

HIGHLANDERS OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

**Anthropological Research
in North-East India**

Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf



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To

R.N. Haldipur

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This volume contains an
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 additional social and cultural life
 of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh
 with special reference to the
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 sequel to *Return to the Naked*
Jagas and *A Himalayan Tribe*, two
 major studies dealing with recent
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(Contd. on Flap II)

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CHRISTOPH VON FÜRER

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 publications on the aboriginal
 tribes of the Deccan and the
 people of the North East Frontier
 Agency are among the standard
 works of Indian anthropology.

After retirement from his
 teaching duties, Haimendorf has
 been in charge of a research
 project involving the study of
 social and economic change in
 Indian tribal societies.

Preface

This volume is the last of three books dealing with recent social and economic change among the hill tribes of India's northeastern borderlands. In the final chapters of *Return to the Naked Nagas* I discussed the development of Konyak society over a span of thirty-four years and in *A Himalayan Tribe: From Cattle to Cash* I described the dramatic transformation which the Apa Tanis have undergone between 1944 and 1978. In the present book I have extended the study of change to a wider range of tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, including the Apa Tanis' immediate neighbours as well as some of the populations in the westernmost district of the Union Territory. Like my recent study of the Apa Tanis it formed part of a comprehensive project of anthropological research among Indian tribal populations in which I was engaged from 1976 until the end of 1980. This project, which involved also intensive work among the tribes of Andhra Pradesh, was financed by the Social Science Research Council of Great Britain and benefited moreover from the sponsorship of the Indian Council of Social Science Research and a grant of the Wanner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research.

In the pursuance of my investigations in Arunachal Pradesh I enjoyed the continuous support of the Administration, and there can be no doubt that without the many facilities afforded to me by the local officials it would have been impossible to complete in a relatively short time a programme of Research comprising a wide area of tribal country. It is a pleasant duty to express my appreciation to all those who assisted me and my wife with hospitality and information. While it is not possible to thank each of them individually, those who befriended us on our extensive travels can be assured that they are remembered with genuine gratitude.

Outstanding in its effectiveness was the support of Mr R.N. Haldipur, Lieutenant Governor of Arunachal Pradesh, to whom this book is dedicated in recognition of his longstanding association with the hill people of the territory, where he began his work in the first phases of the modern development policy. I am also deeply grateful

for the assistance of Mr L. Sharma, Deputy Commissioner of Subansiri District, and of Mr O. Kelkar who held the corresponding position in Kameng District. Most of those who helped me in 1978 with my work among the Apa Tanis are mentioned by name in the Preface to *A Himalayan Tribe*, and it was a pleasure to meet them once more in 1980. A special word of thanks is due for the companionship of Mr B.B. Pande, who accompanied us on our travels both in 1978 and 1980 and was most successful in solving all practical problems. Most important for the success of my work, however, was the friendliness and trust of the local tribesmen, many of whom remembered our visit thirty-six years earlier and who welcomed us with the most touching cordiality.

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Introduction

Northeast India is a part of the world where numerous radically different racial and ethnic groups dovetail and merge, distinct ideologies coexist, often within a narrow space, and a multitude of mutually incomprehensible languages are spoken. The geographical character of the area is equally uneven, for the broad and almost completely level Brahmaputra valley is surrounded horseshoe-like by rugged highlands comprising hills covered by tropical forests as well as snow-crowned mountains whose alpine slopes offer pasture-land for yak and Tibetan sheep. Two of humanity's principal racial groups meet and sometimes intermingle on the soil of Northeast India, peoples of Mongoloid stock occupying most of the highlands and members of the Indian branch of the Caucasoid race dwelling in the villages and towns of the plains of Assam. The ideological pattern is equally kaleidoscopic. Adherents of Mahayana Buddhism occupy some of the peripheral hill-regions, while Hindu populations have long been established in the lowlands. There, they were subjected first to martial incursions and later the gradual infiltration of Muslims who constitute now a substantial part of the inhabitants of Assam. In more recent times Christian missions made many converts, the majority of whom are members of hill-tribes who traditionally practised tribal cults lacking any links with any of the great historic religions of Asia.

