

*ENTICING  
FRONTIERS*

*T.K. BHATTACHARJEE*

**ENTICING FRONTIERS** is a sequel to the much popular memoir of the author 'Alluring Frontiers' that has become very popular among the readers in India and abroad. The preseat volume too is equally absorbing and is almost like an analytical travalogue on the fast developing Arunachal Pradesh. The author, with his rich background of more than thirty eight years of active service as a Civil Service Officer, has presented a study of common phenomenon witnessed by him in the little-known regions-for the enquiring readers of the outside world. He has visited many interesting places Arunachal, met many people who have remained unkown, and has given fascinating accounts of his experiences in a simple but extraordinary style of his own. The author is often at his best when writing about places and people-perceptive, warm and direct and quick to spot the unusual, the evocative. In this book you travel with him, which is next only to actually being there yourself. The book is a chronicle of the discovery that extends from 1968 to 1989. It will be a continuing source of inspiration for those who are interested to discuss and appreciate the tribal life of Arunachal Pradesh. It offers much more to the critical observer, tourist and scholar though written in light vein, and provides a fascinating insight into the hidden land, life of the tribal people and Government officials of Arunachal Pradesh covering a period between 1968 and 1989.



Tarun Kumar Bhattacharjee recipient of the highest award of Arunachal Pradesh-Gold Medal from the Government in recognition of his yeoman service rendered to the State-erstwhile known as NEFA for a long period of thirty-eight years from 1952 to 1989, functioned in various capacities such as Extra Assistant Commissioner, Additional Deputy Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner in the Districts and at last as the Director of Agriculture before his retirement. He has enriched the literature concerning Tribal life of Arunachal Pradesh, with his long experience in the region and his keen observation, and is the author of Myths of the Shimong of Upper Siang (Foreword by Dr. Verrier Elwin). The Tangams of Northern Siang, and the Idus of Mathun and Dri Valley, besides a number of Scholarly articles on the land and people of Arunachal Pradesh. His latest absorbing memoir "Alluring Frontiner." ran into two editions that has become very popular among the readers.

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F238  
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# ENTICING FRONTIERS

Sequel to Alluring Frontiers

By

Tarun Kumar Bhattacharjee



**OMSONS PUBLICATIONS**

**NEW DELHI**

Printed at :  
Editions of New Delhi  
210, Gurgaon Road, Ind. Complex,  
New Delhi-110028  
Phone: 011-2617801, 2617802

*Hint/offset  
TB.*

*57.95*

1992

© AUTHOR

ISBN No. : 81-7117-098-6

*171573*  
*High*  
*24/11/95*  
*10/1/95*  
*SP*

Published by :  
**R. KUMAR**  
**OMSONS PUBLICATIONS**  
 T-7, RAJOURI GARDEN,  
 NEW DELHI-110027

*NE*  
*915.416304*  
*BHA;1*

Laser Composed by ;  
**Enen Grafiks**  
 CB-178, Ring Road, Naraina,  
 New Delhi-110028

Printed at :  
**Efficient Offset Printers**  
 215, Shahzada Bagh Indl. Complex,  
 Phase-II, Delhi-110035  
 Phone : 533736, 533762

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## PREFACE

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Spread over 83,000 square kilometers area in India's North East is a vast mountainous territory called Arunachal Pradesh — the land of the dawn lit sun — the erstwhile North East Frontier Agency.

I entered the territory in early 1952, when it was still a mysterious, foreboding land with abounding jungles, gurgling rivers, awesome mountains. It was soon after the great earthquake of 1950 that the devastation wrought was manifestly visible in ripped hills. There lived in isolation dozens of tribes about whom very little information was available to out-side world.

The hills were kept as barriers till late forties. There were only periodical forays by body of troops to subdue the tribesmen and development in road communication or primary education, that was limited to fringe areas of garrison stations in the foot hills.

With the re-organization of the territory as North East Frontier Agency in 1948, a gradual process of consolidation of Administration was started with the formation of six districts — each under a Political Officer. The primary objective at the time was to extend the influence to the interior areas.

A process in developmental activities started with building up of porter tracks, extension of primary education, establishment of health units.

