

## **The Indigenous People of Arunachal Pradesh**

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### **Abstract**

Arunachal Pradesh is the largest of all the North-eastern states. Though the state possesses 31.94 percent of the area, it has only 2.81 percent of population of the region, with a density of 13 per square kilometre. Scientific studies have proved that Arunachal Pradesh had prehistoric settlements. A large number of tribes inhabit the hills and plains of northeast India. The British, by 1842, has established their suzerainty over the entire province. In 1954, with the promulgation of the North East Frontier (Administration) Regulation, a full-fledged administration for the entire area, under the title of 'North East Frontier Agency' or 'NEFA' came into existence for the first time. In 1971, the government of India passed the North-East Areas (Re-organisation) Act, separating Meghalaya, Mizoram and NEFA from Assam. After many years, NEFA became Arunachal Pradesh, became a Union Territory and, on 20 January 1987, emerged as the 24th state of the Indian Republic. The people, varied as they are in their customs and manners, food and dress, languages and dialects, dances and songs, in the way of building houses, in their beliefs and superstitions, belong to the Mongoloid or Paleo-Mongoloid or Indo-Mongoloid race. There are 24 major tribes and 86 sub-tribes, some say even 110 sub-tribes, living in the state. The Wanchos, comparatively the biggest tribe, inhabit the eastern part of Tirap district. The people of this region, in their various stages of initiation into the 21st century, are just emerging from their age old traditions, customs and manners, into a new world.

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**Keywords:** North-East India, Arunachal Pradesh, Indigenous people, Tribes, Wanchos

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### **North-Eastern Region of India**

Of all the eight states of North-East India – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura – Arunachal Pradesh is the largest with an area of 83,743 square kilometres and a population of 1,097,968. It possesses 31.94 percent of the area and only 2.81 percent of population of the region, with a density of 13 per square kilometre. The region shares borders with Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh on all sides and is linked to the rest of India by a narrow passage, about 60 kilometres wide, between the foothills of Himalayas in the North and Bangladesh in the South. The region is home to many tribes who have lived here from pre-historic times. Into this area, it is assumed, that the great Sino-Tibetan speaking people who had their original home in eastern Tibet and western China, the Austrics from Indo-China, the Dravidians and the Indo-Aryans from the mainland

of India and finally the Siamese-Chinese from the Shan plateau of Northern Burma, migrated.

### **Tribes and Migration**

That Arunachal Pradesh had a prehistoric settlement was first brought to light in 1871 by John Anderson, who reported the discovery of Stone Age tools from the Mishmi Hills. Later R. D. Banerjee found Stone Age relics in Meiso on the left bank of the Dihang river. During 1933-35, J. P. Mills and J. H. Grace brought to light many relics of the Stone Age culture of Arunachal Pradesh. More recently B. P. Bopardikar carried on systematic survey in the Daphabum area of Lohit district. This expedition yielded evidence of early Stone Age settlement on the Eastern Himalayas comprising of chopper, hand-axe, cleaver, scraper, flake, point and other types of stone implements. Considering the vast size of the region, the archaeological investigations carried on so far in different parts of North-East India are too inadequate to reveal the complete picture of the prehistoric settlements in this part of India.

A large number of tribes inhabit the hills and plains of northeast India. These tribes entered this region at different points of time and through different routes. After entering this area they occupied marginal territories and had been living for centuries in isolation from one another. The interaction between various tribes was minimal till recent times. This isolation led to a very high degree of variability among tribal population. The variation in cultural patterns and dialectical differences is characterised by the presence of large number of tribes and sub-tribes living in this region.

Among all the immigrants, the Mongoloids predominate and are characterised by yellow or yellow-brown skin colour and black, stretched or flat wavy and coarse head hair. Their eyes are black or dark-brown in colour. The eye-slit is oblique and narrow. One of the typical characteristics of the Mongoloid is the presence of Mongolian fold in their eyes. Another characteristic feature of them is the scanty growth of facial and body hairs.

### **British Colonial Administration**

In earlier times the whole of North-east was known as Assam and it had been a part of the province of Bengal which was handed over to the English by the Moghul Emperor. In 1792, the Ahom Raja had appealed to the British for help and Lord Cornwallis despatched sepoy under Captain Welsh, who speedily reduced the rebellious chiefs to order. It was then proposed that a brigade of British troops should be kept in the province at the Assamese expense, but before this project could be carried into effect Lord Cornwallis left India and Captain Welsh was recalled by Sir John Shore, whose cautious policy was opposed to the enterprise. In consequence of this action, by 1794, Assam again went into anarchy. In the meantime, the Burmese began to interfere in the region and hostilities broke out with them in 1824. In 1826, under the Treaty

of Yandaboo, the Burmese were expelled from Assam and the British took over its administration except for Upper Assam, which was under the Ahom ruler, Purander Singh. Within a few years, the British consolidated their rule in Assam and annexed the whole of North-eastern region, including the area under Purander Singh and divided the region into 'administered' and 'non-administered area'. By 1842 the whole province was under the suzerainty of the British.<sup>1</sup>

