

NEFA—AN INTRODUCTION

R. N. HALDIPUR

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 rest 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 endlessly from one end to the other, and insulated by the vast expanse of the once unfordable Brahamaputra, 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 adventurer 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 Gangadin, conjured up romantic images of proud, warlike tribes and of sudden death, it was only in the wake of the later 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 tribal 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 corner stone 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 gaint 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 Tuensang District of Nagaland on the South. NEFA is divided into five administrative units previously called Divisions and now Districts; they are Kameng, Subansiri, Siang, Lohit and Tirap named after the principal rivers flowing through them. The Tuensang District of Nagaland also formed a part of NEFA till 1957 when it was joined to what was then known as Naga Hills-Tuensang-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, slavery, opium and ritual poisoning and now the 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 size and 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 flamboyant 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 inextricably 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 tribesmen of NEFA hills. The ruins of Ita in the Dafla country are identified with those of ancient Mayapur founded by a Kalit King named Ramchandra. The runis of a fort at Bhalukpung in the Kameng Frontier District are acclaimed by the Akas, as the original home of their ancestor Bhaluka, the grandson of Raja Bana who was defeated by

Krishna at Tejpur. The temple of Tamreshwari, in the present day Lohit District, stands testimony to the existence of Shakti cult, and the ruins of Bhismakanagar are associated with King Bhismak. Legends have it that Akashaganga and Ghograsthan were the favourite resorts of Rukmani 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 Shahabuddin who accompanied Mir Jumla when he invaded Assam in 1662. He says, "that the Dafla 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 Kings 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 conciliation. Expeditions were sent out only when there were raids of unusual audacity.

After the treaty of Yandaboo, in 1826, when the British took over the control of Assam from Purender 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 officers. 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 1942 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.

(1) Karmeng 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 olden days, the Tawang Raja was very influential and controlled the Bhutias of the Koriapara Duars which touches the eastern boundary of Bhutan and extends from the Doisham to the Rota River.

Among the tribes of this District—Monpas 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. Ever 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 barter trade with Tibet also.

Another Buddhist tribe, to the south of Kameng are the Sherdukpens. 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 Khowas and the Akas and the Mijis in the North. They are not Buddhists but have been influenced by their neighbours. There are number of references to the Akas in the history books. The Akas occupy the region as far east as the source of Khari Dikari 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 Assam 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 Bhalukpung—claimed by the Akas as the original home of Bhaluk.

The Daflas 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 Doimukh, in the Dafla area, are the ruins on the Ita Hills. These have been indentified as ruins of N Mayapur, the capital of a Kalita King, Ramchandra, who had to fly from his Kingdom to the Dafla area. They have a well-established trade link at Kimin 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 Kimin in North Lakhimpur District. The plateau is inhabited by the Apa Tanis who are an industrial 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 Daflas similar to those in Kameng.

The Tagins, the tribe which lives in a very difficult terrain having tracks that are well-nigh 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 Daflas 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 Abors—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 Pailibos 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 Districts are Along situated on the banks of Siyoum and Sipu rivers and the other at Pasighat on the bank of Siang.

Adis are interesting people. They love dancing and music and their Ponungs—as the dances are known—are captivating. They are good weavers and their canework, especially the canehat 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 ‘Kebang.’ 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 Borgaon 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 Monpa and follow the Nyingmapa 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 Roulatt 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 Sadiya. Old Sadiya 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 Taraon, (ii) Miju or Kaman, and (iii) Chulikata 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's the Daflas, the village community is unimportant. Villagers sometimes have only one house or scattered buildings half a mile from one 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. Digarus and Mijus 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 Khamptis 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 Khamptis are supposed to have come originally from Thailand and the Singphos from Upper Burma. The Lohoit Frontier District has a lot of places of mythological significance as mentioned above.

(5) Tirap Frontier District.—This is the southern-most District, smallest and compact in area. Khonsa is the headquarters. Amongst the tribes which inhabit this District, Noctes 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 Wanchoos. Their society, like that of the Noctes, 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 palaces there are also dormitories for girls. Their social organisation and head-hunting practices are similar to those of the Konyak Nagas of the adjoining Mon Sub-division of Nagaland.

The Tangsas is the third tribe of the District. Very near to the Burma 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 Wanchoos and Noctes to the extreme democracy of the Adis—the ferocity and aggressiveness of the Daflas to the gentleness and modesty of the Monpas, the Membas and the Khambas—from the industry and hard work of the Apa Tanis to the lethargy and callousness of the Tangsas and the Tagins. One, however, finds a common thread running through all the differences and is struck 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 patrilineal and polygamy is common. Marriages are usually arranged by parents with certain kin 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 hardheaded, almost commercial outlook, especially in certain matters like marriage, bride-price, stands in juxtaposition to a sense of abandonment and a zets for life. Their generosity and spirit of hospitality are unparalleled. Their honesty and integrity is something which on rarely sees in a very sophisticated society.

