CHAPTER VIII

Conclusion

In rounding up our discussion, we may note that the present territory of Arunachal Pradesh, like all other parts of India, represents an admixture of different cultural traits. As against the prevalent notion of its lateness in culture, recent discoveries have indicated existence of human civilization in the territory right from the palaeolithic stage. It has also yielded faint indications of even the birth of human race on its soil. It can now be asserted with confidence that other later stages of human culture also did flourish here. Difficulties of communication though hindered easy contact with outside world, the land was never a void so far as human life is concerned.

The results of archaeological, geological and ethnological investigations, especially in the last few decades, when viewed in proper perspective and corelated with literary accounts reveal that right from the earliest phase of its existence the territory, now designated Arunachal, never remained a totally isolated spot. Contiguity with Tibet, Bhutan, Burma, South China and South-East Asia with which it also has a general ecological affinity naturally encouraged free movement of people and tribes in ancient times across the present political boundaries. These strict demarcation lines dividing these territories have developed only with the growing consciousness regarding political frontiers. As we recede into the remote past such boundaries were neither so rigid as at present nor
so jealously guarded against movement of peoples, missionaries or traders. This freer contact is obvious from the extent of cultural affinity with these countries writ large on the archaeological relics of Arunachal. A good amount of ethnic and linguistic affinity also may be observed. However, this affinity can never be misinterpreted as complete identity. Rather, the different waves of culture have undergone a great amount of miscegenation in Arunachal Pradesh to generate its independent character more and more in sharp outlines to distinguish it from its neighboring regions especially over the recent periods of its history. As in all other parts of our magnificent country, here also we find incessant march of numerous groups of people over centuries. Further investigation may alone unravel in future more minute details of the identities of all these ethnic groups and cultures that penetrated this territory. However, as it stands now, it can very well be asserted that perhaps even long before Aryan immigration across the north-west frontier the Tibeto-Burman-speaking people resided in an around Arunachal. The Austro-Burmese-speaking autochthones of India had also a strong foothold in this region as is evident from the ethnic, linguistic and cultural traits of the populace of Arunachal and its neighbouring states and union territories. As in the case of the later phases of its history in this early period also this hilly forest region must have been chosen as a place of refuge and last resort by many a people of the adjoining regions during discomfiture and distress. The corridors through the mountains in its different parts also functioned as communication routes between the plains of the
Indian mainland and other countries of South and South-East Asia. Through these passes the Tibeto-Burman-speakers may have entered India and advanced as far as the Indian plains prior to the Aryan invasion. On the other hand, these may have even facilitated spread of Austric-speakers from India to the countries beyond. In course of such movements these various cultures intermingled in Arunachal as in other adjoining areas.

The hills of the territory were never suitable for establishment of extensive empires. The mountains and ridges rather kept divided various groups of people who developed separate entities, intense love of autonomy and self-sufficient economy of tribal culture. Republican and autonomous tribes under local chiefs and village councils lived in an atmosphere of primitive democracy. The imperialists of adjoining territories occasionally tried to extend their sway over them but they rarely succeeded owing to the difficulties of communication and the resistance of the tribal folks augmented by their own natural surroundings. Before modern scientific discoveries the natural resources of the hills were neither thoroughly known nor could be exploited profitably by these emperors. Thus the friendly relation with the tribes to keep them confined in their hill abodes was all that the emperors could demand. And perhaps such friendship was interpreted as their suzerainty over the tribes as indicated by the account of Huen Tsang and later records (supra, Ch.IV).

The ruling authorities of Assam right from the time of Bhagadatta of the Mahābhārata to the Ahom kings and even the
British government thus occasionally tried to establish their supremacy over these tribes. The Ahoms even enlisted their help against external dangers of Muslim invasion. But this authority amounted to nothing more than a loose suzerainty. Otherwise, the independence of the tribes was never disturbed except during occasional conflicts arising out of misunderstanding between the plains people and the hill tribes relating to rival claims over the resources of the mutual boundary region.