However, the British frontier has at no time coincided with that of the ancient Ahom kingdom. In many places it has not been judged worthwhile to assume control of the hill country which formerly belonged to the Ahoms, and the British administrative frontier included less territory than the original treaty frontier. In other places again, it has gone beyond it.<sup>2</sup> From the eastern boundary of Independent Bhutan to the banks of the Sessiri, north of the Brahmaputra valley, according to British reports, a series of tribes occupy the whole of the hill country between Assam and Tibet. These, with one exception, are akin to the Tibetans and appear to be one people, though they were known to the British under the different names of Bhutias, Daphlas, Miris and Abors. One exception is the Akas, who differ from their neighbours and have a language very similar to that of the Nagas. When the British government took over Assam, it found that its territory extended in many places to twenty to thirty miles into the hills.

The first attempt by the British to explore the area was to send punitive or survey parties into the region with a large contingent of armed personnel under an officer together with a political officer. The British were curious to know about the land and the people in the un-administered area and wanted to cultivate better relations with the hill people. However, the killing of political officers Mr. Williamson and Dr. Gregorson resulted in the punitive expeditions of the British into the interior of Siang and came to known as 'the Abor expedition of 1911-'12. As a consequence, the Lt. Governor Sir C S Bayley, suggested important changes in the administrative set up of the frontier areas, based on the recommendations of General Bower.

A big step was the creation of a frontier administration in 1912-'13, primarily directed towards the North-East Frontier, under the control of a political officer. In 1914 a separate administrative unit called, the Lakhimpur Frontier Tract was created under the charge of the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur and divided into three sections. The central and eastern sections were placed under one political officer with headquarters at Sadiya, and Charduar was the headquarters of the western sector. By 1919, the names were changed into Balipara Frontier Tract and the central and eastern section into Sadiya Frontier Tract. The North-East Frontier Tract was made a part of Assam, even as the government of Assam was denied direct participation in the administration and governance of the area.

1 Thomas Vattoth, *The Wanchos in Transition*, Dimapur, Don Bosco Youth and Educational Services, 2008.

2 Army Headquarters of India, *North and North-Eastern Frontier Tribes of India*, Delhi, Cultural Publishing House, (1907) 1984, p.157.

The Government of India Act of 1935 introduced some measure of provincial autonomy and certain constitutional reforms, but the tribal areas were kept out of it, either as 'excluded areas' or 'partially excluded areas,' based on the respective stage of advancement in the scale of literacy and political consciousness. The administration of these areas was vested with the Governor of Assam, who was given a secretary to assist him, which was later on renamed as 'Advisor to the Governor of Assam' for the administration of the North-East Frontier Tracts. With the outbreak of World War II in 1939, and the Japanese conquest of Burma in 1942 and their attempted thrust into Assam through the Naga territory greatly enhanced the importance of the North-East Frontiers. In 1943, a new administrative division called Tirap Frontier Tract was created out of some areas of the Lakhimpur Frontier Tract and the Sadiya Frontier Tract with headquarters at Margherita.

### **North-East Frontier under Independent India**

With the independence of India, the political scenario has changed completely. India's policy towards the tribal areas was hotly debated in the Constituent Assembly and according to the recommendation of the Cabinet Mission an advisory committee was set up, which in turn set three sub-committees to recommend appropriate administrative frame work for the tribal areas. The committee for North East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas was known as Bardoloi Committee, as it was headed by Mr. Gopinath Bardoloi, the then Chief Minister of the greater Assam. The Committee emphasised the need to establish administration and control over the whole area right up to the international border. Its second recommendation was that the government of Assam should eventually take over the administration of that area from the Central government. However, with the installation of a Communist government in China in 1949, the geo-political perspective of the area changed and the administration of the North East Frontier agency was placed under the External Affairs Ministry and the Advisor to the Governor of Assam assumed the direct charge of the administration, and there was hope that the area would be integrated with Assam one day.

### **North East Frontier Agency: NEFA**

In 1954, with the promulgation of the North East Frontier (Administration) Regulation, a full-fledged administration for the entire area, under the title of 'North East Frontier Agency' or 'NEFA' came into existence for the first time and the earlier frontier tracts were re-designated as divisions and the whole area was divided into six divisions. The question of integration of the frontier areas with Assam had always been a thorny issue between the Central government and the public opinion in Assam. From the very beginning the officers of the administration (who were non-tribals) realised that they had to reckon with the tribal background, with their separate cultures, traditions and aspirations. Prime Minister Nehru himself spelt out this principle when he declared that the tribal people should be allowed to develop along the lines of their own way of life. Elwin Verrier, a renowned anthropologist, was appointed as an honorary Advisor

for Tribal Affairs for North East Frontier Agency. He formulated his theory in his well-known book, *A Philosophy for NEFA*, in which he spelt out the principles for the development of the tribal people according to their pace, with the least amount of interference and imposition from outside, without any harm to their own culture.

