NEFA—AN INTRODUCTION

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The North East Frontier Agency of India, which nestles in the extreme north-eastern part of the country, on the lap of the Himalayas, attracted the notice of the west of the sub-continent and of the world, with a sudden impact, after the Chinese aggression of 1962. This territory, consisting of rugged hills stretching unduly from one end to the other, and insulated by the vast expanse of the ever unfaired Brahmaputra, has provoked and excited the interest and the curiosity of explorers, travellers, anthropologists, as early as the 19th century. It, however, remained a close preserve of the scholar and the adventurist and very little was known to the outside world. While everyone knew about the North West Frontier through Rudyard Kipling who wrote of Pathans and Gangadis, conjured up romantic images of proud, warlike tribes and of sudden death, it was only in the wake of the latter half of this century that the North East Frontier which is equally wild, romantic and mysterious caused so much concern, interest and sympathy and was brought into focus largely due to the challenging and lucid writings of the late Dr. Verrier Elwin. The Chinese attack of 1962 evoked the attention of the common man and stimulated interest among anthropologists as well as political and social thinkers. The main points of argument and discussion were the methods and the policy for administering this mass of territory.

Talking about tribal people of India, especially with reference to NEFA, the late Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru had said, "I am not at all sure which is the better way of living, the tribes or our own. In some respects I am quite certain their’s is better. Therefore, it is grossly presumptuous on our part to approach them with an air of superiority to tell them how to behave or what to do or not to do. There is no point in trying to make of them a second rate copy of ourselves." This was the basis of the policy he advocated—of functioning between two extreme positions of isolation of these tribes on the one hand and total, unscientific assimilation on the other. This was the cornerstone of the policy adopted by the N.E.F.A. administration since 1954, but there were many who did not agree with it earlier and their protests grew louder after the Chinese aggression of 1962.
In the popular mind, there has been some ignorance and confusion regarding NEFA—What it denotes? Where exactly it is?—Whether and how far it is different from Nagaland? NEFA extends over 30,000 square miles, hardly any of it flat. Its jagged ridges, deep gorges, steep valleys restless with landslides, constant rain and primordial and dense forests had always been a challenge to those who wanted out of life a little more than mere living. This strip—a giant horse-shoe fringing the north-east corner of India—is bounded by Bhutan on the West, Tibet and China on the North, Burma on the East, the plains of Assam and the Turaong District of Nagaland on the South. NEFA is divided into five administrative units previously called Divisions and now Districts; they are Kimeng, Subansiri, Siang, Lohit and Tirap named after the principal rivers flowing through them. The Turaong District of Nagaland also formed a part of NEFA till 1957 when it was joined to what was then known as Nagi Hills-Turaong Area and the present day Nagaland. The population is a little over half a million and consists of a rich conglomeration of tribes which in the not too distant past had been wild people practising headhunting, witchcraft, blood-feuds, sorcery, abduction, opium and ritual poisoning and now the same group of people have boldly stepped into the 20th century—a phenomenon which baffles the students of social change. The main concentration of population is in villages usually situated on the tops or spurs of hills though the sizeable configuration may vary from tribe to tribe. One is struck by the rich variety of life and culture, customs and habits, dialects and social institutions. Their songs and dances are no less captivating than their colourful apparel and bushboyant head-dresses. One wonders at the excellence of their artistic taste exhibited in the execution of little details in the hand-woven cloth, head-dresses and their weapons, making them merge with their environment as if nature and man were pieced inseparably together.

The history of this tract stretches backwards for several centuries into the mists of tradition and mythology. There are some accounts of the vast hinterland, based mainly on the written historical records of Assam. The presence of a number of archaeological ruins, at some places along the foothills and along other places in the interior, suggests a great deal of contact between the ancient rulers of Assam and the tribemen of NEFA hills. The ruins of its in the Dafu country are identified with those of ancient Mayapur founded by a Kultik Kinnar, Ramchandra. The ruins of a fort at Bhakung in the Kameng Frontier District are acclaimed by the Akas, as the original home of their ancestor Bhakaka, the grandson of Raja Bana who was defeated by
Krishna at Tejpur. The temple of Tamrashwari, in the present day Lohit District, stands testimony to the existence of Shakti cult, and the ruins of Sibhojibasu are associated with King Bhismak. Legends have it that Akastagonga and Ugbhasthan were the favourite resorts of Rajkani who visited these places for worship. A detailed study of the archaeological ruins may help to remove the veil of mystery and help the historian to fill in some of the gaps. There are very few old records of the tribes and their way of life though their stream of life converged at various points with that of people from the plain. One of the earliest specific references occurs in an account written by the by the chronicler Shahruddin who accompanied Mir Jumla when he invaded Assam in 1662. He says, “that the Dalsa tribe did not place its feet in the skirt of obedience” to the Ahom Raja but occasionally encroached on his Kingdom.

