainsman progressively widened. It was a grievous shock to the Assamese to find the hillman rejecting the hand of brotherhood so generously proffered. The Assamese took just pride in their culture and their language, and it seemed inconceivable to them that the hillman should not wish to be admitted within their fold.

It is the British, however, who have to bear the brunt of responsibility for the plainsman's lack of understanding of the tribal mind. Since the first years of their occupation, the Naga hills had been administered as a British preserve. The frontiers were regarded as sensitive areas to which it was preferable, for reasons of security, to post British rather than Indian officers. British officers also adjusted themselves more easily to the rugged life of the mountains. With gun and rod, they happily passed away their days, untroubled by the proximity of awkward politicians or the interference of higher authorities. Above all, they were relieved of the ever-oppressive heat of the

plains. The Indian officer, on the other hand, was inclined to regard a posting in the hills as a penal infliction. The Indian is, by temperament, more gregarious. The joint-family system makes him more family-minded; there are perpetually funerals to attend and marriages to celebrate, not to speak of the ceaseless round of religious rituals to be performed at regular intervals. At a time when road communications in the hills were non-existent, it would take a week to a fortnight to reach the nearest railhead in the plains and the Indian officer would be obliged to spend a lot of his time on journeys back and forth to attend to his various family obligations in his home district. The consequences were twofold. As Indians were so rarely posted to hill districts, there were few Indian officers available on the transfer of power with any experience of the hill areas and their problems. Conversely, the tribal people also had no experience of dealings with Indian officers and apprehended the worst. The situation was not helped by the fact that mischief-mongers had deliberately put out propaganda that the new Indian government would ban the eating of beef and ease the way for outsiders to infiltrate into the hills and dispossess the tribal people of their land.

The dearth of Indian officers with knowledge and experience of the hill people during the transfer of power was a serious handicap to the administration. While the British must have foreseen that a time would come for the hills to pass over to Indian control, no serious effort was made to train non-European officers to hold positions of responsibility in the frontier districts. The result was that, when the time came for the British to move out of the hills, there was a wide and gaping administrative vacuum.

The first problem was to fill the key post of Adviser for the tribes and frontier areas. Hydari decided, after consultation with Bardoloi and the central government, that this post should be offered to me. Apart from any consideration of my competence—I was then a very junior officer, with no experience of the tribes—Hydari's instinct perhaps told him that the appointment to this post of a Parsee, a member of a small minority community, would be acceptable to the tribal people as a token of the essentially secular basis of the administration. And although I was not an Assamese, the Assamese regarded

me as an officer who respected their language and culture. I had taken pains to learn Assamese and had been a not unsuccessful District Magistrate in the largest and most important Assamese district of Lakhimpur. I also belonged to the Assam cadre of the Indian Civil Service and was likely therefore to be sympathetic to Assamese interests.

It seems extraordinary, in retrospect, that an officer as junior as myself and of such limited experience should have been selected for this key appointment. I had served for four years as a district officer in the plains and two years as a Secretariat officer dealing with problems relating to the regularly administered plains districts. I had not had a single day's experience of administration in the hill areas and was being called upon to organize and head an administrative machinery for the governance of an area of over 50,000 square miles whose inhabitants were, for me, virtually unknown. After an overlapping period of two weeks' briefing by my British predecessor, I was expected to advise on the laying down and implementation of policy on issues as divergent as devolution of power to indigenous tribal institutions and defence of a frontier several thousand miles long. The tools at my command were a team of officers equally devoid of experience of hill administration, save for a couple of Englishmen whose services were temporarily retained to provide, in name at least, a measure of continuity.

It was also unfortunate that, apart from the unavailability of experienced field officers, continuity of policy was so often disturbed by the frequency of changes at the highest levels of administration. During my ten years' tenure as Adviser, I saw the installation of nine Governors—six permanent incumbents and three who officiated during an interregnum. Of the six permanent incumbents, two had been drawn from the Indian Civil Service, two from the political field, one from the judiciary and one from the army. The frequency of the changes and the widely differing background of the appointees reflect to some extent the attitude to tribal affairs of the policy-makers in the central government. Assam had been known during the British period as the Cinderella of the provinces. It was so remote from the main body of India, both geographically and culturally, that nobody was aware or cared much what went on within its largely undefined boundaries. A short-lived interest was aroused

in the province by the Japanese invasion during World War II, but otherwise, Assam was left to lie sleeping on, reconciled to its neglect and lack of attention. Until disturbances on the frontier assumed alarming dimensions, Delhi attached little importance to the murmurings of the hillmen, appointing as Governor whosoever could most readily be spared and was prepared for what was regarded by many as a sentence of exile. However, in Assam, unlike other states, the Governor was not a mere figurehead but had been vested under the Constitution with special responsibilities, to be discharged in his individual discretion, for the administration of the tribal areas. He ruled as well as reigned and the office was no sinecure.

Assam has nevertheless had the good fortune of being headed by a series of extremely competent Governors. The tribal people were however confounded by the frequent change of countenance at the apex. They had scarcely come to recognize and have some understanding with one Governor when they were peremptorily faced with another. The tribal attaches importance to the *man*, whether he be the District Officer, Adviser or the Governor. Many British officers became over-attached to the tribes in their jurisdiction, virtually assuming proprietary rights over them. Their attachment became so strong emotionally that they resented any suggestion of their being transferred away from them to another station. While such an attitude had its risks and drawbacks in that a tribe might fall victim indefinitely to the idiosyncrasies of a single individual, the tribals at least knew whom they were dealing with, whether for good or bad, and felt a sense of stability and security. With frequent changes of officers, there was apprehension that commitments made by one officer might not be honoured by his successor. In an illiterate milieu, business was carried on by word of mouth, there was nothing on record, and the successor officer, however honourable his intentions, might well be unaware of his predecessor's commitments.

Apart from the break in continuity caused by over-frequent changes in the higher echelons of the administrative pyramid, the tribal people became confused by the differences of attitude and approach emanating from an ever-shifting, gubernatorial kaleidoscope. There were Governors (prompted by their consorts) with an exaggerated taste for pageantry, sticklers for

protocol who would not move a step without their gold-braided ADC's. There were others who preferred to affect a Gandhian style of egalitarian simplicity. Hydari could drink any Naga under the table and made no secret of his bibulous predilections. His successor, Sri Prakasa, was no prude, but, being a lifelong Gandhian, was unaccustomed to drinking alcohol. He managed to devise stratagems, however, to avoid wounding tribal susceptibilities. We were sitting together one day during a break for refreshments while touring the Naga hills. Our hosts were serving us, as is the custom, with the local brew of rice-beer, and I was surprised to observe that, within less than five minutes, our Gandhian Governor's cup had been drained dry. He noted my astonishment and, without uttering a syllable but with a mischievous wink, flicked his wrist in the direction of a nearby window to convey that he had surreptitiously flung the contents outside. Little did he know that Naga hospitality will not permit of a cup resting empty, and it was soon replenished. He realized he could not repeat his dodge without being detected, and accepted my advice to raise his cup to his lips at periodical intervals as a token of his appreciation of hospitality offered.

The tribal is shrewd and perceptive, and can soon size up if an officer genuinely enjoys his work in the hills or is performing it as an enforced penance. Vishnu Sahay, a Governor drawn from the Indian Civil Service, once consulted me on the advisability or otherwise of participating in the somewhat rugged and exotically served feasts offered by the tribal people. I gave it as my view that this was one of the occupational hazards of a frontier officer and that it would be impossible for him to function effectively if he were constantly worrying if the pork offered him was not properly cured or the rice-beer not brewed in chemically disinfected vessels. And here lies the difficulty of selecting personnel for these unusual areas. For a little something extra is needed, apart from mere cleverness, for the makings of a good frontier officer. India has a surfeit of smart officers, officers with brain-power. But there are not so many who are sufficiently sensitive to human responses as to take the trouble, and often the risk, of accommodating themselves to such responses. Eating, drinking, dressing—it is in the

common participation of such primary activities that people feel a sense of community amongst themselves.

The subject of dress, again, has been an issue of controversy from the time that outsiders first made contacts with aboriginal peoples. In tropical regions, aborigines had been accustomed to wear the very barest clothing, in some regions no clothing whatsoever, until the advent of the administrator and the missionary. It was the latter who felt offended by 'indecent exposure' of the body and set about propagating the propriety of ample coverage. Shorts and blouses were lavishly distributed by missionaries to the uninhibited dwellers of the hills, forests and mid-Pacific islands, and the shielding of the bosom from public view was heralded by them as the triumphant first-fruits of the civilization they were bequeathing to the rude and ignorant savage.

It has since been proved beyond doubt that the introduction of an alien style of clothing has been a major factor in the decline of tribal populations. Primitive communities cannot afford the luxury of frequent changes of clothing and have perforce to continue wearing their single set of soiled and sweat-soaked clothes on completion of their hard day's labour in the fields. It is not surprising therefore that they fall victim so quickly to pneumonia and other sundry diseases. They do not have the wherewithal to wash their garments regularly and, in the absence of any spare set of clothing, are obliged to wear the same shorts or blouses day after day, night after night, until they are tattered to shreds. Much of the disease and infection prevalent amongst primitive peoples can be attributed to the wearing of soiled and damp clothing and there is scarcely any region of their habitat where scabies and pulmonary diseases are not endemic.

The administrator, on the other hand, has not always seen eye to eye with the missionary and, in the matter of clothing, has hesitated, for hygienic as much as for cultural considerations, to encourage foreign modes of dress. Some administrators have fallen to the opposite extreme of fining or otherwise penalizing tribal people for wearing foreign apparel. This however has not always had the effect intended; for though the intention is to encourage the tribal people to retain respect for

their own traditional mores, the administrator's ban on modern clothing can be misinterpreted by them as intended to hold them back and deprive them of the supposed fruits of progress and civilization.

Taking their cue from the Englishman who was reputed to dress for dinner when camping in the jungles of darkest Africa, Indian officers posted to the hills also started off by sporting the traditional and formal Indian style of dress when they first took over charge from their British predecessors. I possess still a photograph of myself robed in a long, formal achkan, buttoned up to the neck, and with churidar, performing a tribal acrobatic rite¹ on a precariously suspended cane swing. Nothing could have looked more ridiculous, but this was all a part of the first flush of enthusiasm under which the tribals were being baptized in the chaste springs of Indian culture from which they had been so long excluded by the schemings of British imperialism.

Most of the hill frontier tribes are skilled weavers. Each tribe has evolved its own distinctive designs, with tasteful matching of colours, and takes pride in presenting visitors whom they wish to honour with a sample of its creative art. Some of the tribes also wear a charming, loose jacket² prepared from their home-woven cloth, which too they customarily present to their guests and friends. I was attracted by these jackets, as they are not only aesthetically beautiful but eminently practical; they are light and comfortable when trekking during the warm weather and require no ironing as they do not easily crease. I made a practice of wearing these jackets not only when touring in the hills but also in the Secretariat at Shilling and during my official visits to Delhi. Soon other officers followed my example, each competing to acquire a better and more beautiful specimen than his colleague's.

This, of course, was exactly what was intended. For apart from the incongruity and impracticability of our more conventional style of dress for rough trekking in the mountains, it seemed a cultural waste that the lovely weaves of the hill people

¹ *Bobo*, a swinging act performed by tribes north of the Brahmaputra to avert the evil spirit of dysentery.

² Called *galuk* by the Adis, one of the most numerous and vigorous tribes inhabiting the hills extending from the north bank of the Brahmaputra up to the Tibetan border.

should not be put to wider use. With the wearing of clothes of tribal design, our officers blended more gracefully with the landscape. Hill people of the Mongoloid regions are fairer in complexion than the plainsman and of lighter physical structure. The presence of even a few plainsmen in their midst becomes immediately noticeable, and particularly so if they are attired in a dress that is completely alien to the local environment. Psychologically, again, the hillman feels a sense of pride to find his handiwork appreciated and put to practical use by prestigious officers of the administration. It is one thing to see his exquisite weaves exhibited as curios in a museum, it is quite another to find officers competing to acquire and attire themselves in his tribe's creation and designing.

Verrier Elwin was our main champion in this endeavour to promote a deeper and more lively appreciation of the tribals' creative urges. My friendship with Verrier sprang from the time he was first invited, in 1953, to assist us in our work amongst the tribal people of the frontier. From long before, however, Elwin had been occupied in research and social work amongst the tribes of Central India. A self-trained anthropologist, his studies of the tribes of Central India had earned him international recognition. But, for all his anthropological research, Elwin was first and foremost a humanist, sensitive to beauty and sensitive above all to suffering. There was no aspect of tribal life that did not evoke in him a sense of poetry. For him, the tribes could do no wrong and he felt such disgust at the ugliness of society as it had evolved after the industrial revolution that he dreaded the same degradation befalling the children of the hills and forests.

Elwin's publications, profusely illustrated with photographs of tribal weaves and artifacts, went a long way towards dispelling the popular notion that the tribal people were nothing more than backward primitives. Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, one of the most eminent anthropologists to have made a study of the tribes of Nepal and the Indian sub-continent, was equally sympathetic to tribal interests and no less sensitive to the richness and beauty of primitive cultures, as evidenced by his splendid photographs of the tribal scene in his several definitive studies. The choice of title, however, of one of his more popular works, *The Naked Nagas*, was not perhaps the happiest, as it projected in the public mind an image of the

tribe which was farthest from the intention of the author. For, of the many who have seen or heard of the title of the book, only a few have taken the trouble to read the contents. The impression that has stuck in the popular imagination, therefore, has been not so much of the fascination and richness of the cultural evolution of the Naga tribes as their rude primitiveness.

While exploring the motivations of tribal behaviour, we do not take sufficient account of the sensitivity of the tribal people to what is presented as the popular image of themselves. There are numerous theories regarding the derivation of the term 'Naga' and the simplest is that which relates it to the Assamese word 'noga', meaning 'naked'. For what could be more natural than for the Assamese plainsman to refer to the lightly-clad hillmen of the eastern hills as 'noga', in the same manner as he referred to the turbulent plunderers from the hills north of the Brahmaputra as 'Abors', the Assamese word for 'untamed'? But though the Naga may not give overt expression to his feelings, he resents the implication that his most distinctive attribute in the eyes of the world is his nudity and he feels slighted that the study of his people that has reached the widest readership should by its very title have highlighted the one attribute of the tribe to which the Naga himself does not give so much as a thought. When I first met Phizo thirty years ago, he was known by his full name, Zapu Phizo, but he later dropped the first name, Zapu, as having too exotic and oriental a ring. Similarly in the matter of dress, I have never seen Phizo except in Western-style attire, suited and bespectacled. I have no doubt that this leaning towards Western and supposedly modern modes, whether in the matter of dress or style of language, is a manifestation of a subconscious revolt against what the Nagas hold to be a humiliating and derogatory image of their tribe in the minds not only of their Assamese neighbours but of the public in general. As long as the Nagas were isolated in their hills, with little outside contact, this sense of humiliation, if present, remained dormant and gave vent to no overt manifestation. The Japanese invasion brought the Nagas out into the forefront and gave them an opportunity of knowing more of what the outside world thought of them. Their brave contribution to the country's defence was duly recognized, commended and rewarded. They were splendidly received at New

Delhi by the Governor-General, Lord Louis Mountbatten, and sumptuously entertained at the Viceregal Palace. But the stress throughout was on their fine physique, their gay and colourful attire, their prowess as fighters, their essentially 'tribal' attributes. And the term 'tribal' had hitherto been associated in people's imagination with primitiveness, head-hunting and African tom-toms. The educated Naga was beginning to feel that the time had come for a refurbishing of the Naga image, and he found in Phizo the spokesman of his aspirations and the symbol of his newly-awakened consciousness, pride and self-respect.

We find thus two distinct and contrary currents underlying tribal attitudes during the period following the departure of the British. There was on the one hand a leaning towards European modes, partly as a reaction against the image of tribal primitiveness, partly as a defence mechanism against the tribal's apprehension of Hindu cultural dominance. Amongst tribes on the other hand that had been less violently exposed than the Nagas to physical and psychological assaults from without, there was more sympathetic response to the administration's policy of fostering the development of their traditional institutions and arts.

The policy of promoting and focusing attention on the tribals' traditional institutions and arts was not however unreservedly endorsed and there was apprehension in the highest echelons of government that this emphasizing of the tribals' cultural identity was an indirect, if not direct, incitement to the forces of separatism. There was a school of thought that considered it preferable, in the interests of the unity of India, to focus attention rather on the broad mainstream of Indian culture—to promote the study of Sanskrit and inculcate the patterns of behaviour, dress and belief prevalent in the main body of the country. Even amongst the most able and experienced members of the civil service, there was failure to appreciate that tribal attitudes and tribal apparel were neither un-Indian nor anti-national. There was thus a wide divorce between policy as enunciated and its implementation in the field. Nehru had explicitly declared that 'there was no point in trying to make of the tribals a second-rate copy of ourselves'. But that was precisely what was happening in many places—and the tribals were not so obtuse as not to sense it.

The New Deal

The sense of uneasiness affecting the tribal people at the time of the transfer of power has been seen to have been the fallout of historical forces rather than the outcome of any specific acts of commission or omission. We shall now consider the effectiveness of the measures taken to allay such uneasiness and create a climate of confidence and goodwill.

We have alluded to the army operations undertaken to quash the parallel government set up by Phizo soon after Independence. Civil and army officers at the highest levels have time and again advocated that, where law and order in the tribal areas is concerned, the 'big stick' is the most speedy and effective solution. And time and again they have been proved wrong. The pity is that administrators so easily forget. The big stick, if applied with sufficient severity and over a sufficiently prolonged period, can make a situation appear on the surface as being under control and create a semblance of tranquillity. For thirty years and more, successive Governors of Assam have claimed to have solved the Naga problem. It is not realized that the lull of exhaustion following army repression is only a temporary respite and no final solution. The violence of military operations on the other hand sows yet further seeds of discontent and bitterness, and no sooner have the victims of such violence recuperated than they take to arms again with redoubled vigour and the whole brutal process of repression and violence is started anew. A change of feeling can be brought about only by processes touching the mind, in the same way as physical change can be effected only by physical force. It may seem superfluous to labour so obvious a principle, and the only reason for doing so is because it has so often been disregarded and at such tragic cost of human life. A survey of the Naga

situation since Independence will show a rising and declining graph at regularly recurring intervals to correspond with the rise and ebb of disturbances. At the point of each depression will be recorded an explanatory footnote that the situation has been brought fully under control and that permanent peace is at last 'round the corner'. All that has, in fact, happened is that the dissident elements have felt the need for a breathing space to recuperate, rally their forces and organize fresh supplies of arms and ammunition. And as inevitably as before, the graph resumes once more its ascending course.

It would have been understandable, perhaps even forgivable, if army operations were restricted to the suppression of only active rebels engaged in violence. What has unfortunately happened is that the mass of the civil population becomes also involved. The army's case has been that the minuscule residue of armed rebels bully and put pressure on innocent and otherwise loyal villagers to supply them with food and other essentials for carrying on their struggle. If the villagers can be protected from such bullying, the last remaining handful of rebels would be cut off from essential supplies and peace could finally be restored. And as there are practical difficulties in giving protection separately to each individual village, the villagers have to be directed to leave their villages and ancestral homes so that they can be grouped together at focal points specified by the army, surrounded with a barbed-wire fence, and given protection by the army against threats by the rebels.

The tribal's attachment to his land is almost fanatical, and the immediate effect of this uprooting and 'grouping' of villagers was to radically disturb the balance of land use. In many cases, villagers were so thoughtlessly grouped that farmers found their rice-fields at too remote a distance for them to visit and cultivate. Their fields remained uncared for or else were illegally appropriated by others; and in either case the consequences were disastrous. If the fields remained uncultivated, there would be shortage of food, even famine conditions, as it was beyond the resources of the administration, whether civil or military, to import and supply foodstuff for an indefinite period to entire villages. If on the other hand the fields were appropriated by persons having no legal rights, this would lead to disputes and unending inter-village feuds. Apart from the

problem of food supply, there were the equally grave problems of water-supply and sanitation, schooling and health services, which even in normal times presented enough difficulty but which, under the exigencies of hasty and ill-planned grouping, caused untold distress.

The above were the more blatantly visible consequences of grouping villages. More serious were the psychological consequences. Land, whether it be homestead land which is the habitat of the family or land for cultivation, constitutes the life-blood of a tribal community, as much in Christian as in non-Christian villages. Particular locations are considered to be the dwelling-place of spirits, good and evil, that have to be periodically placated. Other locations are associated with the shades of departed ancestors and are held in special respect and reverence. Villagers were being peremptorily ordered to abandon their ancestral homes and set up hutments in distant places arbitrarily selected by the civil or military authorities. If they were lucky, and depending on the whims or organizing capacity of the authorities of the time, they might be supplied with some corrugated iron sheeting to roof their huts. And if not, well, they must just get along as best as they could.

It is not realized that whether a person is uprooted from a primitive hut or a palace, the shock is equally traumatic. For the tribal, every corner of his home has its associations. His rice-fields might not be extensive, but his co-villagers still talked of the day he offered a Feast of Merit for the community and pointed to the spot where he had sacrificed the ceremonial *mithun*.¹ Not far from his fields were the time-hallowed memorial stones so deeply venerated by his family since generations past. His removal was indeed a literal uprooting, for everything that was most dear to him was being cut from beneath his very feet; tomorrow would find him rootless, with nothing left but a memory of all that had been of meaning to him and his community.

Although there were hardliners who held that grouping would 'teach the tribals a lesson' and bring them to heel, I do not think there was deliberate intention on anybody's part to be inhuman. People do not easily realize that primitive people cannot be shifted wholesale, like animals, from one place to

¹ The gaur, resembling the bison.

another. And yet this is precisely what colonizers have been doing in the past without so much as a murmur of protest from the civilized world. Native populations have, in the interests of industry, been shifted from their habitat to unknown islands hundreds of miles away without any more concern than if they were cattle being moved to fresh pastures. And yet the perpetrators of such outrages are honourable men who would be surprised at the suggestion that their action was wrongful. If they themselves were ordered to leave their homes at a week's notice for an unknown destination where they would be offered a piece of land and materials to rebuild their houses and set up home, they would doubtless take a different view. We have to face the sad truth that, throughout the world and throughout the centuries, there has been the most gross and cruel lack of imagination in man's dealings with tribal populations, and we have not to this day outgrown the attitude inherited from our forefathers of regarding them as puppets that can be shifted at will at our slightest whim. It is an attitude which the tribal people have suffered in the past with a patience beyond belief but are not prepared to endure much longer.

It would be unjust, however, to impute that the Government of India have resorted to physical repression alone in their endeavour to deal with the tribal problem. A measure of policing is necessary for the maintenance of law and order, and it was inevitable, though unfortunate, that there were at times excesses and abuse of authority. As has been observed, however, Nehru had himself enunciated that there was no intention to impose an alien way of life upon the tribal people and that it was 'grossly presumptuous to approach them with an air of superiority, to tell them how to behave or what to do and what not to do'. Special safeguards had also been embedded in the Constitution for the protection of tribal interests, including their rights in land, forests and water, and for ensuring that there should be no interference with their customary usages and traditional practices.

While everything looked well enough on paper, the Naga villager, who was in any case not competent to read the Constitution, found the situation very different in practice. The British had admittedly not proceeded very far in introducing the amenities of a welfare state amongst the Nagas. But at

least they were by comparison non-interfering and their presence on the Naga landscape was rarely noticeable. Kohima, the headquarters of the Naga hills, was still a quiet, unbustling station at the time of the transfer of power in 1947, despite a British presence of seventy years. And in the Naga villages I visited at the time, the pattern of life showed little trace of outside influence.

Here again, it was a case of good intentions being tragically belied. There had been much talk after Independence of a 'New Deal for the Tribals'. These 'backward' people must be pulled out of the cramping isolation to which they had been condemned by the British, they must be quickly reformed and brought on par with the great heartland of India of which they were the rightful heirs despite their exclusion and unforgivable neglect in the past. The first priority must necessarily be roads; for roads would not only open up the country to new ideas from without but would make it possible for cement, steel and other essential materials to be transported into the hills for construction of a wide network of schools, hospitals and welfare institutes envisaged under the New Deal. There were admittedly no Nagas technically qualified at the moment to man all these new services. But that would provide no obstacle, as there was an abundance of technical personnel in the rest of India and, provided they were offered sufficiently remunerative terms and allowances to compensate for the rigours and hardships of serving on the solitary mountain-tops, they would easily be attracted. Steps would simultaneously be taken to select and train young tribals so that they might become qualified in due course to man these newly-established services. But there must meanwhile be the most generous investment, both in finance and personnel, to atone for the neglect and injustices the tribals had suffered in the past.

These were fine sentiments and noble intentions—and the flood-gates of disruption were opened. What was unfortunate was that the tribal leaders themselves became no less wildly infected with the mania to import an alien and utterly incongruous concept of administration and inject it into their indigenous cultural stratum. Every segment of tribal life was soon touched by the contagion. Officers from the plains, who had never seen a hill in their lives, poured into the mountains, brimming with

enthusiasm to give a taste of their higher culture to the primitive tribal. The prime concern was that money must be spent lavishly, and the more spent the better, so that not only the tribal people but the country as a whole should know how much was being done to develop these backward areas. And though many of the officers selected were efficient and earnest, there were others who had no interest whatsoever in the hills, found the tribal people tiresome and whose only incentive were the extra allowances and perquisites of service in the hills.

Whereas in the rest of the country there is at least a semblance of control on the expenditure of public funds, for the hills there was a blank cheque. The overriding consideration was speed, and if a contractor demanded an exorbitant amount for constructing a road or building, it was conceded; for the tribal must not on any account be allowed to get the impression that the government were stinting money where tribal interests were concerned. The tribals themselves soon caught on to this lively game of money-making and joined hands with the contractor in the amassing of undreamt of fortunes. A vested interest was created in the promotion and acceleration of so-called 'development projects'. The criterion for their adoption was no longer the public interest but the profit that could be squeezed out of them. And the contractor, whether tribal or plainsman, the administrator, the politician, all became increasingly involved in the ever-spreading web of graft and corruption.

It was not only the integrity of the tribal people that was affected. There was a fundamental change in the entire landscape of the Naga hills, a change more drastic—and devastating—within the course of the seven years after the transfer of power than had taken place over the entire seventy years of the British occupation. Hastily improvised, ill-planned administrative colonies sprung up, mushroom-like, upon hillocks all over the land. In the unrestrained rush to accelerate progress, the Naga leaders became themselves intoxicated by the novelty and excitement of the changes taking place and were blind to the disruption that was being created, insidiously and irrevocably, in the social fabric of the tribal community. It was not long before the slopes of the lovely village of Kohima were desecrated by ugly, concrete structures, with contractors, officers and ministers all vying with each other to appropriate the most ostentatious

residences. The Naga, who had set such store on the survival of his identity that he was prepared to carry on a struggle unto death for the independence of his hills, was now allowing himself to be seduced by the glitter and allurements of a culture utterly repugnant to his traditions and customary way of life.