The people of NEFA are distinguished by what the late Dr. Elwing called the "psychological imponderables." The first is their exceptionally co-operative character. The village works as a whole in agriculture, ceremonies and war. "There are no heretics in religion and a few dissidents in village society." The clan system acts as a unifying influence so far as the members of the various exogamous groups are concerned and it tends to balance, to some extent, the separateness 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 rain-coats. 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 Monpas who have a strong sense of protocol elect the "Chorgins" or elders of their Lengui who hold office for life and are carefully graded. The Sherdukpens have what is known as the "Jang" which is led by the senior "Thik Akshas" (headmen). Among the well-organised councils which have great authority and influence are the Apa Tani "Buliang" the Kaman Mishmi "Pharal" 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 had to be one that would not sweep them off their feet.

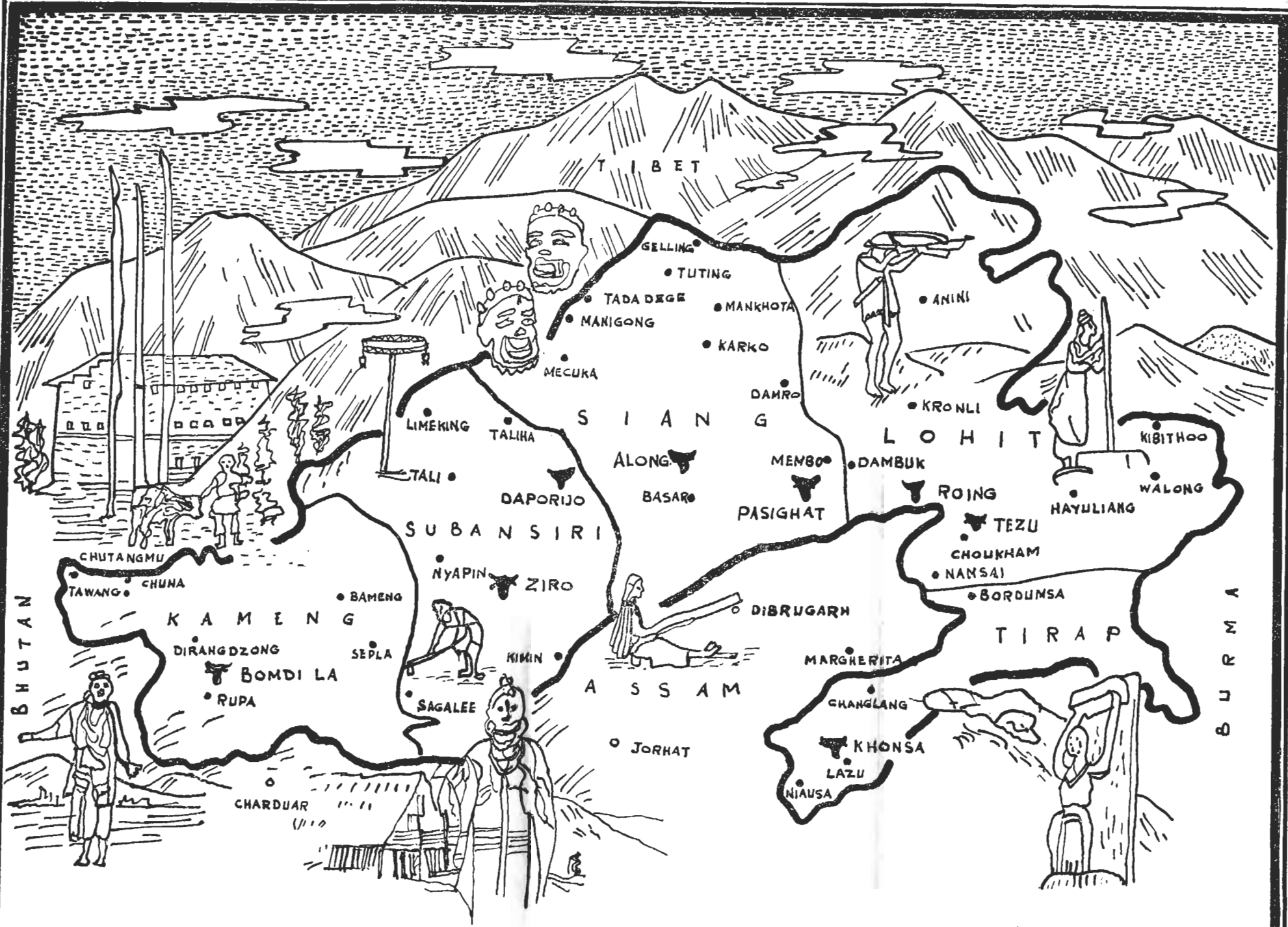
Though the task is one of material development—like food, clothing, housing and schools, the real problem is a psychological one. The great test has been in the transformation to modernity of a society where some sections of the population were still living in the near stone-age era. The passage has 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 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 larger 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 zig zag,—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 doctrinaire ideological confabulations,—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 imprinting facets 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 slaves. 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 apportion 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."



THE NORTH-EAST FRONTIER AGENCY