The aim of the Ahom King was to contain the tribal people in their own hills and forests and to protect their own subjects from them. Their policy, on the whole, was that of condition. Expeditions were sent out only when there were raids of unusual audacity.

After the treaty of Sandaloo, in 1826, when the British took over the control of Assam from Purendra Singh, they found that the tribes of the frontier were more aggressive as a result of the breakdown of Governmental authority. After an interlude of six years from 1832 to 1838, when the experiments of handing over the civil administration back to Purendra Singh proved a failure, his territories were placed directly under the management of British officials. The British attitude towards this region was one of non-interference. It was not rewarding enough to undertake the administration of territory so volatile and wild. They were satisfied with staying the raids on the plains of Assam and taking periodic columns into the territory right up to the Indo-Tibetan border in the North to keep peace and exercise some control. More active interest in the administration of this area was taken after the first world war. The entire region was properly divided into districts and their administration undertaken from 1927 onwards, it was only after the Indian Independence that planned welfare projects were undertaken to meet the needs of the tribes living here.

It is difficult, within the scope of this article, to do full justice to the history of each tribe and give a full description of their lives, but a reference to the various tribes according to Districts and salient features of their life and history would not be out of place.
(c) Khamse Frontier District.—This is the western-most District of the highest administrative centres in India. The other well-known place, Tawang, a sub-divisional headquarters, is situated on a plateau of 10,000 feet. Here stands the great monastery founded some 350 years back and possesses unforgettable majesty and beauty of construction. In the earlier days, the Tawang Raja was very influential and controlled the Bhutas of the Koriapar Pass which touches the eastern boundary of Bhutan and extends from the Dolsam to the Rota River.

Among the tribes of this District—Menpas are quiet, gentle, friendly, artistic and dignified. The influence of Buddhism in their life is marked in every aspect of their lives. A certain gravity and order in their manners, modesty, a consciousness of protocol and the ceremonial of daily life impress one. They follow the Nyingmapa school of Buddhism and hold in veneration Guru Padma Sambhava. The great Monastery at Tawang is the heart of Monpa life and culture. The sixth Dalai Lama is reported to have come from this region.

They are very fond of music, dance, drama and have great reverence for literature. Even since early days, they had intimate contacts with the plains of Assam. Today their large and continued attendance at Udalgiri Fairs is one of the many avenues of communication of ideas and goods. They had better trade with Tibet also.

Another Buddhist tribe, to the south of Khamse are the Sherdukpen. They migrate to the low country every year to trade with the plains and avoid cold. In the eastern part of the District are the Khrom and the Akaas and the Mijis in the North. They are not Buddhists but have been influenced by their neighbours. There are number of references to the Akaas in the history books. The Akaas occupy the region as far east as the source of Khari Dikiri river. Their Raja, Tagi led a number of raids against the plains people of Assam in the early years of the last century. These tribes have adopted some elements of Monpa dress but the influence of Assamese is evident in their love of Assamese silk. They have large houses, are keen traders and had the institution of slavery which has now almost disappeared. We have already made a reference to the remains of the fort at Bhululpung—claimed by the Akaas as the original home of Bhuluk.

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The Dallas inhabit the eastern part of this District and are also found in Subansiri. They have had the reputation of being unruly and turbulent. They have long houses occupied by a number of related families. There are several such houses in each settlement but are not united into a village community. A few of them weave and do some work in bark-fibre. Aggressive by temperament they have long-standing blood-feuds among themselves. Not very far from Dolmukh, in the Dalla area, are the ruins of N Mayapur, the capital of a Kachari King, Ran-Chandra, who had to fly from his Kingdom to the Dalla area. They have a well-established trade link at Kinim with the Assam plains and are conversant with the Assamese language.