It had been clear to me after my first tour in the Naga hills in 1948 that, irrespective of any rational considerations of economic viability, the Nagas would not, under the emotionally charged climate of the time, be prepared to continue as a district within the State of Assam. In my report¹ to the Governor on conclusion of my tour, I had noted: 'It was while at Mokokchung that I discovered the most recent trend working in the minds of Naga leaders. They urged that the Naga Hills should be centrally administered, in the same way as the North-East Frontier Agency. I am afraid there is no getting away from it, they do not relish the idea of being comprised within the Province of Assam. I explained to them at length the safeguards provided in the Sixth Schedule, and that the Constitution is so framed that the rights upon which they set a value cannot possibly be disturbed, should even the Province of Assam wish it. The sum total of the discussion was, however, that even though on paper everything might look all right, they still preferred to be administered by the central government and not by Assam. I pointed out to the best of my ability the benefits to be derived from their continued association with the province, and the advantages to be gained through representation in the provincial legislature. They argued that they did not want representation, had never asked for it and that it would be of no use to them even if they got it. Their argument ran along the line that the Nagas are quite distinct from the people of Assam, had in the past been administered separately (i.e., by the Governor as a special responsibility and not by the ministry) and that a compulsory association with the province would always rankle and might eventually lead to worse. If, in years to come, and as a result of freer intercourse with the plains, the ties between the Nagas and the plainsmen of Assam should become stronger, there was no reason why the Nagas might not then ask for inclusion within the province. Meanwhile, however, they should be administered centrally, together with the

¹ Dated 7 December 1948, shortly before Sir Akbar's death.

North-East Frontier Agency, instead of being forced into a compulsory alliance with the province.

‘Another point that was raised in this connection was that the hill areas should be administered directly by the central government *through a Chief Commissioner*, as in the case of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. They expressed their apprehension at being placed at the mercy of an elected Governor or even of a Governor who was nominated but nevertheless subject to political influences through his contacts with the provincial Ministry.’

The Government of India could not have been more generous than when they eventually agreed in August 1960 to separate the Nagas from Assam and grant them a state of their own. There was violent and bitter opposition from the Assamese, who apprehended, and rightly, that this step would create a precedent and that her remaining tribes would follow the example of the Nagas and demand separation from the parent body. Had it not been for the commanding authority of Nehru, it is doubtful whether the central government would have been prepared at this juncture to take a step so violently distasteful and humiliating to the Assamese. But Nehru had made up his mind and I recollect to the letter his impatient outburst when the Chief Minister of Assam pleaded, desperately, for time before any irrevocable decision was taken: ‘When a limb has become gangrenous, for God’s sake cut it off at once before the whole body is infected. Can’t you see you’ll be doing yourself more harm than good by trying to cling on to the Nagas?’

I did not myself much favour for the Nagas a status of the stereotyped and sophisticated pattern of states under the Constitution. It may, of course, be argued that the parliamentary system of democracy was as foreign to the traditional culture of India as a whole as it was to the Nagas, and that if it could be accepted as being workable in the rest of the country, there was no reason why it should not be workable in Nagaland. It has to be borne in mind, however, that, even if not practised, the principles of parliamentary democracy had been familiar to India’s intelligentsia and leading lights from at least as early as the nineteenth century. And though, under diarchy, the more sensitive subjects, such as Home and Defence, had been excluded from the purview of Indian politicians, their twenty

years' experience in central and state legislatures was adequate grounding and preparation for the wider powers to be exercised under India's Constitution after Independence. In Nagaland, on the other hand, there had been no period of preparation. The evolution of Naga society could not, moreover, be even remotely compared to the social and political evolution of the rest of India and it was anomalous to prescribe for the Nagas, for whom the maintenance of their individual identity was an issue of such paramount concern, a system that formed no part of their own culture. I held protracted discussions with the Naga leaders, giving it as my view that the dissident 'underground' leaders, who were running a parallel administration in opposition to the pro-government overground leaders, had succeeded in keeping alive their popularity because they lived with and like the common villager in traditional Naga style. Once the elaborate paraphernalia and nomenclatures of a regular state under the Constitution were adopted, ministers and legislators would expect identical emoluments and perquisites as their counterparts in states of the size, population and revenue of Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra. The Naga villager would draw comparisons between the simple standard of living of the underground leaders and the extravagances of the overground leaders, to the prejudice of the reputation and good name of the latter. The Naga leaders with whom I held discussions maintained that, while they were insisting on the grant of a state with all the formal nomenclature prescribed in the Constitution, there would be no bar to their accepting, under the new set-up, only nominal allowances and living simply and unostentatiously like their counterpart underground leaders in the forests. It was not the emoluments of office they were after; their concern was the constitutional status of the Nagas and, once their demand of constitutional status was conceded, they would willingly agree to accept a modest honorarium and not insist on the salaries and other perquisites, such as cars and sumptuary allowances, enjoyed by ministers and legislators elsewhere in India. These professions were, needless to say, put out of mind—and understandably so—when the new state was eventually born.

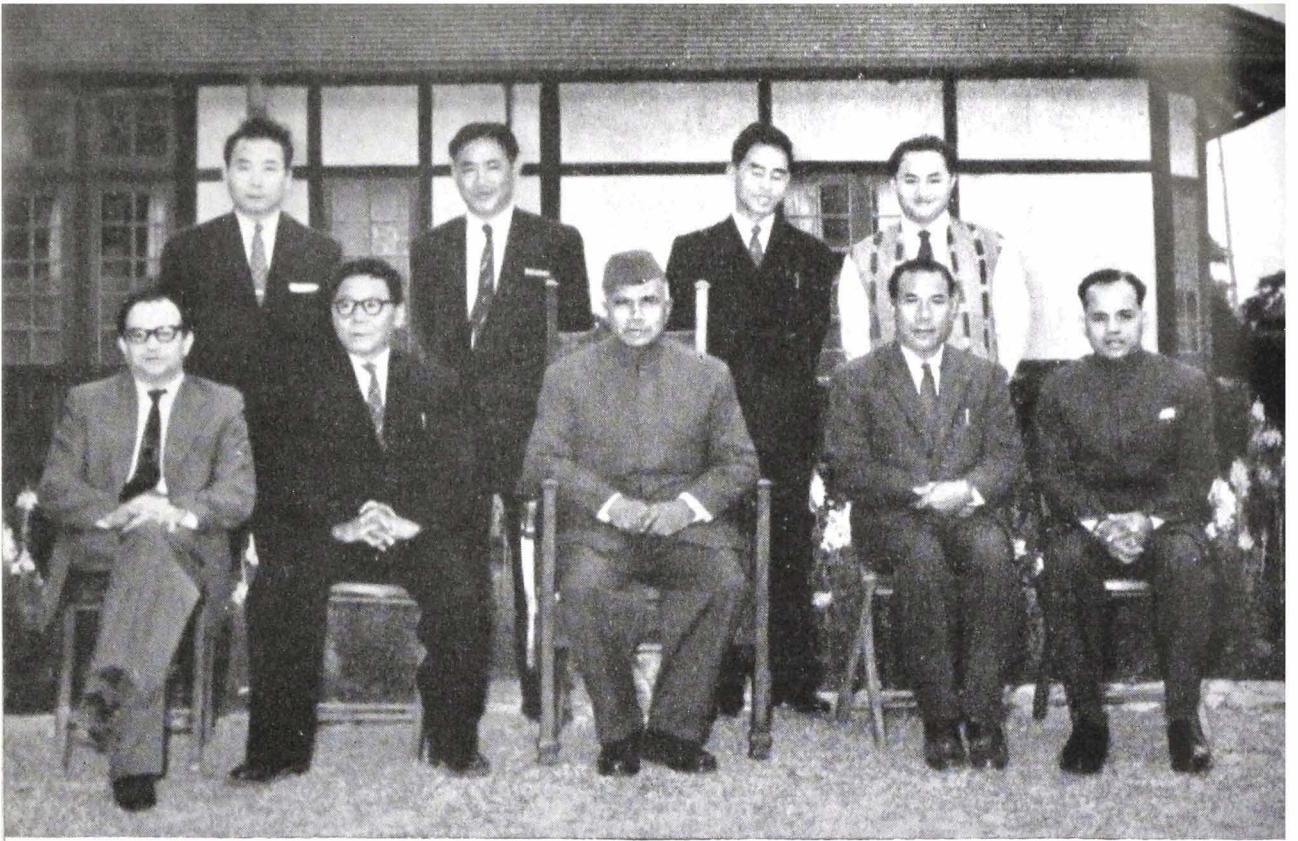
It has been the adoption and application of constitutional formulae alien to the community's natural evolution that has,



1 Sir Akbar Hydari with Naga headmen, 1947

2 Naga warrior dance





3 General Shrinagesh, Governor, with the first Naga cabinet, 1960 (the author and Chief Secretary sitting on extreme left and right respectively)

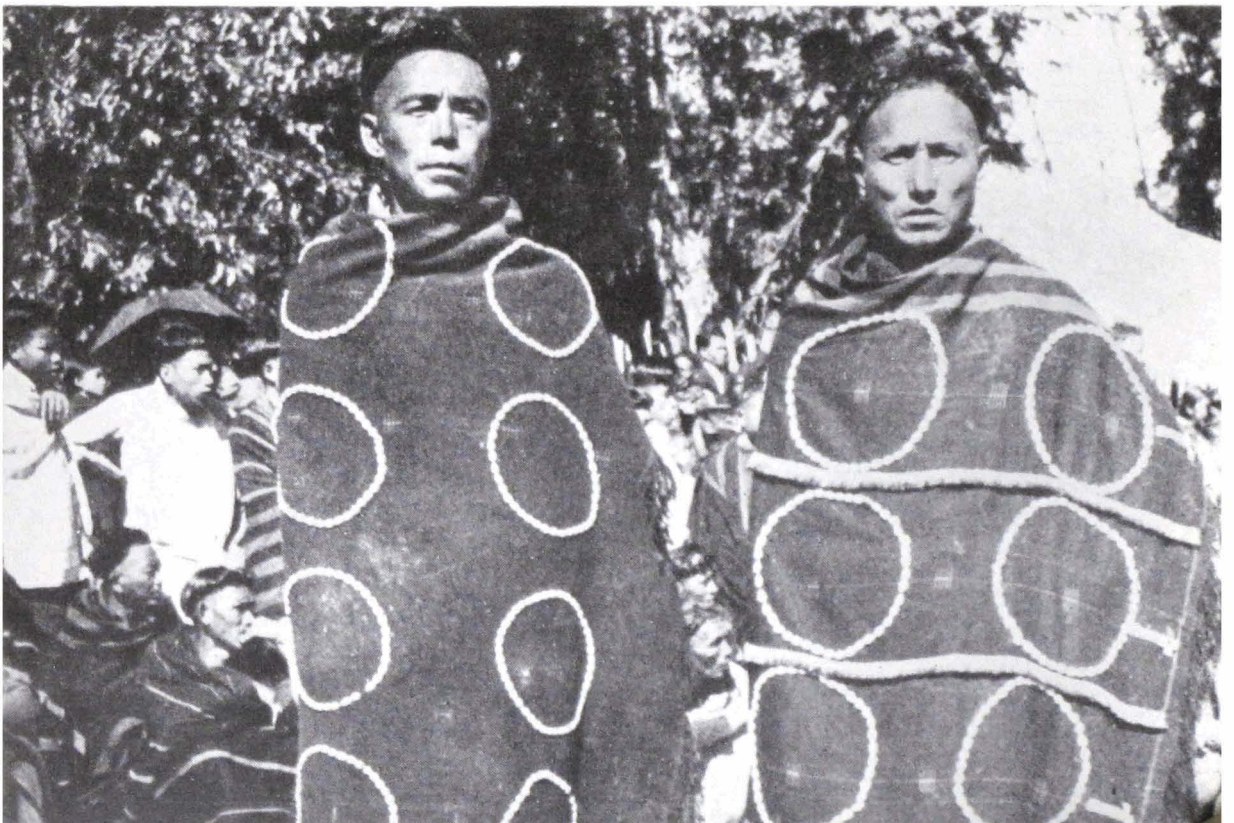
4 Naga church, with congregation

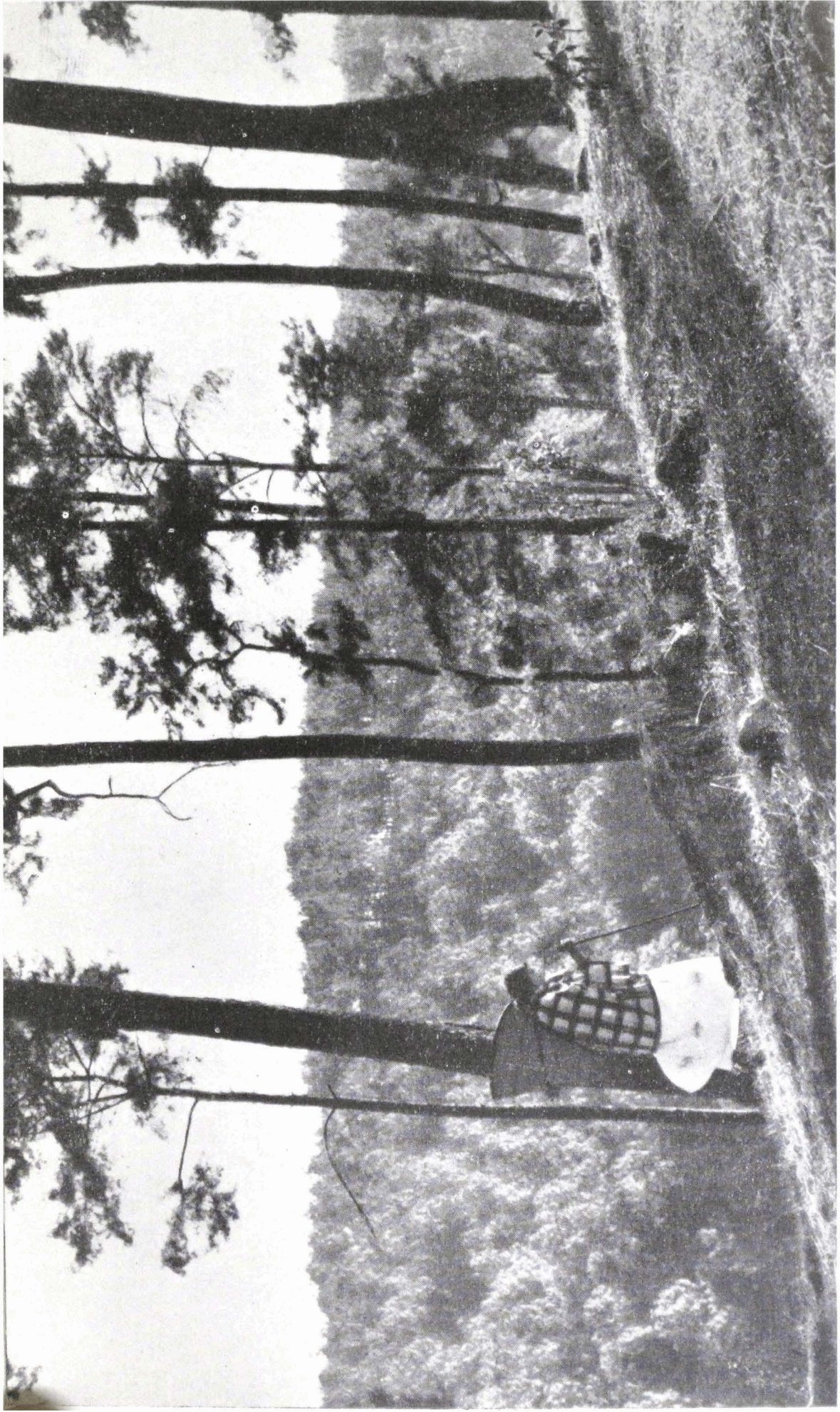




5 Community radio in Naga village meeting-house

6 Sema Nagas wearing their traditional shawls





7 To market through the pine forests, Meghalaya



8 Khasi village bazaar

9 Traditional Khasi memorial stones





10 Khasi mother and child



11 Garo villagers



12 Garo farmer

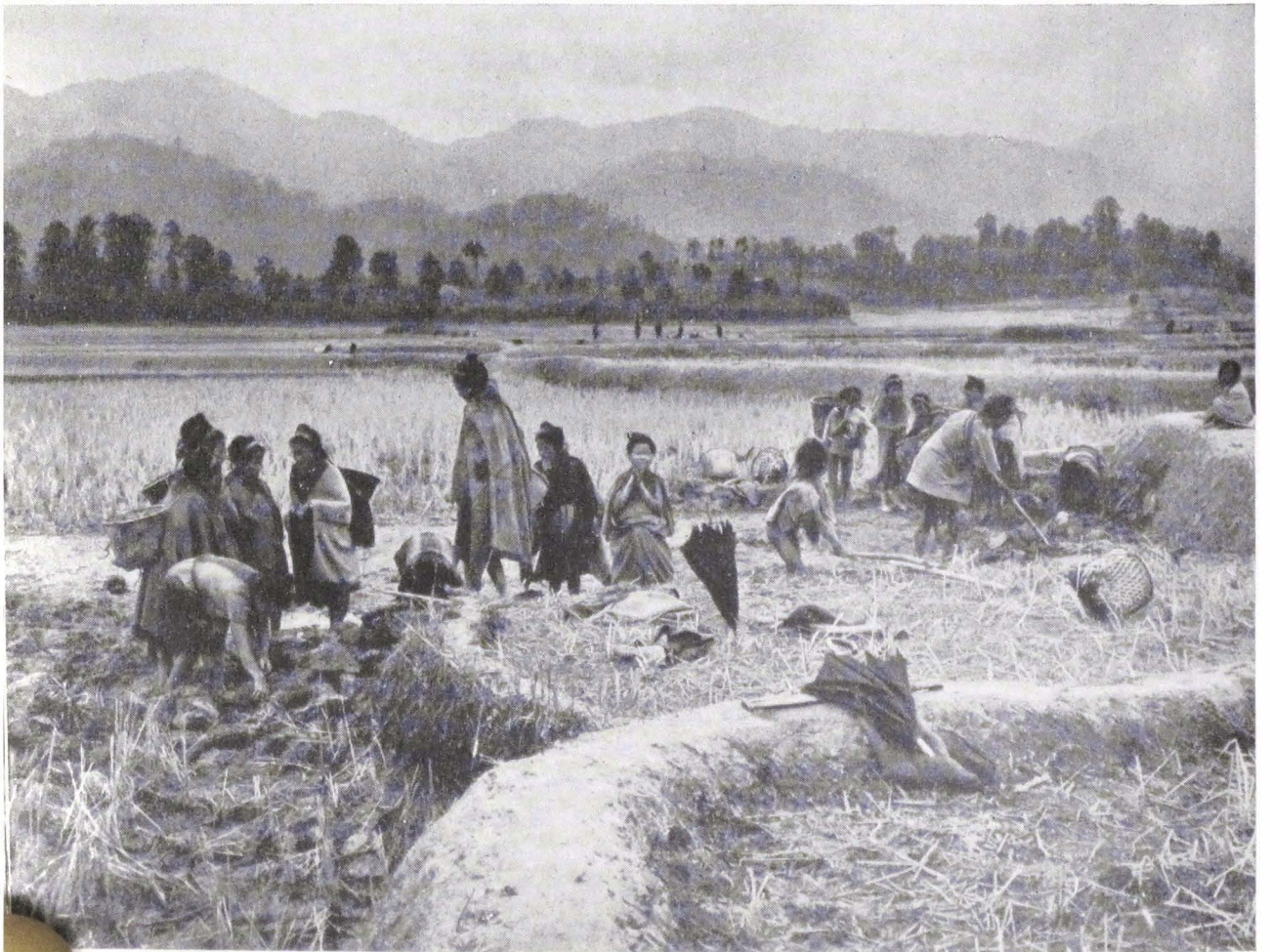


13 Garo mother and child



14 Verrier Elwin and the author with Mishmis, 1954

15 Apatanis at work in their fields at Ziro





16 Apatanis at a village meeting



17 Adi community dance

18 Daffa couple

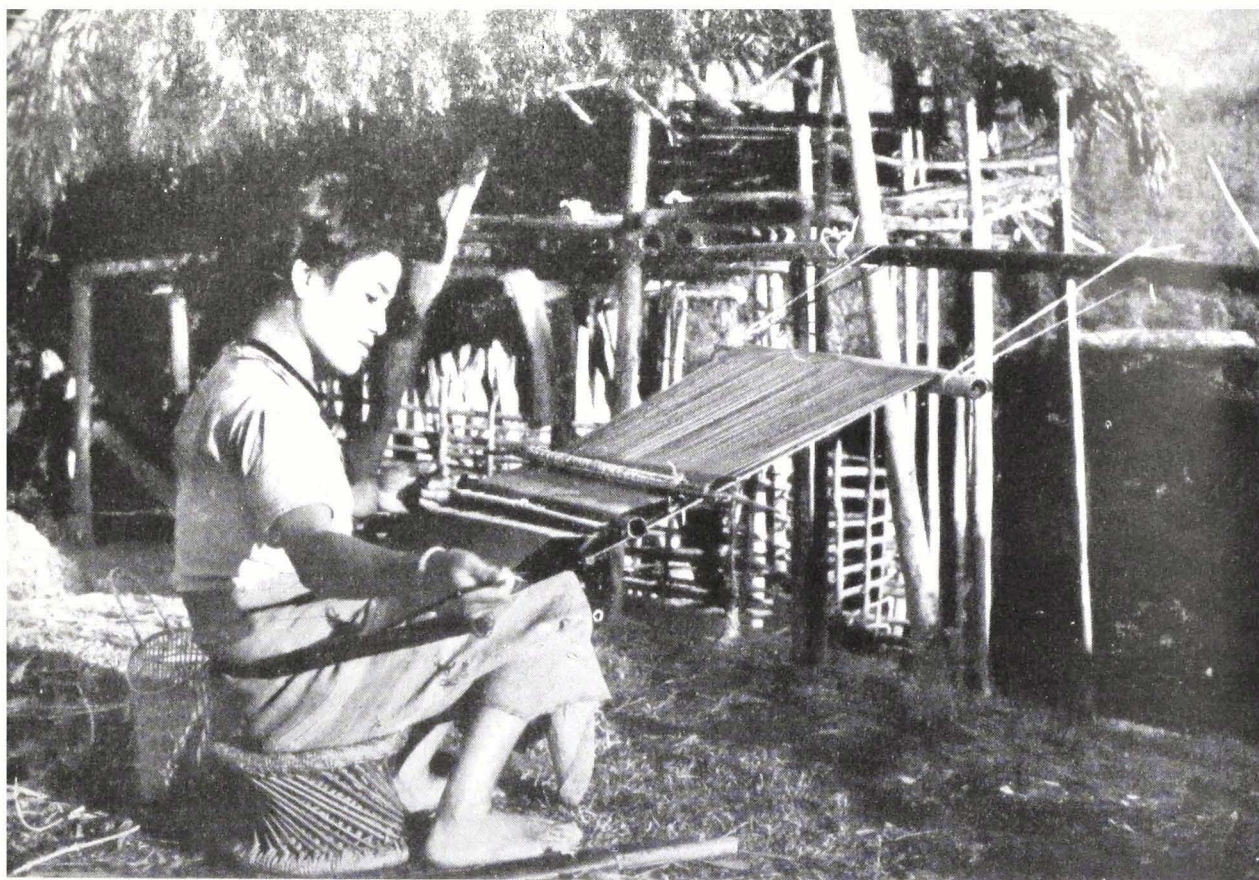




19 Monpas at archery contest in Tawang

20 Sherdukpen masked dance





21 Adi girl at her loom

22 In Upper Siang







24 Adi couple



25 Highlander of Siang



26 Highlander of Upper Subansiri

throughout the frontier regions, been widening the gap between the people and their leaders. In other states, there are private individuals in abundance for whom a minister's emoluments and perquisites would offer no attraction or incentive to seek office. Whilst there may be criticism of the extravagance in the style of living of cabinet ministers and holders of high office, such extravagance is nothing to the splendour and scale of living of industrialists and others with large private incomes. There is a wide range of professions that yield incomes far in excess of the expectation of a minister or a government officer of the highest rank. Extreme difficulty has, in fact, been experienced in attracting private individuals, such as members of the Bar, to accept official appointments as they are naturally reluctant to surrender their more lucrative professional practice. There is admittedly an element of kudos attached to government office, apart from the opportunities of dispensing patronage. But in monetary terms, a minister's emoluments and standard of living do not exceed the upper-class norm and give little occasion for attracting notice or jealousies.

In the tribal areas also, there was in former days not much gap between the standard of living of the leaders and the common villager. For the casual visitor to a tribal village, it might even be difficult to distinguish who were the leaders. The houses of the chiefs (in those areas where the system of chiefs, hereditary or otherwise, prevailed) would be somewhat larger to permit of their holding meetings with villagers. But in other respects, such as design, furnishing and construction material, there was little difference. Similarly in the matter of clothes, food and drink, the distinction would be scarcely noticeable. Even in the case of a monarchy such as Bhutan, the ruler when on tour in the interior of his kingdom was indistinguishable from his subjects and it was mainly on state occasions that he made an assertion of his regal status. The tribals are essentially democratic, and although a chief or leader would be accorded the courtesies and respect due to his office, theirs is an egalitarian society in which the standard of living does not vary much as between different sections of the community.

With the introduction of the new constitutional arrangements, all this was quickly reversed. As soon as the elected representatives found themselves in ministerial office, they set

about patterning their style of living on that of their counterparts in the rest of the country. The talk of living simply and unostentatiously like the underground leaders in the forests was no longer heard. The government machinery was concentrated on erecting the elaborate paraphernalia of a parliamentary system in a region where the unit of administration had not up to then extended beyond the limits of the village. Financial resources and labour which might more profitably have been channellized towards socially productive ends such as the building of hospitals were frittered away in constructing mansions for ministers and government officers. In a region where, until recently, all movement had been on foot, time, temper and energy were needlessly expended on account of jealousies and controversies over entitlement of cars and jeeps. In an essentially rural society where all business had hitherto been transacted by word of mouth, disputes started raging over the scale of stenographers and typists to be allotted to ministers and their deputies. The tribals are a practical people, ready to set their hand to any task, without consideration of class or caste. But a scramble quickly began for the appointment of retainues of retainers to uphold the prestige of their new-found dignity.

Step by step, tribal leaders were being tempted to adopt wasteful and extravagant habits. They paid frequent visits to New Delhi on the pretext of extracting additional funds for development. The more pressing problem was, in fact, to channellize the already available funds to fruitful ends; but there was political advantage to be gained in letting the public see how close the minister was to the Prime Minister and other high dignitaries in the capital and how strenuously he was exercising himself in the cause of his people. The ministers also allowed themselves to be persuaded by their underlings to visit foreign countries with the avowed object of widening their perspective and gathering fresh ideas. While it was all to the good that their horizons should be widened by such visits outside their hills, the effect was that the attitudes and approach of even the most well-meaning of leaders began to undergo a marked change. They found less time progressively for their own people with their simple, old-fashioned habits, and tended to gravitate increasingly around a more sophisticated milieu than was afforded by the Naga village, finding relaxation by

preference in army messes, Station Clubs and Western-style parties.

