CHAPTER II

Land and the people

The Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh came into being only on the 21st January, 1972. Earlier it was known as the North-East Frontier Agency. It corresponds roughly with the north-east frontier tracts of the British Empire. Although knowledge of the tract can be gleaned from early Indian literature as well as foreign accounts, lack of intimate association is evident from the sketchy and cryptic nature of the narratives regarding the land and its inhabitants. It was apparently regarded as a part of Prāgjyotisa or Kāmarūpa which included the present-day Assam and adjoining regions and was inhabited by non-Aryan tribes like the Nīsādas, Kīrātas and Asuras (infra, Ch.IV). Allusions to these tribes and their territories may be traced even in the Yajurveda, Atharvaveda, Mahābhārata and Rāmāyana. With the passage of time more definite information was available to later writers. This culminated in the detailed accounts of the Kālikē Purāṇa, the Ahom Buranjīs and finally the reports of the explorers of the time of the British rule. Ultimately with the beginning of extensive surveys since the early years of the present century was revealed a closer view of the territory to people living beyond its boundaries to dispel many a misgiving. Still this work of exposition is far from satisfactory, and mystery veils many things of the territory, one of the most beautiful terrains of our country, from the eyes of the people living outside this tract.

Arunachal Pradesh lies between 26°28' and 29°30' north latitude and 91°30' and 97°30' east longitude along the north-east frontier of the Indian Union. Comprising an area of 83,578 square
kilometres in the region of the eastern Himalayas, the territory is full of dense forests, high mountain ridges and deep valleys with torrential rivers and streams separating the inhabitants from one another living in small hamlets.

It is contoured by Bhutan in the west, Tibet and Sikiang province of China in the north and north-east, Burma in the east and south-east and the Brahmaputra valley of Assam in the south.

A series of ridges and spurs rise from the plains of the Brahmaputra valley in the south through outer Siwalik type hills to join the Himalayan ranges forming the boundary in the north while the Patkal hills represent the dividing line with Burma in the south-east. The entire territory thus presents an undulating terrain with the highest peaks in the west and north having an elevation of about 7000 metres, whereas the maximum altitude in the south-western side of the Tirap district is about 2000 metres.

The Union Territory of Arunachal has a total length of 1628 kms. of international boundaries separating it from Bhutan, Tibet, China and Burma. Its topography, flora and fauna offer wide variety. We come across damp rain-forests at the foothills, tropical and subtropical zone upto about 2134 metres with luxuriant vegetation and various orchids. Simul, hollock, bola, khoken and nakah trees are abundant in this region. Various kinds of bamboos grow upto even a higher altitude where deciduous and mixed deciduous forests have characteristic vegetation like walnut (Jugland), oak (Quercus), chestnut (Castanea sativa), pine (Pinus), spruce (Picea) and rhododendron.
Beyond 2743 metres conifers like juniper, pine and silver fir (Abies), short variety of rhododendron and strawberry (Fragaria) are to be noticed. From 4877 metres alpine meadow continues up to the snowline.

The wild life of Arunachal also offers rich variety. Tiger, black panther, leopard, black deer, barking deer, elephant, pig, monkey, langur, buffalo, wild goat, flying fox or fruit-bat, takin (a type of ox-goat species - Budorcas taxicolor), clouded leopard, musk deer, antelope, panda, yak and mithan (Bos frontalis) are found in different parts of the territory. Of these tiger, elephant, leopard, deer, wild pig etc. live in the foothills and plains. Takins, musk deer, clouded leopards and pandas are found at higher altitudes. Musk deer is noticed in snow level in the Lohit district. In snowfall areas yaks are domesticated. The semi-domesticated mithans are abundant in the entire territory and are also prized as a treasure. Hornbills similarly represent a typical variety of birds. Numerous species of birds like babblers, bulbuls, warblers, fly-catchers, pigeons and pheasants are found. Snakes and other reptiles of different varieties, curious types of insects and worms like leeches are also characteristic of its forests. Frogs, toads and other amphibians and fishes of several kinds are encountered.

The entire north-east region of India receives the heaviest rainfall in the country. The foothills and valleys near the Assam plains like the Dihang, Dibang and Lohit valleys are most exposed
to the monsoon clouds and have the largest share of rainfall in the territory. The highest precipitation ranges up to 380 cms. The central part of Arunachal records 200" of rainfall a year. The rains continue from April to September. But the period of the heaviest downpour is from June to July.