The resources of the hills, although prized by people in the plains when they received them through the tribes who also participated in overland trade between India and Tibet or China, could not be exploited sufficiently to satisfy the growing needs of the hill people. With the passage of time they started supplementing their economy by collecting forest resources in the plains near the hills. This also led to clashes with the local people and occasionally invited expedition to the hills by the Ahom and British rulers.

The southern fringes of the territory, however, occasionally came under direct control of the Assam rulers as is proved by the Archaeological relics and literary accounts, embodied in works like the Kālikā Purāṇa and the Ahom Buraṅjis. Monumental remains at Bhālukapung, Mayspura or Itānagara, Mālinithānā and Bhīmkanagāra seem to testify to such contacts. Many of the local wardens of the frontier areas of Assam may have assumed independence during the dismemberments of successive ruling dynasties of Assam.
Sometimes even Ahom princes or these local potentates sought refuge in the hills.

Near the frontiers of Tibet, Bhutan and Burma are also noticed extension of influence of those countries which were, however, mostly cultural in nature, and neither the emperors of Assam nor the early kingdoms of Bhutan, Tibet or Burma were in a position or interested to attempt complete subjugation of the hill tribes. Thus a comparative immunity from imperialist rivalry allowed the people of the interior to maintain their primitive institutions of tribal culture intact through the ages. Yet they were hardly outside the mainstream of Indian history and culture.

The trading activities, visit of religious missionaries and occasional military raids, exerted impression of different cultural waves especially on the tribes of the outer fringes of the territory. The influences gradually percolated into the interior although the process obviously took a longer period and intensity of the impact diminished with time and distance. However, such diverse influences which were imbibed and assimilated by the tribal people ultimately gave birth to a distinctive personality of Arunachal. While playing the role of an intermediary between the Indian interior and the other parts of South and South-East Asia it has nevertheless developed a colourful heritage of culture which has added to the variety of Indian tradition. The people of Arunachal like all other branches of human society have marched forward through interaction with external world and between various elements within themselves settled in different
groups over hills and hamlets of the territory. In this process constant movements and adjustments, one group dominating over another, integration of different elements and disintegration of broad groups into sub-groups are palpable among the tribes too.

Noteworthy are the different stages of economy and culture among the various tribes. Under the outer veil of homogeneity thus we find the Monpas and Khamtis having literate traditions, while all other tribes possess only oral myths. The latter groups are only now being introduced to the threshold of modern education. Permanent cultivation is known only to the Apa Tanis and a few other tribes, the latter, again still practising shifting cultivation as well. Slavery among many of the tribes, some amount of private ownership of land and other properties, difference in landholdings, etc. also reveal socio-economic disparity within the tribal communities. So there is also not a completely classless society in which some writers even try to detect caste-like features. From the outside also the tribal folk encountered periodical attempts of exploitation, as during the British administration, when the tribal rights over forests in the foothills were curbed in order to serve the interests of tea-planters and rubber merchants as well as by the establishment of reserve forests. Tribal reaction to such exploitation may be noticed in the records of numerous conflicts or tribal raids. The necessity of defending the British empire against possible Chinese threat subsequent to the establishment of Chinese suzerainty over Tibet roused the British government ultimately to think of the defence of the
north-east frontier seriously. But it is only the Government of independent India which finally took up the cause of socio-economic development of the territory to bring it in line with other parts of the country.

A broad discussion on these various aspects of Arunachal's history and culture has been attempted in the foregoing chapters. But the details of the developments and characteristics in different stages of its history are likely to be forthcoming with the future explorations as well as investigations into the records, account-books of the Buddhist monasteries, many an important manuscript and document lying with the chiefs and dignitaries as well as deeper analysis of tribal traditions, comparative study of the records of the adjoining territories, and study of the numerous Tibetan inscriptions and art objects of the Union Territory.