Although these symptoms first manifested themselves in the capital at Kohima, they gradually filtered down to the manifold administrative outposts in the interior. It was not long before a minister's tour took on the semblance of a royal cavalcade, with pilot cars and police escort ahead and to the rear. Whereas, formerly, the villager had easy and direct access to his leaders, he would now be required to penetrate the meddlesome barrage of police, private secretaries and orderlies before he could hope for a hearing. The gap between the leaders and the common villager became wider and wider, until the former emerged as a separate and superior caste, the Brahmins of the tribals, with the Brahmins' arrogance and contempt for their lesser brethren.

The constitution of the tribal districts into states on the pattern of the larger states of India may have been satisfying to the tribal ego, but it also resulted in the dislocation and disintegration of the vital fabric of tribal communities, a fundamental shift in their value-judgements and an ever-widening gap between the villagers and their leadership. It would be unjust to blame the government for this outcome, as it was on the insistent demand of the tribal people themselves that the new states were constituted. Had the government resisted this demand, it would have been criticized as being unsympathetic to tribal aspirations. And it would be uncharitable to blame the tribals for pressing a demand, the fulfilment of which would have the effect of raising them to a higher pedestal in the constitutional edifice. It would have required unusual prescience and exercise of self-denial on the part of the tribals to decline pressing for a status that seemed to augur such bright prospects and tempting rewards. As for the future, there were few who could foresee the long-term implications of a primarily primitive village-based tribal community being geared overnight to a parliamentary system of government that had evolved over a period of centuries under completely different conditions. And those few who had the prescience of such foresight preferred to take the view that that bridge would be crossed when they came to it. It did not occur to them that, by then, it might be too late to make amends.

Apart, however, from the social and economic gulf that the

'New Deal' was opening between the leaders and the villagers, the gulf between the Naga and the non-Naga was also becoming perceptibly widened. It had become necessary to enlist a substantial number of plainsmen to man the numerous schemes envisaged for the new welfare state. These recruits, however, were prepared to join only if they were offered high salaries and special accommodation, transport and children's educational allowances to compensate for the physical and other hardships of serving in the hills. They tended, on appointment, to club together in separate little pockets, not identifying with the local people but remaining as a distinct colony with its own alien mores. It is not surprising that the Nagas became jealous of the special advantages enjoyed by this privileged group, who received higher allowances and perquisites than the Nagas employed on identical duties. The argument that these outsiders were being employed on a temporary basis and therefore had to be compensated for insecurity of service did not carry weight. Nobody could foresee how long it would take to train up Naga substitutes and, meanwhile, these temporary hands would have succeeded in establishing their indispensability and in entrenching themselves permanently in the administration. A situation might well arise where newly-trained Nagas would find all avenues of employment blocked to them. These were justifiable apprehensions, as there seemed to be no limit to the influx of outsiders and no prospect of their replacement by the Nagas in the foreseeable future.

While it had been the hope that the Naga would grow friendlier towards the plainsman if he were given opportunity for closer contact, the result was the opposite. As the plainsman was recruited on a temporary basis, he took little interest in identifying with the Nagas. His main aim was to save a little money from his extra allowances before leaving on expiry of his tenure. There was also a category of plainsman who became so allured by the perquisites of office that he tried to ingratiate himself with the tribal people so that his services might be retained on a permanent basis. In either case, the results were not happy. In the first, the officer put little heart in his work, as his sights were more sharply set on his next assignment after completion of his tenure in the hills. In the second, the officer had no scruples about tendering wrong and mischievous advice,

as long as this would be conducive to his continuance in office. The jealousies and unhappy relations between the Nagas and outsiders created such an unhealthy climate that, in course of time, only those candidates who failed to secure employment elsewhere in India were found prepared to apply for service in the Naga hills as a last refuge. The Nagas thus came to be served by indifferent officers who did little to enhance India's image in the hillman's eyes.

The proliferation of colonies of non-tribals all over the hills added to the Naga's apprehension of a Hindu cultural assault. It is unfortunate that, in the years before the transfer of power, there were British officers and missionaries who had, perhaps unconsciously, sown seeds of suspicion in the minds of the tribal people. It has to be remembered, on the other hand, that, whatever might have been the original motivation, it was the British officers and the foreign missionaries, mainly British and American, who had endured the hardships of working amongst the Nagas at a time when there were no communications in the hills and the tribes were still hunters of heads. These early pioneers had developed an intensely possessive feeling for the tribes, as parents for children whom they have reared from infancy. The tribes too had come to look upon them as friend, philosopher and guide, even to the extent of giving up their traditional beliefs and adopting Christianity. Although, therefore, the Christian missionary was responsible for bringing about changes that cut at the root of the tribals' natural evolution, he was none the less held in respect, as was equally the British administrator.

The British administrator and the missionary had deep and spontaneous affection for the hill people and, whether because of their simplicity or their naivety, they found them more friendly and cheerful to deal with than the plainsman. Many British officers and missionaries were genuinely apprehensive that, on their departure, the hills would be flooded and overwhelmed by plainsmen. The British administrator had, as a whole, a sentimental attachment to the tribal way of life. The tribal was, by temperament, an outdoor type, a hunter, a fisherman, like the colonial Englishman, and not a stay-at-home introvert, like the conventional Indian *babu*. What hope had he for survival once he was surrendered to the mercies of the trader

and the moneylender of the plains? The tribals of Central India had been horribly exploited by the plainsman. They had lost respect for their traditional cultural values and picked up the worst of the plainsman's vices, alcohol, drugs and habits of cheating and deceit. The hill tribals of the frontier had been saved hitherto from such corruption by their inaccessibility. With the Japanese invasion, however, the Nagas had seen the construction of roads in their hills and there was now talk of building a network of communications throughout the district to bring the benefits of administration to the door of the tribal people.

If the British officer and the missionary cautioned the tribals against the dangers of a too rapid and close embrace, it was not necessarily out of mischievous motives. The Indian reaction, however, to this attitude can be well imagined. It was the British bureaucracy and the foreign missionary who had all these years taken the tribal people under their wing, clung to them as their private preserve and stood in the way of their integration with the mainstream of India's culture. Now, at the time of their departure, they were up to their old game again, hinting—and more than hinting—to the hill people that they had better beware of the plainsmen, preferably cut themselves off from the country altogether by demanding independence than risk falling under their domination. It is not surprising that suspicions were aroused and moves initiated by the government for weeding out the foreigner with his seditious propaganda from the hills.

The departure of the British administrator from the hills followed as a natural consequence of the transfer of power and did not give rise to so much criticism or suspicion. Throughout the country, British officers had been replaced by Indian officers and it did not come as a surprise that the same pattern should apply to the hills. It *did* come as a surprise, however, and as a shock, when foreign missionaries, who were non-officials, were found being eased out of parishes in the hills that they had been serving for the better part of their lives. India, according to her Constitution, was a secular state. The first, and virtually the only people who had taken pains to help the tribal people in the field of education and health services had been the missionaries. The British administrator's responsibility had

been the collection of revenue and the organizing of punitive expeditions against head-hunters. It was the missionary who had tended both to the physical needs of the hillmen by treating them in times of illness and to their spiritual needs by teaching them a religion based on compassion and forgiveness.

The easing out of the foreign missionary confirmed the hillmen's apprehension and suspicion of their new masters. They had been assured that there was to be no interference in their way of life and beliefs, and amongst the first acts of the new order was the expulsion of just those persons who had supported them in their difficulties and provided them with spiritual light from as long a time as they could remember. It might be argued that, as Christianity was a foreign imposition and no part of tribal culture, there was justification for government's action. Christianity had, on the other hand, come to be accepted as virtually a tribal institution and way of life by a considerable and influential section of the community and there was deep and bitter resentment that there should be discrimination against its proponents, whether foreign or otherwise.

This feeling of resentment and grievance became apparent to me when, on my return to the tribal areas in 1959 after my tenure as Dewan of Sikkim, I was asked to advise on Naga affairs during the brief interim period before the setting up of the new state of Nagaland. It was to allay such feelings that a series of radio broadcasts was especially initiated for the Naga hills, including the relaying of Christian religious services on the Sabbath and on important Christian festivals such as Christmas and Easter. These broadcasts were arranged from Shillong, where a number of Naga students were my close friends. The tribal people have an instinctive flair for music and a choir was formed for the singing of hymns and psalms to be broadcast at the weekly services. Apart from religious services, programmes were also organized on Naga folklore and poetry, with Naga students as the main participants. The feedback received from the hills indicated that these relays were eagerly listened to and widely appreciated.

I was aware, however, of a sense of uneasiness in certain quarters of authority—they considered these broadcasts as ill-advised, as encouraging, albeit indirectly, the spread of Christianity. There had been rumours for some time of a move

to constitute all the hill districts into a single Christian state as a buffer against Hindu cultural and religious dominance. The broadcasting of Christian religious services, it was apprehended, would serve as an encouragement to such trends and it was thought to be politically unwise to pander to what were projected as anti-national tendencies.

It was not understood that, although Christianity was first preached to the tribal people by foreigners, it is neither foreign to India nor anti-national. The public has been perversely ill-informed in the matter and a quite wrong impression created that the tribals' holding of Christian rather than Hindu beliefs disqualifies them from being accepted, or trusted, as thoroughbred patriotic Indians. Suspicion breeds suspicion, and the assumption that, because the tribals are Christians, they must owe allegiance elsewhere than to India, has been the source of much of the misunderstanding and ill-will generated in government's handling of the tribal situation. It has led the tribal people to suspect that the government and the Indian public are prejudiced against Christianity and that devious means would be devised to stay its propagation.

These suspicions and apprehensions have been evidenced in the tribal reaction to the Freedom of Religion Bill that was tabled for introduction in Parliament in 1979. On the face of it, the bill was innocuous, purporting as it did to penalize attempts to convert any person to another religion by force or deceit. Stormy protests were nevertheless voiced against the bill by the tribal people, who assumed that its ulterior motive was to place obstacles in the way of Christian missionary activity.

While it is not the intention here to discuss the relative merits of Christianity and Hinduism, there is no doubt that the hill tribals, with their freedom from rigid caste distinctions, have, since emerging from their primaeval isolation, found more satisfaction in Christianity than in Hinduism. It may be that the idea of a personal God is easier for them to grasp than the more abstract concepts of Hinduism. The story of Christ, from the immaculate conception to its close in the crucifixion, would also have its dramatic appeal. Whatever the reason, Christianity has spread with extraordinary rapidity amongst the frontier tribes and the momentum has been consistently maintained, despite the departure of the foreigners who sowed the original

seed. The tribal people take Christianity seriously and their religion is not limited to a routine attendance at Church on the Sabbath. All the zeal with which they used to appease the countless spirits of nature is sublimated in their newly-adopted religion. The proportion of students studying theology as against other subjects in schools and colleges is higher in the Naga hills than perhaps anywhere in the world.

With such a burning zeal for their religion, there is little doubt that the tribal people will not spare effort in its propagation and the pace of proselytization will progressively quicken. Whatever may have been the inner motivation of the Freedom of Religion Bill, what is significant is that the tribal people have interpreted it as a direct and deliberate instrument for curbing conversion not to Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism or any other religious faith, but to Christianity. They have further inferred that if, today, there is interference in one sphere, and a vital sphere, of tribal life, tomorrow there may well be in another. Their sense of confidence in the safeguards of the Constitution has been rudely shaken; and once there is loss of credibility, the consequences can be quite unpredictable.

The Ultimate Hope

There have been initiatives at various times and at various levels, official, political and missionary, to find a solution to the Naga problem, that is, to bring about conditions under which the Nagas may settle down peaceably and contentedly within the Indian Union. While there is still a body of opinion in the Naga hills that holds to Phizo's call for independence and separation from India, the Nagas as a whole are weary of the struggle and would seem resigned to accept a *modus vivendi* within the Indian Union, provided they are not needlessly interfered with and are left to run their own affairs.

I have refrained from detailing the proceedings of the numerous goodwill missions that have devoted so much honest and conscientious effort to bringing about a settlement between the conflicting parties within the Naga hills as well as between the Nagas as a whole and the Indian government. If there has been failure, it has not been for lack of endeavour. But even the Peace Mission including amongst its members a Gandhian of the stature of Jayaprakash Narayan could bring about no final settlement. Another distinguished and much respected member of this Peace Mission was the Reverend Michael Scott, an Anglican chaplain of long standing and a recognized champion of lost causes. With his widely known reputation as a fearless and outspoken critic of authority, Scott might well have been considered suspect in official circles, and it is to the credit of the Indian government that it did not allow such considerations to stand in the way of granting him free access to the Naga hills and appointing him as a member of the team constituted for bringing about a reconciliation.

The Peace Mission could bring about no settlement, as the premises from which the principal parties set out were at

diametrically opposite extremes. Although Phizo was in London and physically far removed from the Naga scene, it was clear that the Nagas would not subscribe to any agreement that did not carry the stamp of his approval. And it was equally clear that Phizo would accept no settlement falling short of independence for the Nagas. As for the Government of India, it had already stretched itself to the utmost in granting to the Naga hills, an unviable territory of less than half a million people, the status of a full-fledged state. This in itself had given rise to severe and hostile criticism as constituting a precedent for other minorities to make similar demands. The example of the great Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was recalled. India inherited from the British a legacy of over five hundred princely states. These were summarily liquidated under the Sardar's strong arm in the larger interests of the country's unity and integrity. By allowing the Nagas a separate state of their own, the process of consolidation was being reversed and the way opened for defeat of the Sardar's grand design. If the grant to the Nagas of a state within the Indian Union had raised such political heat, the conceding to them of independence was clearly out of the question. The Mission was doomed to failure at the very outset, as what Phizo wanted was not for the giving.

It should not be inferred from the above that the Mission served no useful purpose. It is always better to talk than to spill blood. Such talks provided a much-needed breathing space for both sides, as it was set down as a condition for the talks that arms must be laid aside for their duration. Every violent death, every wound, whether suffered by Naga rebels or by the security forces, put the final solution one step back. Such injuries are not easily forgotten; they serve to increase bitterness, whereas it is only with the removal of bitterness that peace and goodwill can be restored. The peace-makers should not therefore lose heart if their efforts achieve no immediate results. They will have made their contribution; for the guns will have been stilled for a while on both sides, allowing time for wounds to heal.

Nor should it be inferred from what has been stated above that the disturbed conditions prevailing in the Naga hills will continue for all time. What has been sought to be shown is the deeper malaise underlying the disturbances; for unless this is brought to light, no tinkering with the problem on the surface

can produce fruitful result. It has been demonstrated that there has been no malice or deliberate ill-intention on either side. The Government of India has shown generosity in its approach to the tribals in general and the Nagas in particular. The Nagas have nevertheless had just cause to entertain fears and apprehensions. At the root of all has been ignorance and misunderstanding on both sides, and it is through ignorance and misunderstanding that they have caused such deep hurt to each other.

The view has from time to time been advanced that the Naga troubles have been mainly fomented by the mischievous schemings of neighbouring countries, more particularly China and Pakistan. While, however, there is evidence that India's neighbours have taken advantage of the unsettled conditions along the frontiers, it would be incorrect to brand them as the root cause. Tribals have, it is true, been supplied with arms and ammunition by India's less friendly neighbours, they have been offered asylum across India's frontiers when pursued by security forces, they have been trained, clothed, fed and helped to recuperate before recrossing the frontier and resuming their hostile, anti-government activities. But had it not been for the deeper causes underlying the disturbances, the question of tribals seeking support from neighbours would not at all have arisen. While therefore the efforts of the security forces to seal the frontiers will serve the limited end of depriving dissident Nagas of supplies, armaments and a haven of refuge, a final solution lies in the removal of the malaise itself.

What has been presented up to now may appear as a negative and not very constructive approach. Stress has been laid and attention drawn to the futility of the various expedients that have been tried—the heavy induction of armed forces, the granting to the Nagas of a more elevated constitutional status, unlimited financial investment. But the stress has been deliberately so laid in order to highlight the anomaly that, despite these diverse lines of approach over a protracted period, there has been failure in the end result for the reason that the essence of the problem has not been fully understood. It is a psychological axiom that problems find their resolution to the extent that their nature is understood. The importance is not so much in working out a solution—there often is no solution—as in

discovering the exact nature of the problem. For once this is revealed in its essential light, the sting dissolves and the path to recovery becomes clear.

Put in its simplest terms, the problem in the Naga hills has been the problem of cultural disturbance and maladjustment. Under the British the administrative structure was so light that the Naga scarcely felt its weight or presence. There was no difficulty in making an adjustment, as there was so little that was new or alien to adjust to. Everything proceeded smoothly enough until the Japanese invasion, to be followed shortly after by the transfer of power. On the one hand, the Naga was warned by his British overlords that he must help them resist the Japanese or else he would be exterminated by them. On the other, he was being advised by Phizo's agents that a promise had been extracted from the Japanese that, if the Nagas co-operated with them in defeating the British, they would be given back their freedom and be independent once again. The Naga had no idea who or what the Japanese were and whom to believe. All he understood, and only too soon, was that the Japanese were at his door, ravaging his home and crops. It was his loyalty to the government and solid co-operation that contributed largely to the enemy's repulse. But he had scarcely received a 'thank you' from his British masters, for whom he had made untold sacrifice in life and property, before they informed him that they were on their way out and that the Indians would be coming to take their place—and their only experience of Indians had been as traders and moneylenders who had exploited them on their periodical visits for shopping in the plains.

The Nagas are deserving of understanding and sympathy if, after all this confusion and traumatic upheaval in their lives, physical and psychological, they thought back with nostalgia of the status quo ante the British occupation. Much of their forest land bordering the plains had been constituted as 'reserved forests' and, as the machinery for forest control had been established in British times at the headquarters of the plains districts, these forest reserves were also included, for administrative convenience, within the boundaries of the plains districts, i.e., the Sibsagar and Nowgong districts of Assam. If the British were now to depart, the Nagas represented that the status quo

ante should be restored *in entirety* and the forest reserves also returned to the Nagas and incorporated in their territory. For the Assamese, it was unthinkable that the forests they had administered for over fifty years should revert to the Naga, whatever might have been their original proprietary rights. Faced with the dilemma of taking a decision that was bound to be unpalatable to one or other of the contending parties, the government resorted to the tactics of appointing a Commission. The Commission was accommodating enough to stretch out its enquiry over as long a period as possible in the hope that passions would cool. When it could no longer, in good conscience, let matters drag on further, it submitted its interim report.

The Government of India set about examining in leisurely depth the Commission's voluminous report. But as year passed after year, it became clear that they were shirking the issue and deliberately delaying a decision. Nehru had assured the Nagas in 1960 that the question of Naga boundaries and forests would be examined and settled. Naga patience was exhausted, and the Indian public was aghast to learn one morning in 1979 that a troop of Nagas had raided a village in one of the reserves, destroyed all the houses and killed over sixty villagers, including women and children. While such violence cannot on any grounds be condoned or justified, it has also to be understood that where feelings are strong, they cannot remain pent up indefinitely and that an outburst of some sort was inevitable if more visible signs were not forthcoming that the government was serious about settling the issue. If responsibility was to be placed on the Nagas for this fearful outrage, it was right that responsibility should also be fixed upon all those whose apathy and lack of imagination had driven the Nagas to such extremes of paranoia.

Events in the Naga hills have moved with the ruthless inevitability of Greek drama. The tragedy consists not of a chain of individual, dramatic incidents, but emerges, in retrospect, as the interplay of contrary and irreconcilable forces. All the past frustrations of the Nagas, their sense of humiliation in being regarded—and treated—as naked primitives, their resolve to be free at last of interference from outsiders, their pride in race—all this, and more, appeared embodied in the person of Phizo.

Unseen and remote in his solitary apartment in Kent, Phizo continued to control the destiny of his people in their mountain retreats; for they knew that his course was unswerving and that, whether for right or wrong, he held no sacrifice too heavy for the attainment of Naga independence. They knew that it was not for personal interest that he had left home and family to live in exile far from his native hills, in an inclement, foreign land. Phizo has no love for the British who, in his view, have failed the Nagas in their struggle for liberation from India. His is a lonely, friendless life—but a life in which hope yet springs eternal.

There is no panacea, no gimmick, that can solve and end the Naga problem. The Naga problem will work itself out to its conclusion, but in its own time. We have observed some of the inner forces underlying the drama, and we have seen that these forces cannot be summarily discounted or dismissed. And there are wounds, deep wounds, that time, and time alone, can heal. The tragedy of the Naga hills has been that we do not learn from experience, that we fail to understand that grown-up, thinking persons cannot be coerced to loyalty by force of arms. India has behind her the experience of thirty-five years since the transfer of power to guide her in her future relations with the Nagas. If the government and people of India have gained, by this experience, a clearer appreciation of the mainsprings of Naga action and attitudes, they will not be as harsh in their judgements and reactions as they have so often been in the past. And if the Nagas will cherish in their hearts with sincerity the Christian doctrine of forgiveness and atonement, the working out of the Naga drama to its conclusion, but a happy not a tragic conclusion, may yet prove a reality despite the bruises they have suffered.

Meghalaya: Break with Assam

The Nagas were only one of numerous frontier tribes who were progressively brought under the umbrella of the British administration from the early years of the nineteenth century. Notable amongst these were also the Mizos, a no less martial tribe of strong and independent spirit, situated in the southernmost hills of Assam bordering the Chin hills of Burma and Bengal. We shall not, however, discuss the Mizo situation in detail, as it follows, with marginal differences, the Naga pattern. Like the Nagas, the Mizos had not been much interfered with by the British. The administrative structure imposed on their hills was the lightest possible and the absence of communications left them even more isolated from the outer world than the Nagas. There are Mizo tribes which have close racial and cultural affinities with their neighbours across the frontier in Burma and whose social and economic contacts lie as much with Burma as with India. However, although involved in defence preparations the Mizos were not faced with the direct impact of the Japanese invasion and were in a less confused and distraught state of mind than the Nagas during the crucial years following the transfer of power. The Mizos were, moreover, too preoccupied with their internal political and social problems at the time to be able to give much thought to the larger question of independence and separation from India. Unlike other frontier tribes, who enjoy an essentially democratic system of village administration, the Mizos were ruled by hereditary chiefs who wielded extensive personal power. The chiefs were, by custom, authorized to summon villagers to provide labour for building their houses and carrying their merchandise back and forth to distant centres of trade. Apart from other miscellaneous exactions, the villagers were also re-

quired to surrender to the chief, as tax, a specified portion of each animal taken at the hunt. While the chiefs were generally benevolent, there were many who abused their powers and brought discredit to the institution as a whole. In India, a democratic upsurge was sweeping away the princely order, and the Mizo hills, despite their remoteness, could not escape the winds of change. Soon after the British withdrawal, a civil disobedience movement was launched by the villagers against their chiefs, the outcome of which was the reduction of their powers and the ultimate abolition of their office.

It was not long, however, before the Mizos followed the Naga path. With their major social objective—the abolition of the chiefs—attained, the move for independence was launched. There soon ensued a repetition of all the processes we have witnessed in the Naga hills—army operations, grouping of villages, constitutional concessions, unlimited financial largesse—and talk, interminable and fruitless, to bring about a settlement.

The tribes other than the Nagas and Mizos had also agitated for separation, but separation from their parent state of Assam and not separation from India. These tribes, the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos, had experienced their first contacts with the British not much earlier than had the Nagas and Mizos. But the weight of contact in their case had been heavier and more concentrated, and particularly so after the capital of Assam was shifted, in 1877, from Gauhati in the plains, to Shillong, a pine-clad plateau in the hills dividing the two main valleys constituting the Assam province, the Assam valley to the north and the Surma valley to the south.

The hills inhabited by the Khasi and Jaintia tribes consisted of a number of small independent states, whose rulers were designated as *Syiems*. One of the first objectives of the British after expelling the Burmese from Assam in 1824 and taking over the administration from the Ahoms was to link up the two major valleys, the Assam and Surma valleys, by building a road running north to south through the intervening Khasi and Jaintia hills. The tribal inhabitants realized the implications, both short- and long-term, of allowing foreigners free access to their hills and strongly resisted the proposal.

The Agent to the Governor-General at the time was David

Scott, one of the ablest and most imaginative of civil servants. It was David Scott of whom it has so rightly been said that 'had the scene of his labours been in North-West or Central India, where the great problem of Empire was then being worked out, instead of amid the obscure jungles of Assam, he would occupy a place in history by the side of Malcolm, Elphinstone and Metcalfe'.¹ It was through Scott's tact and diplomacy that permission was wrested from the Khasis for constructing the road, but not before perpetration of a brutal massacre of the British officers and other ranks deputed to carry out the road-survey operations.

David Scott saw in the Khasi hills infinite potentialities. Here, climatically and otherwise, was a little England. The hills and lush meadows recalled the English landscape and there was scope for growing peaches, plums, pears and all manner of English fruit and vegetables. And not only fruit and vegetables. Scott had visions of rearing in this cool, salubrious clime, fine, strong Englishmen as recruits for the British army. It was wasteful, he felt, to transport men from England to India to serve in the armed forces, with all the concomitant expenditure of sending them home periodically on leave. The solution that occurred to him was to create a permanent home for them in the Khasi hills where, after retirement, they could happily settle down, living not very differently from what they would be used to in England, and bring up their children to provide manpower for the civil and military services.

David Scott was a peripatetic officer, perpetually shifting his headquarters to wheresoever he decided he was most needed. Essentially a practical administrator, he is remembered for introducing the English pear² to the Khasi hills. But he was also instrumental in encouraging Christian missionaries to sow another kind of seed, the seed of education and Christianity, amongst the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo tribes.

Scott was an ill man, but he never suffered illness to come in the way of duty. Rather than rest or resort to a civil station for medical treatment when unwell, he would himself sound

¹ A. Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the N.E. Frontier of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1884.

² Named 'Sohpoh Nongkhlaw' (in Khasi) after Scott's one-time headquarters at Nongkhlaw.

his heart while on tour with a home-made stethoscope, count his pulse-rate, and medicate himself after consultation with the district surgeon by correspondence. It is not surprising that he burnt himself out through over-exhaustion, dying prematurely at the age of forty-five. He is one of the few officers in whose honour the Supreme Government considered it fit to set up a public memorial.

Scott's grandiose schemes remained unfulfilled. The plans for the widespread British settlements he had envisaged for the Khasi hills died, thankfully, with the man. Thankfully, for, as must by now be clear, the tribals would have bitterly resented such a massive intrusion and trespass upon their land. But the seeds of his Christian enterprise bore fruit, and it was not long before missions were established in these hills through which the tribals were progressively converted to Christianity. Some of the finest educational and medical institutions of these north-eastern hills owe their origin to the dedicated work of Christian missionaries and indirectly, therefore, to the initiative of David Scott.

As significant a catalyst of change as the Christian missions was the road David Scott had cut through the hills to link the Assam and Surma valleys. With the opening of communications through the hills, it was only a question of time before pressures would build up for the shifting of the headquarters of the province from the pestilential and sultry plains to the refreshing, forest glades in the hills. The Supreme Government was indeed for many years averse to the proposal of the local government to shift the capital to the hills. The population of Assam consisted mainly of plainsmen and it was appropriate therefore that the capital should remain in the plains. Government's dealings were also principally with the people of the plains and it would not be right to put them to the trouble and expense of having to journey up to the hills to transact their business, all for the comfort of a handful of officers who wanted to escape from the heat. The local officers, however, eventually had their way, with the Chief Commissioner moving camp to Shillong without obtaining formal approval and virtually presenting the Supreme Government with a *fait accompli*.