In 1954, Dr. Verrier Elwin, a distinguished scholar was brought in as Adviser to Tribal Affairs. It was Elwin who became the architect of the new policy and his "Philosophy for NEFA" spelt out in details on how to approach and appreciate the Tribal problems. The new policy had proved a success as existing socio-religious institutions of the tribes were least disturbed and there was no social tension on the wake of developmental activities. The remarkable impact of the policy was evident during the war in 1962 when people rallied behind the Government inspite of severe crisis.

But after the departure of Dr. Elwin, a Policy shift was discernible as some found the process of development was too slow and not in keeping with the need of the time. Since then, Dr. Elwin's "Philosophy for NEFA" remained only an academic interest.

With the shift in the policy, the special cadre of Indian Frontier Administrative Service was discontinued with the induction of IAS. The Officers belonging to IAS being in All India Service, not necessarily for frontiers alone thus served for fixed tenure. It is debatable, however, on this switch over in the context of peculiar need of the Frontier Administration.

The memoirs of early years in North East Frontier Agency — was described in "Alluring Frontiers". The 353 pages book which was published in 1986, ran into second edition. The present book is the continuation in the narration of the experiences spanning over further twenty years in the Frontier when it was named as Arunachal Pradesh.

The present book would not have come so soon but for the encouragement received from my well wishers who wanted me to continue the story. Amongst them are Nari Rustomji, Dr. Goldwin Phira, Dr. I.M. Simon, Dr. G.N. Gogoi, Dr. D.K. Bora, Dr. D.K. Duarah, Jren Manik Syiem, Prof. C.K. Singh and Pijush Kumar Sen — whose evinced interest ultimately made me to complete the writing.

I am particularly indebted to Prof. C.K. Singh of the Department of English, Government College, Itanagar, for painstakingly going through each chapter and correcting the errors that had crept in.

My thanks are also due to Ramesh Kumar of OmSons Publication, New Delhi who readily agreed to take the onerous task of publication.

Lastly, I acknowledge the help of Jogeswar Mochahari, who has typed out the pages single handedly with utmost care and devotion.

Tarun Kumar Bhattacharjee

# 1

## Prelude

A train pulled up in North Lakhimpur Railway Station of Upper Assam during a rain-soaked day in mid Seventies. I was on my way to the frontiers to a place called Ziro, the Headquarters of Subansiri District — 5200 ft above Mean Sea Level, nestling in a beautiful valley of irrigated rice fields, pine, bamboo groves, clustered hamlets of colourful tribe — the Apa Tanis.

The Erstwhile North East Frontier Agency by now transformed into Arunachal — the land of the dawn lit sun. It has gained the status of union territory with a representative Government, functioning under the advice of a Lieutenant Governor. Bureaucracy headed by a Chief Secretary and half a dozen Secretaries under him, mostly drawn from the Indian Administrative Service as new Policy thrust, apparently demanded able Administrators with wide ranging experiences.

The train was an express — newly inducted into the feeder line which ran from the junction station of Rangia in Lower Assam to Murkongselek — a 400 Kms stretch. Somewhere in the Middle of this stretch is North Lakhimpur, the gate way to Ziro.

Seven years I was in another hill, away from the frontier. The hill, an elongation of Patkai range named Borail, is the home of about a dozen tribes each having distinct identity. Foremost amongst them is the Dimasha Kacharis who had turbulent history. Their kingdom once included vast areas of plains and hills. It was in Dimapur, the Capital of Kachari King, the relics still preserved the hoary past. Driven by powerful Ahom King, Dimapur was abandoned for a more secure place in Maibong in the hill. Later, the Capital shifted further down to the plains of Barak Valley in Kashpur where

it remained so till the British annexation in 1835. The hill portion of the erstwhile Kingdom with the predominance of the Dimasas was formed into a sub division with Head Quarters at Haflong, nestling in the shadow of the Borail range. A railway line — a master-piece of great engineering feat traversed the hill over 180 Kms through a series of tunnels, via ducts and loops. The longest tunnel is 587 meters at Mahur Saddle close to Haflong. The railway line was constructed at the turn of the Century — a concomitant enterprise of the expanding British investment in coal and tea in Upper Assam. The gigantic effort at the time could be imagined and attributed to the sheer determination of the Engineers who worked on the line. The terrain was most unfavourable being in the very high rainfall area, abounding jungles, where herds of elephants roamed freely. It is told that there was a casualty for every slipper laid, yet the indomitable spirit survived. The line was completed by 1905.