On the other hand, most of the regions above 1524 metres witness snowfall during winter. The duration and density vary according to location and altitudes. But, in general, it continues from November to March.

The climate throughout the year is somewhat damp in most parts of the territory, especially so in the valleys and foothills. Deep influence of this ecology is vivid in the life and culture of the people. The houses are generally built on raised platforms and stilts to avoid dampening effect of the ground. The roofs are also constructed so as to protect the inmates from rains and snowfall. In the zones of the heaviest snowfall stones and wooden planks are used in construction. The dress, outfit and headgears also vary from region to region depending on climatic condition. As already noted, the valleys and gorges with torrential streams desecrating the entire territory into undulating terrains left only small zones in valleys or hill-tops for the inhabitants to settle and did not allow them opportunity to come together in massive scale comparable to the plains of North India. Smaller groups of people thus resided in their huts and developed characteristic ways of life different from one another. Only modern amenities
and scientific developments in recent years have started obviating these barriers of nature and generating a spirit of large-scale integration between the different groups of the territory and also with the mainland of the country.

A number of large rivers flow in this territory, viz., the Kameng, Subansiri, Siang, Dibang and Lohit which run from the north to south. Smaller rivers like the Tirap, Tisa, Kamlang, Sisseri and Kamla flow from the south, north and north-east finally joining the Brahmaputra in the Assam plains.

The territory has different passes across its mountainous boundaries which served as routes of communication, migration of people and military movements since the earliest times. Five such roads from Sadiya to Tibet and China (including one through Manipur) have been mentioned by McCosh. In the east there are passes across the hills such as the Dibang pass, the Mishmi route, the Phungan pass leading to Manchee and China, and the Patkai pass to Bhamo on the Irrawaddy. Most important among them was the north-eastern route across the Patkai hills which ran through the upper parts of Burma finally leading to China. This route was followed by the Shan invaders like the Ahoms and Khantis. Large number of Burmese troops and auxiliaries invaded Assam across the Patkai in 1816. The Burmese government within its territory established villages and settlements along this route every twelve or fifteen miles in former times. The residents maintained the routes by cutting the

jungles and removing other obstructions.

In the western part of the territory a number of duars or passes connect Assam with Tibet through Bhutan and Arunachal. British records mention Bijni, Chapakhamar, Chapaguri, Banska and Ghaukola duars of Kamarupa and Kalling and Buriguma of Darrang districts.¹ Best of these routes lay the Kuriapara duar and Charduar or four other passes. These definitely relate to passes through Arunachal while some of the other routes could also run across its territories. Even now there are many routes across the hills used by the Monpas for visit to Bhutan and Tibet. Thirty-five mountain passes were known during the composition of the Tabagat-i-Nasir of Minhaju-s-Siraj which connected Kamarupa with Tibet.² Horses were imported to Lakhnauti through these routes. A flourishing trade was carried on during Ahom and British rules between Assam and Tibet through the Kuriapara duar. The various tribes of Arunachal Pradesh like the Monpas, Sherdukpens, Membas and Khambas are known to have participated in the trade with Tibet and China even in later times.

Arunachal Pradesh is situated in a highly seismic zone of India and tremors of moderate nature to violent upheavals are experienced by the residents from time to time. Many of such serious earthquakes have been recorded in the Ahom Buranjis, the Fatihva-i-jhbrriya and the British records. On the 15th August, 1950

¹ A. Mackenzie, The North-East Frontier of India, India, 1979, reprinted from History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal, Calcutta, 1884, p.10.
² Elliot and Dowson, History of India as told by its own Historians, II, Aligarh, 1952 reprint, p.308.
another such tremor of great magnitude have altered the outlook of several areas and caused damage to the old monuments. Earlier such occurrences leading to the change of river courses as in the case of the Dibang or Dihang are known from the Ahom records.

The territory is at present divided into nine districts, viz., West Kameng, East Kameng, Lower Subansiri, Upper Subansiri, West Siang, East Siang, Dibang valley, Lohit and Tirap. These have evolved out of former five districts, i.e., Kameng, Subansiri, Siang, Lohit and Tirap (infra, Ch.IV).

The capital is at Itanagara, near the site of the old ruins of Mayapura, the legendary capital of Rāmacandra, the king of the Jitari dynasty of Dharmapāla (infra, Ch.III).