In the meanwhile, the demand for separate states had been voiced by the different tribal groups in the North. As early as 1971, the Agency Council recommended a change in the name of NEFA in favour of Arunachal Pradesh. In the same year, the government of India passed the North East Areas (Re-organisation) Act, separating Meghalaya, Mizoram and NEFA from Assam. After many years of transformation, NEFA became Arunachal Pradesh, became a Union Territory and, on 20 January 1987, emerged as the 24th state of the Indian Republic. In the subsequent years, the number of districts was increased from 5 to 9, and from 9 to 13, and today Arunachal Pradesh has 16 districts, starting from the east of Bhutan, West Kameng, East Kameng, Tawang, West Siang, East Siang, Upper Siang, Upper Subansiri, Lower Subansiri, Papum Pare, Upper Dibang valley, Lower Dibang valley, Kurung Kumey, Angjaw, Lohit, Changlang and Tirap.

### **People of Arunachal Pradesh**

Very little was known about the people of Arunachal Pradesh before the beginning of the 19th century, except for some brief mention about the villagers bordering Assam, as recorded in the *Asom Buranjis*. Even that little was known for the wrong reasons; because of the raids that the hill men used to make on the people of the plains. It was never known for certain the number of tribes or the villages that were there in the interior of the hills, hidden under the canopy of the forests. The people themselves did not know the tribal name by which others called them, but they were known as the people of so and so village. Arunachal Pradesh, being a mountainous country, with deep valleys and gorges, with rapid flowing mountain streams separating the valleys and mountains, with no roads except for some footpaths, it was impossible for an outsider to negotiate the twists and turns of the paths through the undergrowth to a steep climb to any village, hidden on the mountain top. And even after reaching the village, one was not sure of the welcome that would be accorded, because the tribal people viewed any intruder with suspicion until they were sure of the intentions of the stranger. Once they were assured of the good intentions of the visitors, they were welcomed with honour and accepted into their society and shared with them whatever they had.

The villages were isolated from one to the other, perched on mountain tops, for security reasons, as they were more or less on continuous enmity, as head hunting was in vogue, and the loss of one head always called for retaliation resulting in an unending chain of attacks and counter attacks. Men were considered heroes by the villagers if they had to their credit an enemy head, and special insignia and decorations on the body proclaimed their valour.

The people of these villages, varied as they are in their customs and manners, food and dress, languages and dialects, dances and songs, in the way of building houses, in their beliefs and superstitions, belong to the Mongoloid or Paleo-Mongoloid or Indo-Mongoloid race with brachicephalic head, flat nose, slit eyes, high face, narrow and sloping forehead, and unpronounced eye brows and might have migrated into the area between 1200 to 700 BCE<sup>3</sup>, possibly from Northern or South-Western China. People with the same physical characteristics are found in Laos, Burma (Myanmar) and in some islands of Indonesia. It is not surprising to notice racial resemblance between the Nishi of Arunachal Pradesh and the Dayak of Borneo or between the Aka of Arunachal Pradesh and the Akha living in Northern Laos and adjacent Burma, Thailand and China.<sup>4</sup>

### **Major Tribes and their habitats**

There are 24 major tribes and 86 sub-tribes, some say even 110 sub-tribes, living in the state and some of the main ones are: Adi, Apathani, Aka, Bangni, Bugun (Khowa), Bangro, Adi-Gallong, Aka-Hrusso, Khamba, Khamati, Koro, Lisu, Mismi, Mini, Monpa, Memba, Minyongs, Miris, Mikir, Miji, Nocte, Nishi, Sherdukpen, Singpho, Sajolang, Sartang, Sulungs, Tagin, Tangsa, Wancho, Yobin, and Zakhring (Meyor).

### **Monpas**

Monpas are mainly residing in the districts of Tawang, West Kameng and East Kameng. Some suggest that the Monpas had migrated from the south that is from Assam; while others say that they are from the west that is from Bhutan; and yet others state they are from the north, that is from Tibet. However, the dominant impression suggests that they had migrated from the north. They are divided into six sub tribes, viz., But, Dirang, Lish, Chug, Kalaktang and Tawang. They differ among themselves in their languages, and many other cultural traits. They are simple, gentle and courteous people. They follow the Buddhist religion and each house has a small altar.<sup>5</sup>

### **Sherdukpens**

The other tribes that inhabit the above mentioned districts and follow the Buddhist religion are Sherdukpens and the Mijis. The Sherdukpens claim that their origin is from the union of the local prince with the princess from the south, possibly of Ahom origin and live in the Rupa Circle. Their dialects belong to the Tibeto-Burman family, but use Hindi or Assamese to communicate with outsiders. Among them marriages are arranged by the parents of the boy and the girl and a bride money has to be paid by

3 J.N. Choudhury, *Arunachal Pradesh from Frontier Tracts to Union Territory*, New Delhi, Cosmo Publications, 1983, p. 61.