The establishing of Christian missions and the shifting of the provincial headquarters to the hills were the two major factors

that contributed to the disintegration of the tribals' community pattern of life throughout the north-eastern hills. Until shortly before Independence, Shillong bore the resemblance of a small, somewhat exclusive English country town. The upper hierarchy of the administration was British and there was not a dark face to be seen in the Station Club. The homes and gardens of the residents were typically English, as was their life-style. The bridge-room in the Station Club was the sanctum sanctorum where, if a player spoke at all, it was in a whisper, with none of the unrestrained and vociferous *post-mortem* argument that, for Indians, is the very life-blood of the game. The ladies—some of the gentlemen too—dressed for the races as for Ascot. Paper-chases on horseback in the mornings, a spot of business during the day, the club, cocktails and dinner in the evening—the European had little social contact with the Indian and even less with the tribals in whose land he had established himself. The Anglicized Indian might, if house-trained, be admitted to his home, but there were not many such in a small station like Shillong, with the consequence that Europeans and Indians lived in separate compartments. The houses where the upper echelons of the hierarchy resided were situated in what were officially designated as the 'European Wards', while Indians were relegated to outlying areas where their presence would not impinge on the British élite.

In some ways, this compartmentalism had advantages, as the tribal population remained apart from their new masters and, as the British residents were few in number, were not overwhelmed, even if influenced, by their presence, either culturally or otherwise. It was inevitable that, as the tribals came to be educated in schools, particularly mission schools, they were tempted to imitate and emulate the life-style of the ruling caste. The process, however, was gradual and gentle, spread over the course of several generations. Although Kohima was established as a civil station at about the same period as Shillong, it was not a provincial capital and not subject therefore to cosmopolitan influences to the same extent as Shillong. Nor had the way of life or attitudes of the inhabitants much altered, as the British presence was minimal. They were not adequately conditioned and prepared, therefore, for the heavy influx of outsiders, with their alien modes of behaviour, following the launching of the

new 'mission', this time Indian and not exclusively Christian, to open up their hills for development as a welfare state.

Shillong, as a provincial capital, had necessarily attracted more outside attention and interest than Kohima. Apart from being the provincial capital, it was also the headquarters of the Indian Tea Association, a powerful and prestigious organization set up to oversee the interests of the tea industry in the Assam region. With the improvement of road communications necessitated by its selection as a provincial capital, Shillong became an easily accessible holiday resort for tea planters as well as for the 'business community in Calcutta, where they could escape from the heat and bustle of the plains to the cool, refreshing calm of the hills. Within a score of years of Shillong's establishment as a provincial capital, she could pride herself on some of the best-run hotels of India, charmingly nestled amidst the pine-forests and efficiently operated by Swiss and Italian hoteliers.

It was not long before planters, civil servants, army officers and prosperous businessmen from Calcutta and other urban areas took the opportunity to acquire land and build houses for themselves on the verdant and wooded slopes of Shillong and her surrounding hills. Traders from Rajputana, Bengal, the United Provinces, Bombay and Sind did not lag behind—there was profit to be reaped in supplying the demands of a growing European community with its staff, servants, stables and other attendant paraphernalia. But all this influx was spread over a considerable number of years and did not descend as a sudden avalanche. The tribal people of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo hills were fortunate in being favoured with a grace period of over seventy years within which to adjust themselves to the gradual change in their pattern of life. Improved communications had enabled them to move out from their village homes and be brought into closer contact with outsiders, with whom many had even intermarried. Several of their community had been trained as doctors and engineers and were familiar with the ways, habits and ideas of city-folk of the plains. Their value-judgements had come to approximate more closely to the value-judgements of the various peoples with whom they had been brought into contact outside their own tribe, and they experienced therefore a lesser sense of shock with the transfer of

power, as their new Indian masters were not unknown to them.

More important, the Khasis and their neighbouring tribes were not regarded by the Indian plainsman as being to the same degree primitive as, for instance, the Naga. There was not therefore the same proselytizing zeal to reform them. The Nagas, under the British regime, had been excluded from the jurisdiction of the elected provincial cabinet and had been administered by the Governor 'in his discretion' and not on the advice of his ministers. With Independence, there was a demand from the Assamese plainsmen for the liberation of the Nagas from the autocratic rule of the Governor and for their closer integration with the province of which they were constitutionally a part. This ardour of the Assamese for a closer embrace gave rise, as we have seen, to apprehensions and suspicions in the minds of the Nagas and drove them even further into their own shell. While, in the language of the pre-Independence Constitution, the Nagas had been 'excluded' from the jurisdiction of the Assam ministry, the Khasis had been only 'partially excluded' and the Assam ministry had the right to advise the Governor regarding their administration, although the advice was not binding on him. They did not therefore feel the same pricks of conscience about their obligation to 'liberate' the Khasis nor the same ardour for a closer embrace to make amends for past neglect.

The Khasi had no more love for the plainsman than had the Naga, but he had seen more of him and his fears and suspicions were diminished by familiarity. From his many years of contact and association, he felt more confident of holding his own against the plainsman in a common government and less compulsion to break away from the parent body. The Khasis had learned to adjust themselves, over the course of time, to the changes that were being brought about in their traditional life-style. The Assamese realized that they could not make much cultural dent on the Khasis who had progressed far, through missionary guidance and encouragement, in developing their own literature in the Roman script, whereas there were few Khasis having any knowledge of or interest in the Assamese language. As long as they were not unnecessarily interfered with or pushed around by the Assamese, the Khasis were reconciled to the prospect of coexistence with them in a single

state; but as they felt the Assamese embrace tightening, they too decided they must extricate themselves before it was too late.

As against the Nagas who did not feel they had a strong enough vested interest in India to justify their continuing the same relationship with the successor government as they had with the British, the Khasis had a vital interest in retaining their connection with India. Apart from personal ties, several important institutions of the provincial government, as well as of the central government, had been headquartered in Shillong and a severance from India would have deprived the Khasi hills of a major source of their prosperity. For economic, if for no other reasons, it was expedient for the Khasis to retain their link with India. Independence, for the Nagas, would place them in less of a quandary, as the schemes and institutions necessitating finance were not as numerous and they saw no insuperable problem in their being temporarily kept in abeyance. Independence, for the Khasis, was a different matter altogether, as their entire economy had come to be inextricably interconnected with the Indian system and pattern of life. They were astute enough therefore to press only for excision from Assam in the confidence that the central government would offer them whatever support they might require, financial or otherwise, in their new-found dignity as a separate state.

Penalties of Over-investment

Whereas there was a body of Nagas that agitated for complete independence, the Khasis and tribes that had experienced closer and more intimate contact with outsiders were not prepared to risk reversion to the primitive order of living that severance from India was likely to involve and preferred to settle for a compromise whereunder, while remaining within the country, they would be protected by constitutional safeguards against any cultural imposition or interference of any sort, whether in dress, language, religion, politics or customary usage. As an essential condition to arriving at such a compromise, they demanded separation from Assam and the constitution of a separate hill state of their own, a demand that was eventually conceded to them under the provisions of the Reorganization Act of 1971.

While historical forces could not be reversed, it may well be asked whether the tribals could not have been spared the long years of ruinous agitations, with the loss of life and destruction of property that inevitably attend such movements, before their demand could be conceded. The delay in conceding the demand betrayed, without doubt, a lack of imagination and foresight, apart from a muddle of wishful thinking that was near culpable for all its tragic consequences.

The best constitutions are often those that are unwritten, and history has demonstrated that there have been countries that have been governed well enough without any written constitution at all. A constitution is practically workable to the extent that its provisions are acceptable to the people for whom it has been framed and reflect their essential aspirations. In the case of the hill tribals of the frontier, the constitution-makers were fully aware of the safeguards needed for the protection of tribal

interests and accordingly made provision in the Constitution for the establishing of District Councils consisting of elected tribal representatives, and vesting them with wide legislative powers to cover all fields where essentially tribal interests were involved. What the constitution-makers failed to take sufficient account of was the degree of Assamese irredentism. The average tribal was no more competent to read the Constitution than was the Indian villager elsewhere. But he had eyes to see vast tracts of the most valuable land in the hill capital of Shillong being allotted to Assamese, Bengalis and other non-tribals despite all the safeguards of the Constitution. The implementation of plans for economic development necessitated the appointment of technical personnel. As there were few technically qualified tribals available, non-tribals were appointed to fill the vacuum and soon flooded the countryside. The Constitution prescribed that there should be no interference with tribal customs. But with non-tribals holding most of the key positions both in the field and in the Secretariat, how could there not be interference? Finally, as the *coup de grâce*, the Official Language Act was passed by the Assam legislature in 1962 notifying Assamese as the official language of the state and its introduction by phases at all levels of the administration, including the State Secretariat.

It soon became clear that, though the Constitution provided safeguards for the tribals, such safeguards would be eroded away as long as the tribals remained as a minority within a state of such irredentist fervour as Assam. It would be unjust to blame the constitution-makers in distant Delhi for failing to assess the extent of Assamese irredentism and insisting on the hill areas being retained within the state of Assam. But Delhi had her eyes and ears in Assam, including her Governors and a wide intelligence network, and it should not have necessitated such long-drawn-out and bitter agitation before the central government could be convinced of the realities of the situation.

Here, clearly, was a case of faulty judgement and lack of imaginative insight. It became obvious within less than a year of the coming into force of the Constitution that Assamese chauvinism would arouse fears and suspicions in the minds of the tribals which would culminate in their demanding and ultimately extorting separate states for themselves. But nobody

was prepared to spell out the likely course of events. Any major constitutional reorganization would have offended Assamese susceptibilities and it was considered safer therefore to let matters rest as they were and hope for the best. If the British had managed to administer Assam, with all the hill tribes, as a single, composite state, what could be the difficulty now? The hill tribes should have no cause for complaint or apprehension. All possible safeguards had been embedded in the Constitution, which vested them with legislative powers far in excess of what had been available to them during the British period.

The point that was lost sight of, or not taken sufficiently into account, was that, during the British period, the Governor did in fact govern. Even in the 'partially excluded' hill areas, while it was open to ministers to offer advice, the final decision lay with the Governor, who knew his rights and was not afraid of exercising them. The hill tribal did not in fact even feel the need for constitutional protection, as he had complete and unqualified confidence in the Governor and knew he was in safe hands. Although the new Constitution also vested the Governor with discretionary powers, there were few Governors of the stature and strength of mind to exercise such powers against the advice or wishes of their ministers. Sir Akbar Hydari was the last of the Governors of Assam to effectively govern, and even where he was constitutionally bound by and acted on the advice of his ministers, he succeeded in projecting the impression that his was the deciding voice. He was thus able to retain the confidence of the tribal people, and had he lived, he might have contained them for some further time within Assam. But no organization can or should depend on the personality of the individual, and after his passing away, the tribals soon came to realize that, whatever the constitutional safeguards, ultimate authority lay not with the Governor but with the elected ministers and that, as long as the tribals remained within Assam, their future destiny lay in the hands of the Assamese.

It was unfortunate that neither the Government of India nor the Government of Assam were prepared to give their agreement to the hill peoples' demand for a separate state until they were finally coerced by a series of agitations that brought the administration to a virtual standstill. The only saving grace

was that the government did not have recourse, in the case of the Khasi hills, to the time-worn panacea of the mailed fist. There was indeed a powerful body of opinion that advocated an unbending stand against the movement for a separate state and the arresting of the hill leaders. There were rumours that the Khasis were getting ready their bows and arrows and preparing to resort to violence, on the Naga pattern, if their demand was not conceded. The District Officers took the expected, bureaucratic stand—the government must show no hesitation, the movement must be ruthlessly stamped out by force of arms and summary detention of the ringleaders. I was holding at this critical juncture the office of Commissioner for Hills and counselled restraint. My advice was eventually heeded by the government, and the hill leaders, who had courted arrest and fully expected they would be detained, were surprised, if not disappointed, to be deprived of the martyr's crown. But I was unaware at the time that, in the police department's assessment of security risks, the Commissioner's name was also 'on the list'!

The above recital of events, with its slightly Gilbert and Sullivan overtones, serves to illustrate that the suspicions as between tribals and non-tribals were not one-sided but mutual. We have noted the deep suspicions the tribals harboured of the non-tribal plainsman. But the non-tribals also had their suspicions. Deep in their hearts, they did not look upon the tribals of the frontier as Indians proper and felt unsure of their loyalties. At varying periods, the tribals of the frontier have been suspected of being pro-Pakistan, pro-China, pro-Burma, pro-Britain, pro-America, but rarely pro-India.

A suspicion has attached, unhappily, not only to the tribals but also to whosoever may be held as being sympathetic to tribal interests. There has been a quite perverse assumption that sympathy with tribal aspirations implies a diluted loyalty to the country as a whole. It is an approach that has been detrimental to the national interest, as it lends indirect support to the inference that the tribals are not in fact Indians proper. One of the factors responsible for tribal discontent has been the arbitrary blacklisting of officers known to be sympathetic to tribal aspirations on the suspicion that they are 'spoiling' the tribes by laying emphasis on their cultural identity. The tribal

people are quick to note and competent to draw their own conclusions. The officers who have a genuine interest in, and sympathy with the tribals are few enough as it is and if even these few are regarded as suspect, the tribals cannot fail but doubt the government's bona fides and distrust its professions.

The new hill state, born in 1972, was named Meghalaya, Abode of the Clouds, comprising as it does within its boundaries the region of heaviest rainfall in the country. With a population of a million, it consists of three main tribes, the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos, tribes that, unlike the Nagas, have had close and intimate contact over a prolonged period with the outside world and have moved far from the days of primitive head-hunting and human sacrifice.

I was invited to assist in laying, as the state's first Chief Secretary, its early foundations and remember well the high hopes of the time as expressed by a minister of the new state, whose father¹ had also taken a leading part in promoting the cause of the tribal people and had been a senior and respected minister in the former undivided state of Assam: 'Now that we have our own state, the way is clear for an efficient, clean government that will really help the people and bring them prosperity and happiness. No more corruption, no more red-tape and dilly-dallying; we tribals are practical people who believe in work more than words; we shall settle all our problems on the spot and not waste time scribbling on office files. Meghalaya will be an example to the rest of India of how an efficient state should be run.'

These were brave and heartening words, but it was not long before Meghalaya followed the Naga way. The new cabinet had scarcely been sworn in before jealousies sprang up amongst the ministers over the allocation of cars and residences. And tribals, with ministers giving the lead, who would ordinarily have thought nothing of walking ten miles along a rugged dirt-track through the hills, would no longer deign to walk a distance of two hundred yards to attend their offices.

Having won their long-desired tribal state, the tribals proceeded to adopt the sophisticated paraphernalia so far removed from the tribal way of life. The emphasis through-

¹ Reverend J. J. M. Nichols-Roy.

out was on massive expenditure of funds rather than achievement of results. Tractors were purchased so that the minister could give an assurance at the next assembly session that agriculture had been modernized. Within a year, these same tractors were lying useless and rusted, as no facilities had been arranged for servicing, garaging and providing spare parts. Sets of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* were distributed in remote rural areas where the level of education warranted no more than an inexpensive single volume *Pear's Encyclopaedia*. The 'Complete Works' of Shakespeare, Dickens, even Plato and Aristotle, Hegel and C. P. Snow could be seen displayed in village Community Centres where not a single villager would be qualified to comprehend a word of their contents. A glossy brochure would nevertheless be issued by the education and publicity departments about the resounding success of the Rural Libraries Project. Loudspeakers, transistor radio sets, cinema projectors were widely distributed under the Mass Communications Programme to serve a brief life before getting out of order through mishandling by inexperienced and untrained operators. Rolleiflex cameras were supplied to officers of the Public Relations Department who had no conception of the simplest principles of photography and who would have shown more satisfactory results with a cheap Brownie Box camera. And so it went on in every branch of the administration. Ways and means had to be devised for ensuring a continual flow of expenditure so that the people's representatives could make a show of figures of progress in the assembly and justify their demands for yet further financial grants in the corridors of power in New Delhi.

It may appear small-minded and niggardly to jib at the infructuous expenditure of a few million rupees if this was to help in winning friends amongst the tribal people. But it did nothing of the sort and the effects were totally negative and mischievous. In the first place, it gave rise to a habit of gross indiscipline and fraud. As money came easily, it was spent without the least concern for the benefits to be gained. Blatant deception came to be accepted as standard practice, and it was considered smart, something to be proud of, to wrest funds under false pretences from the central government which had no adequate machinery to check on their effective utiliza-

tion. Where the example was set at the highest level, it filtered down in due course to the lowest until every sector of the administration was polluted.

This flood of easy money had a yet more serious consequence in undermining the basic morality of the tribal people. Traders were prepared to offer substantial consideration to persons in high places for obtaining profitable contracts; and, in the general climate of financial indiscipline, such consideration was readily accepted, though not necessarily in cash. It could take many forms—the presentation of cases of expensive liquor or the payment of travel and hotel charges for family members when on holiday. Though the amount of consideration was negligible compared to the scale of corruption in bigger states in the rest of the country, the very smallness of Meghalaya and its population threw these malpractices into greater prominence. In a tribal community, the assets of every member are known, and where there is conspicuous expenditure, it soon becomes public knowledge if such expenditure has not been incurred from known and legitimate sources of income.

While the main justification for creating a separate hill state had been the safeguarding of tribal values, it was precisely these values that were amongst the first casualties when the state was eventually born. The heavy financial investment concomitant with the implementation of the successive Five-Year Plans brought a flow of money into the hands of the people for whose expenditure the basic tribal economy and pattern of life provided no outlet. As the tribal was not conditioned to the idea of saving or banking his gains, he expended them on the purchase of goods and in the indulgence of activities which formed no part of the essential pattern of tribal life.

In the wild rush to make profits while opportunity offered, the tribals did not foresee that they were sounding the death-knell of their culture and their traditional society. There were indeed a few who were aware of the perils and took some initiative to establish in Meghalaya an Institute of Art and Culture for promoting a deeper and livelier interest in the tribal heritage. But they were swimming against the tide and it was fast becoming apparent that the electric guitar and quadrophonic stereo would prevail before long over the rural pipe and flute. The least that could be attempted, however, was

to afford the tribal people opportunities for practising and propagating more widely their traditional art forms, their folk literature, poetry and music. The nucleus of a museum for the display of tribal artefacts was also established to revive a sense of pride in the indigenous crafts of the hills which were being so sadly and swiftly superseded by mass-produced trinkets of tinsel and plastics.

The hills of the north-eastern region are rich in wildlife, harbouring a multitude of rare species of animals including the Golden Cat and Clouded Leopard. When the tribal hunts, it is not primarily for sport but to meet his basic requirements of food. His hunting implements are primitive—traps, spears or bows and arrows—with the result that few animals are killed and the balance of nature is not unduly disturbed. With the new order ushered in by the increase of money-flow, the tribal concept and motivation of the hunt underwent a radical change. This change of concept and motivation became apparent during one of my tours of inspection in the Garo hills, when I was holding discussions with my staff regarding the importance of conserving wildlife. The District Officer was himself a tribal, whom I had known and helped as a student, and he felt free to confide in me and explain his delicate predicament. It had often happened that a visiting minister (all the ministers in the new state were tribals) would inform the District Officer of his plans for going on a shikar by night. A fleet of jeeps would set off in the evening and penetrate deep into the forests along the rough jungle tracks. Any live creature crossing the convoy's path would be dazzled by the glare of headlights and stand stock-still in bewilderment, a target for a dozen guns. The minister would return to headquarters next morning, to be congratulated by his entourage on his splendid performance. And the minister concerned might well be the minister in charge of wildlife conservation.

The hunt was no longer a modest need-based adventure, essential to the survival of the community. Its character was transformed and it had been transmuted to a grand sport to be indulged in as a symbol of status by the rich and great. There was grave danger that, if a halt was not called to this periodic massacre, the time would not be far when there would not be a live creature left in the forests either for the hunter's sport or to

provide for the villager's essential needs. Tribal customs duly prescribed the seasons for hunting and fishing and also prescribed that certain forests were to be held as sacred and spared the woodcutter's axe. These were the strict sanctions evolved over the course of generations to preserve the ecological balance, to ensure a constant supply of meat and fish for the community and to safeguard against the drying up of water-resources that would result from the reckless denudation of forest cover. The force of these sanctions, however, is now being steadily eroded and the tribal sees no wrong in dynamiting the hill-streams for fish and denuding the forests for supply of timber to contractors at exorbitant rates.

Much of my time was devoted to highlighting the importance of conserving forests and wildlife, so much so that a respected Khasi friend once referred to this interest, in all kindness and innocence, as my 'hobby'. It was not, however, so much a hobby for me as a mission. The creating of parks and avenues of flowering trees, the providing of opportunities to the public for seeing and taking pride in the wonderful world of animals and birds in their own native hills—all this admittedly fulfilled an inner creative urge. But the main aim was to evoke a deeper awareness of the perilous disturbance of the ecological balance that was everywhere taking place and to encourage the tribal people to have another look at their value-judgements before it was too late.

The question that may be asked, in view of the unhappy consequences, is whether the constitution of a separate state was such a wise decision after all. The answer, despite all, is a positive and unqualified affirmative. Much has not turned out as well as was hoped, as indeed has been the case in India as a whole after Independence. But the responsibility for the failure rests squarely now on the tribal people themselves. It was only too easy in the past to blame others for failures and resort to agitations for redress of supposed grievances. It had become the fashion, when things went wrong, to complain that the tribal people were not being allowed to run their own affairs and that the corrupt, non-tribal plainsman was the cause of all the mischief. In shedding themselves of all responsibility, the tribal people did not apply themselves to diagnosing the root of the malaise and seeking out constructive remedies.

Once the hill people were granted their own separate state, they were compelled to accept responsibility for failures themselves. If there is corruption and inefficiency in the administration, it will no longer suffice to start an agitation, but ways and means have to be found to put matters right. The tribal people are discovering that it is one thing to mount a demonstration, but quite another to run a clean and efficient administration.

The time has come for the tribal leaders to take stock, to carry out an exercise of introspection and ask themselves whether they have been faithful to their pledge to serve their people. They have had ample time to learn by now that administration is a fine art and not the mere dispensing of favours and patronage. It is not a matter of surprise that many were knocked off balance by the windfall of such an unprecedented increase in money-flow. But the tribal is basically a person of practical and sound common sense and it is not too late for the leaders to make an objective assessment of their performance and examine whether their actions and approach are at all serving the interests of their people.

The lesson of developments since Independence should by now have become clear to the tribals, to the government and to the public of the country. The tribals do not favour an excess of outsiders in their land, any more than Indians generally favoured a heavy British presence. The case for the tribals is stronger, in that their population is sparse in proportion to the area of their habitat and there is imminent danger of their being engulfed by an immigrant population as they have seen the originally tribal state of Tripura being engulfed by refugees from what was formerly East Pakistan. The Indian had no ill-will against the British; but even though the British were lightly spread over the land and their presence could by no means constitute any threat to Hinduism, they realized that they were not welcome beyond a point and saw wisdom in moving out. The tribal too has no inherent ill-will against the plainsman. But if the plainsman surges into his land in numbers, the tribal has an understandable fear of being overwhelmed. He feels insecure, as an outsider in his own native hills.

There was a genuine consensus throughout the country, at the time of Independence, that closer attention should be paid

to the tribes and more strenuous efforts made to raise them to the level of the rest of the country. What was not realized was that, although the conventional welfare activities of government had not yet penetrated into the hills, the tribal people did in fact enjoy a sense of deep security within their traditional social system. Every man had his part to play within the life of the community. He made his contribution to the community according to customary usage—as, for instance, by assisting in the construction of the community hall or dormitory—and he was in turn assisted by the community in time of need. It was the community and its sanctions that fulfilled the functions of the modern welfare state, without the tiresome red-tape and baffling form-filling of the bureaucracy of advanced societies.

As long as road communications were primitive, a tribal would make only one or two excursions in the year to markets in the plains to purchase his essential requirements of salt or iron. It was not uncommon to find villagers trekking for many weeks through the hills to the plains, buying their merchandise on arrival at the plains markets and returning home the following day. The villager was so integral a unit of the community that he could not afford to be absent for a day longer than was necessary. Under such circumstances, there was no motivation for change. The tribal might be mildly diverted by the modernities of life observed during his brief sojourn in the plains, but they made no impact on his attitudes and value-judgements. With the construction of a vehicular road, a week's journey could be performed in a day and the time saved spent in savouring the seductions and diversions of city life. Visits to the plains became more frequent and their duration more prolonged as communications improved; and the tribal pattern of life was gradually, though at first imperceptibly, influenced by the impact of the new ideas carried back home.

By the time of Independence, the shell of tribal isolation had already been cracked in the Naga and Khasi hills and the processes of change were well under way. In the popular view, tribal as well as non-tribal, all that was needed to 'uplift' the tribal areas was financial investment, and the heavier the investment, the faster the flow of the benefits of civilization. We have observed the ill-effects, corruption and amorality arising from an excess of money-flow into the hills. There is a

limit up to which investment can be fruitfully and constructively absorbed, and if that limit is exceeded, finances are squandered upon non-essentials and there is deterioration and disintegration of moral standards. A disproportionate share of the investment also becomes concentrated in the hands of a small élite in the towns without reaching the bulk of the populace in the villages.

The rural population continues according to its old traditional ways, respecting the customs and usages of their forefathers. They are intrigued and amused, but not impressed or influenced by the new-fangled gimmicks and mannerisms of the townsfolk. They are kept content with the favours dispensed to them by their leaders and representatives in the state and district headquarters—an educational grant for their children, a permit for cement, a financial loan for constructing irrigation channels. But the stream of life flows on in the villages as in the past, with no essential shift in the villager's value-judgements. The town élite on the other hand cannot escape the pressures emanating from a fast changing, breathlessly racing world. The transistor radio and the cinema are amongst the most potent and subtle forces of change. The British may have departed from India and the hills, but the race of the empire-builder is still looked up to as the pace-setter in fashion, and the overabundance of money-flow finds ready outlet in the emulation of the extravaganza of the West.

A stage is reached, in such situations, when the gap in material living and value-judgements between the urban ruling élite and the people as a whole becomes so wide that the latter no longer look upon the former as one of themselves. The lack of communication widens until it leads to an outburst in which the traditional forces rise in revolt against the new order that threatens the old. It is a situation in which rational considerations cease to operate, where the crudest barbarities of primitive ages are revived in a desperate struggle for the preservation of the heart and life-blood of the community. The time may not indeed be far when the villagers will reject their leaders if they do not show more respect for traditional values. Statistics of schools and hospitals established, miles of roads constructed, tonnage of agricultural seed distributed, will count for nothing if the people's deeply-rooted spiritual and cultural urges do not

find fulfilment. The leaders have therefore to be watchful that their life-style does not become so sophisticated that they are alienated from, and lose empathy with their own people. It is no less important to ensure that the development projects sponsored by them do not run counter to beliefs and sentiments that are the very foundation and motivating force of the community.