(2) Subansiri Frontier District.—This is the second District to the east of Kameng. The headquarters Ziro is situated on the Apa Tani Plateau. This is connected by a hill-road to Kinim in North Lakhimpur District. The plateau is inhabited by the Apa Tanis who are an industrious people with a well organised society of their own. Their extensive agricultural system of well irrigated fields has evoked the admiration of many a visitor. They have succeeded in raising two annual crops and are good at weaving also. The second tribe in the region are the Dallas similar to those in Kameng.

The Tugios, the tribe which lives in a very difficult terrain having tracks that are well high, impossible are on the right bank of the Subansiri river. They find it very difficult to eke out subsistence from the land, as a result they were under-nourished. The struggle for existence leaves them very little time and energy for the cultural aspects of life. Still, they have a little weaving, song and dance. Their poverty seems to have been the main cause of their being carried away as slaves.

Hill-Miris occupy the eastern and the southern portion of the District. They resemble the Dallas and most of them tie their hair in a knot above their foreheads. The hats of men are attractive and the dress of women elaborate and peculiar. The Hill Miris have mild and pleasant temperament and are very co-operative to outsiders.
(3) Siang Frontier District.—Siang Frontier District is to the east of Subansiri and through it flows the Siang—the main river which later becomes the Brahmaputra. The people, now called "Adis", were once known as Ahoms—a derogatory word meaning unruly and disobedient. The term Adi covers a large number of tribal groups united by one language, though there are variations in their dialect. There are two main divisions—the Gallongs and the Minyongs. Tribes such as the Ramos, the Puliabs and the Bokars of the far North are also associated with the former category, whereas the latter have common characteristics with the Padams, the Pasis, the Panghis, the Shimongs, the Boris, the Ashings, and the Tangams—each one having its own distinctive characteristics. The headquarters of the District are Along situated on the banks of Siyom and Sipu rivers and the other at Pasighat on the bank of Siang.

Adis are interesting people. They love dancing and music and their Penongs—as the drums are known—are captivating. They are good weavers and their censwork, especially the cassetot is very attractive. Good orators with an unusual memorising power, they are strongly democratic and all decisions pertaining to the village or individuals are taken in the village council known as Kabung. An important feature of Adi life is the youth dormitories. Among Minyongs there are girls' dormitories also. The Gallong group has a polyandry and polygamy of a type unknown elsewhere, except amongst the Buddhists of the North. The institution of slavery did have a place but is rapidly going out of vogue. The Adis had close trade links with Assam and the popular markets used to be Sisi Borgona and Dibrugarh. The people in the foothills and round about the headquarters use the Assamese language.

Along the border are the Buddhist tribes known as Membas and Khambas. They resemble the Mosops and follow the Nyingma sect of Buddhism. Their music and other religious dances resemble those in Sikkim. They had their trade links with Tibet in the past.

(4) Lohit Frontier District. This tract was formerly known as Mishmi Hills and spreads along the bend of the horse-shoe. The terrain though formidable attracted many early explorers—surveyor Wilcox, botanist Griffith Roulac and others. Father Kirk, an early missionary, and a Hindu Sadhu Parmanand Acharya, several decades
later were murdered while trying to make their way from Assam into Tibet through this District. The headquarter of the District is Teju and another important place is New Sadia. Old Sadia used to be a famous trading centre where Mishmi used to barter goods with their Assamese neighbours.

The main tribe is the Mishmis among whom there are three different groups: (i) Digaru or Tarom, (ii) Mijis or Kamis, and (iii) Chilikata or Idu. The main difference between these tribes is the way they do their hair. The Mongoloid characteristics in their appearance are strongly marked. Their language has some affinity with the Lepcha language.

As among the Dallas, the village community is unimportant. Villagers sometimes have only one house or scattered buildings half a mile from another. Dresses of all the three tribes are picturesque. The Mishmis have an extraordinary sense of colour and pattern. Men and women are devoted to tobacco. Digaru and Mijis are addicted to opium also. Besides Mishmis, there are Padams—allied to the Adis of the same name—living in the same District. There are two Buddhist tribes—Singphos and Khampis in this District. They were aggressive and warlike initially, but the influence of Buddhism has changed their outlook on life and they are now peaceful cultivators. Each village has a Buddhist temple. They are very enterprising and progressive and do rice-husking with the help of water mills. The Khampis are supposed to have come originally from Thailand and the Singphos from Upper Burma. The Lohit Frontier District has a lot of places of mythological significance as mentioned above.