4 Thomas Vattoth, *op.cit.*

5 K.S. Singh (ed.), *People of India (Arunachal Pradesh) XIV*, Kolkata, Anthropological Survey of India, Seagull Books, 1995, pp. 13 & 216.

the groom. They are agriculturists and the women folk do the greater part of the work. They are Buddhists and the Lama is very much a part of their lives, performing rituals at birth, marriage and burials.

### **Mijis**

The Mijis are a small group of people who call themselves Sajalong and they are closely related to the Akas. They live in West Kameng district, spread over 20 villages. Their language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family, but they also speak Aka, Monpa, Assamese and Hindi and now the educated ones speak English as well. Women used to tattoo their faces. Men and women keep long hair and the men tie it in a knot on the crown of the head. Their staple food is maize, supplemented with rice, millet, pulses and meat. They are divided into a number of exogamous clans, which regulate the marital alliances. Parental negotiation is the most common form of marriage, in which a bride price is fixed in the form of cattle, clothes and utensils. The Miji society has both nuclear and extended families. They follow the patrilocal rule of residence after the marriage. All the sons get equal share of the parental property. They believe in transmigration of the soul and the priest offers prayers to let the soul take birth again in the same family. They believe in many deities and spirits. They have a strong faith in malevolent and benevolent spirits and worship the natural forces like the earth, sky, moon, sun, water and mountains and offer animal sacrifices.<sup>6</sup>

### **Khowas**

The Khowas, who call themselves Bugun, is a non-Buddhist tribe and live in eight villages in the West Kameng district. This is a small tribe and was at the mercy of the other surrounding tribes like the Akas and Sherdukpens. Rice is their staple food. Being a small community, they have learnt to survive by learning the languages of the neighbouring tribes like, Shedukpens, Akas, and Monpa. They also speak Assamese, Nepali and Hindi. The community is divided into several exogamous clans. Today boys and girls choose their life partners, and marriage formalities are performed by the families. At the birth of a child a feast is given. They follow the traditional tribal religion, though some of them are Buddhists. The Khowas bury their dead, together with the personal belongings. They also keep food and water at the grave.

### **Bangnis**

The Bangnis trace their origin to places situated somewhere north of the present Chayang Tajo circle of the East Kameng district and is very similar to the Nishis. The men keep their hair long and tie it into a bun over the forehead. Their staple food is rice and maize along with meat and vegetables. Another important item of their diet is the local beer. They are divided into a number of exogamous clans. A boy has to pay a heavy bride price before marriage, consisting of mithuns, costly beads and clothes.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 200-205.

Polygamy was common among them and the wife was considered a status symbol for the husband. Divorce seldom took place, because of the inability to pay back the bride price. Their houses are very long and every wife gets a separate apartment with a hearth. On the death of the father, the eldest son looks after the property. He takes care of all the wives of his father, including his mother. The younger brothers continue to stay in the father's house with their wives. As a rule, the daughters do not get any immovable property, but they get a share of the mithuns, costly beads etc. They bury their dead together with fowls and the rope which the deceased used to tie the mithuns. Their religion consists of belief in malevolent and benevolent spirits. The biggest community feast is Nyokum which is related to agriculture and fertility. It is held once in five or six years generally in February-March. Sulungs are kept as slaves in their house, and has been an age-old custom.<sup>7</sup>

### **Sulungs**

Sulungs are considered to be one of the oldest tribes in this area and live in the upper part of East Kameng district, close to Tibet. They like to be called as Puroik, as the name Sulung was given by the Bangnis and means 'slave.' They live in 53 villages and are also spread into Lower Subansiri district. Historically they were kept as slaves by the Bangnis, but today they are a community of free people. Their villages are built on the top of hills, which are covered with bamboo, cane and deciduous forests. Their staple food consists of boiled rice, vegetables and meat whenever it is available, mostly due to hunting. They are divided into a number of exogamous clans, and sometimes marriages are arranged by the owner of the land where the Sulung family lives and he pays for the bride price, thus perpetuating the dependence. The house continues to expand as the man brings in more wives and each wife is provided with a hearth. But this tradition is slowly disappearing. After marriage the sons are at liberty to stay with their parents or separately. On the father's death, all the sons inherit equal shares of the property. Women are expected to do all the work because the men have paid the bride price. They bury their dead in a sitting position near the house and they do not bury any personal goods along with the dead.<sup>8</sup>