If a lesson is to be learnt from the experience of tribal administration since Independence, it is that it is for the tribals to decide for themselves in what directions and at what pace change is to be brought about in their society. If they seek advice at all, they should be counselled to take up projects necessitating the minimum induction of outside personnel for the minimum period of time. They should be prepared, again, to recruit less qualified personnel from their own community in preference to more qualified outsiders, *provided* of course the former are fully competent to handle the work entrusted to them. They should remember, above all, that changes should be introduced only when the proposed beneficiaries are ripe for such changes and both appreciate and accept their implications. The mere availability of finance should not in any case be the criterion for investment; the sole criterion should be the essential need for such investment. The leaders should bear in mind that their leadership will be effective to the extent that their value-judgements do not depart too widely from the value-judgements of their people. While the tribals have no wish to remain static and fully realize that the world has become too small a place for them to continue in perpetual isolation, they do not wish to see the institutions their community has cherished for generations denigrated and summarily discarded. They appreciate that change is inevitable, and will welcome such change provided it is brought about in a manner acceptable to themselves, with gentleness and understanding, without causing hurt to their sensibilities, without implying contempt for their own native institutions. It will not be the end of the world if the processes of change are geared to a steadier and more relaxed pace. It may well be the end of the tribes if they are not.

Arunachal: The Hidden Land

The tribes we have been discussing (i.e., the tribes of Nagaland and Meghalaya) had, as we have seen, been brought under varying degrees of administrative control from the first half of the nineteenth century. The control was light, but a rudimentary network of bridle-tracks had been constructed to link up the main centres of population and the government's writ was, by and large, recognized by them. While the administration's principal concern had been the maintenance of law and order, it had been left to Christian missionary bodies mainly to attend to the medical and educational needs of the people.

By the time of the transfer of power, a fair number of tribals from these areas had studied in educational institutions outside their own native hills. Apart from missionary enterprise, the government had itself also established some schools and hospitals and the tribals of these districts were no longer strangers to the outsider and his life-style. They were as resolved as before that there should be no interference in their customary way of life, but they no longer regarded the outsider as an animal from another world to be kept at as wide a distance as possible. Many tribals had formed personal friendships with plainsmen and until, as we have seen, the latter began to show signs of an over-possessive approach, they were content, except for extremists amongst the Nagas and Mizos, to coexist with them in peace and amity.

Apart from the tribals mentioned above, who had enjoyed some measure of association with outsiders since the nineteenth century, there were a multitude of tribes along Assam's northern borderlands¹ adjoining Tibet that had never been brought

¹ Designated successively as 'Tribal Areas', 'North-East Frontier Agency (Nefa)' and, finally, in 1972, as 'Arunachal Pradesh'.

under formal or regular administrative control up to the close of the British regime. There was indeed a system¹ under which certain commodities particularly valued by the tribes, such as cloth, salt and iron, were annually made over to their representatives by the Political Officer in lieu of their waiving their raiding-claims over villages in the plains adjoining the foothills. This was a system inherited by the British from the Ahoms, the former rulers of Assam; but it was really bribery in all but name and its retention is significant as illustrating the extent to which the government was prepared to go to appease the tribes rather than risk involvements that would oblige them to establish, at heavy cost, a network of administrative centres in the interior hills.

During the British period, the Chinese had been for the most part too preoccupied with their internal revolutions to pose a threat to India's north-eastern frontiers. These had been defined, at a conference in Simla in 1914 attended by British, Chinese and Tibetan representatives, as the McMahon Line² and followed the main watershed of the Himalayan range. As, however, the Chinese refused to ratify the arrangements and there was subsequently no formal demarcation, the British considered it politic to send their Political Officers up to the border every year to show the flag and reaffirm their claim to all territory south of the main watershed.

These annual excursions could not however by any stretch of imagination be interpreted as constituting effective administrative control of the tribals inhabiting the border regions. Access to the frontier was by routes following the major river-valleys running from north to south. There were no lateral communications and the few bridle-tracks that existed were rudimentary and negotiable only during a brief part of the year. It required officers of the most robust constitution and adventurous spirit to stand up to the rigours of touring in these trackless regions infested by all kinds of vexatious insects and inhabited by tribes in whose eyes a stranger was not a welcome guest. The Political Officers confined their flag marches to the three or four months of the cold weather, when the mountain tracks were compara-

¹ Known as the *posa* system, *posa* being the vernacular term for tribute.

² So named after Sir Henry McMahon, the British representative at the Simla conference.

tively dry after the heavy monsoon rains and therefore negotiable. A few villages situated along the valley routes might thus catch a fleeting glimpse of the flag once in a year during the winter. But for the major part of the population, the administration might as well not have existed.

It was not until the 1930s that the British began to entertain more serious apprehensions of Chinese ambitions and established a few paramilitary outposts at focal points along the valley routes leading to the McMahon Line. The headquarters of the Political Officers were however retained in the distant foothills to the south and, apart from a handful of solitary paramilitary outposts, there was no move to set up a regular administrative apparatus nearer the northern border and in the interior.

This vast, mountainous tract north of the Brahmaputra, designated after Independence as the North-East Frontier Agency (Nefa), was one of the few tribal regions that had never been appreciably influenced by Christian missionary enterprise. Two French missionaries,¹ who were on an exploratory visit, were killed by the chief of a Mishmi tribe of Nefa in the nineteenth century, and subsequent acts of hostility on the part of the tribesmen convinced the British that these inhospitable hills and their inhabitants would best be left undisturbed.

Although, under the new Constitution, Nefa was included as part of the state of Assam, it was specifically prescribed that its administration was the responsibility of the President of India and that the President's Agent for the discharge of this responsibility was the Governor of Assam. It was further provided that, in the discharge of his agency functions, the Governor would act *not* on the advice of his ministers, but *in his discretion*. The constitution-makers thus drew a clear line of distinction between the Nagas and other southern tribes, in respect of whose administration the Governor acted on the advice of his elected ministers, and the northern tribes whom he was to rule unfettered by ministerial interference.

The reasons for this distinction are not far to seek. The constitution-makers were aware that the northern tribes had had no contact with the outside world and that their ties even

¹ M. Krick and M. Bourri were murdered in 1854 on their return from Tibet through the Lohit district in eastern Nefa.

with the contiguous plains of Assam were tenuous. The Assamese on their part had little experience of the northern tribes or knowledge of their culture, languages or customs; they could lay therefore no special claim to their administration. More important still, the Chinese were beginning to take a belligerent stand *vis-à-vis* the regions along India's north-eastern borders. Rumours were afloat of their designs on Tibet, and they were also showing reluctance to accede to the Government of India's request to alter their maps, which showed vast areas south of the Himalayan watershed as Chinese territory, and delineate the McMahon Line as the international frontier. The northern border had thus become a live and sensitive region and the problems of the frontier tribes were now a matter of national concern for which the central government decided they must take direct and sole responsibility.

The Governor of Assam's chief aide in the discharge of his responsibilities as Agent to the President was his Adviser for Tribal Areas. The Adviser's was a post normally held by a very senior officer in the closing years of his service. The last British incumbent¹ had been an officer of thirty years' experience of administration in the hills, who had achieved eminence as an anthropologist and whose monographs on the Naga tribes had earned recognition as definitive treatises. My appointment was clearly a case of Hobson's choice. It was considered more politic to appoint an Indian officer to this sensitive key post, where India's international frontiers were involved, than to extend the services of a British officer, however wide his experience and knowledge. And of the Indian officers available, there were none with any special claim to experience or knowledge, for the British, as has already been pointed out, had taken no steps to train up Indians in hill administration.

I was, ironically enough, at an advantage, in my predicament of ignorance and inexperience, by reason of the country's comparative indifference to affairs of the north-eastern frontier and its preoccupation with more pressing internal problems, such as the consequences flowing from Partition and the integration of the princely states. Although the area of Nefa was extensive, its population was less than half a million, so that, on a strictly per capita basis, the allocation of funds for its administration

¹ J. P. Mills, C.I.E., I.C.S.

would have been negligible. The central government was approached for additional funds (over and above Nefa's per capita entitlement) on grounds of its backwardness and the need to compensate for past neglect; and the central government readily agreed. But even so, there was no conception at the time of the financial implications of developing these north-eastern hills.

It was not realized that, in the absence of road communications, the cost of constructing a hospital in the northernmost hills might well run to over fifty times the cost of constructing a similar building in the plains. The road construction estimates similarly spiralled proportionately higher the further the roads penetrated towards the frontier. The British knew what they were about when they decided to let these intractable hills remain in their undeveloped state. They could see no financial profit in their economic exploitation in the foreseeable future and, in the absence of any political or strategic motivation, they considered it pointless to commit themselves to infructuous expenditure.

Although we pressed for, and the government conceded, funds many times in excess of the annual expenditure incurred in these frontier hills during the British period, even this was but a negligible drop considering the huge cost of opening up a completely virgin area. I did not know it at the time, but it was this failure of ours to make a realistic calculation of the financial requirements of developing Nefa on the scale of the rest of the country that initially saved Nefa from her only too zealous well-wishers. The funds we had asked for were minuscule considering the vastness of the area, but the resultant constraints of finance allowed us a breathing space to ponder more deeply and restrained us from embarking recklessly upon a multiplicity of hastily- and ill-conceived projects.

My appointment as Adviser came at a time when the era of the helicopter and the jeep had not yet dawned in India. It was a time when, whether we liked it or not, we had no alternative but to walk to get from one place to another, as the hill tracks were not yet fit for even ponies or mules to negotiate. There were often stretches of the journey during which we had to get on all fours to make any progress. While all this was no doubt tiresome, it had its value as it enabled, or rather forced us to

come into closer contact with the hill people and so understand at first hand their problems, their apprehensions and their aspirations. As we laboriously made our way over the hill-tracks, we could chat at length with the tribal guides and village headmen who accompanied us and we would exchange a word from time to time with passers-by on their way to till their fields or trade in the plains bazaars. And when we halted in the villages for the night, we were rewarded with a glimpse into tribal life that would never have been available had we come on a lightning tip-and-run visit by jeep or helicopter. These early tours were however mainly in regions comparatively close to the valley routes along which our Political Officers had been wont to proceed on their flag-marches to the frontier. For the main bulk of Nefa remained still an unexplored territory.

Limitation of funds fortunately restrained us from taking up a number of schemes that would have necessitated the recruitment of a spate of outsiders with no knowledge or experience of the tribal people or their problems. This would have confused the tribals and given rise to apprehensions and suspicions that the successor Indian government was out to infiltrate into their land under the guise of developers and dispossess them. They had no particular love for the predecessor British government, but it had at least left them alone to run their own affairs and not been meddlesome. The new administrators of Nefa were following the British example in not being meddlesome, but it was not so much by deliberate choice as by necessity—they had failed, in their happy ignorance, to equip themselves with the financial wherewithal to hasten more quickly.

We have seen how, in the case of the Nagas and other tribes, Assamese irredentism aroused fears and suspicions. The Assamese regarded Nefa also as part of their domain, but realized that here they must tread more warily, as the administration of Nefa was constitutionally the central government's responsibility. There was on the other hand an enabling provision in the Constitution whereby Nefa could also be brought under the Assam government's direct administrative jurisdiction as soon as its tribes were considered ripe for the change. What the Assamese apprehended was that, as long as Nefa remained a central government responsibility, the climate would never be created for its ultimate integration with Assam. It would be

administered by central government officers, who had little knowledge of or sympathy for Assam, her people or her culture. The Centre would create a vested interest for itself in the area and would not readily surrender the patronage in appointments, contracts and other fields that Central rule offered. What was more, the Centre was not likely to evince much enthusiasm for Nefa's cultural integration with Assam. The Assamese argued that the tribes of Nefa had enjoyed age-long historical ties with Assam and that, if only offered the opportunity and choice, would readily accept being administered by the Assam government in preference to New Delhi. The Assamese further maintained that they had a better understanding of the ways and attitudes of the tribes of Nefa and that many of the latter were conversant with the Assamese language. New Delhi, on the other hand, was too remote to be able to appreciate the problems of Nefa, and officers appointed by the central government would, in any case, find themselves handicapped in communicating with the tribals, who had a smattering of Assamese but of none of the other major languages of the country such as Hindi, Marathi or Telugu.

It was the Assamese case that, if the ultimate intention of the Constitution was to bring Nefa within the administrative fold of Assam, preparatory action towards this end must be initiated at once or else Nefa would be kept perpetually as a separate entity under the Centre. The first desideratum, in their view, was to vigorously promote the spread of the Assamese language for official, educational and other purposes. It was not long before agitations were set afoot all over Assam to bring pressure on the central government to enforce Assamese as the medium of instruction in every school in Nefa. Pressures were also progressively built up for posting Assamese officers in Nefa in preference to officers from other states, in the expectation that Assamese officers were more likely to favour and work towards Nefa's early integration with Assam.

There was indeed a certain justification in the Assamese stand. The tribes close to the foothills had in fact developed contacts with the Assamese during their marches to trade-marts in the plains and were also conversant with the Assamese language. Tribals in Tirap, the easternmost district of Nefa, had even come under the influence of the great Assamese

satra (monastery) at Majuli, to which they resorted on periodic pilgrimage. The tribal agents and interpreters in Nefa had, again, been accustomed to converse with the political staff during the British period in a *patois* of broken Assamese.

What the Assamese failed to appreciate was that this Assamese veneer was limited to the narrow southern belt of Nefa that was contiguous to, and had had some limited contact with the Assam plains. But in the absence of internal communications, by far the greater part of Nefa had enjoyed no such contact. Many of the tribes inhabiting the extreme northern areas, such as the Monpas, found it indeed more convenient to cross over to Tibet for their essential requirements and had had little occasion for visiting the Assam plains and so coming under Assamese cultural influences. In language and in culture, they were of predominantly Tibetan affinity. The great monastery of Tawang at the north-western extremity of Nefa resembled more closely the Buddhist monasteries of Tibet and Bhutan, and its monastic discipline too was derived from Tibet. I thus found, during my tours, that I could more easily communicate, in my broken Tibetan, with the Monpa tribals in northern Nefa than I could with the tribes in its central belt, who understood neither Assamese nor Tibetan. The casual visitor to Nefa, therefore, moving along the southern regions contiguous to the Assam plains, would gather a totally misleading impression of the overall culture of the people.

To do them justice, though the Assamese pressed their case for the immediate integration of Nefa, it was in a spirit of reasonableness and restraint. This was partly in deference to the statesmanlike guidance of the then Governor of Assam, Sir Akbar Hydari, who was able to convince his ministers that he favoured the ultimate integration of Nefa with Assam and was steering his course to that end. The appointment of Assamese officers to focal posts in Nefa, including the posts of Political Officer, went a long way towards satisfying Assamese aspirations and allaying fears that their people would be excluded from the administration.

The Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950, however, marked a turning point in Nefa's history. Whatever might have been government's stand in the past regarding the future shape of Nefa, it now became abundantly clear that Nefa was a zone of

vital political and strategic importance which must not on any account be allowed to become the sporting ground of rival, bickering politicians. High-level committees were constituted to examine every aspect of the administrative apparatus, developmental, cultural as well as strategic, and a final blueprint drawn up to set the pattern for Nefa's future.

Nefa's five-year plan for economic development was drawn up by the various specialized agencies and patterned on conventional lines—the establishing of road and air communications, the setting up of administrative centres, each with a school and dispensary, at focal points extending to the frontier and the introduction of improved techniques in agriculture and small industries. There was nothing new or original in all this warranting special notice—it was a pattern that would find parallels in most Indian states, as indeed in most developing countries of the world.

There were, however, certain original features in the overall policy approach that saved the tribes of Nefa from much of the distress, cultural degradation and loss of nerve that has been the lot of tribes elsewhere subjected to the processes of 'civilization'. For although the plans for the social amelioration of the tribes followed a conventional pattern, very special, and not so conventional, measures were adopted to ensure that their implementation on the field should not cause them shock or emotional hurt.

The first essential was to recruit a team of officers who would be both professionally equipped and temperamentally suited for the very unusual and exacting conditions of Nefa. It was decided to constitute for this purpose an All-India Frontier Service, which would carry prestige and status no less than that of the Indian Administrative Service.¹ Recruitment to this new service was to be not by written examination but through interview by a high-level board consisting of experienced administrators and specialists in the field of tribal culture, including Verrier Elwin, who was appointed as Tribal Consultant to the Nefa administration.

It had been the practice during the British period to draw upon the Defence and Police Services for recruitment to the Political Service. The Political Service was required to man,

¹ Successor to the I.C.S. (Indian Civil Service).

inter alia, the Political Agencies in the turbulent north-west frontier and the view was held that an officer with a strong army or police background would be well suited to deal with the tough and trigger-free Pathan. In the background of British practice and precedent, applications for the new Indian Frontier Administrative Service (I.F.A.S.) were also invited from the Defence and Police Services, although for somewhat different reasons. The problems and character of the tribals of Nefa and of the north-west frontier were by no means similar. Moreover, a decision had been taken that the British policy of non-interference in the tribal areas required to be reconsidered. For the administration's objective was no longer to be limited to the maintenance of law and order. It was to be extended to ensure that the directive principles of the Constitution should apply in the remotest corner of the tribal areas with as much force and effect as in the capital at New Delhi.

It was expected that officers from the Defence and Police Services would have had a good grounding in discipline and would be physically well equipped for the strains of touring in the hills. The Indian Administrative Service was in any case unable to offer officers for deputation to the new service as it was itself short-staffed, while officers from an established, prestigious service, successor to the Indian Civil Service, were not likely to volunteer for transfer to a new cadre where the future prospects were as yet undefined and uncertain. A Special Recruitment Board was therefore constituted to sift the thousands of applications received from the Defence, Police and other services and recommend, after scrutinizing their records of service and on the basis of a searching interview, which would be the officers best suited, temperamentally and otherwise, for the new frontier service.

On finalization of the selection, the officers were put through an intensive training course directed to preparing them for their new responsibilities. The venue of the course was at Government House in Shillong and the then Governor, Jairamdas Daulatram, personally presided over the proceedings to lend them the required weight. While the trainees were duly briefed by the heads of the various technical departments, such as the Agricultural, Forest and Medical departments, more particular emphasis was placed on giving them an insight into

the basic problems of tribal administration, especially the problems arising from contacts between communities at different levels of culture. This aspect of the officers' training was handled mainly by the Governor, Verrier Elwin and myself. We wanted our officers to understand that tribal culture was not a primitive anachronism to be summarily swept away, that it was, on the contrary, the very flesh and life-blood of the people, that with its extinction would be extinguished also their vital force and motivation for living. We further wanted our officers to understand the basic values of the tribals, the importance they attached to their land, their forests, their water rights and to understand that there was beauty in the handicrafts of the tribal people, as much beauty, in their eyes, as in the masterpieces of Ajanta or St Marks. There was beauty and loveliness in tribal ritual, in tribal song and dance, different admittedly from what might be heard and seen in the great cathedrals and opera houses of world renown, but no less meaningful, no less aesthetically fulfilling, for their practitioners in the forests and the hills. We wanted our officers to understand how much hurt could be caused by insensitivity to tribal sentiment. 'Civilized' people tended to take their religion as a matter of routine, limited to the Sabbath and feast days. For the tribal, the world of spirits, whether good or evil, was alive and around him constantly. There were seasons of the year, for instance, when it was regarded as of ill omen for an outsider to enter within the precincts of a village. No offence was intended to the visitor in denying him admission, but there was genuine apprehension that, by his entry, the village might become infected with disease. In a society that knew nothing of vaccination and inoculation, it was understandable that certain periods should be prescribed by its members for isolating themselves from apprehended epidemics. There were officers, however, who were ignorant of tribal usage and regarded such restriction on their entry as a sign of unfriendliness, even hostility.

The tribals, once suspicion and apprehension have been dispelled, are the most hospitable of people. Many have been the occasions that I have not been allowed to leave a village without first partaking of food and drink at every elder's home. It has not always been an agreeable experience—the tribals regard fatty meat as a special delicacy, and I have been allergic

to fat since my earliest childhood. But I have happily set my scruples aside so as not to cause offence by refusing their well-intended hospitality.

The inculcating of a respect for tribal institutions, tribal art, tribal susceptibilities, tribal languages—this was the main thrust of our training programme. The attitude and habit of regarding everything tribal as crude primitivism had become so deeply engrained in people's minds that many thought our approach was anachronistic and that, by its adoption, we were holding the tribals back and denying them the blessings of a more enlightened culture. We wanted our officers to understand that respect was a two-way traffic and that the tribals would respect us and our institutions to the extent that we respected them and theirs.

Special stress was laid on the importance of officers learning the language of the tribes amongst whom they were to be posted. The difficulties were appreciated, as there was such a multiplicity of languages and the learning of languages does not come easily to all. What was important, however, was not so much the officer's proficiency in the tribal language as the fact that he was making an effort, at the cost of time and trouble, to learn the language of the tribals instead of taking it for granted that they should learn his. There is a class of people who regard any person who does not understand their own language, whether it be English, Hindi or Assamese, as uncultured and uncivilized. It is an attitude of superiority which, though innocent of ill-intention, is resented, and justly, by the tribal for whom his native language is dearer than all the world.

It was decided, as part of the training exercise, to invite to Shillong tribal representatives from Nefa, together with the craftsmen, artists and respected elders of their respective districts, so that our officers should be enabled to have an idea of the rich spectrum of tribal life. This orientation was intended not for the officers alone but also for the public at large. For unless the public could be educated and led towards a more rational and objective understanding of tribal values, official endeavours would not bear fruit. It was no less essential therefore to offer the public an opportunity of appreciating something of the richness and beauty of tribal culture.

It is too much to expect that a training course of a couple

of months will turn out an officer adequately equipped for service amongst the tribal people. But while experience is the best master—and the one for which there can be no substitute—broad guidelines were laid down which saved officers from the graver pitfalls. They were made to understand that they would be judged and their merits assessed by the extent to which they showed respect for tribal institutions and functioned not against but through such institutions. We did not want them to lord it over the tribal people. They knew that we would be keeping a close watch over their behaviour and dispense with the services of officers who lacked the will or aptitude to carry the people along with them. If officers would not take the trouble to pick up at least a smattering of the tribal language, they would have to seek a billet elsewhere. The officers, we made it clear, were for the tribals and not the tribals for the officers.

For many incumbents, a governorship was a comfortable reward and carefree conclusion to a successful service or political career. For Jairamdas Daulatram, who succeeded to the office in 1950, it was a solemn and dedicated mission and I have not known a Governor of Assam who took his responsibilities as seriously and conscientiously. Jairamdas had had no experience of the hill tribes before assuming the governorship, but it was not long before he set about studying all the records and reports he could lay his hands upon relating to the Assam frontiers. Apart from his archival researches, Jairamdas put every frontier officer through a detailed and rigorous cross-examination to squeeze out of him the quintessence of his knowledge and experience. Above all, he went to the most authentic and original source, to the tribals themselves. Wherever Jairamdas toured, he engaged in long discussions with the tribal people in his endeavour to gain the fullest possible knowledge of their customs, aspirations and responses to the administration. No man could have taxed himself harder to get to know his job.

Jairamdas was a true Gandhian, with a long and distinguished record of service in the national movement. But unlike many of the more fanatical and hidebound nationalists, he saw that the minorities had a vital part to play in the life of the new India. He had the vision to realize that lasting unity was to be

achieved not by moulding every segment of the population according to a single, uniform pattern but by allowing each part to grow and develop according to its own genius, to feel a sense of freedom and fulfilment in contributing its own individual and distinctive share to the rich and varied tapestry of the nation. The tribes were, as he so truly and poetically put it, like flowers, each of which 'helps to make a garden. I would not like to change my roses into lilies nor my lilies into roses. Nor do I want to sacrifice my lovely orchids and rhododendrons of the hills.'¹

If Jairamdas was, as I had once described him, the 'High Priest' of Nefa, Verrier Elwin was its administering herald angel. The popular image of the tribal may have been of an uncouth savage. For Verrier Elwin, he was all magic, love and beauty. Verrier's first and most important offering to the cause of the frontier tribals was his *Philosophy of Nefa*,² which was soon accepted as the frontier officer's bible. The book unfolds the fundamental problem of the frontier tribes with sympathy and affection, written simply but with a poetry and depth of feeling that reach directly to the heart. And though it is concerned mainly with the people and problems of India's north-eastern frontiers, the principles discussed are of universal application and are equally valid wherever in the world peoples who have lived in isolation are subjected to the pressures of change.

Soon after seeing the training course through to its conclusion, I moved on³ to my next posting in Sikkim. The parting was a wrench for me, as I had passed six exciting and stimulating years in Nefa and had formed deep friendships with the tribal people. But my transfer afforded me an opportunity to widen my experience and, reluctant though I was at the time, I realize, in retrospect, that my move to a fresh milieu, with fresh problems, was sensibly timed. I had inherited, in Nefa, an administration that was virtually no administration. I had functioned practically single-handed, issuing instructions by word of mouth during my tours and giving guidance by wireless

¹ *Philosophy of Nefa*, p. 57.

² Published by the North-East Frontier Agency, Shillong, 1957.

³ In early 1954. I was recalled to Shillong in 1959 for a second tenure as Adviser for the frontier areas.

to officers in our remoter outposts. It was an essentially personal technique of administration evolved to fulfil the objectives of a policy of least possible interference with the tribal population.

The Chinese entry into Tibet in 1950 had changed all this. Political and strategic pressures dictated henceforward a more elaborate and complex administrative structure in the tribal areas than I had favoured, as well as a heavier physical presence of the bureaucracy and of the engines of law and order in the very centre of the hills, and not merely at their extreme southern periphery as in the past. Mine had been governance with a light touch, on a personal, paternalistic basis, in the nature of a man-to-man dialogue with tribal elders. The new policy warranted a difference of technique and it was in the fitness of things that, at this crucial transitional stage, this difference should be symbolically reflected in a change of incumbent at the helm.

Verrier Elwin and the Philosophy of Nefa

Nefa was, as we have seen, initially spared the consequences of administrative folly because its budget was limited. Limitation of funds was an automatic brake on the taking up of schemes that were unrealistic, if not positively harmful to the interests of the tribal people. But Nefa had also its inherent defences—the extreme inhospitability of the terrain. In its pristine, undeveloped state, Nefa's total food production was only just sufficient to maintain its sparsely spread population. Nefa's economy was geared to meet the barest requirements of a primitive community, and no more. Outsiders were not attracted to seek their life's occupation in a region of forests and rocky mountains where the mere availability of food was a major problem.

The enormousness of the task of setting up a regular and full-fledged administrative apparatus in Nefa will be appreciated when it is realized that there was not even a rudimentary network of hill tracks throughout the area and that it required over a month to trek from the plains to the extreme northern frontier. Food and other essentials for the journey had to be carried by human labour, as no supplies were available *en route*, and the tribal people were reluctant to offer themselves as porters, as this interfered with their agricultural and other domestic operations. Where outsiders were engaged for portering, there arose the complication of arranging food supplies for these outsiders. If the organizing of a routine tour involved such endless logistic problems, it can be imagined what would be the difficulties of establishing a network of administrative headquarters, with offices, residences for staff, hospitals, schools and so on, to cover the entire hills.