(q) Tirap Frontier District.—This is the southernmost District, smallest and compact in area. Khonsa is the headquarters. Amongst the tribes which inhabit this District, Noces are a virile and picturesque tribe who have adopted a very elementary form of Vaishnavism and have had an intimate contact with the plains. Their society is organised under their great Chiefs, each controlling a number of villages from which he collects a tribute.

The other tribe is the Wanchos. Their society, like that of the Noces, is organised under great Chiefs, each controlling a number of villages. There are three classes—the families of the Chiefs, the proletariat and an intermediate class of the descendants of the sons of
Chiefs who have married commoners. The Chief's houses are often very large—probably the largest in the whole of NEFA. They use massive blocks and pillars of wood with some of them carved with fantastic designs. There are Morungs (dormitories) for boys and young men in all the villages and in some places there are also dormitories for girls. Their social organisation and head-hunting practices are similar to those of the Konyak Naga of the adjoining Mon Sub-division of Nagaland.

The Tangas is the third tribe of the District. Very near to the Beema border, they are opium addicts, but are slowly getting over their addiction. They tie their hair in top-knots and wear an apparel similar to a Sarong.

There are a few Singphos also in this District.

This bird's eye view of the tribes, though very sketchy at its best, can show us what great variety of tradition, custom, dress and dialect is compressed within a small region. The variegated pattern ranges from the near dictatorship and chieftainship of the Wanchos and Noces to the extreme democracy of the Adas—the ferocity and aggressiveness of the Dassas to the gentleness and modality of the Monpas, the Memias and the Khambas—from the industry and hard work of the Apa Tonsis to the lethargy and callousness of the Tangas and the Tagins. One, however, finds a common thread running through all the differences and is truck by the unity in diversity. Each tribe can be broadly called endogamous and is divided into clans which are exogamous. Inter-tribal marriages are usually not frowned upon but a breach of the clan-rule means a strong disapproval and is penalised. Society is patriarchal and polygamy is common. Marriages are usually arranged by parents with certain kosi or on the basis of exchange, though love marriages are not infrequent. There is a good deal of premarital freedom among the younger people but there is a high standard of fidelity within the marriage bond though divorce is permitted. There are social distinctions in many tribes but no caste differences. They all, however, eat together and take part in tribal councils, festivals and dances. There is also a certain amount of flexibility in these distinctions. A released slave can be a headman of his village and headman's sons and daughters can be married into other families. People are surprisingly business like and before they learnt the use of money they had developed an elaborate system of barter which still holds away
in some of the remotest regions. Their hard-beded, almost commercial outlook, especially in certain matters like marriage, bride-price, stands in juxtaposition to a sense of abandonment and a zest for life. Their generosity and spirit of hospitality are unparallelled. Their honesty and integrity is something which one rarely sees in a very sophisticated society.

The people of NeFa are distinguished by what the late Dr. Elwing called the "psychological impossibilities." The first is their exceptionally co-operative character. The village works as a whole in agriculture, ceremonial and war. "There are no heretics in religion and few disidents in village society." The clan system acts as a unifying influence so far as the members of the various exogamous groups are concerned and the tends to balance, to some extent, the separatism caused by the great distances and the memories of war and feud. Their self-reliance has been exemplary and that has been the quality which has sustained them in their struggle for existence in a country which has been hard and terrain inhospitable. In the past, they did everything for themselves—constructed their village paths—planned and built bridges—helped one another in sickness and distress. Ingenious machines to husk or grind rice—contraptions for fishing and hunting have been devised by some. They are the manufacturers of their own cloth, hats and raincoats. They have made their own cooking utensils, ornament and some of them have their own cosmetics.