In view of so heterogeneous a racial, linguistic and religious pattern, it is not surprising that Northeast India and particularly many of the remote and isolated hill-regions harbour a confusing accumulation of distinct cultural styles some of which are undoubtedly of a very archaic type, pre-dating probably most of the historic civilizations of India. The Mongoloid populations of the highlands are part of the cultural sphere of Southeast Asia rather than of South Asia, and this explains why several anthropological compendia deal with tribes such as Nagas, Khasis and Garos together with the pre-literate tribal societies of mainland Southeast Asia. Cultural parallels extend even further into the island world of Indonesia, and much suggests that in the tribal cultures of Northeast

India there are elements of an extremely ancient stratum which in prehistoric times may have been spread over a large part of South-east Asia. They certainly represent a life-style which in the greater part of Asia had long given way to much more advanced forms of civilization, and in an age of improved communications and the resulting levelling of cultural differences, it is unlikely to survive for much longer.

The Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh, which adjoins the plains of Assam to the north and east and has common frontiers with Bhutan, the Tibetan region of China, and Burma, includes within its boundaries many of the least known and most archaic tribal societies of Northeast India. There are several reasons for their long isolation in remote hill-tracts difficult of access from any direction. For the peoples of the Brahmaputra plain, itself sparsely populated until recent centuries, there were no incentives to struggle through precipitous gorges and pathless tropical forests of the rugged foothills in order to reach the less forbidding country of the middle-ranges, for there too they could neither expect to find fertile cultivable land nor any other resources attractive to lowlanders. Other parts of the Himalayas, which form a natural barrier between the civilizations of India and the peoples and cultures of the windswept plateaux of Inner Asia, were traversed by a number of trade-routes along which caravans of pack-animals maintained a trickle of trade between India, Nepal and Tibet, and along these trade-routes Buddhist as well as Hindu ideas and forms of life seeped into many of the intervening highlands and brought about a gradual transformation of the indigenous tribal life-style of the local people. But in Arunachal Pradesh, until 1972 known as the North East Frontier Agency, often abbreviated to NEFA, there have never been caravan routes except in its westernmost part adjoining Bhutan. For everywhere else the rocky gorges of rivers which break through the Great Himalayan range and turn during the monsoon into unfordable torrents made travelling hazardous and prevented the development of trade depending on animal transport. Rainfall many times heavier than that of the Central Himalayas sustains thorny thickets and dripping forests which discourage all except the most intrepid travellers. Difficulties of communication rather than the nature of the neighbouring regions of Tibet and India seem to be responsible for the fact that the tribal populations which inhabit the mountainous tracts extending between Assam and China have re-

mained for centuries untouched by Hindu as well as Buddhist civilization.

Isolation, initially caused by physical factors, persisted as late as the middle of the twentieth century because of political decisions taken by the Government of India in the days of British rule. When the British first extended their dominion into Upper Assam they were interested mainly in the development of a tea-industry, for which the hot and humid climate of the Brahmaputra plain offered excellent conditions. By the middle of the nineteenth century tea-gardens extended in many areas right up to the edge of the foothills, and to ensure the safety of the tea-planters and their labour-forces, largely recruited in other parts of India, it was necessary to resist incursions of hillmen tempted to raid settlements established in areas of the plains which they had considered their traditional hunting grounds. An accommodation with most of those hillmen whose villages lay in the outer ranges was usually reached and their rights to old hunting-grounds were bought off by payment of a kind of annual tribute known as *posa* (see pp. 26-27), but there was no attempt to bring the highlands under any kind of administrative control. A few expeditions of British officers into the interior of the hills had little success, because difficulties of transport and the resistance of local tribesmen prevented any deep penetration, and the costs and hazards of such excursions seemed disproportionate to their usefulness.

While control over the martial tribesmen of the Northwest Frontier seemed essential for the defence of India against potential expansive tendencies of Russia, the Northeast Frontier did not figure in the power-game of the nineteenth century, and the Government of India saw no advantage in adding a vast and thinly populated mountain-tract without obvious resources to its far-stretched dominions, and spending large sums on the administration of its tribal population described by most officials and residents in Assam with such unflattering adjectives as "savage", "barbarian" and "treacherous". Anthropological interest was then minimal and with a few honourable exceptions, among whom E.T. Dalton¹ is the most outstanding example, observers evinced no real understanding of the inhabitants of the hill-country, adjoining the plains of Assam.