The scenery on both the sides of this railway track is truly magnificent. Evergreen forests, rolling landscape, gushing streams, chirping birds and at times one could be lucky enough to see an elephant majestically sliding down the hill slope.

The garden planters and the railway officials selected Haflong as an ideal retreat from the sweltering heat of the plains. They had a beautiful rest house on the hill top, constructed an artificial lake lined by pine trees and a convent for education of their children. The convent run by the sisters of Mary was one of the best in Assam. When I came in 1963, it still maintained the pristine glory.

The exclusiveness of the place, alas! did not last long. In the late sixties the Government conceded to the demand to up-grade the sub-division to a district with consequent posting of dozens of officers, opening more offices, construction of roads and buildings. The virgin beauty is now no longer to be seen but is just a talk of the past.

16 Kms from Haflong is Jatinga — an idyllic settlement of the Jaintias of Meghalaya who had migrated some decades now. Hard working and tenacious, they have beautifully laid a village of tin roofed buildings with compounds dotted with flowers and fruit trees. Almost every house-hold had an orchard with banana, pineapple,

orange and spices. Delicious oranges fetched a lucrative price, and no wonder, the people of Jatinga were far more well off than their neighbours.

But the main attraction of Jatinga was the strange phenomenon of bird's flight that seemingly descends annually in the recesses of the houses during autumns, sucked in by the wind into the blind alley of the valley. The people used to run with powerful petromax lamps and staves to hit at the helpless birds which fell easy prey to their merciless on-slaught. Once I observed the trapping of the birds in the house of the headman Klintiwel Suchiang. The birds only arrived during the dark nights. Suddenly, to my surprise, I found scores of birds descend on every conceivable place. It was an exciting moment as the beam of the powerful lamp temporarily immobilized them and they soon succumbed to heavy blows. At that time, I too felt like other nature lovers that something should be done — sooner the better, to save the birds from total extinction. It was said that just before I left Haflong, the migration recorded an all time low.

Half way to Jatinga is Longkai — a Jemi Naga settlement divided in two parts — one part is Christian and the other following the traditional faith. The difference is obvious — reflected in their out-look. Christian Jemis rigidly adhere to the church, and on sundays it was a treat to see colourful processions winding through narrow streets on an improvised church building. While in the other parts of the village, various taboos and ritual associated with belief were still followed. A fundamentalist outfit opened a centre in an apparent bid to stem the tide of proselitization, but the appeal of the church was attracting attention of more and more people except in Dimasha Kachari villages.

The Jeliang tribe inhabits large tracts of land spread over three states. The legendary leader of the tribes is Rani Gaidiliu, fire — brand of yesteryear, who was banished to prison by the British Administration for 14 years for her alleged subversive activities.

The Rani was the follower of Jadonang — the mysterious man who proclaimed himself as a messiah. He promised a heaven for the faithful and threatened to cast spell on any one defying him. He had a sacred temple and had amassed huge wealth. Jadonang was arrested and hanged for committing murder. At that time the Rani was too

young and for that reason was let off. She dashed off to the hills and soon after great unrest spread to the land. People were dazed by her mystique power and was even seen dancing before the empty throne. Ultimately, the government captured her and sent her to prison.

I had a chance meeting with Rani Gaidiliu, draped in a black apparel, eyes hidden behind the dark glasses, the Rani was flanked on either side by body guards. What surprised me was that despite her advanced age she was least mellowed and was even vehement in her demand for exclusive Zeliang land. The Rani, though not a convert yet, had tremendous influence and appeal for her people.

100 Kms west of Haflong is densely wooded region where the river Kapili has its source. Rani splashes the wood and the ground with extensive down-pour, exceeding 7000 mm a year. So dense is the forest that it has remained largely unexplored. Even the daring hunters could venture only around its fringe areas. Rich in flora and fauna, it is a naturalist's paradise. But alas! how long would it remain so is but only a guess. The hydel project that was in schedule has not yet even begun, but the prospective treasure hunters had already started their work and set up lucrative trade and business in and around the beautiful spot.