### **Akas**

The Akas who live in East Kameng district, believe that they inhabited the plains of Assam before settling down in their present habitat and trace their first place of settlement to Jigago which is possibly situated somewhere in upper Assam. They are surrounded by the Nishis, Bangnis, and the Sherdukpens. They call themselves as Hrusso. They are divided into two sections known to the Assamese as *Hazarikhoas* and *Kapaschor*, which names so pleased the Hrusso that they have adopted them themselves, but now they are known as *Khuchchan* and *Kuvachan*. Both these tribes are

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 303-307.

believed to be limited in number. The women used to tattoo their faces. The Hrussos are on fairly good terms with their neighbours, especially with the Mijis, with whom they are intimately connected.

### **Nishis**

According to the report of the British Army they are no doubt closely allied to their eastern neighbours, the Miris, although they differ from them in appearance. They are short, well-formed men of considerable muscular development, with large, broad faces, square foreheads, high cheek bones, flat noses and large mouths. They have a very independent bearing, but hold no communication with the Akas, whom they fear and dislike. They had a great reputation for warlike qualities, and in fact they were thought to be the most formidable of the northern frontier tribes.

The Nishi community has three major groups, viz., Dol, Dodum and Dopum which are again subdivided into exogamous clans. They are polygamous, and the more the number of wives a man has, the more his prestige in society. Such persons are remembered for a long time. Bride price is usually paid in instalments. The boy's father starts paying the bride price as soon as the betrothal takes place which is normally during the girl's childhood. The girls have no say in the matter and sometimes even young girls are purchased by old men. Quarrels leading to even murder take place if a betrothed girl elopes with somebody else. In such cases it is the responsibility of the girl's father to bring her back or pay back double the bride price received. Since the husband pays the bride price, the people have a notion that he has purchased the woman, and even if he tortures her physically no one has got any right to interfere. The status of women is low in the Nishi community. Each wife gets a separate plot for cultivation and a separate apartment. Land is the major economic resource, and all the plots are owned individually. Agriculture is the primary occupation. They practise jhum cultivation, but opt for wet cultivation wherever suitable land is available.<sup>9</sup>

### **Tagins**

The Tagins are one of the major tribes inhabiting the Upper Subansiri district, close to the Tibetan border, at an altitude ranging from 1000 to 18,000 feet above sea level. They are believed to have migrated from Penji, a village in Tibet, to the Tadadege region from where they migrated to their present settlements. They have their own language belonging to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family, and it is still an unwritten one. Men used to wrap themselves in a Tibetan blanket and women used to wear white cotton blanket with stripes for the upper part and a grass skirt. Their men also wear an elliptical cane hat. Their diet includes rice, meat, fish, millet, maize and apong or rice beer.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 267-280.

The community is divided into a number of exogamous clans and marriage within the same clan is considered as incest. Marriages are normally settled through negotiations by the parents of the boy and the girl with an agreement on the bride price, consisting of a number of mithuns and cash. Divorce may be sought either on grounds of adultery or sterility. Re-marriage is allowed for both widows and widowers.

Property is inherited only by the eldest and the youngest sons. Normally the eldest son succeeds as the head of the family. The women have to cook, draw water, manage domestic animals and cultivate the jhum fields. On certain occasions like the naming of a child or on the death of a person, divination is conducted through breaking of eggs or by killing a fowl.

The Tagins bury their dead and on the fifth or the tenth day a feast is given by killing animals to those who took part in the burial and a divination is done to see which spirit was responsible for the death and it is placated with the sacrifice of an animal. Any wrong doing among them is settled by the village headman and generally the wrong doer is fined a *mithun*, a cow or a goat according to the seriousness of the crime. The Tagins are famous for handicrafts especially a rain coat, called '*nara*', knitted from leaves and a hat knitted from cane. They also make a variety of baskets for different purposes, such as carrying paddy, firewood and other materials.<sup>10</sup>

### **Apathanis**

The Apathanis practice settled cultivation unlike the other tribes that practise jhum, and live in the plateau surrounding Ziro, the headquarters of Lower Subansiri district. According to their legend, they migrated from a country north or north-east of Arunachal Pradesh and settled in the present location. The Apathani men could be identified by the traditional cane girdle, dyed red and finely polished, worn around the waist and fitted behind with hanging long bushy cane tail. They kept long hair with a knot projected on the forehead. A bodkin (a thin long piece) made of iron, brass or bamboo is kept perforated through the knot. The traditional identifying mark for the women was the wooden nose plugs, worn on both the nostrils, which is out of fashion today.