As late as the beginning of the twentieth century, the Government

¹Author of *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*. Calcutta, 1872.

of India seemed content to leave a political no-man's land, unmaped and largely unknown, on its northeastern border, and it was not until 1914 that for reasons unconnected with conditions in the hills between Assam and the Himalayan main range the British government decided to engage in negotiations with Tibet and China aimed at defining the Indo-Tibetan boundary east of Bhutan. These talks resulted in a convention drawn up by the British representative Sir Henry McMahon and initialled by the delegates of Tibet and China which designated the ridge line of the Great Himalayan range as the international frontier, implying thereby that the entire sub-montane tract lying to the south of this national line (which no one had been able to inspect on the ground) belonged to India. This convention however, was never ratified, and though official Indian documents have ever since referred to the proposed border as the McMahon line, no attempt was made to demarcate the frontier. While Tibet took no steps either to implement or to repudiate the convention, China never renounced her earlier claim to the sub-montane tract. Indeed China continued to publish maps according to which a large part of the present Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh was included within the borders of China.

It was not until the years of the Second World War when Japanese armies overran Burma and invaded the Naga Hills, that the Northeast Frontier assumed the role of a strategically important area, and the Government of India embarked on the exploration of the hill-regions between the plains of Assam and Himalayan main range. In pursuance of this belated endeavour to obtain firsthand information on conditions in the area in question and to establish friendly relation with the tribesmen inhabiting the highlands, I was offered an appointment as Special Officer Subansiri² and Assistant Political Officer. In early March 1944 I entered the Subansiri region from North Lakhimpur in Assam, and until the end of May 1945 I spent most of the time among tribesmen and undertook extensive exploratory tours some of which took me to areas never before visited by outsiders. For several months I concentrated on the study of the Apa Tanis, a tribe of some 15,000 souls, inhabiting a large valley situated at an altitude of 1,500 metres and surrounded by wooded mountains rising to heights of more than 2,400 metres.

²Subansiri is one of the main rivers of Arunachal Pradesh and has given its name to the present Subansiri District.

The Apa Tanis who live in compact villages of many hundreds of houses and have transformed their valley into an intensively cultivated oasis in the wilderness of sparsely inhabited hills, are in many respects the most remarkable of the Subansiri tribes, but as I have described them in detail in my books *The Apa Tanis and their Neighbours* (London, 1962) and *A Himalayan Tribe: From Cattle to Cash* (Delhi, 1980) they will not figure prominently in this book except by providing data for comparisons with neighbouring tribesmen who differ from the settled and disciplined Apa Tanis by their instability, aggressiveness and lack of any tribal authority system.

Nishis and Hill Miris are the most immediate neighbours of the Apa Tanis, but the former numbering more than 51,000 are spread over a very large area, and extend under the name Bangni also into the Kameng District to the west of the Subansiri District. It was fortunate that I came to know the Nishis at a time when no outside control had as yet been imposed on the tribes, and the Nishis persisted in their traditional lawless state. Instances of tribal societies studied before they had become subject to the administrative system of a centralized government are getting increasingly rare, and today, 36 years after my first acquaintance with Nishis, it would no longer be possible to observe the way in which they conducted their social life without any interference by outside forces.

While I had an opportunity to renew my acquaintance with Nishis and Hill Miris in 1978 and 1980, and the changes which I observed will be described and analyzed, my main purpose of writing this book is to record Nishi social life as I observed it in 1944 and 1945, and thus present the picture of an archaic, preliterate tribal society in its pristine state, unaffected by any contact with economically more advanced and politically more powerful populations. What I saw then is today largely history, but there are occasions when anthropologists must take on the task of recording data which belong to a past age if they had the chance of living in such an age which many tribesmen of the present generation may not remember. The developments which occurred in the 36 years which separate my first and my last stay among Nishis were of such magnitude that in the more normal course of evolution even two centuries might not have brought about comparable changes. Indeed I am convinced that Nishi life as I saw it in the early 1940s resembled more closely the condition of Nishis in 1740 than that which prevails today among the Nishis of the Subansiri District. Not only was their mate-

rial equipment in 1944 much the same as it must have been in the eighteenth century, but their social organization and the manner in which individuals and families ordered their life and dealt with the strain and stresses inevitable in a society lacking any institutionalized system of authority and administration of justice are unlikely to have been modified to any great extent. The great transformation of the Nishi style of life came only after 1944, and I am aware of the fact that in a minor way I myself was instrumental in bringing about such changes when I engaged dozens of Nishis from the interior highlands as porters, paid them in silver rupees and taught them that with such cash they could purchase goods from a small trading depot in the Apa Tani village which I had set up there in order to encourage the tribesmen to earn wages by working for government. In the same way I unconsciously helped to replace the traditional way of settling disputes by raiding and the taking of hostages, when I persuaded opposing parties to meet each other face to face and negotiate indemnities for injuries suffered. At that time neither I nor other government officers had effective coercive power, but as in the following years a regular administration was set up and the influence of government rapidly increased Nishis learnt that there were other ways to right a wrong than by waging war on their opponents. Today peace prevails among the tribesmen whose fathers and grandfathers had prided themselves on their martial exploits and regarded raiding as an enterprise capable of earning rich profits in the shape of loot and ransoms.