So although the policy decision had been taken to set up a regular administrative apparatus, the inhospitability of Nefa's terrain and the austere, if not perilous, living conditions of the area, discouraged recruitment of staff, despite the offering of compensatory benefits. There was little consolation in the 'rent-free house' promised by the government, consisting as it did of a few posts of bamboo that would be swept away by the first monsoon shower. The difficulties and consequential delays in recruiting staff allowed a providential breathing space for the tribals before they were faced with the full impact of the new policy.

Brief though it was, this breathing space also provided an opportunity for the administration to give deeper thought to the far-reaching implications of the new policy. This introspection bore good fruit—for of all the frontier regions, none has been brought under the wing of the administration within so brief a period and together with such smooth rapport with the tribal inhabitants as the vast tract of 30,000 square miles that comprises Nefa. Save for one tragic incident, the administration was spared the sequence of massacres that had successively blotted the history of the occupation of the Naga, Khasi and other southern hills since the beginning of the nineteenth century. The achievement is the more remarkable considering the almost total lack of practical experience of hills administration of the frontier officers responsible for its credit. But where practical experience was lacking, it was compensated by a zeal to carry out the precepts of the Nefa 'philosophy' that was near-missionary in its intensity and sincerity.

It was the first and all-important principle of this philosophy that whatever was undertaken must be only in consultation with the tribal people and with their consent. Officers were warned against the patronizing attitude of assuming that they knew better what was good for the tribals than did the tribals themselves. A practice, for instance, that was known to be distasteful to the tribals was the conscripting of villagers to turn out as labourers to construct roads or carry stores. 'But the roads are for the villagers' own good and the stores are for the doctor we are posting for their benefit' ran the stock argument and there was, *prima facie*, force in it. A strict ban was none the less placed, for the first time in the history of the administration of

the hill areas, on officers enforcing their demands for labour, however legitimate they might appear, by coercion.

Nefa was thinly populated and there was rarely surplus labour that could be drawn upon from the local population for portage or public works such as road building. The tribals' time is more than filled by his routine, day-to-day chores—preparing the fields for cultivation, sowing, periodic weeding, protecting crops by night from wild animals, harvesting. He may be somewhat freer during slack periods of the agricultural cycle, but this is the time he requires for the hundred and one odd jobs that have always to be attended to—repairing or rebuilding of his house and the trekking down to the plains for the purchase of essential supplies such as salt, iron and yarn. The tribals along the northern borders might wish to proceed on pilgrimage to a Buddhist shrine in India or to seek religious instruction or a blessing from a renowned *lama* of a celebrated monastery in Tibet. The casual visitor to a tribal village would carry away the impression that the tribal has nothing much to do and that it is no hardship for him to be summoned to the district headquarters to serve as a porter or road labourer. He sees no factories or workshops in the hills, and the fields do not give the appearance of requiring much attention. The village looks quiet and restful, with no ferment of bustling activity. It seems to run on its own momentum, and the reaction of the visitor to the tribal's seeming indolence is that 'it will be good for him to do a spot of work for a change. After all, he will be paid for it, he won't be working for nothing.'

It soon became apparent that an over-rapid programme of road construction would cause serious hardship to the tribals if they were to be conscripted to carry out the work. And there would be complications of a different sort, and no less harmful, if a labour force from outside was inducted for the purpose. The momentous decision was therefore taken to resort to air-support to maintain the administration. The road-development programme was not shelved, but it was decided to adjust the pace of its execution so that hardship should not be caused to the tribal people through the compulsory impressment of labour or their community life endangered by the import of a heavy work force from outside.

The decision was momentous, as it mitigated the main hard-

ship suffered by primitive communities when subjected to outside contacts. The tribals are busier people than appearances may suggest and deeply resent being summarily called away from tasks essential to the life of the community for menial and derogatory services such as portering stores for administrative and police requirements. For though the tribals are democratic and enjoy an egalitarian society, they also have their occupational distinctions of status. The headman, the priest, the respected elder who is accepted as the final authority on the tribe's lore and history—these are amongst the functionaries held in special regard by the community. The tribals take pride in manual labour and every member of the community, however highly placed, will gladly and proudly join hands to build the community hall and participate thereafter in a village feast to the accompaniment of dancing and singing. But this is very different from being regimented and commanded, as in an army porter corps, to carry loads or dig a latrine. The practice was all the more degrading and humiliating in that the tribal labour force, which might consist of highly respected members of the community, was generally under the orders of a very subordinate and low-ranking officer of the governmental hierarchy. The airlifting and airdropping of stores at the administrative centres thus eliminated a major cause of discontent and humiliation amongst the tribal population. It also reduced the number of outsiders who would otherwise have been moving about through tribal villages, giving rise to friction and misunderstanding.

While we have noted the tribal's reaction to the outsider in his midst, the latter was no less affected and disorientated by the very unusual and unfamiliar environment in which he found himself—amongst primitive people in a strange land where he could not easily communicate for want of a common language or common interest. The outsider, during the early days, lived separated from his wife and children, as there were logistic difficulties in providing family accommodation and regular food supplies, apart from the absence of medical and educational facilities. He felt lonely, frustrated and sex-deprived, and the only people on whom he could work off his irritations were the tribals who crossed his path. The fewer the outsiders needed for administrative purposes, therefore, the less

were the risks of friction and misunderstanding. Air transport served the dual purpose of not only eliminating the hardships and humiliation of forced labour but reducing the movement of outsiders through tribal villages, with all the risks of friction that such movement involved.

The policy of restricting the number of outsiders did not, however, receive unanimous approval. There were many who criticized the administration as being reactionary and following the bad old ways of the British who wanted to isolate the tribals and keep them as their private preserve. The vast, sparsely inhabited tracts of Nefa could, in the view of these 'progressives', more profitably be stocked with the fighting races of India, strong, sturdy folk, who could make a granary of Nefa as they had made a granary of Punjab. There was need moreover for a thoroughly loyal and India-oriented population in these vitally strategic regions. The tribals were an uncertain factor and their loyalties had not yet been tested. They were largely Mongoloid by race and, if it came to a conflict with India's northern neighbours, there was a possibility that they would side with the neighbour that was racially and culturally more akin to them. It was in the interests of security, therefore, to populate the border regions with Indians of the heartland whose loyalty was not in question and who would stand as a firm first line of defence in the event of an invasion from the north. The presence of such settlers, it was argued, would also be helpful in getting the tribals more quickly assimilated with the mainstream of India's culture. The tribals would, by closer proximity, have readier opportunity to learn the languages and customs of the greater India and so be enabled to participate more contentedly in the larger life of the country.

This was, however, an ill-conceived and rightly resisted approach. There was, in the first place, the moral consideration. It would have meant certain extinction of the tribes and their culture. Even as it was, Nefa was the region of lowest density of population in the country and it would have been impossible for the tribals to maintain their identity in the face of a sizeable settlement of outsiders. The tribals of Nefa were, moreover, scattered in tiny settlements throughout the mountains and not concentrated in a single block where they could continue to maintain their corporate existence in competition with any

immigrant population. It was morally indefensible to create a situation wherein the indigenous inhabitants would be dispossessed of their land and identity.

But moral considerations apart, the settlement of outsiders would have been highly inexpedient politically. For even where the tribals live in physical isolation, they keenly watch government's actions and policies *vis-à-vis* their fellow tribals situated in the neighbouring frontier districts. The Indian Constitution provided safeguards against the alienation of tribal land. In spite of such inbuilt provisions, there had been inroads into tribal land by outsiders. With the Partition, refugees from East Pakistan had poured into Assam through the predominantly tribal Khasi and Garo border districts. Many had succeeded, despite governmental vigilance, in manipulating land for themselves and settling down in the tribal areas. The tribals were fully alive to the risk of their being outnumbered by non-tribal outsiders in their own hills; but on humanitarian and compassionate considerations, they showed sympathy to the refugees in their tragic plight and offered them shelter. They would take a very different view, however, if the government were to take deliberate and calculated steps, with an ulterior motive, to plant non-tribals in their midst. The Nagas, Mizos and other southern tribes had already, in no uncertain terms, voiced their apprehensions of inroads by the Indian plainsman. The settlement of outsiders in Nefa would have confirmed their suspicions, destroyed their confidence in government's assurances and drawn them yet further away from the path of co-operation.

The policy and aim in Nefa was not however merely negative, the protecting, in passive isolation, of the tribes from outside contacts. The first objective was to win the confidence of the tribes by assuring them that the government respected their culture and way of life and had no interest in destroying it and imposing an alien culture. Following closely upon this fundamental aim was a positive and constructive endeavour to prepare them to meet the challenges of an inevitably changing situation—to so equip them that they would be competent to assess and make their own choice, with wisdom and forethought, between the traditional values of their community and the new values they found crowding in on them from all directions.

The guiding star in the fulfilment of this policy was Verrier

Elwin. Jairamdas Daulatram was the Governor who laid the administrative foundations of Nefa. Elwin made no claims to being an administrator. But it was under his inspiration and gentle influence that, for ten years, until his death in 1964, the administrator built upon the foundations so devotedly laid by Jairamdas. No two men could have been more different in temperament—Jairamdas ponderous, severe, puritanical, Verrier light of touch, fun-loving and an aesthete at heart. But for all the difference, they shared a common dedication to serve the tribal people. Where the tribes were concerned, no labour was too great for them, no task too wearisome.

Verrier enjoyed no statutory powers, but his influence and inspiration permeated the entire administrative fabric. His critics objected that he was advocating the isolation of the tribes and thus retarding their integration with the rest of the country. But they hesitated to attack him beyond a point, knowing that he was held in deep and affectionate regard by Nehru. His advice therefore carried the highest sanction and was respectfully heeded.

If the tribes were to be convinced of their fellow countrymen's respect for their culture, the first requisite was that the latter should know what their culture was all about. In the case of the Nagas and other tribes which had been brought under the administrative umbrella much earlier, extensive research had already been carried out and a series of monographs published under the auspices of the Assam government. Nefa, however, had been a hidden land, about whose tribes the information was so little that even their names were in doubt. There were vast areas which had never in their entire history been visited by outsiders and there was not even the barest knowledge of their inhabitants, their language or their customs.

The first step taken was to build up a Department of Tribal Research, with Verrier Elwin as its head, to collect material and publish a series of monographs on Nefa's manifold tribes. A team of young research scholars was recruited and was quickly put to work under Elwin's overall guidance. The resultant monographs were mostly superficial from the point of view of scholarship, as a life-time's study would have been required to do justice to a single tribe. The objective, however, was not to carry out an academic exercise in anthropological research.

The objective was to make available to our administrative officers, in a compact, easily-readable form, the basic data regarding the tribes amongst whom their work lay—their customs, beliefs and superstitions, their art, history and language. Much of the trouble that had arisen in the past had been the result of sheer ignorance of the tribal mind and tribal sensibilities. The more thoroughly our officers could be briefed about the tribal people, their traditional values, their aspirations, the less likely that they would cause offence through unintended indiscretions. But apart from the practical expediency of equipping officers with the basic knowledge of the people to be served, we wanted the tribal people to know that we considered their culture important enough to be worth studying and telling the world about. For past experience had taught that nothing is so damaging to a tribe's vitality and sense of well-being as loss of self-respect, as a devaluation in their own estimation of their own culture and heritage.

It was necessary, again, to educate the public about the frontier tribes and to correct the popular misconception that they were no more than backward primitives. It was after years of hard and bitter experience that I had come to learn how futile were the administrator's most earnest and conscientious endeavours in the face of an ill-informed public. The public could not be blamed, as it had had no opportunity of being correctly informed. In the absence of the most elementary information, there had been little interest in the northern tribes and no idea of their stage of development or way of life.

It was clear, however, that unless the public could be made aware that the tribes had a culture and identity of their own, it would see no justification for troubling about their survival as tribes—and the tribes would become soon engulfed in the vast ocean of India, to be lost and forgotten for all time. We had to take it upon ourselves therefore to be their spokesmen at the crucial period when they had few representatives literate in English or in any of the major Indian languages to speak for themselves. Had it not been for the inspiration of Elwin, his burning enthusiasm and his unflagging efforts, the battle for the tribes might well have taken a very different turn. For, in the eyes of the ill-informed public, the officers at Nefa's helm appeared as unpractical visionaries with nothing more worth-

while to busy themselves with than worrying over the survival of tribes which might as well be allowed to pass out of existence to nobody's loss.

Elwin not only felt deeply for the tribes but was possessed of the gift of conveying his feeling for their culture in language of poetic beauty and grace. His books on the art of Nefa, lavishly and beautifully illustrated by his own photographs, presented a fresh and exciting concept of the primitive tribal. The tribals' unerring instinct for colour combinations was confirmed in the reproductions of their lovely textile designs. His translations of tribal folk-poetry were proof that their folklore was as rich in imagery as the literature of the most advanced societies. And proof of the tribals' innate capacity and intellectual potential appeared in yet more concrete form when, within a few years, tribal students were found competent to hold their own in competitive examinations against non-tribals who had been favoured with a far longer start in public schools of all-India standing.

It was not through his writings alone that Elwin's influence was felt and spread. In spite of his advancing years and somewhat ponderous gait, Elwin toured indefatigably to the remotest corners of Nefa. His perambulations kept officers perpetually on the alert, as they were well aware that he would be reporting at headquarters whether their approach to the tribals was in consonance with our policy of according respect to tribal institutions. Elwin functioned as the eyes and ears of the administration. I was myself so involved with the strictly practical business of running the administrative machine—supervising the airdropping of essential supplies, deciding on promotions, preparing material for replying to questions to be asked in Parliament—that it was not always possible for me to feel the pulse of the people as closely as I would have wished.

We had taken pains to recruit officers with a sympathetic approach to the tribal people and to give them some training and insight into tribal problems. But the officers were young and inexperienced and it was only to be expected that they would require continued guidance. Elwin and I spent as much time as possible visiting the interior hills and informally meeting the tribal people. On conclusion of our visits, it was our practice to record our impressions and circulate them to all officers of

the administration. This helped in building up an *esprit de corps*, a feeling that we were all co-operating as one team to share with each other our thoughts on how best we could serve the interests of the tribal people. The radio was another invaluable means of keeping alive this feeling of working together in a great and challenging enterprise. I took pains to broadcast talks to our officers on return from each of my tours by way of encouragement and appreciation of their work in isolated stations where they would otherwise have felt that they were forgotten and their services unrecognized.

Whilst we were not opposed to change on principle, we were opposed to change for the sake of change. We wanted our officers to understand that tribal practices which might appear strange and meaningless on the surface were generally based on the soundest practical experience. The architectural pattern of a tribal hut, for instance, had evolved over the course of countless generations and was more suited to the needs of the tribal and to the climate of his locale than were the type-plan, box-like structures erected by the technocrats of the Government Public Works Department. The tribal's was a self-sufficient, self-contained economy. Each man was his own grocer, his own butcher, his own general storesman. Enough space must therefore be available in his compound for keeping pigs and poultry, for storing grain and firewood, for growing vegetables. The tribal house was a rambling ramshackle affair, raised some ten to fifteen feet above the ground on stilts for protection against damp, insects and wild animals. Pigs and other miscellaneous livestock inhabited the space in between the stilts and served as scavengers for the household living above. In cold climes, the family slept huddled together on the bamboo flooring around the embers of the central hearth, their body heat and the heavy fug of the smoke-filled room providing the much-needed warmth.

The dismay of a tribal employee can be imagined on his being favoured with the allotment of a government quarter—a couple of tiny rooms at ground level, with no place for keeping livestock or storing grain. The cement floor would be not only hard and uncomfortable to sleep on, but insect-ridden during the monsoon and unbearably cold in the winter. And where was the space for dancing parties at times of celebration? The

Public Works Department had specified a fixed scale for each category of employee and, though bamboo and cane were locally available in abundance, cement, which could only be imported at heavy cost, was utilized in preference as being more economical from the point of view of annual maintenance.

The tribal hut of bamboo, cane and thatch blended with the landscape and could be repaired by the inmates themselves. The hard, angular structures of the Public Works Department had the appearance of a malignant growth on the hill-slopes and when they fell into disrepair, as so often, required the services of technical personnel. Endless difficulties however were encountered in prevailing upon the Public Works Department to revise their type-plans and authorize use of materials locally available in preference to cement, which was not only difficult to transport into the hills but cold and hard on the eye.

Although Shillong had, under the British regime, served as a provincial capital for over fifty years, the residences, offices and public institutions had continued over all this period to be structures of a light, wooden framework that blended unobtrusively with the surrounding pine-forests. The capital presented a picture of charm, peace and gentleness. With Independence and the sudden spurt of development projects, the population rose steeply and cement was found to be the material by means of which standard-type buildings could most easily be constructed in mass and at short notice. Within ten years, much of the charm of Shillong was irretrievably lost. There was danger that the same fate would befall the little townships that were springing up in Nefa. The preference to proceed at a steadier pace was however not out of any perverse motive to hold back or insulate the tribal people. It was simply that to move more quickly would result in irreparable damage for the future. Our officers were mostly youngsters and could not be expected to have much knowledge or experience of town planning and urban growth. Indiscriminate increase in the number of new projects would necessitate increase in the number of outsiders to implement such projects; and increase in the number of outsiders would necessitate increase in housing. With the tribals' sensitivity over land rights, the local officers would have to be content with whatever site was offered, irrespective

of its suitability in the light of long-term planning and future growth. It was in the interests of the tribals themselves, therefore, that projects should not be recklessly multiplied or rushed. It would not matter so much if the construction of a polytechnic was delayed by, say, three years. But these three years would allow so much more time to choose the most suitable site, discuss the lay-out and architecture of the buildings and decide upon the training courses that best answered the community's needs. A site some distance away from the main township would have the advantage of allowing for future expansion and space for constructing quarters for trainees attending the institute from remote villages. It was also essential to consult the local tribal people as to what skills might most usefully be taught. There would be no point in teaching paper-making in a region where the shrub that produces the raw material for this industry does not thrive. And yet this is precisely what happens in the unbridled zeal to 'develop the backward areas on a war footing'. There have been innumerable cases of tribals being trained year after year to acquire skills for the practising of which there was no scope on completion of their course. Such trainees would have been more profitably employed cultivating their fields and carrying on the traditional pursuits of their community, instead of which they have been turned into frustrated misfits in their own society, with nothing to contribute but idle discontent.

Our officers' previous acquaintance had been with conditions in the non-tribal plains districts and it took them time to understand that what was admirably suited for the plains might be positively harmful in the hills. The easiest course for them was to lift plans devised for conditions and people of the plains and apply them unthinkingly to the hills. The ways of the central government did not help matters. Experts in India's Planning Commission might formulate an all-India scheme for boring tube-wells and issue directives requiring implementation within a fixed target date. Without enquiring whether tube-wells were feasible or not in the hills, field officers would be instructed to get busy so as to satisfy the higher authorities that local initiative was not lacking. In this way, much time and labour was squandered, with no gain to the tribal people, who

were only harassed by surveyors carrying out investigations and arousing needless suspicions that their land was being measured for assessment of tax.

There was need to be as alert as watch-dogs to ensure that only such projects were taken up as were directly beneficial to the tribal people. The tribals are shrewd and have been heard to insinuate that much of the investment allocated for tribal welfare is expended on the salaries, allowances, housing and transport of outsiders inducted to implement the schemes, with only a small residue left for the tribals themselves. It was for this reason that it was laid down as an inflexible rule for Nefa that outsiders must be limited to the irreducible minimum and that, if there was any question of doubt, better one too few than one too many.

As important as putting a curb on the proliferation of unrealistic schemes was to ensure that, whatever might have been the approach and attitude towards tribals before Independence, our officers should treat them in future as equal and respected partners. The plainsman had been accustomed to look down on the hillman in the past, an attitude evidenced by the names bequeathed by him to the tribes. It was decided therefore to discontinue the use of appellations that were derogatory to tribal self-respect and to adopt instead the names by which the tribes referred to themselves in their own languages. The 'uncouth Abor' thus faded from history and became metamorphosed as the 'Adi, denizen of the hills'. While these may appear to be small matters, they were significant as token of a fresh and more enlightened approach. It was made clear by this deliberate change in nomenclature that, as far as the administration was concerned, the concept of the tribal as a primitive boor was a concept of the past—that, in the new India, the tribal, whatever might be his language, dress, customs or religion, was an equal and respected partner with the rest of his fellow-citizens.

Government procedures tend, as we have observed, to impose a single uniform mould in all fields of activity, irrespective of local, environmental conditions which may necessitate a departure from the general norm. The 'type-plan' has its value in times of emergency when considerations of aesthetics and long-term suitability must take secondary place. Type-plans are admirably suited for erecting army hutments at short notice in

operational areas, and not much harm ensues as there is every expectation that they will be as quickly erased after the battle has been won or lost. But it was patently unrealistic to apply to the hill areas, under normal, peace-time conditions, architectural type-plans designed for the climatic conditions of the plains and for meeting the domestic and social needs of an urban population.

Nothing has been more detrimental to tribal interest than the approach that tribal development must be pushed forward 'on a war-footing'. It is an approach that rests on the assumption that the tribals are so far behind in material culture that it can only be by operations on a war-footing that they can ever hope to be brought up to the level of their fellow-citizens. The risk that, in this traumatic process, the whole basis of their culture may disintegrate is tragically overlooked.

Where the hustle of war-foot operations results in an architectural blunder, the risk is not so fearful. At the worst, the faulty structure can be later demolished and replaced. But where the shaping of the mind is involved, the blunders resultant upon war-foot hustle cannot so easily be repaired. It was for this reason that, in the field of education, the administration fought shy of the mass-literacy and mass-education drives so rampant in most newly-developing areas. The unhappy experience in the plains areas of the problem of the educated unemployed was enough to warrant caution. A 'type-plan' educational curriculum would turn out 'type-plan' young men and women who would find no useful place in the life of a tribal community. Before venturing out on a mass educational programme, moreover, it was necessary to be sure about what should be the contents and objectives of such a programme.

The failure of the educational system in India sounded a salutary warning. Ole King Cole was doubtless a merry old soul, but the rhyme was of little relevance to the millions of infants in remote village schools of India who were taught to chant it to the accompaniment of a tune that was equally irrelevant to their culture. It is the firm view of educationists that the medium of instruction in the primary stages should be the mother tongue, as it imposes an undue strain on a child to have to cope with a new and unfamiliar language at too tender an age. But none of the educationists had as much as a per-

functory knowledge of the tribal languages and even the simplest textbooks were not available.

The Assamese had a ready answer to the problem. There was no dearth of Assamese young men who were only too ready to earn a living teaching the tribal people the Assamese language, history and literature. Whether the tribal people particularly wanted to learn Assamese was overlooked and nobody seemed much concerned about their views or wishes. What ensued was a political tussle, with the Assamese arguing that, by virtue of the contiguity of the northern hills to Assam, it would be to the advantage of their inhabitants to learn Assamese; knowledge of the language, they pointed out, would be helpful to the tribals in their trade, social and other contacts with their neighbours. The protagonists of Hindi, on the other hand, urged that, as Hindi was an all-India language, the learning of Hindi by the tribals would draw them more quickly within the wider mainstream of the country's life and culture.

Irrespective of the merits of either case, what was baffling was the problem of initiating any worthwhile educational programme in the absence of suitable textbooks and teachers equipped with knowledge of the tribal languages. The existing textbooks, whether in Assamese, Hindi or English, were a chaotic hotch-potch of Ole King Cole, Aurangzeb and legendary Assamese heroes, and were enough to create confusion in anyone's mind, let alone the mind of a guileless tribal student whose village was three weeks' march from the nearest railway station and who had never in his life heard of London, Delhi or Kamrup. Until, therefore, we felt more clear in our minds about what should be the type of education best suited for the conditions of Nefa as also the most suitable machinery for imparting it, popular pressures to hasten quickly were firmly resisted.

It seemed clear that the tribal people would ultimately have to resort to institutions outside Nefa for higher education, particularly in specialized and technical subjects, as the population and needs of Nefa would not justify the setting up of high-level scientific establishments in Nefa itself in the near future. The educational curriculum of Nefa would, therefore, have to be suitably dovetailed into the all-India pattern so that students from Nefa should later find no difficulty in obtaining admission

to and following courses in institutes outside their native hills. There could be no radical departure from the all-India pattern, and the most that could be aimed at was that the teachers in the schools of Nefa were given a sound and broad-based training which would ensure that, within the general framework of the all-India pattern, what they taught should not be too widely divorced from the realities of the tribal people, their environment and their culture.

As a first step, a Training Institute was set up in Nefa, where teacher-trainees were provided the facilities and opportunity of learning about the various tribes, their language, customs, folklore and, in particular, their handicrafts. Our schools were not to be islands of a foreign culture, and if tribal children were to be taught nursery rhymes, they would not be about little robin redbreasts, which they had never seen, but about the regal hornbill that figured so prominently and meaningfully in the folklore of their tribe. It was not an easy task recasting conventional textbooks and adapting them to the setting of Nefa and its tribes. But the task was undertaken nevertheless, and the targets for opening new schools were strictly adjusted according to the pace at which suitable teachers could be recruited and put through a comprehensive course of training on the conditions of Nefa, the basic attitudes and culture of its population and the approach we expected of our teachers in their relations with the tribal people.

It was the Research Department, under the guidance of Verrier Elwin, that was responsible for prescribing the pattern for the textbooks to be introduced, bearing in mind the aim that the new schools should reflect and be in consonance with the life and conditions of Nefa. While there was to be no prejudice against cricket, hockey or football, it was stressed that the tribal people had evolved their own particular sports, such as archery and wrestling, and it was fitting that these should also find an appropriate place in the school curriculum. It was to this end that the Research Department published a series of booklets on the games, folklore, handicrafts, dance and other aspects of life in Nefa. These booklets served the dual purpose of educating the educators as well as making it manifest to the tribal people that the administration respected their institutions.

Shillong, though not falling within the territorial boundaries of Nefa, was its capital at the time, as it was at Shillong that Nefa's head, the Governor of Assam, had his headquarters. It was arranged therefore that, pending the establishment of a college in Nefa, students from Nefa should be admitted after their schooling to colleges in Shillong, where they could continue to remain under the personal supervision of the administration. Arrangements were also made for their accommodation in a hostel exclusively earmarked for students from Nefa, so that they could have their meals prepared to their own liking and feel no embarrassment in living according to the customs and habits of their tribe. With a hostel to themselves, the students were able to celebrate periodically the important festivals of their tribes, when they would invite their friends, tribals and non-tribals alike, to eat, drink and participate with them in their traditional dances in a spirit of free and happy comradeship.

There were many who criticized the administration for thus segregating tribal students in a separate hostel. This was a continuation, they protested, of the British policy of keeping the tribals apart from the plains people instead of integrating them into the wider life of the country. The intention was never, of course, to keep the tribals permanently separated from non-tribals. This would not in any case have been possible, as tribal students would be sitting in the same classes and playing games with their non-tribal fellow-students throughout the day. There was bound to be close contact between tribal and non-tribal students both during their college days and thereafter. Our concern was to reduce the points of friction at the initial stages of contact, when misunderstandings over small and trifling matters can sour relations and give rise to unnecessary ill-will and hostility.