The Apathanis are divided into major endogamous groups called Mith and Mora and these are sub-divided into exogamous clans. The Miths enjoy a higher social status than the Moras, though social relations are maintained beyond this rigid class barrier. The Mora people are obliged to do the burial work for the dead in a Mith house. On some ceremonial occasions, these two groups are not allowed to eat together. They feel economically superior to the neighbouring communities such as the Nishis and the Hill Miris by virtue of the fact they have been practising settled cultivation since long back.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 308-312.

In marriages, they follow clan exogamy and though monogamy is the general rule, polygamy is permitted and bride price is not obligatory. The sons inherit the property and the daughters inherit only clothes and ornaments from their mother. Clan members generally help each other in building house, cultivation and in other necessities. They have a strong traditional village council called 'buliang' consisting of the village headman and other clan representatives and all disputes are settled by them. The community worships a number of spirits, who are thought to be responsible for the various turns in human life. These spirits are propitiated with sacrifices during their festival called 'Mloko'. Today the Apathanis are educationally one of the most advanced communities in Lower Subansiri district, and many of them are qualified as administrators, engineers and doctors.<sup>11</sup>

### **Hill Miris**

The first reference to the Hill Miris is available in the Ahom Buranjis during the time of King Swargadeo Pratap Singha (1603-41). He appointed Katakis and arranged the system of *posa* (gift) to conciliate the Hill Miris. The Hill Miris of these districts had close contacts with the plains of Assam. They live on the lower catchment area of the Subansiri River, where they dwell on the low hills. The Miris carry on little cultivation and their villages are small and scattered. They have just as much as they can to keep themselves alive, and have little power either to help or to attack their neighbours. The British have always been on friendly terms with them and the *posa* paid to them is perhaps more of a charity than that paid to any other frontier tribe.

### **Adis**

The Adis (known to the British as Abors) are the main and important tribe that live in West, East and Upper Siang districts and they are divided into 15 sub-tribes such as, Minyongs, Karkos, Shimongs, Ashing, Bori, Milang, Padam, Pangi, Ramo, Tangam, Bokar, Gallong, Komkar, Pailibo, and Pasi. The other tribes that live in the districts are the Khambas and Membas. The Adis believe that they migrated from the north of the Himalayas. It is rather difficult to ascertain the cause of the migration. It may be presumed that a great natural upheaval in their place of origin or large-scale racial movements caused them to migrate to the present location. They are democratic by nature and they are famous for their village council called 'Kebang.' Adi women are good weavers.

### **Mishmis**

In Dibang valley district we find the Mishmis, who are divided into three groups, viz. Idus, Digarus and Mijus and some of them are spread into the next district Lohit. They were earlier known to the people in the plains as the Chulikattas (people with cropped hair) for they cut their hair round the head.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 141-46.

The Chulikattas are the most formidable of the Mishmis. They are disliked by their neighbours, the Abors, and also by the Digaru Mishmis, and they are especially dreaded by the Sadiya population, owing to their prowling expeditions to kidnap women and children. Before the British took possession of Assam, the Mishmis paid tribute to the Sadiya Khawa Gohains. They also appeared to have obeyed the orders of the Khamtis and Singphos.

### **Khamtis**

The Khamtis and the Singphos live in the Lohit district. The Khamtis are believed to have migrated from the Shan states of Myanmar (Burma) and they are the only tribe in Arunachal Pradesh to have a script of their own. They follow the Buddhist religion. They are probably the richest tribe in the state. The Khamtis occupied a larger area of land, because of which a rebellious situation prevailed in Assam from 1799 to the beginning of the 19th century.

### **Singphos**

The Singphos are a section of the Kachin tribe of Myanmar. They first made their appearance in Arunachal Pradesh when Assam was under the Ahom King Gauri Nath Singha (1780-1795). In about 1793 the Singphos crossed the Patkai pass and confronted the Khamtis to the east of Sadiya. Finally, they settled in the areas intersected by the Burhi-dihing, Noa-dihing and Tengapani rivers. Though monogamy is the basic rule of marriage, there is no prohibition for polygamy. They dispose the dead by exposure on a platform.

### **Tangsas**

The Tangsas with 15 sub-groups live in the Changlang district. They are considered to be the earliest migrants who settled on the northern slopes of the Patkai range, and are believed to have migrated from the south. Other communities that came later settled in the Manmao and Nampong circles. Few Tangsa groups also live across the border in Myanmar, with whom they maintain socio-economic relations. In recent times they are spread into the plains of the Noa-Dihing River in the Miao and Bordumsa circles. The Tangsa dress consists of a shirt, a chequered lungi and a white turban. Rice is their staple food along with maize and millet. Rice beer is an important item of their diet along with beef and pork. Clan exogamy is the common rule of marriage. They are mostly Buddhists and they bury or cremate the dead. The village administration is run by the headman and his assistant.<sup>12</sup>