My notes from the years 1944 and 1945 contain sufficient data on the conduct of feuds and raids to draw a picture of the constant insecurity in which Nishis had to lead their lives, and such historic sketches may be of interest to the younger Nishis of the present generation who now enjoy the advantages of peace but were undoubtedly brought up on stories of their forefathers' heroic exploits, while they may have heard less of the sufferings caused to the victims of raids who were often separated from their families and sold into slavery to men of distant villages.

While anthropologists are often inclined to speak of "the good old days", when the people whom they had befriended were able to live within the orbit of their traditional culture, and I often adopted this same attitude when I saw the erosion of old values and a noticeable diminishment of the quality of life in tribal areas which I revisited after several decades. Finding myself once again among Nishis and

Hill Miris, however, I tended to recall rather "the bad old days", and was happy to notice the very obvious improvements in the people's prospects to lead peaceful lives no longer darkened by the fear of being raided, captured and held for months and possibly years as hostages in an enemy's house.

I hope that educated Nishis reading the following accounts of the violence that prevailed among their immediate forebears will consider that phase as part of their tribe's history, and appreciate all the more the present reign of peace which the administration brought about surprisingly rapidly and without the employment of more than minimal force.

While an ethnographic account of the traditional social and cultural life of Nishis and Hill Miris will be the centre piece of this book, there will also be notes on other tribal groups, and a separate chapter dealing with my observations during a recent visit to the regions of high altitude in Kameng District. There I had the opportunity of getting to know Sherdukpens and Monpas, two ethnic groups strongly influenced by Tibetan Buddhism and hence fundamentally different from the great majority of tribal populations of Arunachal Pradesh. My previous contact with these communities had been confined to encounters with men visiting the foothills of the Balipara Frontier Tract, and the time I spent in 1980 in the areas of Tawang, Dirang Dzong and Rupa was not long enough to go deeply into the problem of change which had been foremost in my mind in areas I knew well in the 1940s. Yet, so little information on Monpas and Sherdukpens is available in print, that even the limited information I was able to obtain may be of interest to anthropologists, and illuminate the extent of the contrast between tribes which had for centuries lived in isolation and those exposed to the influence of Tibetan Buddhist civilization.

I

Tribal Groups and Their Structure

Arunachal Pradesh covers an area of 81,424 square kilometres and had in 1971, the year of the last census, a population of 467,511. This means that the average density of population is 6 persons per square kilometre. In view of the fact that the average density of population of India on the whole is 178 persons per square kilometre, Arunachal Pradesh represents the least densely populated area of the country. There are five districts in Arunachal Pradesh and their population figures are as follows: Tirap 97,470; Lohit 62,865; Siang 111,936; Subansiri 99,239; and Kameng 86,001, and for administrative purposes each of these is divided into sub-divisions and circles. The boundaries of administrative units and ethnic groups do not necessarily coincide, but most of the individual tribes are contained within the limits of one district.

One of the results of the long isolation of many parts of Arunachal Pradesh and the scantiness of information on the inhabitants is the confusion in the appellation of the various tribal groups. In the early days of British contact with the hill-people the only names applied to inhabitants of the various tracts were those used by the Assamese of the adjoining parts of the Brahmaputra plains. Thus the term Dafla was used to describe the majority of the hillmen of the western part of the present Subansiri District and the adjoining eastern region of Kameng District. Similarly the Assamese used the blanket term Abor for virtually all the hillmen of the Siang District. Both terms have a somewhat derogatory flavour, meaning "wild man" or "barbarian", but nevertheless were widely used in official reports, census returns, and also in the entire ethnographic literature. Thus they were used by E.T. Dalton in his *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1872), G. Dunbar's *Abors and Gallongs* (Calcutta, 1915), and as recently as 1959 in the title of B.K. Shukla's book *The Daflas* (Shillong, 1959). It is not surprising, however, that with the spread of modern education the old derogatory designations became unac-