We were dealing, it must be remembered, with the first generation of students from Nefa ever to read in a college. Their parents were illiterate and still leading lives hedged around with primitive superstitions. And their favourite diet was beef, meat of the sacred cow. Some of the students bore tattoo-marks on their chins, while others grew long plaits of hair which were bound up in a top-notch on top of their heads. The tribals of the higher mountains are not accustomed to daily bathing or

regularly changing their clothes, and I can remember times when I myself, when on tour in the snows, have kept on the same clothes for days on end rather than suffer the discomfort of shivering in the biting cold while changing. Young people can be thoughtless and even cruel. The orthodox Hindu student might well resent seeing his tribal hostel-mate devouring with unconcealed relish a hunk of unmistakable beef-steak. In unthinking retaliation, a derogatory remark would be made about the tribal student's tattoo-mark, top-notch or body odour—and the fat would be in the fire. Tribal and non-tribal students would, in course of time, come to understand each others' ways and habits and joke about matters over which they might earlier have taken deep offence. The initial segregation in a separate hostel was in the nature of a temporary cushioning for the tribal student during which he was enabled to find his feet in a strange, unfamiliar and seemingly unfriendly environment.

The administration in the early stages was essentially patriarchal, and the selection of tribals for training courses, scholarships and appointments was finalized only after a personal interview with the highest executive, the Adviser himself. But this was possible only as long as the administrative structure was kept within manageable limits and the pace of administration was carefully regulated. The subsequent stability of Nefa owed much to the personal handpicking and 'rearing' of the first generation of tribal leaders.

This process of rearing is well illustrated in the career-building of the first tribal from Nefa to achieve the distinction of appointment as a Deputy Minister in the Government of India. Daying Ering was an Adi from the Siang district of Nefa. He was of not much above average intelligence, but it became evident quite soon during his student days that he had a deep feeling for his people and was genuinely concerned to give of himself in their service. He used to visit me frequently, first at my office and later, as we came to know each other more closely, at my home. The specific purpose of his visits might be to assist a fellow-tribal in the matter of a scholarship or an appointment, but his main object was usually to discuss Nefa's more general problems. The Governor, Jairamdas Daulatram, saw in Daying Ering the potentialities of a leader of his people and promptly—and affectionately—took him under his wing.

Daying became a frequent visitor to Government House, where he was invited to stay during his halts at Shillong and was treated as a family member. After taking his degree, Daying was appointed to a post in the newly-established Department of Culture, where he served until he was nominated by the government as a Member of Parliament for Nefa and proceeded to Delhi to embark on his new political career. He quickly made friends with his fellow M.P.s and it was not long before he attracted the attention of Nehru. Though simple in habits and not brilliant in intellect, he was of a genial, lovable temperament, mixed freely with people of every sort, and had a gift for language which enabled him to converse fluently in a number of tongues, including, besides his native Adi, English, Hindi, Assamese, Bengali and Nepalee.

Nehru appointed Daying as his Parliamentary Secretary and, through Nehru's kindly interest and influence, Daying came to develop a wide, all-India outlook, far beyond the horizons of Nefa. Nehru was impressed by Daying's conscientious efforts to improve himself and promoted him as Deputy Minister, an appointment that necessitated his touring throughout India and meeting leaders of the country at the highest level and from every region. When the time came, after the Chinese invasion of 1962, to review the status of Nefa under the Constitution, Daying was selected as the Chairman of the Commission appointed to make recommendations regarding Nefa's future constitutional set-up. He steered the proceedings of the Commission with consummate tact and adroitness, and the Commission's recommendations were broadly accepted by the government. Shortly afterwards, Daying suffered a severe heart-attack, from which he died. But within the space of a brief lifetime, a tribal of Nefa had made a major contribution towards laying the foundations of Nefa's future.

Daying's career has been thus outlined to illustrate the practice of handpicking tribals in the earlier days of the administration and seeing them through each stage of their career. But this was possible only under a system of orderly and unhurled progress and at a time when the students qualifying for such handpicking were so few that jealousies were not aroused. I was personally and closely in touch with Daying from the moment I first met him as a schoolboy in Nefa until the day of

his death in Shillong. During the years I served in Sikkim and Bhutan, he wrote to me regularly about the problems of Nefa and we continued to meet frequently, whether at Gangtok, Delhi, Calcutta or Shillong, to counsel together how best we could promote Nefa's interests. It was characteristic of his modesty and sincerity that, even after reaching the eminence of high office, he continued to address me as 'Uncle', as indeed did most of my tribal protégés.

Daying's was by no means a solitary case. I have been *in loco parentis* in respect of numerous students, girls as well as boys, studying in institutions outside Nefa, whether for general education or specialized studies such as medicine, forestry or engineering. I did not regard this in any sense as a burden or duty, but as a welcome privilege and joy. It enabled me to understand the tribals in deeper perspective when they came up to me with their problems. I could sense their frustration, bewilderment and loneliness in the maze of a bustling, noisy city after a childhood spent in the quiet and friendly intimacy of a tribal village in which there is so much interdependence of family and community.

I did not at first myself realize what a trauma it must be for the tribal, uprooted from his home environment, to live in a city. It was much later, during my travels in new and unfamiliar countries abroad, that this realization fully dawned. Everybody must have experienced at some time the feeling of utter desolation at being alone in a strange and crowded metropolis where everyone around speaks in a foreign, unintelligible tongue and is busy about his own affairs with not so much as a thought for his neighbour. It is at such a time that a single sympathetic ear in a city of a million unknown inhabitants can make the difference of a heaven and a hell.

As Nefa's population was small, personal administration and the handpicking of tribals for career planning and training was up to a point possible, particularly in the earlier years. We were also fortunate in being comparatively free from political interference. Nefa's administration was the responsibility of the President of India and therefore excluded from the jurisdiction of the politicians of Assam. And, until the Chinese invasion of Nefa in 1962, the politicians at the Centre were too remote and had their minds too preoccupied with pressing issues nearer

home to trouble themselves much over the tribals of the northern hills. The Chinese entry into Tibet in 1950 had focused interest upon Nefa. But it was a limited interest and it was not until the full-scale invasion of 1962, which was a direct threat to India's security, that Nefa's concerns were considered to be of sufficient weight to warrant a review of the policy of 'hastening slowly'. But by then, strong and solid foundations had already been laid and there was a nucleus of tribals in Nefa with a balanced approach to the changing situation and who were largely free from the apprehensions and suspicions that had poisoned the relationship between tribals and non-tribals in other parts of the country. The administration had gently held its hand during the crucial fifteen years since Independence, without pushing them or hustling them. They saw India, therefore, not in the light of an aggressor, either territorial or cultural, but as a friend and guide, and Nefa was spared the bloodshed and distress that have been the sorrowful lot of the Naga, Mizo and other neighbouring tribes.

Fruits of Restraint

It would be misleading and unrealistic to pretend that all was well all the way and all the time in the Nefa hills. However enlightened might have been the policy and however strict the supervision to ensure its implementation, it was inevitable, in an area covering over 30,000 square miles, that mistakes should have been committed. What is remarkable is that they were committed so rarely. There was one incident, however, that caused shock, both within and outside Nefa, and it will be of interest to examine its circumstances as there were lessons to be learnt from it that are of universal application.

The venue of the incident was Achingmori, in an area of Nefa deep in the interior inhabited by tribes with which the administration had not yet made contacts. The establishing of first contacts with a tribe is a matter of the utmost delicacy and a tribe's future attitudes depend much on the tact and friendliness of the first approach. In this particular instance, a column of the Assam Rifles was despatched in October 1953 on routine patrol duties to Achingmori, habitat of the Tagins, a proud, independent-spirited tribe, residing on the borders of the Siang and Subansiri districts. The Assam Rifles were at that time a rough and ready paramilitary frontier force, with none of the sophistication of a regular army unit. They built temporary shelters for themselves for spending the night when patrolling in the remote wildernesses, carried their own baggage and were accustomed to living off the land, without much fuss or ado, in an emergency. They were manned mainly by Gurkhas who, being hillmen and Mongoloid, resembled the tribals and blended naturally with the landscape of the mountains and forests.

The Assam Rifles encountered no hostility in their progress

to Achingmori, which was about two weeks' march from the district headquarters. The tribals appeared to be friendly and co-operative and, on reaching the village, the Assam Rifles set up camp as usual and made preparations for distribution of salt. Of all commodities, salt is amongst the most valued by the tribal people, as it adds some savour to their simple diet of rice, meat and jungle roots. In the remoter areas, tribals are known to undertake treks of over a month to markets in the plains to replenish their reserves of salt. The airdropping of salt in regions difficult of access by roads has indeed been one of the main means of winning the confidence and friendship of the tribal people, and no official tour would be undertaken in the interior hills without an ample stock of salt for distribution to villagers on the way. In the past, it had been rum, cigarettes and even opium that were offered as presents to the tribal people to win their co-operation. The administration decided, as part of its new policy, to substitute in their place salt, yarn and such other commodities as would be more directly beneficial to them.

The villagers of Achingmori showed every sign of appreciation at the prospect of receiving salt and the Assam Rifles were given the feeling that they were welcome guests. No one objected to their entry into the village and they were treated with the utmost courtesy and respect. Without a care in the world, they stacked away their rifles and proceeded with the business of distributing salt.

All of a sudden, the tribals fell upon the Assam Rifles with their *daos*¹ and mercilessly slaughtered the entire contingent. A trickle of porters managed to escape by devious forest tracks and carry back to headquarters the news of the appalling disaster. The public reaction was of the fiercest indignation. Here was treachery of which only the vilest savages were capable. What was all this nonsense about the 'Philosophy of Nefa' and the 'Noble Savage'? Was this not a blatant example of tribal barbarity, cunning and ingratitude? The tribals did not know the meaning of kindness and generosity, all that these primitives understood was the bullet and the strong arm. It was high time to be done with all this pampering of the tribes and to demonstrate to the hillman that the Indian administrator

¹ Tribal dagger.

was as tough as the British and could smash him out of existence if he wanted.

The armed forces pressed for the sternest retaliatory measures. Their men engaged on a mission of mercy had been treacherously cut up. There was no hint or suggestion that the Assam Rifles had caused any harassment to the Tagins that might have provoked or justified the attack. The attack had evidently been planned well in advance—the Tagins had acted as one man, as at a given signal. Unless exemplary punishment was administered with the speediest possible despatch, it would be unsafe for the security forces to operate and maintain law and order amongst such brutal and unpredictable tribesmen. The least that should be done was to demolish their villages and burn their grain. Unless they were made to starve and suffer sufficiently for their crime, they would never submit to the administration and learn the arts of civilization.

Achingmori was a crucial watershed. The massacre was widely proclaimed as manifest evidence of the failure of the administration's policy and justification for its reversal. But despite the universal outcry and criticism, the administration stood firm and refused to yield to the demand for indiscriminate vendetta. It conceded that the Tagins individually involved in the massacre should be tracked down, tried and sentenced. But we resisted the demand for widespread punitive operations against innocent tribals, we resisted the pressures to strike terror and give a taste to the Tagins of the administration's power to crush and kill. We insisted that only the guilty should be punished and we took upon ourselves the responsibility to ensure that our directives were not dishonoured.

The reason for this restraint in the face of such insistent pressures was that, although it had been a cold-blooded and brutal attack, there had also been flagrant lapses on the part of our own officers. Subsequent enquiries disclosed that there had been some previous enmity between the Tagins and the porters of the Assam Rifles party, who belonged to a rival tribe. The Tagins wrongly suspected that the porters had planned to satisfy their private grudge against the Tagins by instigating the Assam Rifles to harass them. The lapse of the officers was twofold. They had failed to collect the intelligence so vitally needed before venturing into virtually unknown territory.

Emissaries should have been sent ahead, well in advance of the column, to sound the villagers of Achingmori before entry. Had this elementary precaution been taken, the emissaries would have got scent of the inter-tribal rivalries and warned the Assam Rifles not to proceed further with a baggage train that was hostile to the village. The failure to collect advance intelligence was a major lapse on the part of the local officers. But they committed the further, and equally grave, lapse of allowing themselves to be lulled into a false sense of security. They had no business to permit their men to leave their arms unattended in a village which they had only recently entered and to which they were total strangers.

The unexpected entry of strangers in their midst must necessarily present a fearful predicament to an isolated tribal community that has had no previous contact with outsiders. Unless the villagers have been adequately briefed in advance, they cannot in all fairness be blamed for suspecting the intentions of the intruders. The villagers of Achingmori could not be sure that the motives of the Assam Rifles were innocent—the offering of salt might have been no more than a cover for more insidious designs. In tribal practice, when strangers come armed and unannounced to a village, it is to commit pillage, and the first and most natural reaction would be to repel them. And even supposing that the Assam Rifles had entered with innocent intent, nobody from Achingmori had invited them.

The villagers of Achingmori might appear primitive and uncouth to the outsider, but they were perfectly content with their own way of life and nobody had any business to want to interfere with it without their prior consent. Developed countries, as they have come to be known, are sensitive to any insinuation that their political system, economy or social values are outdated or inferior to any other. Loud and brave pronouncements are made at international gatherings regarding the rights and wrongs of superpowers interfering in the internal affairs of nations that are small and weak. It may appear unrealistic and fanciful to apply these criteria to an insignificant and unknown tribe. But for the Tagins, their way of life was as important and meaningful to themselves as was that of the Allies when threatened by Hitler and Nazi domination. The Tagins had no idea what these strange men in khaki who

entered their village were about. Rumour had it that their rival tribesmen were instigating the Assam Rifles to destroy their village. They had no hope of being able to defend themselves in regular combat against soldiers armed with machine-guns and bayonets. Their only hope of survival lay in guile, in taking the Assam Rifles by surprise.

Apart from their apprehensions and suspicions, the Tagins had found occasion to note how tribal villages nearer the plains were being gradually brought under closer administrative control. While they might not have been aware of the long-term implications of such control either for good or for evil, they would certainly be noticing the changes that they saw taking place before their very eyes in the tribal way of life. It was not any particular, definable evil or danger that they apprehended as the general uncertainties of the changes that contact with outsiders was likely to bring about in their pattern of life. Their surest defence up to now had been their inaccessibility and the inhospitable terrain which was their habitat. They saw now that tracks were being built by outsiders into their hills and this could only mean that these outsiders were planning to move about in their land for some sinister purpose of their own, perhaps to settle and make it their home.

A study of the stages by which primitive communities throughout the world, in the Americas, Africa and the Pacific islands, have, over and over again, been seduced by enticements to the destruction of their culture and their own ultimate annihilation will demonstrate that the tribals of Achingmori were more than justified in their apprehensions. No one was much worried about the backwardness of the Tagins or felt any responsibility to reform them as long as the north-eastern frontier was not a live frontier. No one's conscience was much troubled until the Chinese hinted that they were reluctant to confirm their acceptance of the McMahan Line as the international frontier. It was only then that serious attention began to be paid to administering the northern tribes and their habitat. The tribals of Achingmori showed wisdom, therefore, for all their backwardness, in sizing up the deeper motivations of the administration. For want of modern arms, the only way they could save themselves was by cunning, and their attack on the Assam Rifles was their last resort to stem a process which

might result in their extinction as a tribe. Deplorable as was the massacre of innocent people who were after all merely the instruments of government's policy, the Achingmori incident has to be viewed in broader perspective before the perpetrators are branded as inhuman and treacherous savages. While the ingredient of 'nobility' might have been lacking in their deed, the Tagins' was a heroic effort, against terrible odds, to save the future of their culture and their race.

The Achingmori massacre was a tragedy, but the handling of its aftermath was a challenge which was met with restraint, courage and imagination. For although the administration was dealing with people of the jungle, it was not the jungle law of a 'tooth for a tooth' that was invoked. The administration did not allow itself to give way to anger or to the public demand for revenge and blood. It declined to answer the call to teach the tribes a lesson. There was no bombing or burning of villages and no strafing of innocent tribals by fighter aircraft.

The case of the advocates of ruthless vendetta was that, unless the tribes were 'taught a lesson', such incidents would constantly recur and no member of the governmental establishment, whether civil, army or police, would any longer feel safe. They were proved wrong in the event, as there was not a single recurrence of such a case throughout the vast terrain of Nefa, despite the fact that the administration was from year to year breaking into virgin and unexplored territory. The dispassionate and strictly judicial handling of the Achingmori affair inspired in the tribal mind confidence in the administration and its purposes. The tribals were themselves prepared for severe reprisals and had taken refuge in the forests for fear of troops destroying their villages and their homes. The restraint and discipline of the security forces gave them assurance that, whatever might have been their apprehensions in the past, the administration was not out to take advantage of its superior armament to exterminate the tribals and take possession of their land. Its purpose was to track down the guilty and bring them to book according to the law of the land, a proceeding that had its parallel in their own tribal customary practice.

Much of the administration's subsequent success in establishing friendly contacts with the tribes of Nefa may be attributed to its calm and reasoned handling of the Achingmori incident.

For this served as a symbol to the tribal people of the administration's *bona fides*, apart from setting up an example for our administrative officers of the way they were expected to function. The administration's restraint demonstrated that we were not so much interested in teaching the tribes a lesson as in teaching ourselves a lesson. An objective appraisal had shown that the tribes could not be held wholly to blame for the massacre. It was the officers of the administration who were more to blame in not despatching emissaries in advance and in neglecting the most elementary precautions for their safety while operating in territory where contacts were being established for the first time. The administration had learnt its lesson at the cost of precious lives. But it was a lesson that was learnt with profit, as was evidenced by the peaceful and bloodless penetration of the remotest regions of Nefa in the years to follow.

As must be clear by now, the administering of Nefa was much like the performing of a delicate balancing trick. It was necessary, on the one side, to demonstrate that the writ of the government extended as far north as the McMahan Line. This involved the establishing of paramilitary outposts along the main tracks leading to the frontier, as well as the setting up of a light administrative framework within which essential services, such as the providing of medical help to the tribal people, might be enabled to function. It was equally necessary, on the other side, to ensure that this intrusion into virtually unexplored territory did not raise suspicions and apprehensions in the minds of the tribal people. For the prime requirement in these strategically vital border regions was a friendly and loyal population which would be a support to the government in the event of an attack from the north.

The first serious challenge to Nefa came with the dislodgement by the Chinese in 1959 of a small Assam Rifles outpost from its position at Longju,¹ just south of the McMahan Line. This blatant act of aggression made it clear that more would in future be needed for the defence of the borders than a light network of paramilitary Assam Rifles outposts. The time had come for the positioning in strength of regular army troops at strategic points of Nefa to hold the Chinese back from a full-

¹ In the Subansiri Frontier Division of Nefa.

scale attack on India's frontiers. The positioning of troops, however, raised at once the problem of provisioning them with essential supplies and the machinery for transporting such supplies into the hills. It had been decided, in the early years of the administration, to maintain the newly-established outposts and administrative centres by air to avoid the conscripting of villagers as porters, which was disliked by the tribals as an interference in their day-to-day life. There were, however, inherent limitations of air-support. There were seasons, particularly during the monsoon, when the sky was so overclouded that it was impossible for aircraft to negotiate the narrow defiles and airdrop stores with any degree of accuracy. Weeks might be spent in waiting for the skies to clear before airdropping could be resumed. Meanwhile tempers frayed at the outposts, starved of their basic requirements of rice, sugar and other essential supplies. With the Chinese threatening to make an issue of the boundary question, sizeable army dispositions needed to be permanently established in Nefa itself for defence of the frontiers. In this new context, dependence on air-support was no longer practicable and the highest priority would have to be given to accelerating the road-building programme for the movement and maintenance of regular troops.

Before much progress could be made in positioning regular troops in Nefa or implementing the road-building programme, the Chinese struck.¹ Theirs was clearly a precisely planned operation, as Chinese troops started pouring, as though at a given signal, down all the major tracks leading north to south from the frontier to the Assam plains. The Indian outposts, which were thin on the ground, inadequately equipped for the rigours of a Himalayan clime, and ill-supplied with rations, retreated in confusion before the Chinese onrush. So rapid was the enemy advance and so utter the collapse of Indian resistance that it was taken for granted that, within a matter of days, the whole of Nefa, if not Assam, would be lost to the Chinese. In his broadcast to the nation, a broken and disillusioned Nehru lamented the country's plight. To the people of Assam, the next stage in the Chinese advance, he tendered his profound sympathy and heart-felt condolences.

¹ The first major thrust of the Chinese into the Tawang area in the north-western extremity of Nefa took place in October 1962.

The Assamese felt outraged and have never quite forgiven—or forgotten—the hopelessness of Nehru's call. What they had wanted to hear from him was that the armed forces would defend Assam to the last man, that not a single Chinese would be permitted to desecrate Assamese soil. What they wanted was a firm assurance of protection from Chinese aggression, massive military reinforcements, armament of whatever sort to keep away the enemy at their door. And all they were offered was sympathy and heart-felt condolences. As it turned out, the Assamese never even saw the Chinese, who declared a unilateral cease-fire and halted their advance just short of entering the Assam plains. But the merest suggestion of the possibility of the Chinese trespassing upon their soil was sufficient for the Assamese to feel a sense of grievance that they had been betrayed by the nation.

In Nefa, the army plainly acknowledged that they were abandoning their positions and that it was in the interests of the civil establishment to clear out of Nefa as speedily as possible before they were overrun by the enemy. As our very competent Commissioner was personally supervising the withdrawal of the administrative apparatus in western Nefa, I decided to direct operations in eastern Nefa and proceeded by air to Along, the headquarters of the Siang district and habitat of some of the most progressive and vital of Nefa's tribes, the Adis and Gallongs. The tribal leaders lost no time in enquiring of me, directly I had landed at Along, whether the army were prepared to protect them or proposed to leave them to the mercy of the Chinese, who were reported to be rapidly advancing towards their headquarters. If the administration was not prepared to defend them at this time of need, they more than hinted that they had better dissociate themselves from it right-away and revert to their old traditional isolation. I was faced with the distasteful task of apprising them that, although our armed forces were putting up resistance, they were grossly outnumbered and being forced back from their positions. The administrative staff were being withdrawn, but if any of the tribals wished to take refuge in the plains, they would be treated on the same footing as the administrative staff and accommodated as best as possible in the refugee camps in Assam.

The tribal leaders held consultations amongst themselves after my discussions with them, and reported back that they wished to be associated with the armed forces in the defence of the country. They were appreciative of our offer to assist tribals who wanted to take refuge in the plains and would collect together batches of women and children for us to airlift to safety the next morning. Although we shortly received news of the Chinese declaration of a unilateral cease-fire, the women and children were airlifted next morning to refugee camps in the plains as already arranged. It took time for the panic and tension to subside, besides which there was no certainty that the Chinese would honour their word and not resume their downward thrust. The Chinese, however, halted their advance as pledged and, within a few weeks, the refugees returned from their temporary camps in the plains and life resumed its customary course.

In the westernmost district of Nefa the Chinese penetrated much farther south, almost reaching the plains. They had occupied Tawang, the extreme north-western salient of Nefa flanked by Bhutan to the west and Tibet to the north, as early as in October 1962, a month before their major southward thrust in late November. In Tawang was sited a renowned Buddhist monastery which had enjoyed long and close association with the Tibetan monastery of Drepung near Lhasa. Drepung, with Ganden and Sera, constituted the trinity of monasteries held in special reverence by the Tibetans and it was from Drepung that monastic officials were selected for appointment to high religious offices in the monastery at Tawang. The Tibetans had never been reconciled to the Indian claim that, as Tawang lay south of the McMahon Line, it must be conceded as falling within India. The Tawang region was culturally more akin to Tibet than to India and there was resentment therefore against its inclusion within the boundaries of India. With the Chinese occupation of Tawang in October 1962, there was wishful thinking in both civil and army quarters that, having achieved their objective of vindicating their boundary claim by the occupation of Tawang, the Chinese would push no further down. The resumption of their southward thrust the following month was not therefore anticipated and resulted in panic and confusion on every front.

The Assamese had felt hurt at the very suggestion that their state was not considered important enough to be defended and that Nehru held it sufficient to merely convey his sympathy and condolences to them. It can be imagined then what must have been the resentment and disenchantment of the tribals to see the Indian army abandoning Nefa and the civil administration fleeing in disarray to the plains. This was, of course, exactly what the Chinese had intended—not so much to extend their territorial boundaries as to humiliate India. The Chinese objective was to demonstrate to the tribals that they should beware of placing confidence in the Indian administration, who would forsake them in their hour of need. During their brief period of occupation, the Chinese went out of their way to be friendly to and win over the tribal population. Their troops were kept under strict discipline and camped some distance away from the villages. They showed respect towards the tribal people and there was no case of harassment or molestation of their women-folk. On the rare occasions that they visited a tribal settlement, they made it a point to volunteer to sweep and tidy up the surroundings and to co-operate with the villagers in every way possible, including the portering of loads.

It was a miracle that, within six months of the confusion and tension of the invasion, the tribals should have peacefully settled down to their normal life, without the slightest feeling of bitterness against the Indian administration. The blandishments of the Chinese proved ineffective and the tribals' feelings of loyalty to the government remained firm although they had been virtually abandoned at a time of their gravest peril. Within the next ten years, Nefa was formally bifurcated from Assam and constituted as a Union Territory,¹ a stepping-stone, in the fullness of time, to ultimate statehood.

Nefa's orderly constitutional progress provides an invaluable case-study, as it is one of the rare, if not unique, instances of primitive tribal communities being successfully guided to adjust themselves, within a relatively brief period, to a smooth and harmonious coexistence with, and within, cultures of a fundamentally different pattern. What is significant is that the relationship of confidence that has been built up is not a superficial veneer. It has stood the severest of tests, the test of a full-scale

¹ Designated as Arunachal Pradesh, 'Land of the Rising Sun'.

military invasion. At a time when civil and military personnel were taking flight in fear and panic from their posts, the tribals of Nefa came willingly forward to porter loads for facilitating army movements and to bring in intelligence of the enemy's positions. The tribals might have been expected to bear resentment and hostility against the administration—and they would have been amply justified—for what must have appeared to them as a gross betrayal. But they showed no bitterness and their loyalty remained strong and steadfast.

It may be asked wherein lay the success in the building up of a relationship of such unshakeable confidence and goodwill. We have seen how scrupulous the administration had been in showing respect for tribal culture and creating a propitious climate for its growth and fruitful development. But there was nothing new in all this. What was new in our approach and gave confidence to the tribal people was that, whereas we respected their culture, we respected equally their aspirations and their right to move forward with the times should they so wish. For while the tribals are sensitive and resent any slight to their traditions and customary way of life, they resent no less the imputation that, as tribals, they are not fit or ready to adjust themselves to and hold their own in a fast-changing world. Any projection or idealizing of the tribal way of life that implies its incapacity for expansion and adjustment to change is therefore repugnant to the tribal people.

In a world where the techniques of mass communication are developing at such a phenomenal pace, it is questionable whether any culture can indefinitely maintain its individual entity. The radio, television, the popular press, the emergence of English as an international medium of communication—all these are instrumental in diluting the identity of a culture and of the languages that are its life-blood. We respect the culture of the tribes of Nefa, not out of any sentimental feeling or expectation that their culture and languages can indefinitely survive in their present form. We show respect to their culture as this is a way of showing respect to the tribes that are its heirs and whose responsibility—and whose responsibility alone—it is to decide in what shape this heritage is to be passed on to their successors.