### **Noctes**

One of the important tribes that inhabit the Tirap district is the Noctes, who live in the Khonsa, Namsang and Laju circles and spread over 85 villages. Though they were

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 313-14.

known for their head hunting, as of today, they are economically and educationally ahead of other tribes in the region. They accepted and followed a kind of Vaishnavism. The Nocte society is divided into three social classes, viz., Lowang or the chief and his descendants, the Channa or the commoners and Mikhiak or the lower status group. Each of these classes is divided into exogamous clans. Each village is divided into a number of sectors called 'sums' and each sector had a bachelors' dormitory called 'morung', where the young boys slept at night. These days the morungs have been converted into places of recreation and general meeting. The dormitories for unmarried girls have also disappeared from the village scene. The chief of a village is allowed to have several wives, provided his first wife is from the 'Lowang' group. Negotiations between the parents of the boy and girl are the common form of marriage, though elopement and courtship are also permitted. Twins and deformed children are not allowed to survive. Their presence is believed to bring misfortune to the whole community. On the third day the baby's ears are pierced by an experienced lady of the clan. The naming ceremony is performed when the child is a month old by a priest at night.

They used to expose the dead on platforms, but now resort to burial. They practice jhum cultivation and the main crops are paddy, maize and millet. Each village has a council headed by the chief and the elders and they maintain the law and order and settle all disputes. The Noctes have a strong belief in benevolent and malevolent spirits and they are propitiated by sacrificing animals like fowls and pigs. They had trade relations with the Ahoms and the British and salt was one of the main items traded for opium, baskets, mats, bamboo tubes and other commodities.<sup>13</sup>

## **Wanchos**

The Wanchos, comparatively the biggest tribe, inhabit the eastern part of Tirap district. The prevailing belief about their migration is that they migrated to the present habitat from Tangnu and Tsangnu areas of Nagaland and they are very similar to the Konyaks of the Mon district of Nagaland. They occupy the western part beyond the Tisa River, concentrated in Longding, Kanubari, Ponghcau and Wakka circles of the district. Their villages are generally big and thickly populated and are situated on the top of the hills. The two groups, *Tangjan* and *Tsangjan*, differ on the basis of the language.

The traditional dress for the men is a 'languti' or loin cloth. They keep their hair long and tie it at the back of the head. The women wear a short skirt and various ornaments, including colourful beads and necklaces. Shawls are common for both men and women. Men and women used to dye their teeth black. Both men and women used to tattoo their bodies, with a head hunter having special designs on the face and body as a symbol of bravery. The Wanchos are non-vegetarian in their diet and rice and millet are the staple food items. 'Zu' or rice beer is the favourite drink which they take with their regular meals. The people living in the upper Wancho areas take opium.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 281-287.

The Wancho society is divided into two distinct social divisions: the Wanghams or chiefs and the Wangpans or the commoners. There are two other groups as well, born out of marriage between the children of Wanghams and Wangpans that is, the Wangsa and Wangsu, whose social status falls in between the Wangham and Wangpan groups. The chief of a village marries the daughter (Wangsia) of the chief of another village. The children born of such wedlock have the privilege of becoming a chief or Wangsia, because they carry the sacred and pure royal blood. The children born of a Wangham father and Wangpan mother are known as Wangsa. The Wangsus are the descendants of a Wangsa father and a Wangpan mother. In terms of social hierarchy, the Wanghams occupy the first position, the Wangsa the second position and the Wangsus the third position and the Wangpans are considered the lowest. On the occasion of the social festivities in the villages, the Wangpans are not allowed to take meals sitting in the same row with the Wanghams.

The community practices both monogamy and polygamy. Generally the village chief is permitted to have more than one wife. The Wanchos select their mates on their own, but the marriage is arranged by the parents. Pre-marital relations are allowed. Dormitories for boys and girls were in existence and boys were allowed to visit the girls' dormitories following the clan exogamy rules. The father is the head of the family, and the eldest son inherits the parental property and the mantle of the family head after the father's death. The women can neither inherit the parents' property nor do they have any right over their husbands' property. They have no role in the village affairs, but play an important role in domestic and agricultural activities.

Earlier, when a person is dead, the body was exposed over a bamboo platform together with the personal belongings. But, now, all are burying their dead irrespective of their religion. The Wanchos believe in malevolent and benevolent spirits and sacrifices are tied to one of the pillars of the house. They also worship natural forces like the moon, sky, sun and land. Oriya is the main festival and it is celebrated for a good harvest and better health for everyone. Different villages celebrate it on different dates, lasting for 5 to 10 days. The Wanchos specialise in wood carving and the art of dyeing goat's hair with the help of a local herb. They are also skilled in basketry, pottery and weaving. They make bead necklaces with attractive designs. Compared to the other neighbouring tribes, the Wanchos are educationally backward. There is only one higher secondary school with hostel facilities for boys and girls for the whole tribe. Miserable economic conditions force many of the students to drop out. Still they are a carefree, cheerful and hard working people.<sup>14</sup>