ceptable to the tribes concerned, and were hence displaced by terms based on tribal languages. Thus the tribesmen previously known as Dafla want to be called Nishi or Nishang, both of these terms being derived from the word *ni* which means "human being". Yet not all those until recently referred to as Dafla are now called Nishi, for those in the Kameng District refer to themselves as Bangni, and this term is used in the census reports. Similarly the term Abor has been replaced by Adi, and the wish of the tribesmen for an identity relating to a group larger than a localized tribe has led to the addition of the term Adi as a prefix to the tribal name. Thus Minyongs who were previously classified as Minyong Abors refer to themselves now as Adi Minyong and Gallongs as Adi Gallong. Yet among the list of Scheduled Tribes both these groups are listed simply as Minyong and Gallong, the prefix Adi being omitted.

There is seldom a neat delimitation between two adjoining groups normally referred to by different names. An example for the blurring of boundaries and occasional overlapping of groups is provided by the case of the Hill Miris. This group inhabits a tract of country including the hills lying west of the Subansiri and south of the Kamla river as well as a strip of hilly country between the Kamla and the Sipi river. Their habitat extends as far as the border between the Subansiri District and the Lakhimpur District of Assam, and in the past they used to migrate in the winter to hunting and fishing grounds lying in lowlands subsequently incorporated into the better districts. The Assamese who encountered them there called them Hill Miris because of an assumed connection with the Miris, a tribal group dwelling in the lowlands next to the foothills.

At the beginning of my work in the Subansiri District in 1944 I took the distinction between Daflas, as the Nishis were then called and the Hill Miris for granted, and initial encounters with some Hill Miris who came to meet me in the Apa Tani valley strengthened my belief that Hill Miris could indeed be distinguished from Daflas. The validity of the name Hill Miri was also confirmed by the members of the Miri Mission of 1912 who extended its use even to the hillmen of the upper Kamla valley. Yet, on my first visit to some Hill Miri villages south of the Kamla I began to doubt the possibility of drawing a neat line separating Miris from Daflas. Coming from the Apa Tanis I first camped in a small village called Bua, which lay close to a line which I had imagined to be the boundary between Tapo (Chemir), an undisputed Miri village, and a group

of "Dafla" villages, i.e. Takhe, Pemir and Linia. Were the people of Bua Miris or Daflas? They could not answer that question, neither term making much sense to them. But I discovered that they intermarried both with the people of Tapo (Chemir) as with those of Rakhe, Pemir and Linia. The fact that Tapo maintained similar marriage relations with the people on the north bank of the Kamla and Linia intermarried with villages well inside Dafla—or as we now would say Nishi—territory shook my confidence in the possibility of distinguishing clearly between Miris and Daflas, and I came to the conclusion that the two groups merge and overlap, and may well be considered as local branches of an undifferentiated population which might be described as "Nishis", a term which by that time I had occasionally encountered. Thirty-six years later I once again came to the Bua area, and found that the local people described themselves as Nishi but referred to the people in villages a few kilometres further to the east as Miris.

B.B. Pandey, the author of a recent book on the Hill Miris,¹ argues that notwithstanding the intermarriage between those calling themselves Miris with tribesmen referred to as Nishis, there is no need to abandon the term Hill Miri or to refute their claim to a separate identity. What speaks in favour of that claim are such distinctive features as hair style, head-dress, and women's dress and ornaments as well as certain special religious and social practices. At the same time Pandey mentions that the Hill Miris have been under pressure both from Gallongs and Nishis, and concludes that the Hill Miris are "a link or bridge-tribe between the Nishi and Gallong mainly along the lower stretch of the Kamla."² The uncertainty which reigned for so long regarding the position of individual tribes is reflected in the confusing figures as to the strength of this tribal group. In 1912 it was estimated to be about 2,000, in 1961 the first regular census put the number of Hill Miris as 2,442, which would represent a very likely increase, but in the 1971 Census 8,174 Hill Miris were recorded, and this figure can only have been arrived at by a method of identification different from that employed ten years earlier.

The confusion of nomenclature stems partly from the fact that a name used by members of a tribal group for themselves may not be

¹*The Hill Miri*, Shillong, 1974, pp. 9-12.

²*Ibid.*, p. 12.