Arunachal is the largest of the seven political units of the North-East India, viz., Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal.

The territory is very sparsely populated. The population is 4,67,511 according to Census of 1971, the density being six persons per square kilometre.

The people belong to a large number of tribal groups many of the divisions gradually emerging with greater knowledge about them and more intensive investigation over the years. Thus an evolution of names may be traced from the earliest blanket designations like Nisāda, Kirāta, and Asura of the Vedic and the Epic
literature which made little distinction between the various peoples of the north-easternmost regions of India including Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and other tribal states of the present time to later appellations for different groups of people noticed in the Ahom Buranjis and British records. Further investigation in recent years have led to distinction of the minor groups on the basis of finer linguistic and ethno-cultural characteristics.

The entire population of the state have thus been divided into Bodic and non-Bodic groups of Indo-Mongoloids speaking about 80 dialects of the Sino-Tibetan speech family. The majority of the dialects belong to the three branches of the Tibeto-Burman group within the said family, viz., the Tibeto-Himalayan Branch, the North-Assam Branch and the Assam-Burma Branch.\(^1\)

The Bodic group comprising tribes like the Monpas, Membas, Khambas and other groups speaking related dialects like the Sherdukpen has been included in the Tibeto-Himalayan Branch.

Of the non-Bodic group the speakers of the North-Assam Branch of dialects may be sub-divided into three groups. The western group includes the Hrussos and Dhammais. The central group consists of the Nisis including Bangnis as well as the Hill Miris, Apa Tamis, Tagins and Adis.\(^2\) The Idus and Digrus have been

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\(^2\) These tribes are generally referred to as Akas, Mijis, Daflas, and Abors which are Assamese terms. It is more appropriate to switch over to the names which the tribal people themselves use.
included in the eastern group.

The Assam-Burma Branch offers two sub-groups - the northern or Kachin group represented by the Singphos and the southern group consisting of the Tangsas, Noctes and Wanchos.

The Mijus are generally grouped with the Idus and Dagarus\(^1\) but show some difference in dialects. Many other minor groups like the Buguns, Sulungs, Bangrus etc. are also known.

The Khantis of Lohit district also represent an important group of people who along with the Singphos entered the territory in large scale during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They speak a language of the Tai Branch which is akin to Ahom and is to be included in the Siamese-Chinese group under Sino-Tibetan, the parent stock of Tibeto-Burman.

The Monpas are again subdivided into the Northern Monpas living around Tawang region, the Central Monpas of Dirang region and the Southern Monpas of Kalaktang area. Another group of people has been described by writers like J.P. Mills as the Eastern Monpas living in But, Rahung, Kudam and Khona.\(^2\) But this division is not generally accepted by other sociologists at present working in the field.

The Sherdukpen reside in and around Senthui (Shergaon) and Thongthui (Rupa) in the valley of the Tengapani river south of Bomdila. The Monpas and Sherdukpen together find mention in the

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1. Together they are called Mishmis by the outsiders. But the tribal people prefer the different epithets.

British records as Bhutias.

The Hrussos live to the east of the Sherdukpens as far as the Khari-Dikaral river and west of the Misis (Bangnis). The Dhammais are found in the valley of the Bichom river. Together these tribes live in the West and East Kameng districts. The Buguns live in the vicinity of the Hrussos. Some group of Misis like the Bangnis are also residents of the East Kameng district.

The Misis inhabit the area contiguous to the northern part of East Kameng upto the Miri country in the east and south of the Subansiri river.

The Miris or Hill Miris inhabit the lower Kama valley and hills in the Lower Subansiri district between the Apa Tani country and the Subansiri river in the area between the confluences of the Kama with the Khru and Subansiri. Unlike as the name suggests they reveal little similarity with the Miris of the plains. Rather their socio-economic and cultural patterns are broadly same as those of the Misis. There are, however, some linguistic differences between them though the dialects are mutually intelligible.1

The Apa Tanis are one of the most noteworthy tribes of Arunachal living in the Lower Subansiri district in the valley around Ziro between the Panior and Kama rivers. They are good in cultivation as well as trade and practise a meticulous system of irrigation.

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The Tagins were not referred to in early British records but came to be known to the administrators only in later period. Tagin Dafis lived in lower parts of the present East Kameng and Lower Subansiri districts. But later on they were identified as a distinct tribe. They are now located around Daporijo in the Upper Subansiri district and near the Denekholi and Taliha outposts.