### **Wancho Philosophy of Life**

As for the communities mentioned so far, few have a script or a codified literary tradition. However, from their oral tradition as well as cultural artefacts, their philosophies could

14 Thomas Vattoth, *The Wanchos in Transition*, op.cit.

very well be derived. Yet much work remains to be done in this regard. The Wanchos, as a community, in turn have evolved their own way of life in keeping with their social and cultural activities. They are characterised by pragmatism in every sphere of life. From their behaviour and life styles, we can deduce the following:

### **Love of Independence**

It is a fact that most of the indigenous communities resisted the interference of outsiders into their villages and fought tooth and nail to keep them out. Whenever an alien party arrived in their vicinity, they were observed with suspicion, watching them closely and if opportunity presented itself to attack the outsiders, they would kill as many as possible, so that they would not dare again venture into those areas. From the historical accounts that we have from the 'Asom Buranji' and the chronicles of British, we find that they organised punitive expeditions to various tribal villages in retaliation. They resisted the advances of others as much as they could, but at times had to give into superior arms and organised fighting. Even at the face of defeat, their independent spirit could not be broken and the hill people regrouped themselves to fight for their rights. Another strategy that was tried was to pay them annual contributions in cash or kind, so that they would not encroach on the neighbouring lands.

Even within the same tribe, each village guarded zealously their own independence, without interference from the neighbouring villages, and they managed their own village affairs in judicial, administrative and executive spheres. Most of them had a village council of their own, with the village headman and a few elders, called by various names according to the tribe and village. They maintained law and order, saw to the developmental aspects of the village and dispensed justice according to need.

Even today they are proud to be independent and do not like interference or lordship over them by any agency or institution, be it government or otherwise. They like to manage their own affairs by themselves. This tendency could be identified as one of the reasons why each tribe or groups of similar tribes want to have an independent state of their own and this struggle continues even in present times.

### **Ethics and Morality**

On the whole, the indigenous tribal people had a sense of justice and fair play and they dispensed justice with impartiality to everyone, according to the unwritten laws and customs of the village and tribe. Each case was taken separately and debated. The accused was given a chance to explain himself/herself and everybody heard them with rapt attention and only after everybody who wanted to say something had finished a verdict was given, either acquitting or condemning the person and the penalty mostly consisted of fines and in some serious cases expulsion from the village.

Thefts, adultery and fights for property were the common offences that were dealt with in the village tribunals. Homicides in the villages were rare occurrences, though head hunting from other villages was held as honourable. Punishment was meted out according to the severity of the offences, and there was no appeal to any other higher authority.

The people are generally law abiding, and they respected the laws given by the village authorities without any questioning. They had their sense of integrity, honour and justice and are devoid of duplicity are characteristics which eventually led to the fact that they could be easily cheated by others.

All the tribal population believe in after life and that this present one has an influence on the life to come. This is ascertained by the funeral rites and sacrifices that they make in honour of the deceased, so that they will have a peaceful life unlike the one that they had led in this world. They also believe in the influence of good and evil spirits guiding and controlling the lives of men and women, and these have to be placated with sacrifices. They have not philosophised on the attributes of a Supreme Being, but they acknowledge their superiority in all spheres of life and tend to incarnate them in human or other forms.

### **Pragmatic Outlook about Life**

The tribal people are most pragmatic in their outlook on life and most practical in their approach to life and other life situations. A modern, urban person may be at a loss without their gadgets and equipments and has to wait impatiently for the situation to change in order that they may do something. Most of the indigenous people have to manage with the minimum that is available in their life. From everyday activities to extraordinary situations, they are never at a loss, but devise ways and means on the spot to overcome the situation. If they do not have something, they will always find an alternative and are never discouraged or come to a standstill. Where there are no roads, they would walk for days to reach their destinations. When there are no bridges across rivers and valleys, they construct hanging bridges with roots and bamboos and canes and they are unique pieces of architecture which we admire today. They find ways to cultivate on the slopes of high mountains to feed themselves and what is deficient is substituted from the jungles. They may not be well fed, but we do not hear them dying of starvation. Consider the size and shape of their houses; they are built according to the climatic conditions of each area, to give them maximum comfort. Their outlook on life is equally simple, 'if we are born, we shall die,' and it is not worth making undue fuss over life and death.

### **Conclusion**

The people of this region, in their various stages of initiation into the 21st century, are just emerging from their age old traditions, customs and manners, into a new world,

and some of them are unable to cope up with the changes that are taking place around them. They are eager to be at par with the rest of the world, but at the same time unable to race at the same pace as those who got a head start. In this race to catch up, they still cling to what is most dear to them, their independence, their simplicity and a pragmatic way of life.