They have made and administered their own laws with a machinery that is both intriguing and unique. Village government varies considerably from tribe to tribe. There are some, like the Noctes and the Wangchos, amongst whom the powerful Chiefs rule but they in turn consult the village elders and priests on important matters. The Idu Mishmis have their council known as "Abbala." The Mongas who have a strong sense of protocol elect the "Chorgin" or elders of their Lengul who hold office for life and are carefully graded. The Sherdikspons have what is known as the "Jang" which is led by the senior "Thik Akshu" (headmen). Among the well-organised councils which have great authority and influence are the Apa Tali "Bollong" the Kamar Mishmi "Phero" and Adi "Kebang." The most highly developed of all these is the Adi "Kebang" which works on the principle of equal votes for everyone. Every man, reaching the age of reason, is by right an active member of any assembly. Each village is ruled by five or six headmen elected for life by the people. They control all affairs of greater importance.
Looking at the above picture of the tribal life in NEFA, one wonders whether they would not have been happier to be left alone. Perhaps they might have been. But how could it have been possible? They had links with the outside world and they had a glimpse of life outside their area. It was but fair and just that the Government should evolve a policy by which they could take their place alongside their other countrymen without sacrificing any of the aspects of their lives which are so beautiful. In the words of the late Pandit Nehru "the problem of tribal areas is to make the people feel that they have perfect freedom to live their own lives and to develop according to their wishes and genius. India to them should signify not only a protecting force but a liberating one." In other words, the main problem was to encourage the people to come to terms with their past and develop from it by a natural evolution. There should never be an idea of freezing the people's culture "as it was" or romanticize primitiveness as such. The passage to modernity and to be one that would not sweep them off their feet.

Though the task is one of material development—like food, clothing, housing and schools, the real problem is a psychological one. The great test has been in the transformation to modernity of a society where some sections of the population were still living in the near stone-age era. The passage has to be smooth and care has to be taken to guard against the development of inferiority complexes which may destroy their pride in their institutions. The vitality of the indigenous culture has to be preserved so that it does not disappear altogether along with the anchorage it offers.

Thus an attempt had to be made to give the NEFA people some of the technical blessings of the modern world, without making them break away from the past. In fact, the various schemes for helping them to step into modernity had to be made acceptable and put into execution through their indigenous institutions and machinery. The various activities the Government undertook could be broadly divided into two groups—one negative and the other positive. Under the former head, amongst other things, could be mentioned the removal of the could of anxiety due to the existence of inter-tribal feuds and bloodshed, abolition of slavery and removal of the curse of opium. Under the latter, the activities were varied; the introduction of water supply schemes which formed the basis of health and hygiene, the improvement of village paths and motorable roads, the provision of medical facilities
and the prevention of disease, especially eradication of malaria, the
time encouragement of tribal dialect and the promotion of their arts and
crafts, the supply of educational facilities so that they take over the
task of administering themselves and also be one with the fabric of
a large society. The various changes and activities had to be introduced
according to the preparedness and receptivity of the particular people.
One had to bear in mind the fact that social change does not take place
in a straight line, perhaps it is along a parabolic curve—probably
more of a zigzag—with the acceptance of innovations and resistance to
change, both pulling in diametrically opposite directions. The
methodology of obtaining the assent and cooperation of a particular
people was important. The approach to the mind of the tribal people
had to be through an audio-visual and perceptual medium rather than
through more ideological contributions—through a collective appeal
rather than through individual deliberations, through the channel of
indigenous leadership rather than through a pattern unknown to 'them,
and in a language which is meaningful to them rather than a jargon to
which one is used in a more sophisticated society. Depending upon the
imposing facts of life, the leadership may throw up new patterns
of life and loyalty, which have to be observed and their assistance taken.
No cultural phenomena is intelligible apart from their relation to psycho-
biological imperatives. In the words of Malinowski, "Culture is an
organic integrated whole and that any attempt to study its parts in
isolation or abstraction is bound to give a distorted view of culture."

Until recently, the NEFA people have been living in an age of almost
uninterrupted continuity with the past. They then made a leap, into
the glare of the present century. A fundamental change has come
in the shifting of the gear of life from war to peace, the cessation of
blood-feud, the gradual disappearance of some of the prestige symbols
associated with head-hunting and slavery. The main task now is the
proper harnessing of the energies, thus released, to fill the vacuum
created by the disappearance of something that had to go to give a
positive direction to the urge for adventure. NEFA which is in the
extreme north-east of India and lies on the lap of the Himalayas,
once figured prominently in mythology—and later passed through a
period of loose contact. Now it has prepared on the stage. It
is a delicate but an imperative task to assign to it the part that it has
to play in the great drama—to ascription to it its share in the common
endeavour. A beginning has been made—some work has been
achieved but a tremendous task still lies ahead. The main problem,
however, remains the same and one cannot but help remember the words of Shri Jairamdas Daulatram, a former Governor of Assam. “Each section of the large population contributes to the making of the Nation in the same manner as each flower has the right to develop its own colour and form and to spread its own fragrance to make up the cumulative beauty and splendour of the 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.”