The Sulungs lived amid the Nisis and remained unnoticed for long. But linguistic and cultural traits mark them out as a separate group. They spread over extensive areas from the Bhutan borders to the Subansiri. Their physical traits show some affinity with the western Nisis or Bangnis. But the Buguns offer the closest similarity. They claim kinship or common origin with these people. They perhaps preceded other tribes of the Subansiri regions like the Nisis, Apatanis and Hill Miris. They also claim to have come from the north. Their language is different from that of the Nisis but is intelligible to the Buguns.

The Adis consisting of numerous groups like Gallongs, Padams, Minongs, Pasis, Shimongs, Boris, Bokars, Pailibos, Miris etc. are spread over extensive regions of the West and East Siang and parts of the Dibang valley districts between the Subansiri and Dibang rivers. The Gallongs living between the Hill Miris in the west and the Adis in the east have been described by G.D.S. Dunbar and L.R.N. Srivastava

as a separate tribe. Kebang or village council of the Adi society is a highly organised institution and enjoy a centralised authority in all important affairs. Another important institution is the dormitory club. Different dormitories are constructed for the boys and the girls.

The Membas and Khambas reside in the upper parts of the West Siang and Dibang valley districts near the Tibetan frontier. Some of the sub-groups perhaps represent offshoots of the other Buddhist tribes of West Kameng, i.e., the Monpas, as indicated in certain legends prevalent among them. In general, however, they betray some cultural affinity with the Tibetans in their north and Khampas of Tibet and Bhutan. Over the ages all these tribes may have moved in waves in these regions before they were segregated owing to more and more strict demarcation of the boundaries after consolidation of Tibet as an empire. The establishment of Chinese authority in Tibet in the beginning of the present century also led the British imperialists in India to survey the areas properly and organise the boundaries with clear definition leading to the present position. Earlier the river Tsangpo of Tibet entering Arunachal as Siang may have served as a guideline of tribal movement and many of the tribal groups, especially those now known as the Adis, may have immigrated along this route. But no definite memory or record is available now beyond the tribal traditions and faint indications in early Indian literature.
and accounts of foreign travellers suggesting intimate relationship of this region in general with the adjoining parts of Bhutan, Tibet, China, Burma and South-East Asia. Archaeological relics also seem indirectly to confirm this state of affair.

Linguistic affinity with Kachin, Chin and Lepcha as well as tribal legends suggest that the Idus, Digarus and Mijus have immigrated from Burma. The Idus live between the borders of the Siang district and the Lohit river thus occupying parts of the Dibang valley and Lohit districts. The Digarus and Mijus live in the valleys of the Lohit and its tributaries like the Kamlang. All these tribes appear to have absorbed the primitive peoples inhabiting this part of the territory and thus evolved their present culture which is based on an admixture of the older and new elements. Mishmi agriculture represents the most primitive method in Assam according to Mills who believed that they remained food-gatherers till very recent times. They used only iron hoes procured from the plains or dibble sticks or dog-leg hoe made from single piece of wood and bamboo tie-hoe for weeding as agricultural tools.

The Meyors and Zakhrlngs speaking Tibetan dialects live in outlying parts of the region north of the Idus near the Tibetan frontier.

The Khantis, who immigrated into the territory in large scale during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from their original

habitats in Burma owing to political disturbances there, are now settled in the south-eastern parts of the Lohit district and Assam. They originally settled near the Tengapani, but were ousted by the Singphos from there during the Moamaria rebellion in the reign of the Ahom king Gaurināthasimha in 1794. In their turn, they crossed the Brahmaputra and ousted the Ahom Sādiya Khowa Gohain and their chief usurped that position. Afterwards he was recognised by the Ahom king as such. In 1839 they were expelled from there for their rebellion against the British authorities but were reinstated in 1844 after their submission and were settled in different parts. They are of the Shan extract like the Ahoms with whom they bear close cultural affinity. They profess Buddhism and have their own script. Although they describe their religion as Theravāda, we find here some traits of Mahāyāna and Tantrikism as well as Brahmanical religions as is evinced by the numerous images of Bodhisattvas, preceptors or monks, Nāgarāja, Vasumati or earth goddess etc. which are held in veneration. The epics, the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyana, have also been found in Khamti translation. The life pattern of the people also suggests that the original form of their Theravāda have absorbed some traits of other sects like Mahāyāna, Ari or demon worship and Brahmanism that prevailed in Burma. Over and above, the independent tribal tinge is to be noticed in the products of their new homeland in Arunachal especially in later period.