In the case of Nefa, political and strategic considerations

ruled out the possibility of the tribes remaining in indefinite isolation. And if the Government of India had not taken the first initiative in including them within its embrace, they might well have fallen to the less tender mercies of their northern neighbours. There is no doubt that, despite all the regard the administration has shown for tribal susceptibilities, their forced contagion with a materially dominant society must affect, if not endanger, the survival of their culture. Once the processes of change have been set into motion, there is no foreseeing to where they may lead, and it would be unrealistic to expect that the future pattern of life of the tribes of Nefa will survive in the form it was found when the administration first made its contacts with them.

It is not in human hands to preserve and crystallize in perpetuity the cultural pattern of Nefa's tribes, even if that were desirable. What the administration has succeeded in doing is to save the people of Nefa from the shock and trauma primitive people throughout the world have had to suffer during the painful period of breaking out of their chrysalis. Pain there has had to be in the process, but an endeavour has been made to mitigate the pain and spare them the shock and trauma. And this has been achieved not so much by dictating to them the way as by the assurance that it is for the tribes themselves to make their choices, for them to decide whether any change is to be brought about in the pattern of their lives, and, if so, the timing, manner and pace of its introduction.

Epilogue

In discussing problems of change, we have seen that there is no uniform solution that can be applied arbitrarily in the case of all peoples and all areas. Much of the distress and tragedy of the past could have been mitigated if it had been realized that what is beneficial in one instance might well prove harmful in another. Each set of circumstances has to be examined individually and it will not do to classify people indiscriminately as 'primitive', 'backward' or 'undeveloped'. The most primitive of people have their own particular social codes, religious beliefs and values, and unless these are understood and respected, they may be injured grievously by the agencies with whom they are forced into contact.

India's dilemma in inheriting the frontiers from the British was that she found herself having to deal with a multiplicity of tribes of whose way of life and thinking she had little knowledge and even less experience. It was not possible for her to disregard or ignore them, as they were situated in sensitive, strategic regions along her borders with China, Pakistan and Burma, and programmes were accordingly drawn up for the development of their habitat. Save in Nefa, however, which was recognized as a region with special problems requiring specialized expertise, the implementation of development programmes in the tribal areas proceeded along the same lines as in the rest of the country, where the problems and racial mix of the people were of an entirely different character.

In the case of Nefa, care had been taken, in the preparation and implementation of plans, to avail of the experience and advice of specialists who had made a life-study of the problems of change and the ways in which such problems could best be approached. Planning is not simply a matter of constructing roads. It is a matter of assessing the social implications of constructing a road, whether the time is ripe for such construction

and, if so, whether the road should be a regular highway for motor vehicles or a rough and ready bridle-track for ponies. Planning is not simply a matter of opening new schools. It is a matter of carefully weighing and assessing the content and objectives of the proposed educational programme and the practicability of recruiting and training suitable teachers to carry it out. The failure in framing realistic and beneficial plans has been the failure to examine the social and other implications of the changes that their implementation would inevitably bring about in the community's traditional pattern of living.

It is unfortunate that the bureaucrat tends even today, in an age of scientific investigation, to look upon the sociologist or social anthropologist with an air of doubt and suspicion. Unfortunate, because the examining of the social implications of change requires no less technical and expert know-how than the performing of a surgical operation or the construction of a dam. Nobody would dream of taking out an appendix without a knowledge of surgery and an intensive course of training. The initiation of a social welfare programme is also an operation, an operation on the heart of a community. And so with all fields of the planning exercise. Whether it be forestry, agriculture or industrial development, there is no planning activity that does not involve change and so carry with it social implications that vitally affect the life of the community.

It may be argued that progress would be slowed down if the short-range and long-range social implications of every project are to be minutely analysed and assessed. So it would be. But in the long-term perspective of history, the slowing down would be scarcely perceptible and the risks of causing harm instead of good greatly diminished. When a person sets out on a journey, he decides first on his ultimate destination, the intermediary stations being selected depending on the final point of arrival. The existing planning processes attach little importance to the ultimate objective of achieving an integrated state of society where each member of the community finds fulfilment in contributing the best of which he is capable towards the common good. The planning processes concentrate attention on the intermediary stations—the achieving of targets of road construction, literacy and so on—without concern for the final end to which these intermediary stations are to lead. Bureaucrats

and policy-makers have not been able to get over their prejudice against the social anthropologist, whom they look upon as a superfluous operator whose aim is nothing more than to keep primitive people segregated as though in a zoo. This was the view widely held, but quite erroneously, regarding Elwin's attitude to change in the tribal's pattern of life. What is not appreciated is that it is not change that the anthropologist opposes but the recklessness and lack of imagination with which it is brought about. The anthropologist and sociologist can, with their knowledge and experience, give invaluable advice on the optimum pace at which changes may be introduced without causing harm to the community. Equally important, they can project the short- and long-term implications of the changes proposed. These are not subjects within the competence of the untrained layman any more than are electronics or biochemistry. These are subjects demanding no less scientific study, and the undervaluation of their relevance and importance can lead, and has led, to tragic consequences.

Failure, again, lies often not so much in the formulation of plans as in the timing of their application and implementation. Few administrators are gifted with the instinct to sense at what juncture of their evolution people are ready for change and to gauge the stages over which such change, when initiated, can be most smoothly effected. There are fewer administrators still who are prepared to accept that there can be problems that, in the very nature of things, have no immediate solution, problems that have to be lived with, patiently, until time, with all the unpredictabilities of its passage, has run its course.

It is a perversity of the democratic system that the government apparatus has, under popular pressures, so often to commit itself to undertakings of vast cost to the public exchequer in situations where it would yield more fruitful dividends to be patient and allow matters to remain in abeyance. The public finds difficulty in comprehending that there is a limit to a community's capacity to absorb change and that the pace of investment has therefore to be judiciously regulated. Politicians, however, cannot afford to let the impression gain ground that the backward areas are being neglected through the withholding of funds. The provision and expenditure of funds becomes a public relations exercise, a façade to convince

constituents that something is being done, without any thought for the relevant consideration as to what is being done.

But apart from political pressures, the aspiring administrator is also under temptation to see the fruits of his labours materialize in concrete and visible shape 'in his time'. It is one thing to give a long and patient hearing to the poor and underprivileged, to strive to redress their grievances and protect them from moneylenders and greedy exploiters; all this may take the administrator to the portals of heaven, but does not attract public attention outside his remote, peripheral, parish or win him worldly rewards. The setting up of a multi-crore petrochemical complex, on the other hand, cannot fail to attract countrywide notice. The imponderables of whether the project will result in more harm than good, whether the heavy and sudden influx of a labour force from outside will undermine the social fabric of the local population to its detriment, whether pollution of the atmosphere resultant upon industrialization will give rise to serious ecological imbalances, causing irreparable loss of forest wealth, the drying up of water resources and the extinction of rare species of wildlife—all this can be allowed to look after itself. The administrator's capacity to push through the project will be the criterion by which he will be judged and rewarded in his service career. The civil servant who plants saplings in obscure corners of the country that will one day grow into avenues and provide shade, fruit and aesthetic joy for succeeding generations is not so likely to find his name in the list of new year honours. It is the pursuit of results that are immediately visible with a view to personal or political advancement that has been in no small measure responsible for the adoption of wrong policies and their over-hasty implementation without thought for the future or for more permanent values.

It would not be just, however, to place the entire blame either on the inherent weaknesses of the democratic system as it operates in India or on the career ambitions of politicians and civil servants. The basic causes are more deeply rooted. They lie in the failure to comprehend that the mind is at least as complicated and susceptible to contagion and disease as is the body and requires at least as much skilled and informed attention for its healthy and orderly development.

Medical research has established the harm that can be caused to the body by a peremptory change of diet. The system becomes adjusted to a regular pattern of food values and is disturbed if the pattern is too abruptly reversed. Medical research has also lessons to teach regarding the building up of immunity to disease. Westerners travelling in the East are warned not to drink water unless it has been boiled and filtered, although unboiled and unfiltered water is consumed without much worry by easterners and generally with no ill-effect. The demand for literature on food values and their impact on the system is unlimited. And yet, with so much concern about the effects of what goes into the body, it is surprising that there should be so little interest in the effects of what enters the mind. Much has been written on the decimation—and virtual annihilation—of primitive peoples through exposure to diseases imported by outsiders who had no conception of the risks of taking primitive peoples unawares before they had had time to develop immunity against infections previously unknown to their land. Physical sickness and death are visible to the eye and responsibility for their incidence can therefore be more easily fixed. Far more pernicious, however, is the impact on an unprepared mind of ideas that may be innocuous enough in the climate within which they have germinated but can be of deadly effect in an alien environment whose people have not yet been conditioned and afforded time to set up their defences. No physician would be allowed to continue in his profession if he presumed to medicate without first making a thorough study of his patient and the history of his disease. And yet, in the region of the mind and spirit, knowledge and experience are placed at a discount where problems arising from contact with primitive peoples are concerned. Unfamiliar ideas and beliefs are recklessly and indiscriminately injected into minds that carry no immunity, with little thought of the impact they may have on a people of a completely alien cultural background and environment. And it is not surprising that the effect is usually traumatic for the whole community.

If there has been instability on India's north-eastern borders, the reasons are not far to seek. There has been a basic failure to appreciate that specific conditions and areas require specific treatment, just as medication which may be appropriate and

beneficial in the case of one individual may be fatal in another. No importance has been attached to the veins and arteries of the mind because they are not visible to the eye and their working and interaction are more difficult to comprehend. Ideas have been scattered abroad without first exploring the climate of the mind that is to be their recipient and assessing its capacity to bear their impact. And with these ideas have been sown also the seeds of the instability and discontent that have been the lot of India's north-eastern borderlands, more especially since the British withdrawal.

It is unfortunate, again, that the methods invoked to restore stability have generally had, in fact, the effect of aggravating the instability. It has to be recognized that, while inter-village rivalries and casual skirmishes have been endemic in the tribal areas since time immemorial, it has been only since Independence and the imposition of a much heavier administrative control that violence and armed insurgency have come to be accepted as the normal pattern of life. The loss of life resulting from the head-hunting raids of former times was negligible in comparison with the fatalities of the more recent period of political unsettlement. For the imposition of a tighter and heavier administrative control has given rise to conditions of continuous and widespread tension, with the security forces of government in perpetual conflict with lawless elements of the local population. If, after the passage of so many years, the control is found to be still so irksome, it is necessary to examine wherein lies its hurt and provocation.

The official and public reaction to any incidence of tribal insurgency is to assume that the tribals have been at fault and must be summarily brought to book. Little thought is given to the question as to why the tribals, with their negligible defences and slender resources, should have risked bringing upon themselves the certain wrath of the government with all the military force and armoury at its command. Life is equally dear to the hillman and nobody likes to be shot. The attitude of assuming that the tribals must necessarily be in the wrong, without weighing the circumstances of each case objectively and dispassionately, has gravely militated against the building up of a climate of reconciliation and goodwill. Under pressure that punitive action must be taken quickly to restore government's

prestige and credit, the authorities feel under compulsion to set about a campaign of thoughtless vendetta. The security forces are urged to justify public expectations. Unless arrests are carried out, they will be condemned as inefficient, apathetic and cowardly. But by the time the security forces are able to gear themselves to action, the ringleaders have generally escaped and already taken refuge in their hiding places in the forests. The only persons left for the security forces to arrest are stray villagers who are innocent of the whole affair, but are nevertheless forced to pay the price. It is not realized how deep is the resentment and bitterness arising from the arrest and harassment of innocent villagers, particularly women and children. The legal codes prescribe that arrested persons are to be periodically produced before a magistrate; but such appearances are merely a formality in remote hill regions where the keepers of the law are their own masters and subject to little effective control. Abuses that would not be tolerated where there is a vigilant press may pass unheeded in the fastnesses of the hills. But the continuance of such abuses gives rise to festering sores that set back the hour of reconciliation.

It is not the intention here to level gratuitous criticism against the authorities. The incidence of abuse was inevitable where such an extensive area, with such an infinite variety of problems and peoples, was involved. It would be unrealistic to expect that, over a period of thirty years since Independence, mistakes would not have been committed when dealing with tribes and situations of which the new administration had so little knowledge or experience. Much was done which, in the light of wider experience and knowledge, would better have been done differently. But judged in the wider perspective, the administration has been humane and sympathetic to the needs of the people. By comparison with agencies elsewhere in the world that have been faced with similar problems, the Indian authorities stand in a not unfavourable light. If there has been criticism, it has been not so much against any particular acts of commission or omission as against an approach and attitude of mind prevalent all over the world respecting communities regarded as primitive because they do not conform to the standards or accept the values of a society that is materially more advanced.

What we have tried to stress is that where, after weighing all the factors, change is considered desirable and in the larger interests of the community, it should be brought about with the consent, if not on the initiative, of the community that is to be affected by such change. The pace at which the processes of change are to be regulated cannot be precisely defined, as it will not be uniform in all cases. It will depend on the extent to which the community has already been inured to change as well as on its inner strength and capacity to absorb change without detriment to its essential social organization.

A community that has been totally isolated and has never known or seen outsiders will be more nervous of change than a community whose members are already familiar with the ways and mannerisms of strangers. We have observed how a primitive tribe on the Indo-Tibetan border reacted to the entry of a party visiting their village on a mission of mercy; in their ignorance and their apprehension, they massacred their well-intentioned visitors. A vital criterion therefore in deciding on the introduction, techniques and pace of change is the degree of contact the community has enjoyed with outsiders in the past, as well as the impact such previous contact has had on the community's attitude and approach to change.

Once the necessity of change in any field is accepted, the technique of its introduction has to be considered, and this again will vary according to the specific conditions of each individual case. If it has been decided to construct a highway for wheeled traffic, the technique and mechanics of implementing the project without causing strain on the economy of the people and interference in their day-to-day life has to be worked out. The pace at which a road-development programme is to be taken up will depend partly on the terrain of the land and partly on the availability of labour, whether seasonal or otherwise. In plains areas, where bulldozers and mechanical equipment can be utilized, the pace may be accelerated, as the demand for manual labour will be only nominal. In mountain terrain, where the utilization of heavy road-building machinery may be impracticable, the availability of local labour is a vital consideration in deciding the extent of the programme and the pace at which it can be carried out without causing undue dislocation to the economic and social life of the people. The

balance of advantage has to be precisely weighed and it may well be that the gain to the inhabitants in getting the use of a road sooner is offset by the hardship suffered by them in having to provide a heavier labour force to the neglect of their cultivation and other vital preoccupations.

The immediate and short-term repercussions are not, however, the most vital or the most relevant criterion for deciding on the pace of implementing a programme for road development. Cultivation may be neglected for a few years with consequential fall in food production. The even tenor of village life may be disturbed by the periodic summons to proceed to distant regions for the uncongenial and hazardous task of blasting roads through the mountains. But these would be temporary inconveniences which could be endured up to a point. What would be more serious would be the long-term implications of a road-building programme. A motor road would open the country to tourists and traders. Tourists bring wealth to a country, but they also bring much that is detrimental to a people who are not adequately conditioned and fortified for evaluating ideas and habits of behaviour that are new and unfamiliar to them. The influx of traders may help in boosting the economy of a country but, if not carefully regulated, may lead to exploitation of the villager and his enslavement to the moneylender. The community's capacity to regulate the influx is again limited, as its leaders are themselves subject to temptations of profit-making and unable to impose upon themselves the necessary constraints.

The construction of a road network constitutes only a single segment of a planning programme, but we have noted the multifarious directions in which the community's life is affected by it—the neglect of cultivation, pressure on labour, infiltration of foreign fashions and modes of behaviour, exploitation by traders. All this is apart from the steady but constant stream of ideas, including political ideas, facilitated by improved road communications, a process that, though silent and not immediately perceptible to the eye, may ultimately prove the most disruptive of all the various forces we have noted to the community's solidarity and traditional texture of life.

If the construction of a road touches and affects the community's life at so many points, so does every activity of the

planning process in varying degrees, whether in the field of education, forestry or industrial development. It is the infinite risks of the unpredictable and the unknown that should be a warning to the planner to tread warily. Such caution should not be construed as indicative of a reactionary, unprogressive or apathetic approach. Apathy, on the contrary, lies in pressing ahead with plans without making the effort to foresee the full implications of their implementation. It is precisely this kind of apathy that has been responsible for the economic, social and cultural degradation of regions where change has been introduced by outsiders who have not at all understood what they were about.

When we set into motion the processes of change, we play with fire. The resultant conflagration may destroy not only the community itself but all that is around it and there is no predicting how far the conflagration may spread. Every community has an inbuilt mechanism for coping with the day-to-day problems and accidents of life. Some communities build reserves of food stocks against times of need when crops are adversely affected by the vagaries of the weather. There are conventions, as we have seen, amongst several tribes respecting outsiders entering villages only at prescribed seasons as a precaution against the import of infectious diseases. There are communities, again, that have evolved a sensible dormitory system under which the unmarried young of both sexes may live together under a regular discipline to fulfil their sexual urges instead of resorting to brothels and vice dens. These conventions and usages constitute a delicate, intricately co-ordinated mechanism, each part of which has evolved over the centuries to play its specific role within the whole. And just as metal-fatigue that has affected a single and seemingly minor component can cause catastrophe to the most sophisticated airplane, the organism of a living community is equally interdependent and the disturbance or damaging of a single part can cause equally catastrophic effects to the whole.

It has been neglect of this fundamental principle of the essential interdependence of the parts within the whole that has been at the root of much of the failure of administrators, social workers and missionaries who have devoted their lives to the service of the tribal people. If some small portion of their

endeavour had been directed to a deeper understanding of the essential interdependence of the mechanism of community life as a whole, much of the unhappiness and confusion that have been the fallout of their efforts could have been averted.

The forces we have seen in operation in the frontier areas operate equally not only in India but wherever in the world communities at different levels of culture, particularly material culture, come into contact with each other. What has been sought to be shown is not that change, *per se*, is to be resisted, but that imposition of any sort may be counter-productive in its long-term results. Assam, in her zeal to promote unity by prescribing Assamese as the official language for the entire state including the hill areas, succeeded only in alienating and finally losing the hill areas. There have been moves to enforce the adoption of Hindi as the official language throughout India, including the south and north-eastern regions where it is understood by only a negligible proportion of the population. What has happened in Assam should be a warning of the dangers of forcing a language upon people who are not yet ready for it and do not want it.

India as a whole, and not only the comparatively restricted segment of its tribal population, is equally affected by the problems created by change, and there is hardly a community, not even amongst its seemingly entrenched and traditional dominant groups, that has been spared the trials and pains of adjustment to new values and a pattern of life that is farthest removed from the country's traditional cultural roots. This is no reason for pleading, however, that change is to be deplored in all circumstances or that the pace of development is to be arbitrarily and universally slowed down. In the greater part of India, on the contrary, the pace of development will need to be accelerated much beyond its present speed, if the minimum needs of food, clothing and social services are to be made available to her people in the foreseeable future.

As in the tribal areas, the changes that have taken place in the main body of India are not changes that have come about as a result of the natural and normal course of the people's evolution. The changes have come about mainly under the impact of the British presence. Unlike the case of the tribal areas, however, the processes of change were spread out in

India as a whole over a period of two to three hundred years. The restructuring of the land revenue administration, the establishing of a judiciary based on the British model and the adoption of the English language as the matrix of the educational system—these were fundamental and radical measures that cut directly at the country's cultural roots. But in the absence of speedy communications and of the mass media paraphernalia of today, the rhythm of life remained slow and leisurely, and the changes caused no shock or trauma to the villagers in their remote and inaccessible habitations. The people were gently and harmoniously inured to the processes of change and could adjust themselves without any sense of tension to the new pattern of life. In the north-eastern hills, on the other hand, the pattern of life at the time of transition from British to Indian rule had remained very much the same as in the previous five hundred years, and even the changes that have come about in the thirty years since Independence have not, in the remoter regions, deeply touched or influenced the people's way of life or attitudes. It was under such circumstances that special care was needed to ensure against the dangers of causing too sudden a cultural shock in the initiating of schemes for development under the new order.

In India as a whole, the question of cultural shock would not arise. There has not been a period of her history during which she was not subjected to the inflow of streams of culture of an infinite diversity. The ocean of India cannot easily be engulfed, as can the little rivulets of her tribal communities. The setting up of large-scale industries and the accelerating of development in the main body of India may give rise to ecological problems but there cannot be any apprehension regarding the effects such developments may have in disrupting her cultural roots. If India has been able to accept and make a language as foreign as English so utterly her own as is evident in the transaction of business in the government, Parliament, the universities, the courts and the Press, there need be no reservations regarding her capacity to absorb and digest, without ill-effect to her system, any extraneous cultural influence, from whatever direction it may come.

Our main concern, however, has been for the small tribal communities of India's north-eastern borderlands into whose

lives change has come in comparatively recent years. It is here that we have felt the need for the exercise of a measure of restraint and caution before they are plunged into the whirlpools of a culture that is so far divorced from their own. With the revolution that has taken place within the last fifty years in the pace of communications, the world has become a very small place and no country or people can hope to survive in isolation even if they wish to. There have been vast movements of population from one continent to another and, in the perspective of history, the most significant development for the future will be the shape in which racial attitudes crystallize within the next generation. Ours has been a small canvas, India's north-eastern borderlands, but its very smallness has enabled us to identify more precisely the forces whose operation on a wider backdrop might not have stood out so clearly. In essence, the fallout of contacts between peoples of diverse cultures is common, whether the contacts are between Assamese and Nagas or between American whites and blacks. Whether a culture is highly developed or primitive, the community within which it has flowered feels concern that it is respected and not arbitrarily interfered with. It is prepared to adapt itself to change, but only on its own terms and in its own time, and not on the dictates of any outside body, however high-powered or prestigious.

We have seen that the sanctions of a community serve as stabilizers, and that where such sanctions are weakened under the impact of alien cultural pressures and cease to operate, the community risks losing its moorings; the old established values are undermined and there is a period of uncertain and dangerous vacuum during which there is nothing to take their place. As indefinite isolation is not a practical or desirable proposition in the world of today, it is in the interests of tribal and other similarly placed communities to prepare in advance for a peaceful adjustment to change instead of making fruitless attempts to remain closed within their shell and becoming ultimately disillusioned when outside contacts are inevitably forced upon them. A study of the processes of change is not therefore a merely academic exercise, but provides a basis for working out how best to strike a balance between the desirability of preserving what is most valuable in a community's

culture and at the same time making the adjustments necessary to enable it to come to terms with and find fulfilment in the environment of an ever rapidly moving world outside and around its boundaries. The sensing of the pulse of a people and gauging their capacity for change calls for an intuitive instinct. It takes a sensitive ear to reach the tribal heart. And while many may be found competent to conduct scholarly researches into the customs, history and folklore of people who have remained untouched by the world mainstream, there are not so many with the sensitivity and empathy to comprehend their longings, their hopes and their fears.

History works strangely. In the high noon of empire, the British carried their flag to the farthest corners of the world and, proudly conscious of their imperial heritage and destiny, made an offering of their civilization in places as diverse and remote as the lonely islets of the Pacific and the sun-scorched villages of tradition-bound India, where it proved as much an unwanted interference in the even current of the life of the community as it was disruptive of its time-honoured sanctions. Today Britain is herself at the receiving end of many and diverse cultural streams and is in her turn experiencing the pressures of being overwhelmed by a multitude of strangers whose habits of life and attitudes are alien to hers and often distasteful. A dispassionate review of the processes of change undertaken in India's north-eastern borderlands is therefore no less relevant to Britain. It would help her to work out her problems in a spirit of tolerance and understanding.

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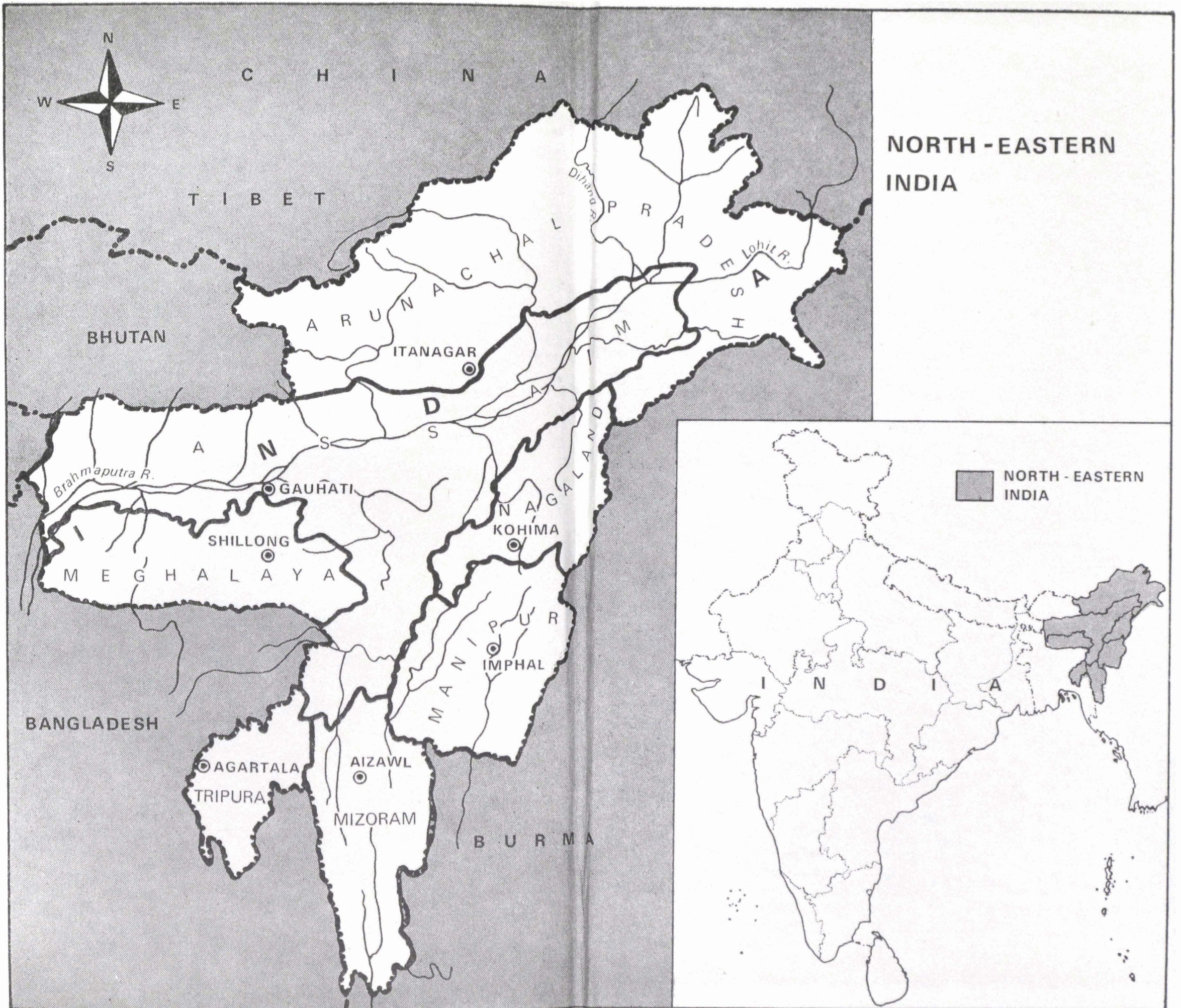
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