The Singphos appear to have immigrated to Arunachal only in C. 1793 A.D. during the Moamaria rebellion from their original homeland near the Irrawaddy in Burma. They along with the Tangsas,
Noctes and Wanchos reside in the Tirap district of Arunachal. The three latter groups of people seem to have evolved out of admixture of different aborigines immigrating to this area from the Assam plains with the later tribes of China moving in during the troubled days of the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries A.D. They find mention in the Ahom Buranjis as Naga people whom the Ahom met in the early years of their invasion into India.

Although these groups speak different dialects an underlying link through all of them are noticed in such characteristics as identical roots of certain basic words and usages which reveal a common pattern. Similarity in certain respects with the other tribes of North-East India like the Mikirs, Garos, Khasis etc. is also quite fascinating. Especially, sharing of common features and words with Khasi, which does not belong to the Tibeto-Burmese group, affords some idea regarding the extent and nature of miscegenation of various ethnic elements that took place in Arunachal. Use of some Austro-words by the Wanchos and Australoid ethnic elements in their physical features are also quite significant in this regard. In all probability these were the outcome of the absorption of the autochthons of the region like the speakers of the Austro dialects whose presence is suggested by the megaliths of Kameng and Subansiri regions (*infra*, Ch. III, IV).

Finally, the religious beliefs and practices of these various peoples may be discussed with reference to more or less three broad schools. First of them may be mentioned the Vajrayana
doctrine of Buddhism followed by the Monpas, Sherdukpen, Membas, Khambas etc., i.e., the Buddhist population of west and northern regions having cultural link with Tibet and Bhutan. This form of mystic or Tantrika Buddhism is said to have originally developed in the Mahāyāna school (Great Vehicle) in Bengal and Magadha in and around the eighth century A.D. (during the reign of the Pāla rulers of Bengal). The chief objective is here the attainment of the permanent vaśrā or void-nature of the individual and all beings through esoteric practices based on mantras, mudrās, mandalas etc. Although it represents only one of the systems of Tantrayāna or Tantrika Buddhism it is often held as synonymous with that broad group as it embodies the best tenets and rituals of the school. This doctrine found its way into Tibet and gained supremacy over all other religious practices there through the efforts of a number of Indian teachers. Among them the great teacher Padmasambhava is associated in popular tradition with the propagation of the cult in Arunachal Pradesh, too. It may be surmised that either on his way to Tibet from his homeland in India, located according to some in East India, he moved through this territory or after his success in Tibet he came here to propagate his doctrine among the tribal folk. In any case, we have evidence of this school of Buddhism having been introduced in Arunachal at least by the beginning of the second millennium A.D. (infra, Chs. IV, V).

The next school of thought is represented by the Theravāda form of Buddhism which is another name of Hinayāna. It is practised by the Khamtis and Singphos of the Lohit and Tirap districts. This
doctrine, based on the original philosophy propounded by the Buddha himself, considers the attainment of emancipation of the individual as its ultimate objective. The religious practices of the Khantis and Singphos, however, indicate some admixture with Brahmanical and Tantrika beliefs and cults. This may be the result of association between these various groups in the original abodes of these tribes in Burma and other parts of South-East Asia.

The third school may be roughly designated as animism or shamanism broadly representing religious beliefs found among the majority of the tribal folk living in the interior parts of the territory. This consists of fertility cults, head-hunting, human sacrifice (these two practices have gone out of vogue with the introduction of modern education and through governmental efforts), fetishism etc. Their faith in reincarnation and heavenly bodies, spirit and ancestor worship, attribution of spirits to everything, sorcery etc. are the chief features of their animism. Fertility cult and fetishism find expression through the use of phallic emblems in certain rites. But above all, their worship of divinities like Doini-Polo or Sun-Moon god, importance attached to morality and faith in an omnipotent Being noticed among the various groups offer interesting similarity with other major religions like Hinduism and Christianity.

Apart from these major groups a rudimentary form of Vaisnavism prevailing among the Noctes and old vestiges of Saiva and Sakti worship or Vaisnava monuments in the foothills indicate the variety
of religious influences that have entered the cultural world of the people in different period and left some impress in vivid or subdued form on their life and outlook.